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CONTRIBUTO TEORICO

Mentoring e competenze chiave: un modello per l'inclusione e la prevenzione dell'analfabetismo funzionale.

Mentoring and key competences: a model for inclusion and prevention of functional illiteracy.

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ABSTRACT ITALIANO

L'analfabetismo funzionale rappresenta una sfida cruciale per l'inclusione sociale, l'occupabilità e lo sviluppo economico contemporaneo. Secondo il Rapporto ASviS (2024), tale fenomeno costituisce uno degli ostacoli principali per il raggiungimento degli obiettivi di sviluppo sostenibile, con impatti significativi sulla coesione sociale e l'accesso equo alle opportunità educative e lavorative. Questo articolo esplora criticamente il potenziale del mentoring come metodologia educativa innovativa per contrastare l'analfabetismo funzionale, attraverso lo sviluppo delle competenze chiave definite dalla Raccomandazione dell'Unione Europea (2018). Sulla base di un'analisi interdisciplinare della letteratura e di progetti validati a livello europeo, viene proposto un modello integrato di mentoring articolato su tre livelli: educativo, lavorativo e intergenerazionale digitale. Tale modello promuove un apprendimento personalizzato e continuo, sostenendo l'autonomia individuale e la piena partecipazione sociale e democratica.

ENGLISH ABSTRACT

Functional illiteracy represents a critical challenge to social inclusion, employability, and contemporary economic development. According to the ASviS Report (2024), this phenomenon constitutes one of the main obstacles to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, with significant impacts on social cohesion and equitable access to educational and employment opportunities. This article critically explores the potential of mentoring as an innovative educational methodology to combat functional illiteracy by fostering the development of key competencies as defined by the European Union Recommendation (2018). Based on an interdisciplinary analysis of the literature and validated European-level projects, an integrated mentoring model is proposed, structured on three levels: educational, professional, and intergenerational digital. This model promotes personalized and continuous learning, supporting individual autonomy and full social and democratic participation.

Introduction

Functional illiteracy represents one of the most pressing challenges in contemporary societies, profoundly affecting social inclusion, employability, and economic development. According to the OECD-PIAAC (2024), approximately 25% of the Italian population faces significant difficulties in understanding and using written information in daily life, placing Italy among the European countries with the lowest levels of functional literacy (Secci, 2021).

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Far from being a mere individual deficit, this phenomenon should be understood as a structural issue that reflects deep-seated weaknesses in educational systems, socio-economic conditions, and access to cultural and technological resources.

Functional illiteracy undermines individuals' decision-making autonomy and limits their ability to engage with institutions, ultimately restricting their full participation in democratic life and the labor market (Alberici, 2002). The lack of linguistic and numerical competencies becomes evident from an early age, as demonstrated by OECD-PISA (2023) data, which indicate that 23% of Italian fifteen-year-old students do not reach the minimum proficiency level in reading. This is compounded by the issue of implicit dropout, affecting 6.6% of the school population, revealing an education system that, while ensuring attendance, fails to guarantee the full development of essential competencies for adult and professional life (ISTAT, 2024).

The problem extends to the adult population as well, where functional illiteracy—along with literacy attrition—constitutes a significant barrier to professional development and social participation. This issue is further exacerbated by the rapid pace of technological change, which has made advanced digital skills indispensable for accessing services and employment opportunities (Bruschi & Mariani, 2002).

In this complex context, mentoring emerges as an effective educational methodology to counteract functional illiteracy and foster the development of key competencies throughout life. By facilitating a structured relationship between an experienced mentor and a mentee, mentoring promotes personalized, autonomy-oriented learning, fostering not only knowledge transfer but also the development of critical thinking, decision-making, and metacognitive skills (Ellerani, 2017). This approach proves particularly effective in adult education, as it allows for the tailored support of individual learning needs, mitigating learning difficulties and promoting social and professional inclusion (Decembrotto, 2018).

Furthermore, mentoring aligns with the European Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (EU, 2018), which identifies functional literacy, digital competence, and personal, social, and learning-to-learn skills as essential for integration and active participation in society.

This paper aims to critically analyze the causes and consequences of functional illiteracy, explore the potential of mentoring in strengthening key competencies, and propose a model applicable to educational, training, and professional contexts. The objective is to provide both a theoretical and operational framework for effective and sustainable intervention.

Theoretical framework and key definitions

Functional illiteracy constitutes a significant barrier to the development of the skills necessary for active participation in the knowledge society, limiting access to citizenship rights, employability, and social mobility. Unlike primary illiteracy, which refers to the failure to acquire basic reading and writing skills, functional illiteracy occurs when an individual, despite having received formal education, is unable to comprehend, process, and effectively use written information to navigate daily and professional challenges. This

phenomenon, first analyzed globally by UNESCO in the 1980s, is now recognized as one of the main obstacles to full social inclusion, with implications that extend far beyond the educational sphere, affecting the labor market, political participation, and access to public services (Street, 2013).

Functional illiteracy is a multidimensional condition shaped by the interaction of multiple educational, economic, and cultural factors. Among its primary causes are inequalities in access to quality education, the lack of targeted educational programs for skill recovery in adulthood, and the progressive obsolescence of competencies acquired in traditional schooling. In Italy, this phenomenon is particularly prevalent in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, where limited access to cultural and educational resources heightens the risk of exclusion. Studies conducted at the European level demonstrate that functional illiteracy is closely linked to digital illiteracy, as inadequate proficiency in technological tools further hinders access to essential information for daily life and the labor market. While the growing digitalization of services presents an opportunity to enhance administrative efficiency and expand access to educational content, it has also exacerbated the divide between those with adequate digital skills and those without, thus contributing to new forms of social and occupational exclusion (Lankshear & Knobel, 2018).

From a theoretical perspective, the concept of functional literacy has undergone a progressive evolution, shifting from a traditional view focused solely on reading and writing skills to a broader, multidimensional perspective that encompasses digital, numerical, and metacognitive competencies. The approach adopted by the OECD in its international assessment programs (PISA and PIAAC) highlights how literacy is not a static entity but rather a dynamic set of skills that must be continuously updated to meet the demands of an ever-evolving society (OECD, 2023). Recent literature further emphasizes the connection between functional literacy and critical thinking, arguing that the ability to read a text is insufficient unless accompanied by the capacity to assess its reliability and apply its content in real-world contexts (Gee, 2015). In this regard, the concept of "critical literacy" (Freire & Macedo, 1987) assumes a central role, underscoring the importance of an education that goes beyond the mere transmission of technical skills and fosters the ability to interpret reality and act consciously within society.

To effectively address the issue of functional illiteracy, the European Union has developed the Reference Framework for Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (European Commission, 2018), identifying eight fundamental competencies that every citizen should acquire and continuously update. Among these, three are particularly relevant for combating functional illiteracy: functional literacy competence, digital competence, and personal, social, and learning-to-learn competence. The first pertains to the ability to understand and use written texts effectively for personal and professional development, while the second refers to the conscious use of technology to access, analyze, and critically share information. The third is essential for fostering continuous learning, promoting adaptability, self-regulation, and the ability to navigate complex and constantly changing environments (Tiana, 2021).

In light of this theoretical evolution, the role of lifelong education appears increasingly central to ensuring the updating and maintenance of basic skills, thereby reducing the risk of literacy attrition. The most effective educational strategies must adopt an integrated approach that combines innovative teaching methodologies, such as experiential learning and the use of digital technologies, with personalized interventions targeting particularly vulnerable groups. Within this framework, mentoring emerges as a highly effective methodology, as it facilitates a learning process based on the relationship between an expert mentor and a learner, fostering skill recovery in a supportive and collaborative environment. Mentoring not only enhances traditional and digital literacy but also promotes the development of fundamental soft skills, such as critical thinking and problem-solving, which are essential for social and occupational participation (Zepke & Leach, 2010).

Addressing functional illiteracy requires a multidimensional educational approach that integrates literacy, digital, and self-learning competencies. In this context, mentoring proves to be an effective pedagogical strategy, thanks to its personalized guidance and its ability to enhance individual skills.

Mentoring and key competences for the prevention of functional illiteracy

Mentoring, within an integrated and personalized educational approach, emerges as a particularly effective strategic methodology, as it allows individuals with limited competencies to be supported by an experienced guide who facilitates not only the recovery of basic skills but also the enhancement of transversal abilities and the promotion of greater autonomy in learning.

Defined as an educational relationship based on individualized support and the experiential transfer of knowledge and skills, mentoring goes beyond the mere transmission of information, fostering a process of personal and professional growth built on mutual trust and intrinsic motivation (Garvey, Stokes & Megginson, 2018). Educational mentoring finds solid theoretical foundations in Vygotsky's pedagogy (1978), which posits that learning is a social process that occurs through interaction with more competent individuals within the zone of proximal development. In this perspective, the mentor acts as a mediator between the mentee's current level of competence and their potential for development, providing gradual support that enables learners to progressively acquire autonomy and critical thinking skills.

A distinctive feature of mentoring, compared to other educational approaches, is its ability to flexibly respond to the specific needs of beneficiaries, adapting content and teaching strategies to the contexts in which they operate.

This approach has proven particularly effective in addressing functional illiteracy, as it allows intervention at multiple levels: from improving reading and textual comprehension skills to strengthening numerical and digital competencies and fostering higher-order cognitive abilities such as critical thinking and problem-solving (Rhodes, 2020). Empirical evidence suggests that mentoring programs have a significant impact on the development of basic skills and the social inclusion of individuals at risk of educational and occupational exclusion.

Studies conducted at both European and international levels have demonstrated that mentoring can reduce school dropout rates, improve academic performance, and facilitate professional integration, particularly among the most vulnerable groups, such as NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), adults with low levels of education, and individuals from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds (Eby et al., 2013). Furthermore, the effectiveness of mentoring is not limited to the individual level but extends to the community, as it fosters the creation of interpersonal and professional support networks that strengthen the sense of belonging and social participation. One of the most innovative aspects of mentoring lies in its potential to enhance key competencies for lifelong learning, as outlined by the European Commission (2018) as fundamental for ensuring social and occupational inclusion in contemporary society. In particular, three competencies are crucial in addressing functional illiteracy: functional literacy competence, digital competence, and personal and social competence.

Functional literacy competence goes beyond the ability to decode a written text; it also involves the capacity to understand, interpret, and critically evaluate information—an essential skill for active democratic participation and access to the labor market (Billett, 2014). Mentoring can facilitate this process through personalized support that enables mentees to develop effective reading strategies, improve textual comprehension, and enhance written and oral expression skills.

At the same time, digital competence is increasingly central in today's socio-economic landscape, where digitalization has profoundly transformed access to information, educational opportunities, and professional prospects. Individuals with low levels of digital literacy face difficulties not only in using technological tools but also in critically assessing online information, making them more vulnerable to misinformation and media manipulation (Selwyn, 2016).

Digital mentoring thus emerges as an effective strategy for bridging the digital divide, helping mentees develop essential digital skills such as data management, cybersecurity, and informed web navigation.

Finally, personal and social competence, along with the ability to learn to learn, is closely linked to the development of a mindset oriented toward continuous learning and adaptability to change.

Functional illiteracy is not merely a problem of inadequate education but also one of low motivation and lack of confidence in one's learning abilities. In this regard, mentoring serves as a key tool for fostering self-efficacy, understood as an individual's perception of their ability to learn and solve complex problems (Bandura, 1997). Through an educational relationship based on support and the recognition of individual potential, mentoring can enhance mentees' intrinsic motivation, encouraging a proactive attitude toward education and personal development.

Mentoring stands out as a highly effective educational methodology for the prevention and mitigation of functional illiteracy, thanks to its ability to adapt to the specific needs of individual learners and to intervene across a broad spectrum of key competencies. Its impact extends beyond the recovery of basic skills to the promotion of lifelong learning, enabling individuals to successfully navigate the challenges of contemporary society. In

light of these considerations, it is essential to promote and support educational policies that integrate mentoring into training pathways, recognizing its strategic value for social and occupational inclusion.

An integrated mentoring model

Functional illiteracy requires interventions that go beyond traditional educational strategies, adopting a systemic and inclusive approach. In this context, mentoring emerges as an effective methodology for fostering personalized learning and the development of transversal skills. The proposed model is structured on three levels—educational, professional, and intergenerational digital—to address specific challenges and promote social and professional inclusion. This holistic approach not only fills educational gaps but also strengthens self-directed learning and adaptability in an evolving society (Bozeman & Feeney, 2019). Educational mentoring, the first level of intervention, targets students who, despite attending school, do not acquire adequate skills for their future education and employment.

The phenomenon of implicit dropout, well-documented in the literature, demonstrates that formal access to education alone is insufficient to ensure academic success and the acquisition of key competencies (Biesta, 2010). Educational mentoring is based on personalized support, in which the mentor assumes the role of a learning facilitator, offering not only cognitive but also emotional and motivational support. Mentoring activities in the school setting are structured through active methodologies such as peer tutoring, experiential workshops, and problem-based learning—approaches that have proven highly effective in enhancing students' literacy and digital skills (Topping, 2017). Creating a relational and motivating learning environment in which students feel supported and valued is a crucial factor in preventing school dropout and improving learning quality (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Professional mentoring represents the second level of the model and focuses on adults undergoing professional transitions, such as unemployed workers, individuals undergoing reskilling, or those seeking labor market reintegration. In an increasingly unstable job market characterized by the continuous need for skill updates, professional mentoring serves as a fundamental tool for enhancing individuals' adaptability and employability. It is based on an approach that integrates individual coaching, training in transversal skills, and the development of professional networks (Kram & Ragins, 2007). Specifically, professional mentoring focuses on strengthening soft skills, such as effective communication, time management, problem-solving, and resilience—elements considered crucial for a sustainable long-term career (Clutterbuck, 2014). Furthermore, the integration of digital tools and e-learning platforms enhances the accessibility of professional mentoring, ensuring greater flexibility and personalization of interventions (Bynner & Parsons, 2001).

Finally, intergenerational digital mentoring constitutes the third level of the proposed model and aims to reduce the digital divide between generations, promoting social inclusion and autonomy among older adults. The increasing digitalization of society has created new forms of exclusion for those lacking adequate digital skills, limiting their

ability to access public services, manage online information, and actively participate in social and cultural life (Prensky, 2010). Intergenerational mentoring, based on interactions between young mentors and older mentees, not only facilitates digital skill acquisition but also fosters dialogue and knowledge exchange between generations, thereby strengthening community bonds (Gilleard & Higgs, 2005).

Research indicates that digital mentoring can enhance not only older adults' technical skills but also their psychological and social well-being, reducing feelings of isolation and increasing their sense of self-efficacy (Charness & Boot, 2009). At the same time, young participants in mentoring programs develop relational and empathetic skills, reinforcing their awareness of active citizenship and intergenerational solidarity.

The proposed integrated model is based on best practices from European and international initiatives, such as the "Mentors for Resilience" project (Oxfam Italy, 2023) and "FEINAMC" (CESIE, 2023), which have demonstrated the effectiveness of mentoring in fostering social inclusion and transversal skill development. A structured three-level model enables a flexible and personalized approach to addressing functional illiteracy. Mentoring promotes lifelong learning, social inclusion, and both personal and professional growth, fostering meaningful connections between mentors and mentees. For effective implementation, the active involvement of institutions, businesses, and civil society is essential in building inclusive and sustainable learning ecosystems.

Conclusions

Functional illiteracy profoundly affects democratic participation, access to employment, and the informed exercise of citizenship rights. Rather than being merely an individual deficit, it reflects structural factors related to socio-economic inequalities, the limitations of traditional educational models, and the rapidly evolving skill demands of the knowledge society (Hamilton & Hillier, 2021). Digitalization and increasing educational disparities heighten the risk of exclusion, making it essential to adopt an educational approach centered on functional literacy, digital competence, and lifelong learning.

In this context, mentoring emerges as an effective and flexible educational tool capable of addressing the needs of diverse social groups. The integrated model proposed here is structured on three levels—educational, professional, and intergenerational digital—offering targeted support. Educational mentoring helps prevent implicit dropout and strengthens learning motivation (Cox, 2021). Professional mentoring facilitates reskilling and labor market integration, while intergenerational digital mentoring reduces the technological divide and promotes greater social inclusion (Philip & Spratt, 2007).

However, large-scale implementation of mentoring faces obstacles, including the fragmentation of initiatives and the lack of integration into educational and training systems. Many programs operate sporadically, with limited resources and without a long-term strategic vision. To make mentoring truly impactful, it must be recognized as a central lever for functional literacy and lifelong learning, fostering synergies among schools, universities, businesses, and the third sector (Zachary, 2022). The creation of structured networks and the training of qualified mentors are essential to ensuring

effective and replicable interventions, as is the development of monitoring methodologies based on scientific evidence.

The growing emphasis of EU policies on lifelong learning presents an opportunity to integrate mentoring into educational and training programs, reinforcing its role as a tool for individual and collective empowerment (Hobson et al., 2009). To achieve systemic impact, institutional commitment is required, including structural investments and targeted educational policies that promote inclusion. Ultimately, mentoring remains a promising strategy for combating functional illiteracy and fostering active participation in contemporary society. Its adoption as an integral part of educational and training policies can contribute to building a more equitable system, ensuring inclusive and accessible education for all.

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