

Confiscated assets and PCTO: legality against school dropout

Beni confiscati e PCTO: legalità contro la dispersione scolastica

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Abstract

The use of assets confiscated from organized crime represents an educational resource of great value, capable of transforming symbolic places of illegality into spaces of legality, training and growth for the new generations. By integrating confiscated assets into the Pathways for Transversal Skills and Orientation (PCTO), students are offered a concrete opportunity for learning, development of transversal skills and career guidance. These paths not only promote the recovery of skills and the strengthening of the link with the territory, but are also a powerful tool in the fight against school dropout, offering experiences that bring students closer to the world of work and motivate them to continue their educational path. The article explores how the reuse of these assets in PCTOs can stimulate values of active citizenship and build a more just and supportive future.

Keywords: PCTO; confiscated assets; school dropout.

Sintesi

L'uso dei beni confiscati alla criminalità organizzata rappresenta una risorsa educativa di grande valore, capace di trasformare luoghi simbolo di illegalità in spazi di legalità, formazione e crescita per le nuove generazioni. Integrando i beni confiscati nei Percorsi per le Competenze Trasversali e l'Orientamento (PCTO), si offre agli studenti un'opportunità concreta di apprendimento, di sviluppo di competenze trasversali e di orientamento professionale. Questi percorsi non solo favoriscono il recupero di competenze e il rafforzamento del legame con il territorio, ma sono anche uno strumento potente nella lotta contro la dispersione scolastica, offrendo esperienze che avvicinano gli studenti al mondo del lavoro e li motivano a proseguire nel loro percorso educativo. L'articolo esplora come il riutilizzo di questi beni nei PCTO possa stimolare valori di cittadinanza attiva e creare presupposti per un futuro più giusto e solidale.

Parole chiave: PCTO; beni confiscati; dispersione scolastica.

1. Introduction

School dropout is a worrying phenomenon that, unfortunately, continues to negatively mark the path of many young people and involves the entire educational system. It manifests itself when students, for various reasons, decide to interrupt their studies before obtaining a degree, with serious consequences on both the individual and social levels (AGIA, 2022; Batini & Benvenuto, 2016): according to Batini, the causes of school dropout are many and vary from economic hardship to family hardship, from deficiencies in the school system to lack of motivation and career guidance.

When a student drops out of school, the risk of unemployment, poverty and juvenile deviance increases, which also has a negative impact on the country's economy and social cohesion (Pandolfi, 2017). Among the main reasons, there is the difficulty in adapting to the school context, which may result from a less than inclusive teaching approach or a lack of motivation on the part of students (Alivernini & Lucidi, 2011; Batini & Bartolucci, 2016). At times, the perceived lack of relevance of schooling in daily life may lead students to view education as an obstacle rather than an opportunity. Similarly, difficult family situations, such as economic hardship, relationship problems or the presence of mistreatment, can compromise students' emotional well-being and prevent them from focusing on their studies (Batini & D'Ambrosio, 2008). Again, lack of social and relational support within school, such as a fragile bond with teachers or the absence of reference figures, can increase the sense of isolation and foster detachment from the educational context. In addition, low self-esteem and difficulty in learning can make the student vulnerable to feelings of frustration and failure, fueling the perception of not being a "good fit" for school and promoting the decision to drop out (Alivernini et al., 2017). The conjunction of these factors, combined with a social and cultural context that does not always value education, creates fertile ground for the phenomenon of school dropout, which can have long-term consequences for the personal, professional, and social development of the individuals involved (Fabri et al., 2022). Early school leaving affects all countries of the European Union and is of great importance in the international educational context today (Capperucci, 2016).

According to Eurostat, the school dropout rate in the European Union in 2023 was 9.5%, with significant variations between member countries. Countries such as Croatia, Greece, Poland and Ireland recorded rates below 5%, while Romania (16.6%), Spain (13.7%), Germany (12.8%) and Hungary (11.6%) presented the highest rates. In Italy, the dropout rate was 10.5% in 2023, down from 11.5% in 2022 and 12.7% in 2021. However, this figure remains above the European target of 9% set for 2030. It is important to note that despite the overall improvement, there are significant regional differences within countries. For example, in Italy, school dropout is more pronounced in large cities, highlighting the need for targeted interventions at the local level (Colombo, 2015).

Several potential and concrete actions have been taken over the past few years to address this troubling phenomenon. One important example is the reuse of property confiscated from crime to structure Pathways for Transversal Skills and Orientation (PCTO) (Belfiore et al., 2023). By allocating these assets to educational and social projects, such as school support centers, workshops, or cultural and sports activities, spaces for inclusion and growth are created for young people. These interventions not only foster learning, but also promote legality and social integration, reducing the risk of school dropout and contributing to community well-being.

2. Confiscated property and legality

Confiscated assets, which range from farmland to real estate to companies and businesses, are the fruit of policies to combat the Mafia and other forms of organized crime. These assets symbolically represent the fight against crime and the return of illegally taken resources to the community. Their use should not be limited to administrative management or sale, but should aim to create social and cultural development opportunities for local communities.

The reuse of confiscated property in the policies implemented by national and regional governments has taken on an extensive meaning, contemplating the possibility of economic purposes for the social actors identified by the legislation (Giannone, 2014; Sanfelice di Bagnoli, 2014). In this perspective, the reuse of confiscated property also takes on an extraordinary educational value, representing a fundamental resource for promoting the culture of legality within schools (Perretta, 2013). By transforming these assets into educational spaces, schools can offer students a unique opportunity for reflection and growth, making them understand that the value of legality is not only theoretical, but translates into concrete actions that can positively change society (Mannese, 2021). Through projects involving the recovery and enhancement of confiscated property, students learn to recognize and counter forms of illegality that undermine the social fabric, while developing transversal skills such as responsibility, active citizenship and a sense of community (Diana, 2010). In the Italian legal system, it is well known how the patrimonial contrast involving the ablation of assets has assumed a central role in the more comprehensive set of measures to prevent and combat organized crime. Within the “Rognoni-La Torre” (Law 64/1982), of crucial importance are the provisions of Law No. 109/1996, which prescribe the reuse of assets for purposes of a social nature. There is a shift from an exclusively repressive field of countering criminal organizations, to a more comprehensive action of restoring and actively promoting legality to be realized both from a symbolic point of view and as new possibilities for development (Letizi, 2014).

Many experiences born from the reuse of confiscated property, precisely from community building, have concretized the possibility of defining possible alternatives in realities also placed in a condition of marginality determined by very complex territorial contexts, marked by criminal violence and various environmental difficulties. Confiscated property, taken away from clans and returned to a community that must take part in the reuse activities that are carried out, becomes a concretization of the “principle of legality” (Selmo, 2014), and as such, is a place of “Democracy” that opposes criminal violence with civic participation and defines forms of social economy as an antidote to the criminal economy. The social reuse of a villa, a house, a piece of land, a company, once spaces of concretization of mafia choices and business, requires awareness and responsibility, teaches us to put “the other” back at the center of our actions, to recognize him and with him to recognize ourselves, allows us to rebuild a “feeling of community”. Confiscated property, as shown by many experiences throughout Italy, can determine real opportunities apt to define and implement a new and different model of territorial development that, starting from the investment on relational good, is also able to generate opportunities for economic growth.

3. Confiscated property as an opportunity to build an educating community

Within the scenario described above, the school takes on a decisive role, especially in its

overall educational commitment on and for legality. One can observe, on the one hand, the growth of students' awareness of their role in building communities free from the mafia yoke, and on the other hand, the meeting of the youngest with realities that, through doing, concretize the principles of legality, social solidarity, inclusion, and sustainability. Confiscated properties are transformed into real laboratories of active citizenship, in which young people are called to take an active and participatory role (Bartolucci et al., 2018).

For this structural relationship between schools and experiences of reuse of confiscated property to be realized, different strategies can be defined and different tools used. First, Didactic Learning Units (UDA) can be structured in the different subject areas related to these experiences: civic education, political and business economy, sociology etc. (Brambilla, 2022). Still, educational institutions can structure service learning actions as a “pedagogical proposal that combines Service (active citizenship, solidarity actions, commitment in favor of the community) with Learning (the development of both social and, above all, disciplinary skills), so that learners can develop their knowledge and skills through a supportive service to the community” (De Nola, 2018; Mortari, 2017a). Evident, then, as well as demonstrated by some experiences already gained, are also the possibilities of implementing Pathways for Transversal Skills and Orientation (PCTO, as regulated with the guidelines adopted by Italian Ministry of Instruction, University and Research (MIUR) Decree 774 of September 4, 2019) on these assets. A PCTO implemented within a confiscated property reused according to the principles outlined so far, makes people acquire specific skills in the areas of self-entrepreneurship and cooperative entrepreneurship, shows the possibilities of sustainable and inclusive development, attentive to environmental, social, legality and safety issues in the workplace (Amoia, 2021). In addition, in many experiences of reuse, realizing forms of return to social contractility of people from areas of disadvantage, attitudes and skills for inclusion are highlighted, which can be decisive for the prevention of school dropout (Bertuletti & Massagli, 2019).

The Italian experience of the social reuse of assets confiscated from organized crime represents a peculiar model at an international level, but it is possible to trace analogies and differences with practices developed in other contexts, including European ones. In Italy, the reuse of confiscated assets for educational, social and community purposes is based on a solid regulatory basis (Law 109/1996) and on a pedagogical vision that promotes legality, inclusion and active citizenship through concrete activities, often integrated into school curricula (Amoia, 2021; Bartolucci et al., 2018). In other European countries, although there is no similar and structured legislative framework, similar approaches can be found in the field of education for democratic citizenship, promoted by supranational institutions such as the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2016), which emphasizes the importance of involving young people in educational experiences related to civic participation and a sense of community belonging. In Spain, for example, educational projects have been developed that promote historical memory and social justice through urban regeneration and the participatory use of public spaces, as in the case of initiatives in the popular neighborhoods of Barcelona or Seville (Ribas-Mateos, 2020). In France, experiences of *éducation populaire* have been intertwined with actions of active citizenship and social cohesion, especially in the *banlieues*, promoting youth protagonism in contexts at risk (Dubet, 2002). However, the Italian model stands out for the direct connection between the fight against organized crime, concrete reuse of assets and structured educational planning, which translates into formalized training courses such as PCTO, UDA and service learning (Brambilla, 2022; Mortari, 2017a). Outside Europe, experiences in the United States and Latin America show methodological affinities, albeit in different socio-political contexts.

In the United States, community-based learning and service learning programs have developed mainly in the university environment, promoting civic engagement as a tool for training in democracy (Furco, 1996; Youniss & Yates, 1997). In Colombia and Mexico, on the other hand, the conversion of violent urban spaces into educational places has taken on the meaning of symbolic and real resistance against the culture of crime, in line with Freire's (1970) critical pedagogical approach. In all these cases, it emerges that the interaction between territory, education and social justice represents a fundamental lever for the construction of active citizenship. However, only in Italy is this interaction grafted onto a legal-institutional system that institutionalizes the social restitution of confiscated assets, creating the conditions for an experiential education rooted in the concept of democratic legality (De Nola, 2018; Mezirow, 2000; Sen, 1999).

4. PCTO and reuse of confiscated property

Pathways for Transversal Skills and Orientation (PCTO) are an innovative training proposal introduced in the Italian educational system, with the aim of fostering the development of students' skills and preparing them in a more targeted way for the world of work. The regulatory evolution of these pathways has undergone several stages, starting with Legislative Decree No. 77 of April 15, 2005, which introduced the possibility for secondary school students to carry out school-to-work alternation activities. However, the real evolution materialized with Law 107/2015, better known as the "Good School", which formalized school-to-work alternation as mandatory for all upper secondary schools. This measure marked a significant change, making the relationship between school and the world of work more structured, with the involvement of businesses and local institutions in projects that allowed students to acquire practical skills and career guidance. Law 107/2015, in fact, made it compulsory for students to carry out a certain number of hours of alternance, stipulating that these should be linked to targeted training projects, combining theoretical knowledge with practical experience. The law was intended to foster the integration of young people into the world of work and to improve their awareness of the professional opportunities available to them, but also to develop soft skills, such as the ability to work in teams, solve problems in real situations and manage their future careers. However, over the years, the alternation model has encountered several criticisms, especially regarding the quality of projects offered and the real impact on young people. In 2019, with the Guidelines on Pathways for Transversal Skills and Orientation, the regulations were revised, introducing a greater focus on the quality of the pathways and specifying that the activities should be designed in collaboration with schools, with the aim of ensuring adequate preparation and orientation for students, rather than being limited to a purely work experience. Subsequently, in 2020, the Ministry of Education reiterated the need for continuous updating of teaching methodologies, extending the horizon of orientation, which was no longer to be limited to just school-to-work alternation, but included activities that could also offer students opportunities to reflect on their personal inclinations and career prospects. Today, the PCTO concept is the result of a combination of educational objectives, soft skills and guidance. By integrating confiscated assets into Pathways for Transversal Skills and Orientation (PCTO), an educational opportunity is created that goes beyond traditional teaching, offering students a concrete and engaging form of learning (Tino & Grion, 2019).

The integration of confiscated property into PCTOs not only provides a concrete learning opportunity for students but also has the potential to prevent students from dropping out of

school by providing them with a stimulating and productive environment (Biasini & Boscaini, 2023). In this way, young people are involved in projects that value work, legality and civic engagement, teaching them skills that make them more aware and motivated to continue their schooling. In addition, the use of confiscated property in educational and social projects helps to root the concept of legality in the social fabric, giving a strong and clear message to young people (Belfiore et al., 2023). Participating in initiatives that transform assets taken from crime into useful resources for the community can provide students with a sense of belonging to a community that stands up to the underworld and works together for a better future. This process contributes to changing the perception that some young people have of institutions and of the school itself, making them feel like protagonists of positive change. These assets, once linked to phenomena of illegality and organized crime, are returned to the community and transformed into places of educational and social value (Fiorucci, 2016). Their integration in PCTOs allows students to live direct and meaningful experiences, which not only foster the development of transversal skills such as problem solving, communication, teamwork and time management, but also confront them with the reality of a job that combines legality with social commitment. In addition, these training paths orient them toward the world of work, offering practical opportunities for contact with professional sectors as diverse as social agriculture, culture, sustainable tourism, and the management of social cooperatives. In this way, students gain a clearer view of their vocational inclinations and opportunities, while being motivated to complete their schooling, reducing the risk of school dropout (Bilge et al., 2014). The experience of working on confiscated property is not only an opportunity for technical and professional learning, but also represents an important life lesson, involving them in a process of civic and personal growth, teaching them the value of justice, solidarity and commitment to a more equitable and inclusive community.

5. A successful project

In the paper by Belfiore et al. (2023), a successful experience related to a PCTO involving the use of a confiscated property was illustrated, showing how this initiative generated value and opportunities for students and the community. Specific reference was made to the agriculture, food service and agribusiness sector, which has benefited greatly from the redevelopment of confiscated property through its transformation into agritourisms, restaurants and farms, thus giving students the opportunity to learn not only about farming, but also about the processing and marketing of products. There was also an opportunity to involve people in situations of hardship, offering students an extraordinary experience of social inclusion and awareness of issues of volunteerism and solidarity. Below is a summary of PCTO's activity.

5.1. Educational farm and confiscated property: cultivating hope

In the confiscated property dedicated to the memory of Alberto Varone (an innocent victim of the Camorra) in Maiano di Sessa Aurunca, on land once owned by a clan, the social cooperative "Al di là dei sogni" has realized, one of the most advanced experiences in Italy of both social economy and social and labor reintegration of people experiencing difficult conditions as a result of pathological conditions or biopsychosocial vulnerabilities (Perretta, 2013).

The confiscated property is now structured as an educational farm that is duly registered in the regional register. Cultivation of the four hectares of land is carried out through theories and practices of organic and social agriculture, and the products grown are then processed in the first organic food processing plant established on a confiscated property in Italy. The plant works both for the independent production of jams, sauces and preserves and products for third parties. For the past few years an agritourism has been open for lunches, dinners, ceremonies and events, with the availability of rooms for possible overnight stays. Both as an educational farm and as a confiscated property, the place is the subject of numerous visits (by school groups, groups, scouts, parish, associations, individuals and other social realities), becoming the object of social tourism flows that bring there about five thousand visitors each year.

The “Al di là dei sogni” cooperative is then part of the NCO Consortium (Nuova Cooperazione Organizzata) with which it carries out several social economy initiatives, starting with “Facciamo un paracco alla camorra”, the basket of products grown, processed, and made on land taken away from the clans and at other agriculture and social economy experiences, which has become the symbol of possibilities for social and personal redemption from criminal violence or complex life paths. All activities require, then, a wide-ranging communication action, first and foremost that related to new media and social channels. The company’s organization is marked by respecting the time and needs of workers, enhancing their talents and possibilities in the different areas of intervention. On the other hand, many of the cooperative’s worker-members and people with work bursaries come from paths of disability and/or fragility (mainly mental health, drug addiction, immigration) and are supported by the other members in mutualistic and non-competitive ways, pursuing a horizontal rather than vertical corporate structuring that provides more moments of confrontation and reshaping of activities, personal and group support and accompaniment. The experiences first of “Alternanza Scuola Lavoro” (work-based learning) (and then of PCTO already carried out on this asset with some schools in the area, have returned significant results, both with regard to the acquisition of specific citizenship and entrepreneurial skills, and in terms of relational and social soft skills, with particular emphasis on those related to the interrelation with individuals with disabilities and/or from disadvantaged situations. There have also been significant experiences regarding the participation of students with disabilities, highlighting, among other things, some significant elements as facilitators and barriers. Of particular relevance and functionality to the project was the multi-sectoral nature of the company that allows for the identification of different areas in which to structure the PCTO, following the aptitudes and inclinations of the students.

The educational paths developed within the educational farm have led to significant results in terms of the personal and social growth of the children involved. Through the activities carried out, the participants had the opportunity to exercise problem-solving strategic thinking, learning to observe, analyze and find solutions in a creative and concrete way. They also learned how to transform their ideas into real actions, directly experiencing the value of initiative and planning. The experience has fostered both teamwork, developing the skills of collaboration, listening and cooperation, and personal autonomy, strengthening confidence in one’s decision-making skills. The children improved their communication skills, learning to express themselves effectively, to negotiate with others and to manage conflicts in a constructive way. Another relevant aspect was the development of the ability to deal with complex and uncertain situations: participants learned to accept ambiguity and risk as part of the learning process, maintaining calm and lucidity even in unstructured contexts. They have gained greater self-awareness, initiative and perseverance, learning to

set goals, plan the actions necessary to achieve them and not to be discouraged in the face of obstacles. Finally, the experience stimulated proactivity and long-term vision, encouraging the children to take responsibility not only for themselves, but also for the well-being of the group. In this context, they learned to motivate others, to value their ideas and to recognize the contribution of each one, thus contributing to the construction of a more cohesive and aware community. Working on concrete projects, students had the opportunity to sharpen critical thinking, learning to solve complex problems creatively, individually and in groups. In addition, they worked on managing emotions and empathy, bringing out how key skills in the context of sensitive social interventions enable them to recognize and understand the difficulties of others. Through these experiences, students cultivate curiosity about the world around them, develop the ability to imagine new possibilities, and engage in creative processes that prepare them to face future challenges with a proactive and knowledgeable attitude.

6. What possible developments for the future?

According to Belfiore et al. (2023), it is possible to state that several sectors could benefit from the concrete experience of reusing confiscated property to activate pathways to PCTO. In particular, the opportunities extend to numerous areas, from the most traditional to emerging ones (Carletti, 2023; Fenza, 2024).

For example, the reuse of confiscated property for school and sports purposes, in keeping with the goals of the Italian National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), represents an extraordinary development opportunity for local communities, especially when vulnerable. Indeed, the PNRR includes significant investments in the renovation and redevelopment of public spaces, with a focus on education, social cohesion and health promotion. Transforming these assets into modern educational facilities, innovative learning spaces, and centers for sports activities can have a long-term positive impact. Schools, supported by infrastructure interventions made possible by PNRR funds, could benefit from technologically advanced classrooms and laboratories, promoting inclusive and cutting-edge teaching methodologies. At the same time, the implementation of gyms and sports facilities in confiscated areas can be key to boosting physical activity, improving the mental and physical health of young people and combating marginalization and school dropout phenomena. In particular, sports activities can become a tool for socialization, personal growth and prevention with respect to the risk of deviance, offering young people opportunities for healthy recreation and gathering spaces (Maulini et al., 2017). Moreover, the reuse of these assets through the creation of multipurpose centers for education and sports can stimulate a sense of belonging and civic responsibility, returning to the community confiscated assets that once represented symbols of illegality, now transformed into sources of value for the entire territory.

The synergy between schools, sports, and the redevelopment of confiscated property not only promotes collective wellbeing but also creates new opportunities for employment and economic growth, contributing to the process of resilience and social inclusion promoted by the PNRR. In this way, these interventions can truly become a driver of change, combining the fight against crime, education, and sustainable development, making communities stronger and more cohesive (Tarozzi, 2015).

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, the integration of confiscated assets in the Paths for Transversal Skills and Orientation (PCTO) offers a unique opportunity to transform symbols of illegality into real laboratories of civic education, training and personal growth. These assets, which represent the recovery of legality and restitution to the community, become spaces in which students can learn transversal skills that are fundamental for their professional and human development, such as responsibility, cooperation, time management and problem solving. The practical approach of the PCTO, which connects school to the world of work, allows young people to acquire direct and concrete experience, bringing them closer to the world of professional opportunities and helping to strengthen their bond with the territory. But not only that: these paths are also an effective tool against school dropouts, as they offer students motivation, a sense of belonging and a clearer vision of their future. Participation in projects involving confiscated assets helps young people understand the importance of legality and respect for the rules, transforming their commitment into an act of active citizenship. The awareness that their work can contribute to a positive change in the community encourages them to continue their educational path with greater determination and commitment. Through the experience of PCTOs on confiscated assets, a culture of legality is promoted that goes well beyond the simple application of the rules: it becomes a value that is rooted in everyday life, a value that builds and strengthens a more just and inclusive society. In this way, schools become real engines of social change, where young people are trained not only professionally, but also as responsible citizens, capable of contributing to a better future, where legality and commitment to the community are at the center of their actions.

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