

Participation in learning opportunities available in the city and perception of employability: The role of perceived inclusiveness

Partecipazione alle opportunità di apprendimento diffuse in città e percezione di occupabilità: il ruolo dell'inclusività percepita

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Abstract

This study, through a mixed-methods approach, analyses the relationship between participation in urban learning opportunities and perceived employability, considering the role of perceived inclusiveness. The results highlight positive associations between participation, inclusiveness, and perceived employability. The interviews also show how social networks, recognition, and self-efficacy make the learning experience more meaningful. The findings suggest that the effectiveness of Learning Cities depends not only on the quantity of opportunities offered, but above all on the inclusive quality of educational experiences. learning on citizens' life and work trajectories.

Keywords: lifelong learning; perceived employability; Learning City; inclusiveness; evaluation of urban education policies.

Sintesi

Questo studio, attraverso un approccio a metodi misti, analizza la relazione tra partecipazione alle opportunità di apprendimento urbano e percezione di occupabilità, considerando il ruolo dell'inclusività percepita. I risultati evidenziano associazioni positive tra partecipazione, inclusività e occupabilità percepita. Le interviste mostrano inoltre come reti sociali, riconoscimento e autoefficacia rendano l'esperienza di apprendimento più significativa. Emerge che l'efficacia delle Learning Cities dipende non solo dalla quantità di opportunità offerte, ma soprattutto dalla qualità inclusiva delle esperienze educative.

Parole chiave: apprendimento permanente; occupabilità percepita; Learning City; inclusività; valutazione delle politiche educative urbane.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the Learning Cities paradigm has increasingly emerged as a central conceptual and operational framework for understanding the role of urban education policies in promoting sustainable development, lifelong learning, and social cohesion. Based on the guidelines developed by the Unesco Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL, 2015; 2017), Learning Cities are conceived as territorial systems capable of intentionally and coordinately mobilizing formal, non-formal, and informal educational resources to ensure learning opportunities for all citizens throughout the lifespan.

Within this perspective, the city is no longer viewed merely as a logistical setting for education, but rather as a complex learning ecosystem in which a plurality of actors, spaces, and practices contribute to the construction of skills, identities, and social capital. Libraries, museums, civic centers, associations, social innovation spaces, employment services, and cultural initiatives function as nodes in a distributed educational network that significantly expands the traditional boundaries of education, fostering situated, collaborative, and experiential learning (Kearns, 2015). Research on learning ecosystems and learning regions has further shown that such territorial configurations can generate positive effects not only in terms of skill development, but also with respect to civic participation, social inclusion, and local development (Benneworth & Hospers, 2007).

Despite the growing diffusion of Learning City strategies and the increasing number of cities joining the Global Network of Learning Cities, both academic literature and policy practice continue to highlight persistent difficulties in rigorously evaluating the impact of these policies. In particular, it remains challenging to systematically measure the effects of urban learning experiences on individual and social outcomes that are inherently multidimensional, processual, and context-dependent (Desjardins, 2020; Schuller & Watson, 2009). Evaluation approaches tend to privilege structural and quantitative indicators such as the number of activities, participants, or instructional hours — at the expense of a deeper understanding of the processes through which learning produces meaningful effects on adult citizens' life trajectories (Boeren, 2016).

Among the outcomes potentially influenced by urban learning policies, employability represents a dimension of particular relevance for both scholarly debate and public policy. Employability is widely recognized as a complex psychosocial construct that integrates skills, personal resources, adaptability, social capital, and perceptions of labor market opportunities (Fugate et al., 2004; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). From this perspective, participation in non-formal and informal learning activities may contribute not only to the development of technical skills, but also to the strengthening of self-efficacy, confidence, and the ability to navigate labor markets characterized by uncertainty and frequent transitions (Tomlinson, 2017).

However, lifelong learning research has consistently shown that the benefits of participation are unevenly distributed. Inequalities in access and participation remain a significant concern, particularly for adults with fragmented educational pathways, precarious employment conditions, or prior experiences of exclusion from formal learning contexts (Rubenson, 2018; Rubenson & Elfert, 2015). In this regard, the inclusiveness of learning opportunities becomes a critical issue. While Learning City policies explicitly emphasize equitable access and barrier reduction, the actual inclusiveness of initiatives can vary considerably depending on economic, cultural, communicative, and organizational

factors, profoundly shaping participants' subjective experiences and the meanings attributed to learning.

Several studies have emphasized that inclusiveness should not be understood solely in terms of formal access, but also as a perceived experience of welcome, recognition, and legitimation (Illeris, 2014; Desjardins & Rubenson, 2013). Perceived inclusiveness may influence motivation to participate, continuity of engagement, and individuals' ability to translate learning into symbolic and practical resources relevant to their life and work contexts.

Against this background, the present study examines the relationship between participation in learning opportunities available in the city and perceived employability, specifically exploring the role of perceived inclusiveness as a key mediating dimension. Through a mixed-methods research design, the study aims to contribute to the development of evaluation approaches that integrate standardized indicators with a deeper understanding of the experiential and relational processes characterizing urban learning, offering evidence relevant to both academic debate and the design and assessment of urban education policies.

2. Methodological framework and research design

The study was conducted in Italy, within a medium-to-large urban context actively engaged in the implementation of Learning City policies inspired by the Unesco framework. The city is characterised by a diversified socio-economic structure and a dense network of cultural, educational and third-sector organisations contributing to the local learning ecosystem.

Data collection took place in Italian. The questionnaire was administered in Italian to ensure accessibility and comprehension for participants, while the qualitative interviews were conducted in Italian and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis. When necessary, excerpts used for reporting purposes were translated into English by the authors. The study adopted a convergent mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative and qualitative components in order to examine, in a complementary manner, the relationship between participation in urban learning opportunities, perceived inclusivity, and perceived employability (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This approach proved particularly suitable given the complexity of the Learning City construct, which requires methodological tools capable of capturing both measurable outcomes and experiential, interpretative dimensions.

3. Sample and inclusion criteria

The quantitative component involved a sample of 157 adult citizens, selected according to the following inclusion criteria:

- age 18 years or older;
- residence or stable domicile within the urban area involved in the Learning City strategy;
- participation, within the previous 12 months, in at least one non-formal or informal learning initiative promoted within the urban learning ecosystem (e.g. library-based activities, civic laboratories, short courses, cultural or guidance initiatives);

- ability to independently understand and complete the questionnaire.

The sample was heterogeneous in terms of age, educational attainment, and employment status, in line with the aim of Learning Cities to engage diverse segments of the adult population. This heterogeneity allowed for the analysis of perceived employability in relation to different biographical and professional profiles. The sample included adult participants with heterogeneous socio-demographic profiles. With regard to age, participants ranged from early adulthood to later stages of the working life. In terms of gender, the sample included both male and female participants. Educational attainment varied from lower secondary education to higher education degrees, reflecting the inclusive orientation of Learning City initiatives. Employment status was also diversified and included employed individuals, unemployed participants, and individuals in transitional or precarious work conditions. This diversity was considered a relevant element for analysing perceived employability in relation to different life trajectories and labour market positions. For the qualitative component, a subsample of participants was selected using maximum variation criteria (different levels of participation, age, and employment status), in order to explore a wide range of experiences and perspectives.

4. Quantitative instruments

The administered questionnaire comprised three main sections.

Self-Perceived Employability Scale (SPE)

Perceived employability was measured using the Self-Perceived Employability Scale (SPE) developed by Rothwell and Arnold (2007). The scale consists of items assessing individuals' subjective perceptions of their ability to obtain, maintain, or improve employment, taking into account both personal resources and perceived opportunities within the labour market.

The SPE is widely used in the literature and demonstrates adequate psychometric properties. In the present study, the scale showed good internal consistency, in line with that reported by the original authors.

Participation in urban learning opportunities

Participation was assessed through a set of ad hoc items designed to measure:

- the number of types of urban learning activities attended;
- the frequency of participation over the previous 12 months.

Based on these items, a composite participation index was constructed and used in the analyses as a continuous variable.

Perceived inclusivity Perceived inclusivity was assessed through items investigating:

- economic accessibility;
- absence of cultural and symbolic barriers;
- clarity of information;
- organisational flexibility;
- perceptions of welcome and non-judgement.

The items were aggregated into a synthetic index of perceived inclusivity, consistent with the principles outlined in the Unesco guidelines for Learning Cities (UIL, 2015; 2017).

5. Description of the intervention

The intervention analysed was embedded within an urban Learning City strategy inspired by the principles outlined by the Unesco Institute for Lifelong Learning (2015; 2017), which conceptualises the city as an integrated educational ecosystem. This strategy did not take the form of a single structured programme, but rather of a coordinated set of initiatives distributed across the urban area and aimed at facilitating adult citizens' access to non-formal and informal learning opportunities.

The urban learning ecosystem under analysis included activities promoted by a wide range of institutional and third-sector actors, such as public libraries, cultural centres, associations, social innovation spaces, guidance services and civic initiatives. These actors contributed, in different ways, to the construction of a widespread educational offer characterised by a high degree of heterogeneity in terms of content, formats, duration and modes of participation.

The activities offered included, among others, thematic workshops, cultural enrichment meetings, short digital literacy pathways, guidance and career support initiatives, participatory events and collaborative learning spaces. Despite their diversity, these initiatives shared a common orientation towards the development of transversal competences, particularly digital, communicative, relational and collaborative skills, which are increasingly relevant in contemporary employment contexts. At the same time, the intervention aimed to strengthen citizens' orientation capacities by fostering reflexivity with regard to their competences, aspirations and professional trajectories.

A qualifying feature of the intervention was the effort to ensure conditions of accessibility and inclusivity through the reduction of economic barriers, the territorial proximity of initiatives and a degree of organisational flexibility. In line with the principles of Learning Cities, activities were generally free of charge or low-cost, located in easily accessible public spaces, and designed to encourage the participation of adults with differing levels of education, professional experience and time availability (UIL, 2015; 2017).

From a pedagogical perspective, the intervention was characterised by an approach oriented towards valuing participants' experiences, recognising prior learning, and creating non-judgemental learning environments. These elements are particularly relevant when engaging adult citizens who may have experienced exclusion or marginalisation from formal educational contexts over the course of their life trajectories.

It is important to emphasise that the present research did not assess the effectiveness of a single initiative or a unitary programme, but rather the overall experience of citizens' participation in the urban learning ecosystem. This methodological choice reflects a systemic conception of the Learning City, according to which the impact of learning policies does not emerge from isolated interventions, but from the dynamic interaction among multiple opportunities, social relationships and educational contexts distributed across the urban space.

From this perspective, the intervention was understood as an enabling environment, capable of offering citizens recurring opportunities for learning, social network building and the strengthening of personal resources. The analysis therefore focused less on formal enrolment in specific programmes and more on the subjective perception of the participation experience and on the meanings attributed by citizens to their involvement within the Learning City.

6. Quantitative results

The quantitative component involved a sample of 157 adult citizens who completed a questionnaire including the Self-Perceived Employability Scale (Rothwell & Arnold, 2007), together with items related to participation in urban learning opportunities and the perceived inclusivity of the initiatives. The self-perceived employability scale showed good internal consistency in the analysed sample ($\alpha > .80$), in line with evidence reported in the relevant literature.

Descriptive analyses reveal a heterogeneous distribution of self-perceived employability scores, with mean values located in the medium-to-high range of the scale and substantial variability across participants. This variability reflects the plurality of biographical and occupational profiles represented in the sample and is consistent with the complex and multidimensional nature of employability as a psychosocial construct, which integrates individual resources, contextual perceptions and expectations of occupational transitions (Fugate et al., 2004).

With regard to participation in urban learning opportunities, the data indicate differentiated levels of engagement. A substantial proportion of participants reported having taken part, over the previous 12 months, in more than one type of activity (for example, cultural initiatives, thematic workshops, digital literacy pathways or guidance activities), while others reported more occasional participation. The composite participation index therefore shows a sufficiently wide distribution to allow for the analysis of associations with the other variables considered.

Correlational analyses show a positive and statistically significant relationship between the level of participation in urban learning activities and self-perceived employability ($r \approx .30-.35$, $p < .01$), suggesting that greater exposure to distributed learning contexts is associated with higher confidence in one's ability to enter, remain in, or reposition oneself within the labour market. This association, of moderate magnitude, indicates that participation does not act as an exclusive factor, but rather represents a relevant resource within a broader set of determinants of perceived employability.

A further significant result concerns the role of perceived inclusivity. The inclusivity index is positively and significantly associated both with participation in urban learning opportunities ($r \approx .40$, $p < .001$) and with self-perceived employability ($r \approx .35-.40$, $p < .001$). In particular, participants who perceive initiatives as accessible, welcoming and aligned with their needs tend to report higher levels of perceived employability, regardless of the intensity of their participation.

Overall, these quantitative findings suggest that the impact of urban learning opportunities on perceived employability cannot be attributed solely to the frequency of participation, but is closely linked to the quality of the lived experience, and in particular to the degree of inclusivity perceived in the initiatives.

7. Qualitative results

The qualitative data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach following an inductive coding strategy (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis proceeded through several stages. First, interview transcripts were read multiple times to ensure familiarisation with the data. Initial open coding was then conducted, identifying meaningful segments related to participants' experiences of learning, inclusivity and employability. In a second phase,

codes were grouped into broader categories through a process of constant comparison, leading to the development of preliminary themes. These themes were subsequently refined, defined and organised into higher-order macro-themes capturing recurrent patterns across participants. To enhance the reliability of the analysis, coding decisions were discussed among the researchers and iteratively reviewed. Discrepancies were resolved through consensus, and particular attention was paid to ensuring coherence between data extracts and the thematic structure. This process resulted in the identification of three main macro-themes.

The first macro-theme concerns the role of urban initiatives as spaces of personal recognition and legitimation. Participants frequently describe learning activities as contexts in which they can feel competent, listened to and valued, even in the absence of high educational qualifications or linear employment trajectories. This aspect emerges particularly strongly among those who report experiences of employment precarity or distance from formal education contexts. The symbolic recognition of one's abilities is described as a factor contributing to the strengthening of self-confidence and to the perception of possessing resources that are transferable to the labour market.

The second macro-theme relates to the function of urban learning opportunities in the construction and reinforcement of social and professional networks. Many participants emphasise how relationships developed during the activities represent a significant resource, not only in terms of social interaction, but also as channels for accessing information, contacts and employment opportunities. In several cases, urban learning is described as a "bridging" space between the educational and occupational domains, in which the sharing of experiences and competences supports processes of career orientation and professional reactivation.

The third macro-theme directly concerns the perceived inclusivity of the initiatives. Participants attach particular importance to elements such as the absence of judgement, organisational flexibility, territorial proximity and attention to individual needs. When these conditions are present, the learning experience is described as facilitating both sustained participation and the development of a more positive perception of future opportunities. Conversely, the presence of symbolic barriers (overly technical language, implicit expectations of prior competence) or organisational barriers (rigid schedules, lack of clear information) tends to reduce engagement and the relevance attributed to the activities, thereby limiting their impact on perceived employability.

Overall, the qualitative findings confirm and enrich the results emerging from the quantitative analysis, showing that the relationship between participation in urban learning opportunities and perceived employability is mediated by processes of recognition, relationship-building and the inclusive quality of the learning experience. Perceived employability thus emerges not only as an individual outcome, but as a situated construction, rooted in interactions and in the meanings attributed to learning within the urban ecosystem.

8. Discussion

The findings of this study confirm the potential of Learning Cities as educational environments capable of influencing adult citizens' perceptions of employability, while also highlighting that such impact cannot be interpreted solely in terms of the intensity or frequency of participation. In line with recent approaches to the evaluation of lifelong

learning policies, participation emerges as transformative only when it is accompanied by favourable experiential conditions, particularly in terms of inclusivity, recognition and perceived accessibility (Boeren, 2016; Schuller & Watson, 2009).

From a quantitative perspective, the positive and statistically significant association between participation in urban learning opportunities and perceived employability, of moderate magnitude, suggests that city-based lifelong learning represents a relevant but not self-sufficient resource. This result is consistent with the literature that conceptualises employability as a dynamic and contextual construct, shaped by a plurality of individual and structural factors (Fugate et al., 2004; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). In this sense, Learning Cities appear to function as enabling contexts that contribute to strengthening psychological and orientational resources — such as confidence, adaptability and a sense of possibility — rather than producing direct and linear effects on employment outcomes.

A particularly salient finding concerns the role of perceived inclusivity. The quantitative results show that inclusivity is significantly associated with both participation and perceived employability, suggesting that the quality of the learning experience constitutes a crucial dimension in interpreting the effects of Learning City policies. This evidence reinforces the idea that inclusivity should not be considered a merely ancillary characteristic of initiatives, but rather a core mechanism through which learning becomes subjectively meaningful and potentially transformative.

The qualitative findings allow for a deeper understanding of these associations, illustrating how perceived inclusivity operates at both symbolic and relational levels. Participants' accounts of experiences of recognition and personal legitimisation indicate that urban learning can contribute to the reconstruction of a self-image as a competent and active subject, even in the presence of fragmented employment trajectories or low levels of formal education. This process appears particularly relevant to the construction of perceived employability, supporting research that emphasises the role of identity and self-efficacy in contemporary models of employability (Tomlinson, 2017).

The construction and strengthening of social and professional networks represents a further mechanism emerging from the qualitative analysis. Urban learning opportunities are described as spaces of interaction that facilitate the exchange of information, informal support and access to contacts that may be relevant in employment-related terms. These findings are consistent with approaches that highlight the role of social capital as a key component of employability, particularly in labour markets characterised by high levels of uncertainty and fragmentation (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). From this perspective, Learning Cities can be interpreted as environments that foster forms of “relational employability” that are difficult to capture through purely quantitative indicators.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings therefore highlights that the impact of Learning Cities on perceived employability depends not only on the number of opportunities offered or on participation frequency, but on the capacity of the urban ecosystem to generate experiences perceived as accessible, welcoming and meaningful. This insight aligns with critical literature on lifelong learning, which has repeatedly warned of the risk that lifelong learning policies may primarily benefit individuals who already possess greater resources, unless they are accompanied by intentional strategies of inclusion and recognition (Rubenson, 2018; Rubenson & Elfert, 2015).

From the perspective of evaluating urban educational policies, the findings of this study suggest the need to move beyond approaches predominantly centred on structural or output indicators, integrating tools capable of capturing the experiential dimension of learning.

Perceived inclusivity emerges in this regard as a particularly relevant quality indicator, able to signal not only formal access to opportunities but also their actual capacity to activate processes of agency, recognition and professional orientation.

Overall, the study contributes to the debate on Learning Cities by showing that perceived employability should be understood as a situated and relational outcome, arising from the interaction between territorial opportunities, access conditions and the meanings attributed to learning experiences. This perspective reinforces the idea that Learning Cities should not be evaluated solely as systems for the delivery of learning, but as educational ecosystems capable of shaping citizens' life and work trajectories through the inclusive quality of the experiences they offer.

9. Conclusion

This study shows that, within an urban Learning City ecosystem, greater participation in non-formal and informal learning opportunities is associated with higher levels of perceived employability. Quantitative evidence indicates that this relationship is of moderate magnitude and that perceived inclusivity is significantly related to both participation and perceived employability, suggesting that the quality of the learning experience represents a key component in understanding the impact of urban learning policies.

The integration of qualitative findings helps to clarify the processes through which this experience becomes meaningful: initiatives are described as contexts of recognition and personal legitimation, as spaces for building social and professional networks, and as enabling environments when characterised by non-judgement, flexibility and territorial proximity. From this perspective, perceived employability emerges as a situated and relational outcome, constructed through the interaction between territorial opportunities and the meanings attributed to participation.

From an applied standpoint, the findings suggest that Learning City strategies should complement indicators of provision and participation with tools capable of monitoring the experiential dimension of access, particularly through measures of perceived inclusivity (communicative clarity, accessibility, flexibility and a non-judgemental climate), which may inform the design and continuous improvement of initiatives.

The study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inferences and points to the need for longitudinal research examining changes in perceived employability in relation to repeated participation pathways. In addition, the measurement of participation through self-constructed items could be further refined by including more granular indicators of intensity, continuity and types of activities. Future research could also explore differences across subgroups (for example by employment status, age or educational attainment), clarifying for which profiles perceived inclusivity plays a more decisive role.

In sum, the findings indicate that Learning Cities can contribute to perceived employability when learning experiences are lived as accessible, welcoming and relevant, and when they activate relational and self-efficacy resources that participants recognise as transferable to their life and work trajectories.

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