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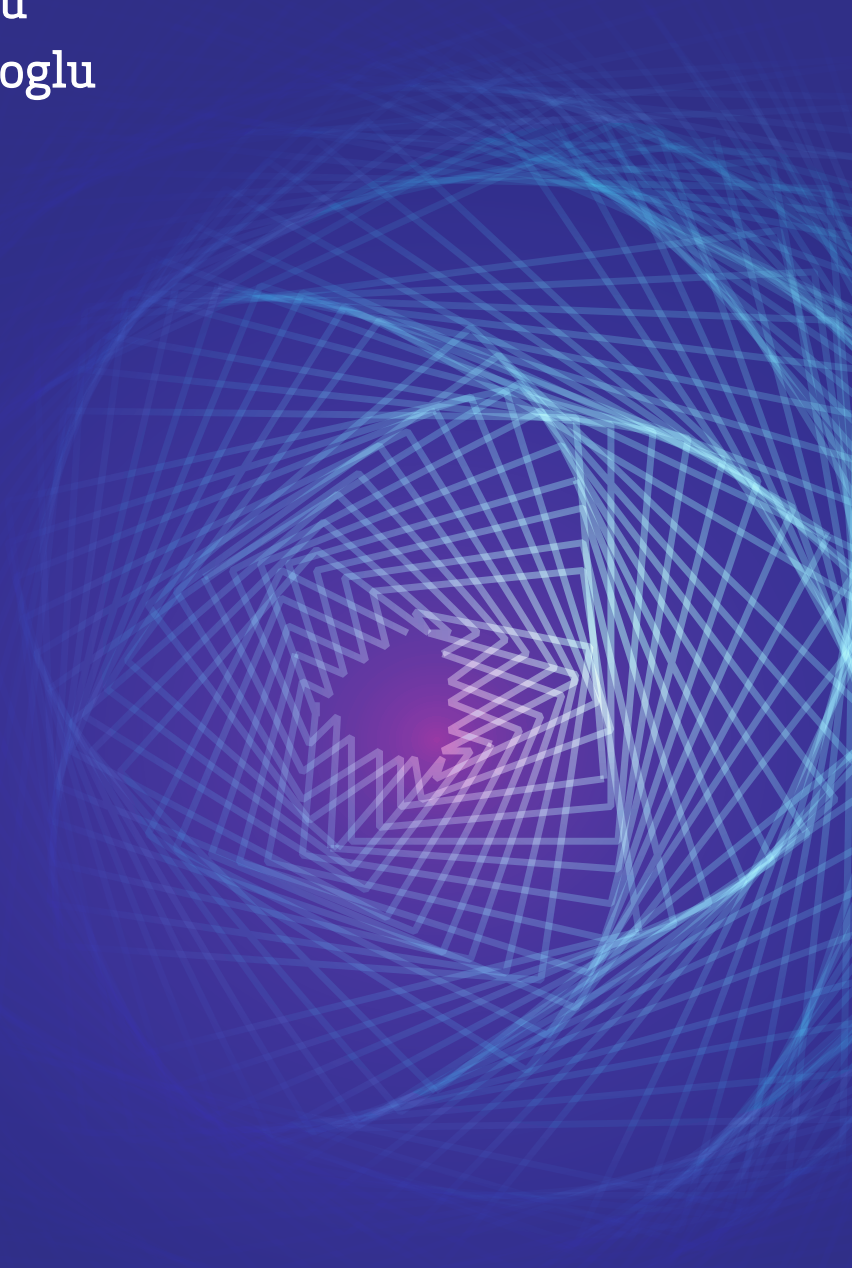
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Navigating Education in Island Spaces: Insights From Italian Minor Islands

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Abstract

Education in Italy's minor islands exists at the confluence of geography, culture, and policy, where the experience of insularity shapes not only the material conditions of schooling but also the foundations of learning itself. These islands, defined by their liminality and interdependence, face pedagogical constraints *imposed* by centralized curricula, which often fail to reflect the embedded knowledge systems, ecological particularities, and socio-cultural rhythms of insular life. This study critically examines how minor island schools mediate the tension between standardization and locality, leveraging place-based education (PBE) as a means of pedagogical resistance and cultural preservation. Through a documentary analysis of *Piani Triennali dell'Offerta Formativa* (PTOFs) from selected islands, this research explores the extent to which national education policies accommodate insular needs. Findings reveal a structural emphasis on digitalization and infrastructure renewal, driven by EU and national funding, yet a marginalization of local knowledge systems in formal curricula. While initiatives such as marine conservation programs, dialect education, and sustainable tourism studies reflect a latent desire for educational autochthony, these remain peripheral to the core curricular framework. This study advocates for a reconceptualization of insular education as a dynamic site of ecological literacy, cultural agency, and place-conscious pedagogy. By re-centering local knowledge and fostering curricular fluidity, minor island schools may emerge as laboratories of epistemic diversity, charting a path toward contextualized and transformative education in insular spaces.

Keywords: insular education, place-based learning, minor islands, cultural resilience, sustainability

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Introduction

Education in Italy's minor islands operates within a complex landscape shaped by geographic isolation, cultural richness, and environmental vulnerability. These islands face distinctive challenges due to their limited resources, dependence on tourism, and the sociocultural impacts of insularity, a reality recently acknowledged through Italy's new constitutional law on *insularità* (Frosini, 2023). This legislation formally recognizes the structural limitations of insular regions and aims to address infrastructural, economic, and social disparities. However, while *insularità* highlights the logistical and economic constraints of insular life, the role of education as a central pillar in sustaining cultural continuity, social cohesion, and ecological awareness has not been adequately considered in national discourse.

Research highlights that education in minor islands must integrate place-based approaches to support identity, resilience, and sustainability. Scholars emphasize the necessity of regional policies tailored to the specific needs of these communities. A place-based rural development study by Salvia and Quaranta (2017) underscores the importance of aligning educational policies with the environmental and cultural uniqueness of small communities. Similarly, Cotella and Brovarone (2020) explore how the Italian National Strategy for Inner Areas (SNAI) applies a place-based approach to regional development, which could serve as a model for insular education reform. National and EU policies, including the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) and the SNAI, attempt to bridge these gaps by targeting infrastructure improvements, digital access, and resource sustainability. The PNRR's *Green Islands* mission, for example, allocates funds for energy, water management, and connectivity, aiming to reduce isolation effects and enable better educational access. However, these policies remain largely infrastructure-focused, lacking emphasis on educational reforms tailored to the unique cultural and ecological needs of minor islands. This infrastructure-driven approach overlooks the potential of educational programs designed to promote environmental stewardship and local heritage preservation. Studies on small island development indicate that place-based strategies integrating traditional ecological knowledge and sustainability principles can enhance community resilience and economic self-sufficiency (Wickham et al., 2022).

In the field of pedagogical practice, insular regions like Italy's minor islands prompt a critical discussion on the role of contextually adapted education that not only conveys knowledge but also nurtures place-based identity, environmental stewardship, and community cohesion. Despite their distinct needs, Italian minor islands are subject to the centralized educational policies of mainland Italy, where standardized curricula often fail to reflect the values, histories, and ecological realities unique to these communities. Research in island education, particularly in autonomous small island states such as those in the Pacific and Caribbean, highlights the critical importance of culturally and ecologically responsive educational practices that support identity, continuity, and resilience (Sprague, 2015; Cheer et al., 2017). However, research on minor islands, which operate within the constraints of larger national systems, remains sparse, creating a significant gap in understanding how such communities can adapt educational frameworks to sustain local identity and agency.

This paper addresses this gap by examining the PTOFs, or three-year educational plans, from selected Italian minor islands, revealing how these institutions attempt to reconcile national policies with the cultural and environmental realities of insular life. Through the lenses of decolonizing and place-based educational frameworks, this study investigates how Italy's minor islands are working to uphold cultural heritage, environmental consciousness, and communal values within a standardized educational system. By focusing on the pedagogical adaptations required for these insular communities, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how education can support not only academic development but also cultural resilience, aligning with the journal's emphasis on exploring pedagogy within unique social and cultural contexts.

Literature Review

Island studies, or nissology, is an interdisciplinary field that focuses on the unique socio-cultural, economic, and ecological dynamics of island life. At the heart of nissology is the concept of *islandness*, which reframes islands not as peripheral or marginal spaces but as unique, self-

contained environments where identity, culture, and place are deeply interwoven (Baldacchino, 2006; Hay, 2006). This perspective challenges the traditional view of islands as extensions of larger mainland contexts and instead positions them as spaces with unique social and ecological systems that shape every aspect of community life, including education (Connell, 2003; Grydehøj, 2017). A growing body of research highlights that island communities experience distinct challenges, such as geographic isolation, economic reliance on finite resources, and vulnerability to external pressures like tourism and migration (Gillis, 2004; Conkling, 2007). These characteristics underscore the importance of contextually adapted educational models that address the specific needs of island communities. For example, Randall (2021) argues that the insularity and boundedness of islands create a *social laboratory* effect, where unique cultural practices and community values are developed and sustained. This localized identity is particularly important in educational contexts, where curricula can serve as mechanisms for cultural continuity, ecological stewardship, and community resilience (McCall, 1994; Selby & Kagawa, 2018).

Place-based education (PBE) is a critical framework that emphasizes learning within the local context and environment, allowing students to engage with real-world problems that directly affect their communities. Scholars have extensively documented the benefits of place-based education for island communities, particularly in fostering sustainability, cultural identity, and economic resilience (Gruenewald & Smith, 2014; Sobel, 2004). Howley, Howley, and Camper (2011) emphasize that place-based education strengthens local identity and fosters collaborative learning among island youth. Likewise, Selby and Kagawa (2018) argue that integrating environmental sustainability and cultural knowledge within island education enhances resilience. Research in Norwegian and Pacific Island contexts underscores the effectiveness of PBE in fostering sustainable education. Johansson et al. (2023) explore intergenerational education in Norwegian island communities, demonstrating the effectiveness of place-based experiential learning (Johansson et al., 2023). Gaffney and O'Neil (2019) show how community engagement through education reinforces cultural identity and sustainability.

Island education policies are shaped by a combination of national frameworks and local adaptations. The European Union's cohesion policies support educational frameworks that promote inclusivity and sustainability, particularly in regions with unique socio-cultural contexts. Article 174 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union explicitly addresses the disparities faced by insular and remote regions, advocating for targeted investments to address socio-economic imbalances due to isolation and limited resources (European Commission, 2020). Small island states often have greater autonomy over their educational frameworks, enabling them to integrate local knowledge systems into formal education. Thaman (1993) highlights how Pacific Island nations have successfully embedded indigenous knowledge in school curricula to strengthen cultural identity and promote environmental stewardship. In the Caribbean, Selby and Kagawa (2018) emphasize that culturally responsive curricula help sustain local identities and reduce out-migration by fostering strong community ties. Conversely, minor islands governed by larger national frameworks, such as those in Italy and Japan, face challenges in implementing localized educational models due to centralized control. Studies on the Hebrides in Scotland demonstrate that balancing national standards with local cultural preservation is crucial to mitigating the loss of young populations to mainland opportunities (Gillies, 2014).

While significant research has explored the intersection of island studies and education, gaps remain in understanding how minor islands within larger states can implement effective, culturally

responsive educational strategies. Future research should examine the adaptability of place-based education models within centralized curricula and explore the potential for policy changes that support educational autonomy in minor islands. This literature review situates Italian minor islands within the global discourse on island education, demonstrating the potential of place-based learning as a framework for educational development and sustainability.

Methods

This study critically examines the adaptation of Italy's national educational framework within the context of its minor islands, analyzing the PTOFs or three-year educational plans. The PTOFs serve as standardized strategic documents mandated under Legge n. 107/2015 (Law n. 107/2015), outlining each school's educational objectives, resource needs, curricular structure, and community-specific adaptations within a centralized system. By analyzing PTOFs from various minor Italian islands, such as Pantelleria, Ponza, Procida, and Lampedusa, this study aims to identify how these schools attempt to balance national educational mandates with local socio-economic, cultural, and environmental constraints.

Contextual Background

Italy's minor islands consist of 35 municipalities, with a combined population of approximately 200,000 residents, which significantly increases during the tourist season. These islands are organized into distinct archipelagos:

- Tuscan Archipelago (Elba, Giglio, Capraia)
- Campanian Archipelago (Capri)
- Phlegraean Archipelago (Ischia, Procida)
- Pontine Archipelago (Ponza, Ventotene)
- Spezzino Archipelago (Palmaria/Porto Venere)
- Maddalena Archipelago (Maddalena, Caprera, and several uninhabited islets)
- Sulcis Archipelago (Sant'Antioco, San Pietro)
- Pelagie Archipelago (Lampedusa, Linosa)
- Aeolian Archipelago (Lipari, Salina, Vulcano, Stromboli, Panarea, Alicudi, Filicudi)
- Egadi Archipelago (Favignana, Levanzo, Marettimo)

Some islands do not belong to specific archipelagos, such as the Tremiti Islands, Asinara, Ustica, and Pantelleria. It is important to note that island boundaries do not always coincide with municipal boundaries. For example, Palmaria is part of the Municipality of Porto Venere, which extends onto the mainland, while Asinara is administered by Porto Torres. Lipari manages six of the seven Aeolian Islands. The administrative fragmentation of these islands presents unique governance and infrastructural challenges, particularly in education.

Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative documentary analysis approach, focusing on PTOFs as primary data sources. Documentary analysis, as outlined by Bowen (2009), is a systematic process used to evaluate official documents to extract relevant themes and patterns. PTOFs, being standardized and legally mandated documents, offer structured insights into how schools in Italy's minor islands

navigate centralized policies while attempting to incorporate local priorities into educational planning.

Data Collection and Analysis

The PTOFs selected for analysis include those from a diverse range of minor islands, chosen based on demographic variations, geographic isolation, economic reliance, and resource availability. The selection of these islands ensures that the study captures a wide range of socio-economic and educational conditions within Italy's minor islands. A thematic analysis of the PTOFs was conducted to identify recurring patterns in how schools address the constraints and opportunities associated with island education. Key sections analyzed include:

- *Analysis of the context.* Describes the socio-economic and cultural environment, revealing specific needs and challenges.
- *School characteristics.* Outlines demographic composition, infrastructural resources, and staffing.
- *Infrastructure.* Details available physical and technological resources, often highlighting infrastructural constraints.
- *Educational Programs* Describes the curricular structure, including standardized and adapted components to address local needs.
- *Inclusive education.* Highlights practices for inclusivity, particularly important in demographically diverse insular contexts.

The structured format of PTOFs facilitates cross-case comparisons, allowing for an in-depth analysis of how different islands modify educational policies to reflect local conditions. Each document was analyzed thematically, with a focus on:

- *Integration of place-based education.* How PTOFs incorporate local cultural, ecological, and historical elements into curricula.
- *Resource allocation and infrastructure.* Identifying disparities in educational infrastructure across different islands.
- *Adaptation to socio-economic and demographic challenges.* Evaluating how schools address population fluctuations, tourism-related disruptions, and migration challenges.
- *Alignment with national policies.* Examining the extent to which PTOFs align with Italy's centralized education system while allowing for local adaptations.

The use of document analysis is justified due to the structured nature of PTOFs, which provide a comprehensive reflection of each school's strategies and limitations. Bowen (2009) emphasizes that documentary analysis allows researchers to extract rich, contextual insights from official documents while ensuring consistency in data interpretation. Furthermore, this approach aligns with Yin's (2012) case study methodology, which supports the selection of multiple cases to identify cross-cutting themes and regional variations. By systematically analyzing PTOFs from a range of Italian minor islands, this study aims to provide a detailed understanding of how insular educational institutions navigate the challenges of geographic isolation, economic dependence on tourism, and infrastructural constraints. This research contributes to the broader discourse on place-based education and policy adaptations in remote educational settings, offering insights relevant to policymakers, educators, and scholars in island studies and educational planning.

Analysis and Discussion

The PTOFs from Italy's minor islands reveal both challenges and opportunities in balancing national educational standards with the distinct needs of insular communities. By examining key themes such as resource availability, teacher retention, environmental education, localized curriculum adaptation, cultural continuity, and inclusivity, this analysis provides a comprehensive view of how these schools navigate the complexities of insular education.

Resource Availability: Addressing Logistical and Infrastructure Constraints

One of the most common themes across the PTOFs of Italian minor islands is the scarcity of resources, particularly concerning infrastructure, digital tools, and specialized learning environments. Schools such as Pantelleria's I.S. *V. Almanza* report a lack of adequate laboratory facilities for STEM education, limiting students' exposure to practical scientific learning. Similarly, Ponza's I.C. Pisacane highlights deficiencies in digital resources, hindering the integration of modern technology in classrooms. However, some institutions have successfully leveraged PNRR funds to enhance infrastructure. For instance, Procida's ITN Caracciolo has implemented School 4.0 initiatives, including digital boards and updated computer labs, improving technological integration in education. These initiatives align with findings from Bowen (2009), who emphasizes that document analysis can reveal systemic gaps between policy expectations and on-the-ground implementation.

Teacher Retention and Professional Development: Stability in Staffing

Teacher turnover remains a critical issue, particularly in more remote islands such as Lampedusa and Ustica, where it is difficult to attract and retain qualified educators. This staffing instability disrupts curricular continuity, limiting the effectiveness of long-term educational strategies. Gillies (2014) refers to this as the *island paradox*, wherein the allure of an insular lifestyle is countered by professional isolation. Conversely, islands with a stronger community-school connection, such as Sant'Antioco and La Maddalena, demonstrate more stable teaching faculties, facilitating sustained curriculum development and stronger student-teacher relationships.

Environmental Education: Integration and Challenges

Given the ecological significance of minor islands, environmental education is a key theme in many PTOFs. Schools such as Ischia and Ventotene incorporate marine conservation projects, sustainable tourism studies, and ecological monitoring activities into their curricula. Sobel (2004) highlights that place-based education enhances student engagement by grounding learning in local environmental contexts, an approach that could be more systematically applied across Italian minor islands. However, many schools report that environmental education remains supplementary rather than integral to the curriculum. Sugimoto and Nakazawa (2020) advocate for cross-curricular environmental integration to ensure that sustainability principles permeate all aspects of education. The current challenge lies in the rigidity of national curriculum structures, which limit schools' ability to fully integrate environmental literacy into standard coursework.

Localized Curriculum and Cultural Continuity: Preserving Identity

A recurring theme in the PTOFs is the desire to maintain cultural heritage while aligning with national educational mandates. Schools such as Carloforte and Egadi incorporate traditional maritime skills, dialect preservation programs, and local history modules into their curricula. This aligns with the research of Thaman (1993) and Selby and Kagawa (2018), who argue that culturally responsive education strengthens community resilience. Nevertheless, many schools categorize these cultural initiatives as extracurricular rather than core components of education, highlighting the difficulty of integrating place-based learning within standardized curricular structures. Connell (2003) warns that without active curricular inclusion, local traditions risk being marginalized within an increasingly globalized education system.

Inclusivity and Socio-Economic Challenges: A Dual Narrative

Inclusivity remains a key concern, particularly on islands such as Lampedusa and Procida, where schools accommodate diverse student populations, including recent immigrants. These schools have established linguistic support programs, multicultural initiatives, and specialized educational support to ensure equitable access to learning opportunities. However, Ponza and Ventotene report limitations due to standardized assessment methods that may disadvantage multilingual learners. Crossley and Sprague (2012) argue that national assessment frameworks should be adaptable to accommodate the diverse learning contexts of minor island communities.

Sustainable Tourism Education: A Missed Opportunity?

Many minor islands rely heavily on tourism, yet sustainable tourism education is not consistently embedded in the curriculum. Schools such as Pantelleria and Sant'Antioco touch on tourism's role in their socio-economic framework, but educational initiatives on sustainable tourism remain underdeveloped. Conkling (2007) argues that education in island settings should prepare students for the challenges of balancing economic dependency on tourism with ecological conservation.

Conclusions

Education in Italy's minor islands is a delicate balance between adhering to national educational policies and adapting to the unique socio-cultural and environmental landscapes of insular communities. The PTOFs analyzed reveal a system in flux—one that faces significant constraints yet also exhibits remarkable adaptability, creativity, and resilience. While resource limitations, teacher retention issues, and curriculum rigidity continue to pose challenges, many island schools have embraced place-based education, environmental literacy, and cultural continuity as strategies to bridge the gap between national standards and local needs. Schools that have successfully embedded these elements within their educational frameworks demonstrate the potential for a more integrated, community-responsive educational model. Moving forward, several key strategies can help minor island schools thrive:

- Developing professional training programs tailored to insular education – Training educators to work effectively within island settings, with a strong focus on localized pedagogy, sustainability, and technological integration.

- Embedding environmental and sustainable tourism education into core curricula – Ensuring that sustainability principles become an integral part of learning rather than supplementary initiatives.
- Strengthening digital infrastructure and STEM education – Investing in technology to bridge the gap between minor island schools and their mainland counterparts.
- Building stronger community-school partnerships – Encouraging local businesses, cultural organizations, and environmental groups to collaborate with schools, ensuring that education remains relevant and community-driven.

By addressing these areas and embracing the strengths inherent in insular education, Italy's minor island schools can become models of contextualized and sustainable education. These schools are not just places of learning; they are cultural and environmental custodians, ensuring that students gain the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to navigate both their local realities and the broader global landscape. Ultimately, education on minor islands must not be seen as a challenge to overcome but rather an opportunity to innovate, fostering a model that balances tradition with progress, community with globalization, and sustainability with academic excellence.

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