

GENERATIVE ITALY: THE WELL-BEING OF YOUNG PEOPLE AS A CHALLENGE FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

ITALIA GENERATIVA: IL BENESSERE DEI GIOVANI COME SFIDA PER UN FUTURO SOSTENIBILE

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ABSTRACT

The World Happiness Report 2025 confirms a global trend of declining well-being among the under-30s. In 2023, almost one in five young people said they had no one to rely on for social support. Only through inclusive and sustainable education will it be possible to give the younger generations a future and make Italy generative.

This paper presents the results of the survey "So.Be.Didlab: Sustainability, Well-being, and Laboratory Teaching," which aimed to identify the main factors that influence the achievement of well-being. The questionnaire was administered to 120 students and future educators at the University of Palermo.

Il World Happiness Report 2025 conferma un trend globale di declino del benessere tra gli under 30. Nel 2023 quasi un giovane su cinque ha dichiarato di non avere nessuno su cui contare per un sostegno sociale. Solo attraverso un'istruzione inclusiva e sostenibile sarà possibile restituire un futuro alle nuove generazioni e rendere l'Italia generativa.

Il presente lavoro espone gli esiti dell'indagine "So.Be.Didlab: Sostenibilità, Benessere e Didattica Laboratoriale" finalizzato a individuare i principali fattori che influenzano il raggiungimento del benessere. Il questionario è stato rivolto a 120 studenti e futuri pedagogisti dell'Università degli Studi di Palermo.

KEYWORDS

Well-being; Sustainability; Agenda 2030; Green Capability.
Benessere; Sostenibilità; Agenda 2030; Green Capability.

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Introduction

Nowadays, growing up and becoming an adult in Italy is more challenging than in other European countries. The Generative Italy Report 2023 (RIG 2023) highlights delayed modernization processes, insufficient support mechanisms, and intergenerational imbalances, all of which undermine young people's prospects. Over the last thirty years, Italy has accumulated four systemic debts: financial (public debt at 140% of GDP), educational (lower levels of schooling compared to the EU average), environmental (hydrogeological instability and limited ecological transition), and demographic (declining birth rates). These factors exacerbate the intergenerational divide (ASviS, 2025).

The World Happiness Report 2024 (WHR 2024) confirms a global trend of declining well-being among people under 30. In 2023, almost one in five young people (19%) reported having no one to rely on for social support, a 39% increase compared to 2006. The report stresses the crucial role of everyday relationships in shaping youth well-being. Fifty-three percent of the population reported experiencing social isolation, which contributes to diminished positive emotions and reduced resilience. Education has the potential to play a decisive role in fostering a culture of well-being and raising awareness of sustainability—issues that have become essential to ensuring a fair and prosperous future. Within an educational context, promoting well-being means not only supporting students' intellectual growth, but also their social and emotional development, encouraging self-awareness and emotional self-regulation, which are fundamental skills for a balanced and fulfilling life. Education for sustainability must be conceived as a cross-cutting process, centred on critical reflection regarding the consequences of one's actions and choices, both individually and collectively. In this sense, the university becomes a privileged place for acquiring civic and environmental competences that shape responsible and active citizens, capable of making informed decisions about global challenges.

However, the new Guidelines for Civic Education 2024/25 reduce the emphasis on sustainability, replacing “sustainable development, environmental education, and territorial protection” with “economic development and sustainability.” The 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015) is marginalized, while nationalist and individualistic values gain greater prominence.

To promote care for our “common home,” it is crucial to develop not only effective technical skills, but also a strong ethical foundation. Ethics must become a core component of teaching, beginning with higher education, supported by well-trained and valued teachers. Only through inclusive, sustainable, and ethically grounded education will it be possible to restore a future to younger generations and make Italy truly generative.

1. Becoming an Adult in Italy: A Complex Challenge

In Italy, the transition to adulthood is currently more difficult than in other countries, as highlighted by the ASviS Report 2025. The phenomenon of demographic winter has evolved into a veritable “glaciation”: by 2030, approximately 580,000 young people aged between 20 and 34 are expected to disappear. In such a context, investing in high-quality education is not only necessary but urgent. Fewer young people mean greater responsibility in preparing them to face the economic, social, and technological challenges that lie ahead.

However, Italy shows signs of delay. In 2022, 42% of young people between 18 and 34 did not participate in political life, and over 77% judged the performance of political parties to be inadequate (Skakal, 2024). Abstention, however, does not necessarily imply disinterest: many young people view voting as a crucial tool for changing the country and would be more inclined to participate if more representatives of their generation were present. Indeed, they constitute the most active social group in mobilizations and initiatives aimed at building a better future. At the global level, the Summit of the Future 2024 (UN, 2024) placed the need for sustainable and inclusive solutions at the center of the debate. Secretary-General António Guterres emphasized that “there are no solutions to the problems of the present that do not take into account a long-term perspective.” The initiative, part of the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015), seeks to strengthen multilateralism and guide the world toward equitable and sustainable development, underlining the urgency of integrating the interests of future generations into today’s decision-making processes.

The educational landscape is also fragmented. Goal 4 of the 2030 Agenda recorded progress between 2010 and 2023: a decline in early school leaving, an increase in lifelong learning, and a growing proportion of graduates, with projections reaching 70% by 2030. At the same time, however, the new Guidelines for Civic Education 2024/25 show a shift: the concept of sustainability is reduced to “economic

development and sustainability,” neglecting essential themes such as global citizenship, peace, gender equality, and diversity.

Investing in education means providing young people with the tools to access the labour market, reduce precariousness, and foster economic independence, while at the same time countering emigration abroad and its impact on the demographic crisis. As underlined by ASviS at the event “Future-Proof Skills”, promoting ecological and digital literacy is a strategic lever for strengthening democracy, supporting peace, and enhancing the talents of younger generations.

Sustainable development has begun to enter European school systems, albeit with different levels of integration. The 2024 Eurydice survey, which analyzed 39 education systems, shows that all address sustainability, predominantly in an interdisciplinary manner. In Italy, it constitutes one of the three pillars of civic education, but future literacy—namely, the capacity to imagine sustainable scenarios and assess related risks and opportunities—is still absent at all school levels. Teacher training, by contrast, records promising results: Italy is among the 17 countries that include sustainability-related objectives in initial teacher education, though this remains limited to knowledge of key ecosystem concepts and environmental impacts. Objectives such as critical thinking, collective responsibility, and active participation are less prevalent.

With regard to lifelong learning, 32 education systems, including Italy’s, incorporate education for sustainability into official programs, although participation is often voluntary. Italy provides teaching resources and promotes networks for exchanging best practices, yet economic support for schools remains limited.

To address contemporary challenges, the Society 5.0 paradigm proposes a model in which technological innovation serves human well-being and social development. Two strategic levers are central: innovation, as a driver of economic and employment growth, and skills, understood as qualified human capital. Within this framework, UNESCO’s report “Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education” looks ahead to 2050 to explore how education can respond to climate change, technological acceleration, social fragmentation, and transformations in the world of work. The call is for collective action to redress past injustices and build fair and sustainable futures.

During the Italian presentation of the Report, held in December 2023 at the Chamber of Deputies, Undersecretary Paola Frassinetti reminded the audience that “each of us carries a heavy obligation toward future generations” (ASviS, 2025).

2. Education for Sustainable Citizenship and Well-being: An Integrated Pedagogical Perspective

The concept of well-being has progressively acquired a complex and multidimensional meaning, evolving from an individualistic and subjective view to an integrated perspective that encompasses psychological, social, cultural, and educational aspects. In psychology, two main approaches are distinguished: the hedonic approach, which focuses on subjective well-being (SWB)—meant as the presence of positive emotions, the absence of negative emotions, and life satisfaction (Kahneman, Diener & Schwartz, 1999)—and the eudaimonic approach, which refers to psychological well-being (PWB). The eudaimonic perspective emphasizes the individual's ability to pursue meaningful goals for both self and community, valuing interpersonal relationships and the mobilization of personal resources (Delle Fave, 2007). This perspective moves beyond the individualistic approach that has often characterized psychological research, opening the way to interdisciplinary intervention tools.

In the field of education, this approach is particularly useful for promoting a broad vision of human development that integrates individual growth with social empowerment, transforming the school into a privileged space for building a culture of well-being capable of responding to the needs of both students and teachers (Nicolella, 2025). According to the World Health Organization (2018), well-being implies the full integration of biological, psychological, and social dimensions in personal growth, and the promotion of health cannot be delegated exclusively to the healthcare system; it must also involve schools, politics, and social and environmental organization.

Casolo (2020) revisits Hettler's (1976) wellness model, which identifies six fundamental and interconnected components—intellectual, moral and spiritual, physical-motor, professional, social, and emotional—within an educational framework oriented toward active health and holistic personal growth. Lifelong learning thus becomes a tool for empowerment and well-being, capable of supporting educational and professional transitions (Federighi, 2018; Boffo, 2018). Educating for well-being therefore means promoting an integrated vision of education that values the individual as a whole, fosters social inclusion, stimulates cultural participation, and prepares citizens to live consciously and meaningfully (Buccolo & Ferro, 2023).

Schools, universities, and educational institutions are thus called to build bridges between education, health, and development, contributing to the realization of a fairer, healthier, and culturally vibrant society. In recent years, a new educational vision has emerged, centred on sustainable citizenship, which combines environmental awareness and social responsibility. This vision was formalized

through the adoption of the UN 2030 Agenda (2015), which also commits Italy to pursuing the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

Contemporary pedagogical reflection calls for moving beyond outdated paradigms that considered the environment merely as a resource, proposing instead to understand it as a common good. In this context, schools play a central role in shaping responsible citizens, capable of critical thinking and responsible choices. The transition from environmental education to sustainable development has led to the definition of national education policies, such as the Ministerial Plan for Education for Sustainability (MIUR, 2017), which recognizes the environment as an educational space for human and social development, with the goal of forming “environmental natives” capable of living in harmony with the environment and contributing actively to building a fair and sustainable society.

This lifelong learning-based approach aims to transform students’ mindset, making them protagonists of change. Within the educational domain, well-being assumes a transformative function: according to Iavarone (2024), it is a “tension toward the rebalancing and harmonization of the individual’s various capacities,” and only through the constant restoration of this equilibrium can an authentic project of individual and social well-being be pursued.

The pedagogy of well-being arises from growing attention to students’ emotional and psychological needs, seeking to integrate psychophysical well-being into the educational process by recognizing the interconnection between learning and emotional, social, and relational dimensions (Huppert & So, 2013). Its aim is to promote “learning to live well” as a core educational objective (Parricchi, 2025). The goal is not merely to train competent individuals, but persons capable of living in balance with themselves, with others, and with the environment (autore, 2025). The culture of well-being requires a constant commitment on the part of educational institutions, with particular attention to teacher training. The European Commission has placed new teacher competences in the centre of the educational debate, stressing the role of education in the knowledge society. Teachers are thus called to a “professional evolution” oriented toward the holistic well-being of the person, which entails the ability to foster inclusive and healthy learning environments.

The well-being of the “new citizen” is now a central issue in social and educational policies, threatened by interconnected factors—psychological, social, economic, environmental, and educational—that compromise quality of life. Rising levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among young people, caused by school pressure, excessive use of social media, and lack of emotional support, require targeted interventions (WHO, 2018; Greenberg et al., 2003). Economic and social

inequalities exacerbate youth vulnerability, while support policies and targeted school interventions can reduce disparities (Durlak et al., 2011).

The environment also plays a crucial role: pollution and environmental degradation affect both physical and mental health, making sustainable policies essential to promoting collective well-being (Huppert & So, 2013). Within the educational context, school climate and the quality of instruction are key factors: a positive environment fosters social, emotional, and cognitive development (Thapa et al., 2013).

3. Well-being and Sustainability: A Survey with University Students

The So.Be.DidLab Test—Sustainability, Well-being, and Laboratory Teaching—is an instrument developed and validated in 2023 (Cappuccio & Autore, 2023), consisting of 20 items. Its aim is to investigate the main causes and factors that hinder or promote the achievement of well-being within the educational context, while also exploring how such well-being can extend to other areas of students' lives. This contribution presents the results of a survey conducted with students enrolled in the course on Docimology within the master's degree in Pedagogical Sciences at the University of Palermo. The objective is to collect useful data to better understand students' experiences of university well-being and environmental sustainability, as well as to test the effectiveness of the instrument in different educational contexts.

The questionnaire was administered via the Google Forms platform, chosen to ensure rapid and widespread distribution among the participants involved. The survey included various types of items: some were multiple-choice, while others were based on a five-point Likert scale that enabled participants to express their level of agreement with the proposed statements, including intermediate positions between two opposing poles.

4. The Survey Sample Il campione oggetto di indagine

The So.Be.DidLab survey was administered to 120 students and future educators at the University of Palermo, who were asked to identify the main factors that determine sustainability and well-being within the university context.

The sample (Table 1) was predominantly female (73%), with the majority aged between 19 and 24 years (58%). Only 23% of the respondents already held a university degree, of whom 13% had prior work experience in the educational field.

Students	Male %	Female %	Age 19-24 %	Age 24-30 %	Age over 30 %	Previous degree %	First degree %	Work experience in education %
120	27	73	58	34	8	23	77	13

Table 1 Description of the survey sample

5. Analysis of Collected Data

The data collected—intended to identify the factors that influence well-being within educational institutions and to capture university students’ perceptions of well-being—were analyzed using the statistical software IBM SPSS v23. The analysis made it possible to highlight the main issues addressed within universities in relation to sustainability and environmental care, as well as to identify the conditions that foster well-being within educational communities. The following paragraphs present the most significant findings.

The topics that emerged as central within educational and training contexts indicate a strong sensitivity toward ecology and individual responsibility. Awareness of climate change and waste management is well established. Other topics, while relevant, appear less present in educational pathways. This could point to a need to update curricula or to a lower perception of the risks associated with them. These themes also seem to be interpreted differently depending on context or professional role. Such variability suggests subjective perceptions and a possible lack of shared guidelines. Moreover, the diversity of responses regarding social and relational issues highlights the need for a more integrated approach between environmental education and social well-being (Fig. 1).

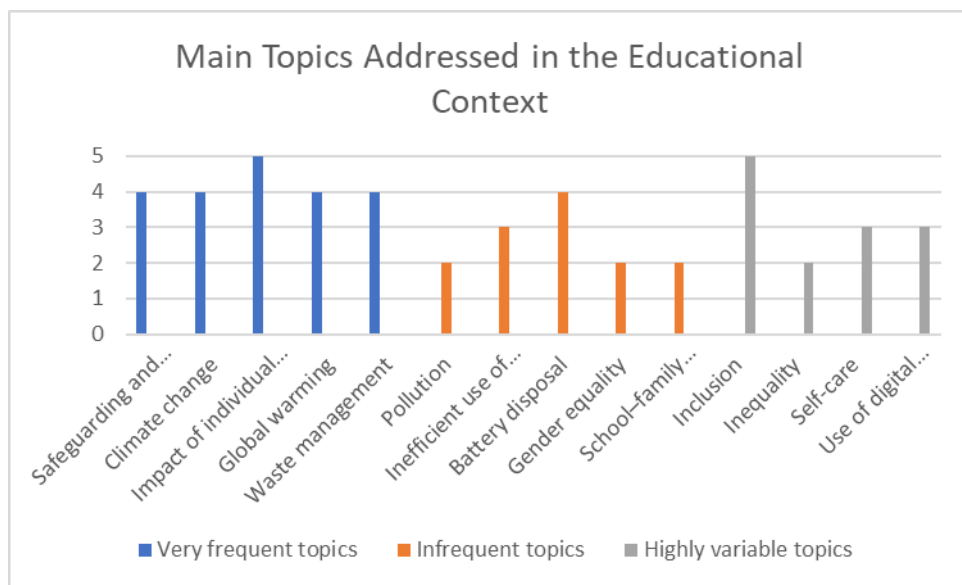


Figure 1-Main topics addressed in the educational context

Environmental variables such as climate change, global warming, pollution, and excessive use of plastic are perceived as the most serious threats to the sustainability of communities. This highlights a strong ecological awareness among the participants. However, it is important to note that the sample tends to focus almost exclusively on ecological threats, while neglecting—or attributing less importance to—those concerning individuals’ psychophysical well-being, such as the quality of relationships, emotional support, mental health, or work–life balance. This polarization suggests the need to promote a more integrated vision of sustainability, one that also includes the affective, relational, and psychological dimensions of everyday life (Fig. 2).

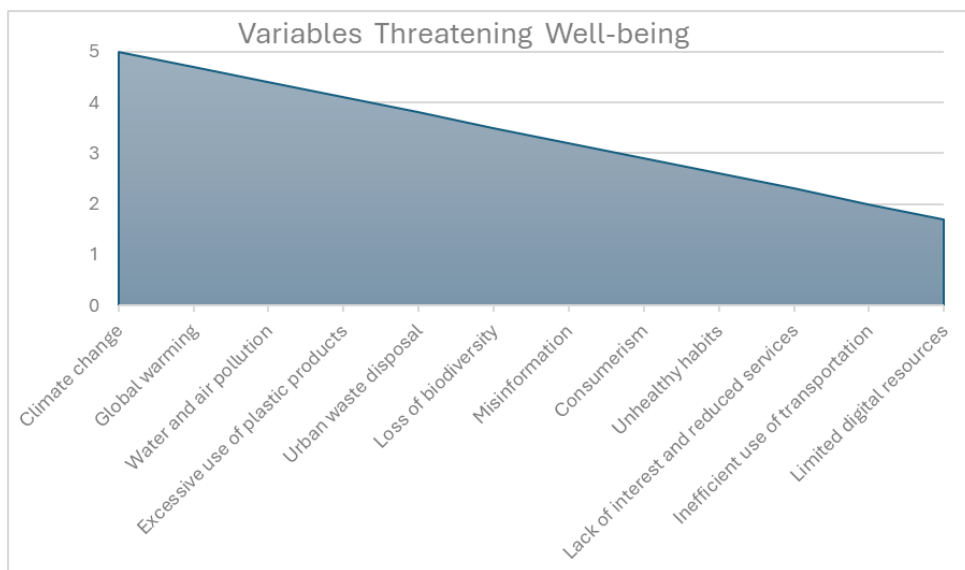


Figure 2- Variables threatening well-being

The graph (Fig. 3) clearly shows that the majority of participants attribute high importance to the factors proposed as contributing to their well-being. In particular, the development of psycho-pedagogical skills receives the highest average value, indicating that the sample places great importance on the relational and emotional dimension of the educational role. Reflective attitudes and methodological competences are also considered fundamental, whereas self-assessment, though valued, appears to be slightly less central.

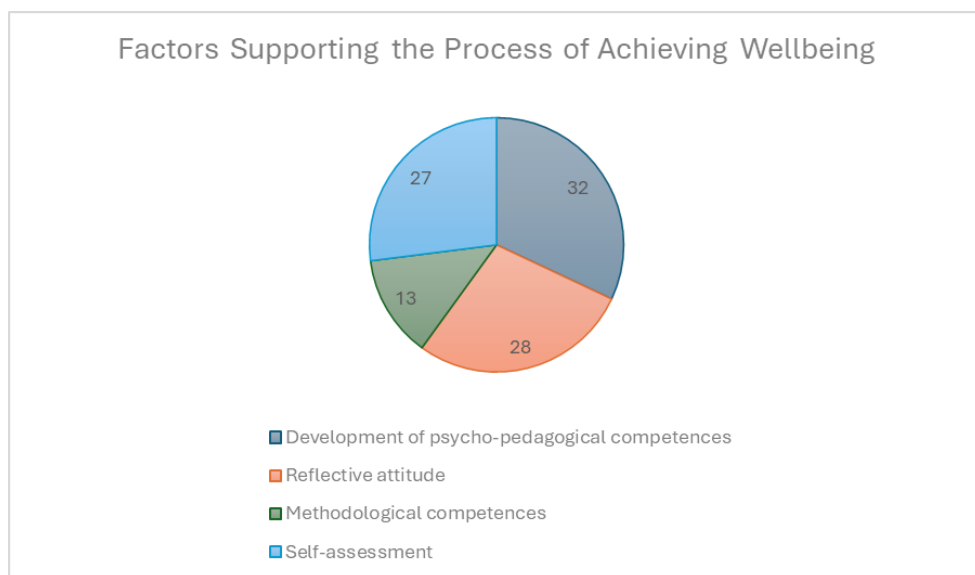


Figure 3- Factors contributing to the realization of well-being

Conclusions

The analysis of the data collected through the questionnaires administered to university students and future educators highlights a strong awareness of environmental issues, particularly those related to climate change, pollution, and waste management. These aspects are perceived as the main threats to community sustainability, whereas factors connected to individual psychophysical well-being—such as mental health, interpersonal relationships, and quality of daily life—are less frequently considered.

This polarization suggests that, despite the widespread interest in environmental education, an integrated vision of sustainability that also encompasses the personal and emotional dimension is still lacking. It is therefore necessary to promote educational pathways that encourage students to develop critical and interdisciplinary reflection, capable of linking ecology with individual and social well-being.

The findings also indicate that students place great value on the development of psycho-pedagogical and didactic–methodological competences, which are considered essential for achieving personal and professional well-being. Self-assessment and reflective attitudes are also recognized as useful tools, albeit perceived as slightly less central.

In light of these results, the importance emerges of adopting a flexible educational approach, one that values lived experiences, fosters resilience, and supports the construction of active and responsible citizenship. The university, as a learning environment, must facilitate the integration of knowledge, emotions, and relationships, guiding students in the development of personal trajectories oriented toward well-being and sustainability.

From this perspective, the 2030 Agenda represents a strategic reference point for educational activism, offering university students and future educators a value-based and operational framework through which they can become conscious protagonists of change, both inside and outside educational contexts.

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