

Youth Knowledge # 23

THE HISTORY OF YOUTH WORK IN EUROPE



Volume 6

Connections, disconnections and reconnections –
The social dimension of youth work
in history and today

Youth Partnership

Partnership between the European Commission
and the Council of Europe in the field of Youth



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Youth work and social work

Connections, disconnections
and reconnections —

The social dimension of youth
work in history and today

Volume 6

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Chapter 6

Two see-saws in motion: youth work and social work in Italy

Daniele Morciano and Armida Salvati

Introduction

This chapter addresses the history of youth work and social work in Italy in the period from 1900 until today. In this historical reconstruction we highlight the alternating connections and disconnections between youth work and social work practices. In the early 20th century a state of separation existed between control-oriented social work and youth work that functioned within the education system for those from bourgeois families. Both practices would have had strong co-operation from the Fascist regime oriented towards the implementation of a totalitarian political and social system. After the Second World War, a new disconnection occurred between institutionalised social work based on the case management of youth problems on one side, and a more informal youth work practice featuring a community approach on the other. From the 1980s until today, finally, youth work and social work seem to be looking with increasing interest at a new potentiality of co-operation, that of empowering young people as a resource for society by helping them to face the personal, social and structural barriers that impede their potential. The analysis takes into account the different representations of young people throughout the evolution of the practice of youth work and social work in Italy in the time frame considered. The chapter also draws attention to the main drivers that motivated the development of the profession of social work recognised by the state, as well as the difficulties of the development of a professional and institutional foundation of youth work in the Italian context.

Disconnection: social work to control and youth work to educate

Professional social work was established in Italy later than in the UK. Before the First World War the Catholic Church was mainly responsible for this particular area of work, at least until the establishment of the Italian Constitution in 1948. Article 38 of the Constitution declares the right to assistance for “every citizen unable to work and without the necessary resources to live”. It focuses attention on the duty of the Italian state to take care of citizens who are physically or economically unable to look after themselves and cannot therefore lead a respectable life. Youth as a social category, however, was not considered in public policy until the beginning of the 1960s.

In the early 20th century, the earliest forms of professional social work in Italy were oriented towards factory workers. The social work task was to assist workers and at the same time to control insurgencies (Bartolomei and Passera 2010). It was a service that was both a help and a control for young people who were increasingly perceived as dangerous by Italian public opinion between the end of the 1800s and the first two decades of the 1900s. This was similarly the case in other western and eastern European states. A combination of demographic, economic and social factors brought about the progressive disruption of traditional patterns of integration of young people within adult society. These factors included the increased demographic incidence of youth on the total population, the crisis of centuries-old agricultural economies (due to international competition); the loss of traditional forms of access for young people to trades based on apprenticeships; and changes in family roles brought about by new work in the manufacturing sector. A mass of unskilled and unemployed young people went hand in hand with the loosening of family ties, membership and rules (Dogliani 2003). During the First World War, a considerable number of children who had not received the call to arms found themselves working in military industries and areas behind the front line (logistics, fortifications) (Gorgolini 2005). It is estimated that in 1918 over 70 000 children under the age of 16 were employed in ancillary military industries (Bianchi 1991). Such children were thus forced into the role of adults from an early age, riven also by the absence of fathers who had left for the front. These “young militarized workers” (Gorgolini 2005) experienced greater freedom in expressing their opposition to the war, as well as to long working hours and exhausting working conditions, exacerbated by strict military discipline. The rejection of such hardship was expressed through strikes, absenteeism, petty theft and fleeing.

While entrusting the solution to the problem of dangerous youth from deprived, working classes in society to policies of repression and institutionalisation, the professional, educated classes began to direct their attention towards the education of the young through group activities beyond school. “[B]y the turn of the century, they began to notice the limits of youth education based simply on the suffocating methods of education in high schools and technical schools” (Fincardi and Papa 2007: 6). Indeed, neither the school nor the family seemed able to “regulate the public or private conduct of youth, turning them towards the liberal values of dynamic social and national competition” (ibid.). Sports activities, games, excursions and other forms of spare-time social activities began to be promoted among young males from the bourgeoisie in order to “temper the body and the individual” and thus cultivate and mature values based on patriotism and national competitiveness.

These youth work activities were increasingly carried out by Scout associations that were established during the early 20th century. Founded in 1912, The Corpo Nazionale dei Giovani Esploratori (CNGEI) (National Body of Youth Scouts) became the leading secular Scout organisation supported by the state. Four years later, the Associazione Scoutistica Cattolica Italiana (ASCI) (Italian Catholic Scout Association) would place the Baden-Powell model in an explicitly Christian vision of life and society (Trova 1986).

As in the religious sphere, youth associations were also promoted between socialist and communist political movements (Degl’Innocenti 2012; Dogliani 2003; Fincardi and Papa 2007). These political movements were to provide a new space within the

mass parties for the political action of young people. The Federazione Giovanile Socialista (FGS) (Socialist Youth Federation), for example, was founded in 1907 with the objectives of pacifist education and union protection for a growing class of young workers.

While social workers were engaged in the factories acting as agents of control of the working class, youth associations supported by the socialist and communist political movements founded the People's Houses. These were places where the integration of political education with leisure activities took place within the tradition of the mutual aid associations and worker co-operatives, which had spread from the second half of the 1800s. Activities of artistic production and fulfilment (choirs and bands, social theatre, concert halls) were combined with those of self-education (libraries, reading rooms) as well as recreational spaces (cafés, restaurants, bars) (Orsi 2013). The People's Houses, therefore, offered new youth work activities to young people coming from more privileged socio-economic backgrounds, as alternatives to the youth education offered by the state or church and the local parishes. As Degl'Innocenti recalls "the People's Houses were presented as antithetical to palaces and castles, the emblems of aristocratic power, the middle-class house, symbol of small private property, as well as the Church" (Degl'Innocenti 2012: 328).

Connection: social work and youth work as integrated functions of the Fascist regime

The Fascist movement placed youth at the centre of its political project. In fact, the ultimate goal of Fascism in terms of youth was the exploitation of youthful vitality in order to service its expansionist and militarist political project, doing so through a clever combination of measures of repression, social control and education.

Even if not yet trained at professional level, social workers started to be involved by the Fascist regime in the Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia (ONMI), the programme entrusted with the task of dealing with the issue of evermore unruly youth, and were therefore more likely to perceive protest as rebellion and disobedience, rather than as expressions of hardship. Indeed, the ONMI established "observation centres for minors with the task of not only punishing, but also controlling forms of deviance and psychological and physical defects in the generations of *new Italians*" (Dogliani 2003: 69-70; original emphasis).

Alongside social work organisations like the ONMI, the fascists established a unique state intervention in out-of-school education of young people. In this regard, the fascistisation of new generations of Italians is considered by historians as "the most successful attempt among those undertaken by Fascism to organise Italians according to orders, genres and generations" (Dogliani 2003: 106). In order to do this, Fascism developed a mass education policy that aimed to fully occupy the leisure time of youth, leading even to the exploitation of schools as a means of ideological indoctrination.

In 1926, to this end, Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB) was founded, an autonomous body with the task of educating young people aged 8 to 18 through the following: "a) a sense of discipline and military education in the young; b) military

education; c) gymnastic physical education; d) spiritual and cultural education; e) vocational and technical education" (Baris 2011: 196).

A further success factor of Fascist mass youth education can be identified in the ability to create a new widespread network of local educational spaces. In several cases, the Case del Fascio (House of Fascio) was established as a result of the forced closure of existing associations. Despite their different forms, these spaces followed a standard architectural pattern (gyms, showers, libraries, cinemas, sports facilities) with the ultimate intention of hosting activities of education, propaganda and political involvement carried out by the Fascist youth organisations.

However, it is perhaps the educational Fascist summer camps for children and adolescents that "have left more lasting traces, at least in the memories of Italians" (Dogliani 2003: 118). Specially created housing developments were established where children and young people spent holiday periods away from their families, with recreational activities integrated with those of health and healing. With a total of 806 904 children and adolescents accommodated and 960 structures created in a decade, the Fascist colonies (together with 2 000 daytime heliotherapy camps in different cities) were fully integrated into the policies of "social hygiene for the improvement of the Italian *lineage*" (ibid.; original emphasis).

Located within the history of education in Italy from the early 1900s onwards, the uniqueness of Fascism also lies in being the first (and perhaps the only) government to have regulated and recognised the profession of the youth educator at an institutional level. Indeed, with the growth of the ONB, the number of operators involved such as sports instructors, gym teachers, youth bodies and ONMI assistants also increased. Fascism was also to implement two youth sport instructor training schools, one in Rome for men in 1928 and the other in Orvieto for women four years later. By training a total of 138 000 youth instructors in 1938, Fascism "aimed to forge *new* men and women, models for the new generations of Italians" (ibid.: 120; emphasis added).

Disconnection: social work as casework, youth as new collective actor

After the Second World War, professional social work arrived in Italy from the United States together with financial help and music culture. The first schools of social work were organised in the north of Italy and their aim was to train a new professional figure, in Italy called "social assistant". This new job (predominantly, for a long time, a female job) aimed, as today, to help citizens who were in trouble and indigent on the difficult route towards autonomy.

This professional role of social assistant also included the theoretical methodology of social work. The 1950s in Italy had a strong psychological approach focused on the individual (the case management approach) while group work and community work were only marginally used. Social research at the time had as a result a vision of young people as a vague social category in which different and rebel lifestyles were included (that is, the Teddy boys) (Jedlowski and Leccardi 2003). Young people in this period were strongly against traditions and rules. For this reason, they were considered potentially dangerous for society.

The rise of young people as new social actors had already begun with the involvement of young people in the Resistance during the Second World War, as well as with their commitment to the work of social and material reconstruction in the immediate post-war period, thereby providing an intense experience of participation in Italian history. This instigated the gradual emergence of young people as social subjects, able to express their own autonomous and original contribution to society (Dogliani 2003). In a different respect, however, the 1950s were dominated by a general climate of adultism. Historians describe the 1950s as a period of “darkness, conformist and hierarchical in relations between the sexes, between classes, between generations; young people were repressed in their customs, sexuality and divided in culture” (ibid.: 182). It is no coincidence, therefore, that in this climate young people began to claim, in different forms, the right to be recognised as an active social subject with their own specific and particular way of being.

The real youth question – both politically and literally – emerged in the following decade. As in the rest of the world, the year 1968 in Italy was full of student movements that demanded liberty and democracy in all aspects of Italian society. Social services also experienced a critical spring during the 1960s. Specifically, there were two main questions, the first being whether or not social services should be considered an agent of change or whether social work should just remain a defender of the status quo. The economic boom, however, left unsolved the second question of social equality. In this period, a Marxist position became important in understanding the situation of the young; according to this perspective, the problems arising from the abuse of drugs, deviance and behavioural risks should be addressed through a system that included the group, the family and the social milieu, rather than focusing on the individual (Campanini 2002). Accordingly, in the last years of the 1960s the left wing of the government organised young people in the FGCI (Federation of Young Italian Communists) as a space for political youth participation (Bernini, Trivelli and Serri 1976).

Reconnection: preventing youth problems

The 1970s in Italy was not a peaceful decade because of the terrorist strategy adopted by the extremist political fringes of both left and right. This was the period when the youth problem became a political problem; young people had a different and conflicted political vision, producing a generation gap with regard to prominent issues and the ways to address them (Collettivo di Controinformazione 1977; Manconi 1990). In 1978, with the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro, the leader of the major political party, Christian Democracy, the revolutionary spirit of youth movements collapsed. In particular, the extremist political movement *Brigate Rosse* (Red Brigades) had wanted to impede Aldo Moro’s attempt to involve the Communist Party in the government led by the Christian Democracy party. In fact, entering the national government would have meant accepting a compromise with the capitalist political institutions that the radical communist fringes wanted to change.

A widespread negative attitude towards any kind of revolutionary ideology, therefore, arose during the 1970s due to the climate of violence and terror as well as to the sense of failure or betrayal of the ideals pursued by the youth movement of 1968.

In fact, Moro's murder and other terrorist attacks led public opinion to associate the revolutionary agenda of the youth movement of the 1960s with terrorist violence.

Social work at the time was divided between those who had a paternalistic attitude and those who tried to give voice to young people, although the loss of the revolutionary spirit continued to express itself in new forms of social participation, even if not linked with political parties or movements. Youth participation between the 1970s and 1980s became less associated with a vision of the future based on specific political ideologies. In other ways, young people were increasingly involved in different forms of social engagement addressing the problems of the present, such as disarmament, peace, environmental protection, women's rights, varying forms of marginalisation and social fragility (Dal Toso 1995). The growing involvement in voluntary work continued until the establishment of the Civil Service during the 1990s as an alternative to military service.

One of the darkest sides of this transition stage, however, was the diffusion of drugs among young people and young adults. The use of heroin and cocaine increased, especially between the 1970s and 1980s, with a growing number of deaths caused by overdose. The role of social workers, therefore, became more and more necessary in the therapeutic communities for drug addiction, as well as in preventive detached social work (Franzoni and Anconelli 2014).

In the meantime, the Framework Law 883/1978 established the national health service within social policy in a wider idea of welfare. The keywords of this period were prevention and information. In particular, prevention was the most important element of the general public social service and specific policies such as those related to drug addiction. From the 1970s there was a high prevalence of drug use among young people. Therapeutic communities for recovery had therefore been introduced into the third sector (or voluntary sphere) during this period. The administrative orders (Law 685/1975), in addition to repressive intervention, were proposing an approach oriented towards prevention and harm reduction (Bertelli 2007; Franzoni and Anconelli 2014).

When oriented towards prevention, social work was practised as a form of non-formal education. Social workers were therefore increasingly involved in out-of-school education during the leisure time of young people and in encouraging peer-to-peer learning and group experiences.

In tune with the preventive and reparative mission of professional social work, during the same period direct intervention of the state in the youth work sector resumed in the social policies of local authorities (Bazzanella 2010). This occurred, for example, with the Progetti Giovani (*Youth projects*) and, soon after, with the Centri di aggregazione giovanile (*Centres for youth groups*) funded by Law 285/1997 (Provisions for the promotion of rights and opportunities for childhood and adolescence). The Progetti Giovani youth centres have, since the 1970s, represented places for the production and realisation of youth policy. From the 1970s to 1990s, the Progetti Giovani youth projects were, for example, promoted by more than half of municipalities with over 10 000 inhabitants (Gruppo Abele 1994). Developing from the need to address issues facing young people, the Progetti Giovani have often overseen the development of meeting spaces where young people can express their creativity and also as centres

of education on health issues (for example drugs, sexuality, alcoholism). The 1980s and 1990s saw the spread of the national CAG, centres funded by Law 285/97 which, by the year 2000, numbered around 900 projects across the country (Italian National Childhood and Adolescence Documentation and Analysis Centre 2001). Even at the beginning of 2000, such provision continued to be funded, accounting for 35% of the total projects resourced through the aforementioned Law 285/97. Research on the issue is still lacking in Italy, despite the proliferation of such experiences in both urban areas and smaller towns. In 2006, it was estimated that there were 1 400 such spaces throughout the country (Bazzanella 2010).

With the reorganisation of the social services system initiated by Law 328/2000 (Framework law for the realisation of the integrated system of interventions and social services), centres for adolescents and young people would continue to operate within the sphere of local social and health services with structures mainly entrusted to management by third-sector organisations.

A persistent disconnection: social workers as professionals, youth workers as ...?

From the Second World War until the present day, a clear disconnection is evident between a national legislative framework for professional social work and a legislative vacuum in national youth policy, along with the absence of a specific professional role of youth worker. Social workers in Italy are currently professionals trained through specific higher education courses. A three-year degree and a state examination are required to become a professional social worker. A further two years of academic training allows for the holding of a management role as a specialist social worker. A national professional register supports the continuing professional education of social workers, as well as giving them the respect of the code of ethics. The social work profession, therefore, is recognised by national law and social workers are formally included in public social and health services, as well as in the social and educational services provided by the third sector.

In contrast, various regulated professions in the sphere of education (for example professional educator, socio-cultural educator, community worker) are still not focused on young people, while practical experience in the field remains the only viable pathway for specialising in youth work. Such limitation also exists in relation to social workers as long as they are regularly engaged in the private sector as educators. This limitation seems indicative of how a vision still prevails in Italy of youth work being understood essentially as a front-line activity or as education oriented towards specific (religious or political) ideologies. The only space for more structured skills development for youth workers relates to the planning and implementation of projects funded by the European Union youth policy programmes. The creation of a professional youth worker whose youth training and certification is regulated by the state on the basis of specific accreditation systems (as, for example, in countries such as Ireland, the UK, Sweden and Finland) seems a challenge that the various associations and youth centres in Italy are still struggling to grasp (Bazzanella 2010). Despite a number of projects supported by European Union programmes, in Italy there is still no specific national public policy or programme with the specific

purpose of developing youth work professionals, services, practices or evaluation. As highlighted in the last European Union report on youth work in Europe (Dunne et al. 2014) priority assigned to youth work by national government seems to be “slightly increasing (however) no law defining or regulating youth work (exists) and youth work is generally not perceived as a policy priority” (ibid.). Even if training initiatives about youth work are increasing at local level, they are not linked to any public accreditation or recognition framework. As stated in the last European Union youth work report: “it is not only the scarcity of training prospects in some cases, but also where opportunities exist, gaining recognition or having those experiences validated” (ibid.: 128).

A new possible connection: working for youth problems to unlock youth potential

Although such disconnection is evident at a legislative and policy level, increasing pressure comes from social policy to integrate public professional social work and private, non-professional (in the sense of being voluntary) youth work at the practice level. Such co-operation seems increasingly required to face what appears to be a shared primary issue for youth policy and social policy, namely youth unemployment. In general, the youth question in the 1990s was firmly connected to the problem of unemployment. Many youth policies in the 1990s were aimed at increasing work possibilities for young people by way of self-employment and through supporting the school-to-work transition.

Of particular importance in Italy was Law 285/97 establishing provisions for the promotion of rights and opportunities for children and adolescents; it was the first step for the third sector in terms of the legal regulation of educative social co-operatives and other non-profit organisations. Its aim was to support social and educational work on the outskirts of towns and cities and where there was a lack of space for group experiences and associative life in leisure time (what were known as *Centri di aggregazione giovanile* (Centres for youth groups) in Italy between the 1980s and 1990s). The law rolled out new modalities of co-operation between public and private actors. Working practices with young people, therefore, made an important contribution and gave a significant impetus to the development of a welfare mix approach. Networking became increasingly important in social work as well as in wider work with young people.

Moreover, in the most recent years of the new millennium, the keyword seems to be “resource”. Creativity, initiative, self-motivation and innovation can and must be based on young people. Not imparting the value of these to the young will lose resources for all of society. Even social investment policies are interested in this phenomenon, in recovering resources before they get wasted as a result of the discouragement caused by a system that does not accord value to young people. The aim of different policies since the 1990s has been to stop the dispersion of resources and energy caused by unemployment, which especially penalises those young people who have studied for considerable lengths of time (Ranci and Pavolini 2015).

This opening up of social work to embrace a vision of youth as a resource to be valued (and not only as a problem for society) coincided with a phase of youth policy

more oriented towards objectives of youth empowerment and emancipation. In particular, this phase was launched in Italy in 2006 with the establishment of the first Ministry of Youth and the creation of a national fund for youth policies. This new period of youth policy contributed to the creation of a policy and cultural context that encourages innovation in youth and social policy. Social policy, as well as youth policy, is now more oriented towards a combination of prevention, reparation and empowerment approaches. A challenge now seems open for social workers and youth workers, namely in the building of integrated policy and interprofessional practices where solutions to youth problems are not imposed using a top-down control-oriented approach, but co-constructed together with young people as a process of empowerment, discovering and improving motivation and skills, self-fulfilment and social emancipation.

Youth centres as spaces for experimenting with new connections

A space for innovative experimentation based on co-operation between youth workers and social workers could, for example, be provided by the new public youth spaces supported by the National Youth Fund from 2006 and entrusted to third-sector management, such as the Laboratori Urbani Giovanili (Urban Youth Lab) in Apulia (Morciano 2015; Morciano et al. 2013), Visioni Urbane in Basilicata and the Officine dell'arte in Lazio. The distinctive feature of these spaces is their attempt to provide learning experiences closely connected with practice and explicitly focused on the interests, motivations and passions of young people. These new spaces therefore seem to be designed as containers of a large number of resources (such as equipment, information, relationship networks, learning experiences) that young people can use in order to create their own projects or collaborate in the implementation of existing projects. An underlying principle is the attempt to diversify and develop opportunities for the active use of these spaces, ranging from the ability to cultivate a hobby to the realisation of projects aimed at entrepreneurship and business creation. These new centres therefore tend to develop as incubators of new projects derived from youth initiatives through the internal creation of a hub of diverse tangible and intangible resources.

These new experiences of centre-based youth work, however, are faced with the need to cope with drastic cuts to the public funding dedicated to youth policies. Indeed, following the allocation of €130 million during the first two years (2006-07), the National Fund for Youth Policy budget has steadily decreased, reaching €13 million in 2014. This decrease is part of a general cut to public funds for social policy. (A dossier prepared by CGIL, one of the major labour unions in Italy, calculates how from 2008 to 2014, the fund for social policies has been cut from an original amount of €923.3 million to €69.95 million.) Furthermore, the Ministry of Youth was abolished in 2011, thus ushering in the present situation of a weak focus on youth policies.

Conclusion

The metaphor of a continuous movement of two different see-saws, one in front of the other, seems to represent the historical evolution of social work and youth work in Italy, characterised by alternate moments of proximity or distance.

The history of youth work in Italy mainly corresponds to the history of educational associations for young people operating in the third-sector sphere. The only systematic state intervention for youth education was established by the Fascist regime, which did produce a phase of strong intersection between social work and state-based youth education: the former entrusted with a number of services for the social control of youth delinquency and rebellion, the latter established to exploit youthful vitality and channel it for an expansionist and militarist political project.

Following the Second World War, youth work in Italy was again characterised by limited state intervention and a simultaneous offering from political or religious youth associations. The first youth policy interventions during the 1980s launched a stage of increasing commitment to public-funded youth centres and the entrustment of youth work projects to the third sector. This phase is still ongoing and includes a resistance to build a common national framework of youth work principles, objectives, approaches and skills.

The launch of a public youth policy during the 1980s appeared in tune with social work and social policies operating at local level. Both private youth work and public social work focused on a reparative approach to health or social problems involving young people (including issues such as delinquency, early school leaving, alcohol abuse, drug addiction, sex education, teenage pregnancy, unemployment) until the beginning of the 21st century.

A phase of youth policy more oriented towards youth empowerment was launched in 2006, when a Ministry of Youth and a National Fund for Youth Policy were established for the first time. The abolition of the Ministry of Youth in 2011 and the decrease in resources provided by the National Fund for Youth Policy (from €130 million in 2006 to €13 million in 2014) is part of the current uncertain period for youth policy and youth work in Italy.

A disconnection is still clear in Italy between a national legislative framework for social policy and professional social work, and a legislative vacuum in national youth policy and youth work. Although such disconnection continues to prevail at a legislative level, there is an increasing potential for integration between social workers and youth workers at the level of practice. Today, the two see-saws of social work and youth work seem to come closer when social policy pushes youth workers to develop new approaches based on networking with different operators and professionals elsewhere in the youth sector. At the same time, the cuts to public funding for social policy caused a decrease in job opportunities for youth workers, who are therefore pushed to develop new job co-operation with other third-sector organisations, including those working with youth.

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