

THINKING SERIOUSLY ABOUT YOUTH WORK

And how to prepare
people to do it



Youth Knowledge #20

Youth Partnership

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



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Council of Europe and European Commission

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Chapter 8

Youth work in Italy: between pluralism and fragmentation in a context of state non-interference

Daniele Morciano

Introduction

The history of youth work in Italy is mainly the history of association-based youth education outside the school. Following the Second World War, the state began to consider the third sector as the main provider of youth work. After the totalitarian, systematic state intervention of the fascist regime, the not-for-profit associations of political parties (mainly on the Left) as well as religious institutions (mostly Catholic) developed pluralistic youth work. This was achieved with the help of limited direct public interventions alongside increasing entrustment of public-funded youth centres to the third sector. This constituted a policy of non-interference in youth-led spaces together with a tendency to isolate them if they were considered to be excessively critical of the status quo.

While ideological pluralism became widely accepted from the 1980s on, the archipelago of youth work in Italy still struggles to build a common national framework of youth work principles, objectives, approaches and skills. The launch of a public youth policy during the 1980s can be viewed as an attempt to respond to such a deficiency. This new intervention of the state, however, was mainly situated within the social policies of local authorities, thus focusing on a reparative approach to health or social problems (i.e. delinquency, early school leaving, alcohol abuse, drug addiction, sexual education, pregnancy during adolescence, unemployment) until the beginning of the 21st century.

A phase of youth policy more oriented towards youth empowerment and emancipation objectives was launched in 2006, when the Ministry of Youth was set up (the first of its kind), along with a new national fund for youth policies. Affected by an endogenous process of reutilising public or private abandoned spaces, this new youth policy led to the financing of the development of new public youth spaces in co-operation with the third sector. This new wave of centre-based youth work would soon need to face drastic cuts to the public funding dedicated to youth policies. The abolition of the Ministry of Youth in 2011 is part of the current uncertainty surrounding youth policy in Italy. Within a general legislative vacuum in national youth policy, moreover, there is still no public regulation of a specific professional role for youth workers in Italy, while the different political or religious associations tend to train educators according to their respective ideologies.

The early 20th century

The perception of youth as dangerous became part of Italian public opinion between the end of the 1800s and the first two decades of the 1900s, as in other European states. With the loosening of family ties and the rules associated with this membership, society was confronted with a mass of unskilled and unemployed young people (Dogliani 2003).

While policies of repression and institutionalisation addressed this problem among the lower classes, the middle and upper classes began to direct their attention towards the education of the young through group activities beyond school (Fincardi and Papa 2007). Sports, games, excursions and other forms of leisure-time sociality began to be promoted among young males of the bourgeoisie in order to “temper the body and the individual” and thus mature values based on patriotism and national competitiveness.

The National Body of Youth Scouts (Corpo Nazionale dei Giovani Esploratori – CNGEI) became the leading secular Scout organisation supported by the state. It was founded in 1912 through the initiative of Carlo Colombo, a positivist physiologist and hygienist who reinterpreted the educational proposals of Baden-Powell in order to create a paramilitary youth organisation, aligned to the principles of the military before those of the school (Pisa 2000).

The early 20th century also witnessed the growth of secular pacifist Scouting, prior even to the CNGEI. Founded by Francis Vane in November 1910, however, the Italian Boy Scouts (Ragazzi Esploratori Italiani – REI) dissolved after a few years, dismembered into a Catholic wing (merged into a new Scout organisation) and another that would feed into the nationalistic orientation of the CNGEI Scouting movement.

Established in 1916, the Italian Catholic Scout Association (Associazione Scautistica Cattolica Italiana – ASCI) would take on the educational aims and methods of Baden-Powell (i.e. development of character, contact with nature, development of manual skills, taste for adventure, service to others) and place them within an explicitly Christian vision of life and society. Religious instruction (catechism) would therefore form the basis of the educational proposal of Catholic Scouting (Trova 1986).

Youth associations were also promoted by socialist and communist political movements to provide a new space for young people within the new mass parties. The Socialist Youth Federation (Federazione Giovanile Socialista – FGS), for example, was founded in 1907, adhering to the Socialist Youth International, sharing the objectives of pacifist education alongside those of union protection for a growing class of young workers. Furthermore, between the two World Wars, sporting associationism among young people in Italy would receive a boost from initiatives such as the International Union for Physical Education and Workers' Sport (UISES).

Youth associations among the working classes founded the "People's Houses" in the second half of the 1800s to integrate political education with leisure activities within the tradition of the mutual aid associations and worker co-operatives. Activities of artistic production and fulfilment (e.g. choirs and bands, social theatre, concert halls) were combined with self-education (e.g. libraries, reading rooms) as well as recreational spaces (e.g. cafes, restaurants, bars) (Orsi 2013).

The People's Houses provoked opposition from the Church and local parishes. However, the emerging social Catholicism movement also created White People's Houses, powered by the force of the *Rerum Novarum* issued in 1891, with which the Catholic Church, taking a position on social issues, founded the Christian social doctrine.

The fascist regime

The fascist movement placed youth at the heart of its political programme in order to exploit their vitality for an expansionist and militarist national strategy. To this end, it promoted mass youth education in leisure time, alongside a gradual suppression or marginalisation of the traditional youth associations and the exploitation of school as a means of ideological indoctrination.

In 1920, the Student Vanguard (Avanguardia studentesca) was formed, a combative student movement with fascist sympathies similar to the fascist University Groups (Gruppi Universitari Fascisti – GUF). Indeed, students represented the largest group among members of the early National Fascist Party (PNF) (Baris 2011).

In 1926, the National Balilla Action (Opera Nazionale Balilla – ONB) was founded. It was an autonomous body with the task of educating young people aged between 8 and 18. On the basis of the rules regulating Fascist Party discipline, the task of the ONB was to pursue a "total" training intervention that would provide "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).

The aims of the military preparation as carried out by the ONB became explicit in 1934, with the introduction of compulsory military service for all young males aged 18 years and above. Moreover, from 1934 to 1935, compulsory military culture courses were introduced in schools, until the introduction of a "military afternoon" for all (the so-called fascist Saturday).

The phasing out of competing youth organisations represented a specific strategy that brought about an induction of young people into the rising fascist organisations. With the creation of Littorio's Italian Youth (Gioventù Italiana del Littorio – GIL) in 1937, direct control by the PNF of all youth organisations was perfected.

A further factor in the success of fascist mass youth education was the creation of a widespread network of local educational spaces. Despite their different forms (e.g. Case dei Balilla, Case del Gil, Case della Giovane Italia, Case del Fascio), these spaces followed a standard architectural pattern (e.g. gyms, showers, libraries, cinemas, sports facilities) with the ultimate intent of hosting activities of education, propaganda and political involvement carried forward by the fascist youth organisations.

Post-war reconstruction and the Cold War

The anti-fascist resistance and the post-war reconstruction can be considered as a period of intense youth participation in Italy, with a gradual emergence of young people as a “social subject”. Considered a distinctly youthful choice (Dogliani 2003; Astolfi 2011), the resistance stands as a challenge to weak engagement in the public sphere of much of Italian society. As noted by Astolfi, the involvement of young people in the fight for liberation from Nazism/fascism represented a kind of “forced familiarisation with politics” (2011: 245).

Notable examples of co-operation between young people and adults in reconstruction include the Youth Brigades for the Reconstruction (Brigate Giovanili per la Ricostruzione) promoted by the Youth Front for National Independence (Fronte della Gioventù per l'Indipendenza Nazionale – FGD), an anti-fascist youth organisation born out of the resistance and open to both secular and Catholic associationism. Between 1945 and 1946 the Youth Brigades “were engaged in works of public utility and returning study and leisure spaces to their peers” (Dogliani 2003: 181), following the “Republics” model promoted by the Allies with communities self-managed by the young, designed to care for children orphaned by the war. The Allies simultaneously helped to lay the foundations for a process of de-fascistisation among youth, developing educational programmes based on the principles of personal initiative, accountability, respect and mutual aid, the practice of freedom and the ability to self-govern.

However, the spirit of social cohesion promoted by the FGD was crushed by the influence of the Cold War, as it entered into competition with the Catholic youth education organisations. The contrast between the Western and Eastern blocs was symbolically reflected in Italy by the division between the Catholic Scout movement (re-established after the war) and the Pioneers Association of Italy (Associazione Pionieri d'Italia – API), born in 1950 in Milan on the back of the associative model adopted internationally by the communist movement. The API would end up being strongly opposed by the Catholic Church and the Italian Catholic party, Christian Democracy (Democrazia Cristiana – DC) due to its atheist pedagogical orientation bound to communist culture. As a result, the API never became a mass organisation like in communist countries and disbanded in 1960. Catholic youth education in Italy could, however, count also on the Italian Youth for Catholic Action (Gioventù Italiana di Azione Cattolica (GIAC) which, thanks to its continued presence among young

people even during the fascist regime, during the Second World War represented “the largest organisation of Italian Catholic laity and, at the same time, one of the strongest youth movements in the country” (Boscato 2011: 249).

An emblematic example of such political and cultural conflicts is represented by the establishment of the Italian Recreational and Cultural Association (Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana – ARCI), an organisation that would involve an increasing number of young people, particularly from the late 1960s. This would develop in the face of an attitude of hostility from the Catholic party DC over the influence of the Left in the local workers’ clubs of the National Body for the Assistance to Workers (Ente Nazionale Assistenza ai Lavoratori – ENAL), the organisation that had inherited the assets and functioning of the National Action for Work (Opera Nazionale Lavoro – ONL) programme from the fascist regime (Degl’Innocenti 2012). Taking into account the incompatibility with the Catholic position, therefore, leftist clubs were to break away from ENAL and move towards the new ARCI, which also incorporated API and the Italian Union Sport for All (Unione Italiana Sport Per tutti – UISP).

From the 1960s to the early 21st century

After the experiences of participation shared by young people and adults during the resistance and the post-war reconstruction period, the 1950s was dominated by an increasing cultural climate of adultism. Avoiding any possible sources of intergenerational conflict seemed to be one of the main concerns of the new democratic order. This period has been described as one 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” (Dogliani 2003: 182).

In this climate, young people began to claim the right to be recognised as an active “social subject”. Urban life and factory work were seen as an opportunity for “psychological emancipation from parental constraints and the uncertainty of day work labour in agriculture” (Cruciani 2011: 346). Inspired by new cultural stimuli from over the Alps (e.g. American youth lifestyle, works of literature by British “angry young men”), an emerging youth culture contributed to the process of secularisation of Italian culture.

The student protests of the late 1960s were an expression of the generational divide that had arisen during the previous decade, but political parties, governments, the family, schools and economic players showed little willingness to change. The new youth culture arising from the student movement forcefully claimed the right to participate in decision making (“participatory democracy”) by young people seen as individuals and as a social group; this was a vision of life based on values of self-realisation and the desire to build a personal and collective youth identity (including through the instrumental use of the new products of mass culture). Anti-authoritarianism became the watchword of this new culture, where institutions (above all, schools) came to be seen as agents of the reproduction “of bourgeois values such as authority, order, meritocracy, respectability” (Dal Toso 1995: 85).

The climate of violence that would follow during the 1970s as well as a sense that the ideals pursued by the youth movement of 1968 had failed pushed youth associations

towards a cultural shift, from the “transcendent” (political or religious) to “secularity”. The rejection of totalitarian ideologies during the 1980s and 1990s was nevertheless accompanied by a more “secular” recovery and reinterpretation of those ideologies that had historically characterised each association, and on which they continued to base their identity. Sociological studies have highlighted how the value of identity based on a specific ideology continued to act as a factor of selectivity and enclosure during the 1980s (Dal Toso 1995).

Ideological or religious pluralism is a value that, at least in principle, seems to have been widely accepted from the 1990s onwards. However, out-of-school education spaces not conditioned by a specific ideological adhesion as well as based on free-choice learning principles would seem to be particularly lacking in the varied and in many ways elusive archipelago of youth education in Italy. The launch of a public policy for youth educational spaces in the 1980s was perhaps an attempt to respond to such a deficiency.

The beginnings of a public policy in the youth sector

Following the attempt of the fascist regime to create a system of mass youth education, during the Second World War educational activities conducted outside of school returned mainly to the sphere of associations. Direct intervention of the state would resume between the 1970s and 1980s in the social policies of local authorities, focusing on the preventive or reparative areas of youth issues (Bazzanella 2010). This occurred, for example, with the youth projects (Progetti Giovani) and, soon after, with the youth aggregation centres (Centri di Aggregazione Giovanile – CAG) funded by Law 285/1997 on provisions for the promotion of rights and opportunities for childhood and adolescence.

Educational work in these new public youth centres appears predominantly focused on objectives of prevention and control of youth problems, according to the notion that young people should primarily be supported during their transition to adulthood.

A phase of youth policy more oriented towards objectives of youth empowerment and emancipation 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. Increased powers granted to the regions in the field of youth policy also stimulated new programming directed towards overcoming the fragmentation and localism of educational work in youth centres or in the voluntary sector at a municipal level. New youth policy interventions began to build upon principles of co-operation among the central government, regions and organisations operating in the youth sector.

This has led to financing of the development of new public youth spaces under third sector management, such as the Youth Urban Labs (Laboratori Urbani Giovanili) in Puglia (Morciano et al. 2013; Morciano 2015a), Urban Vision (Visioni Urbane) in Basilicata and the Art Lab (Officine dell’arte) in Lazio. The uniqueness of these spaces is represented by their attempt to provide learning experiences closely connected with practice and explicitly focused on interests, motivations, passions and projects for young people. An underlying principle is the attempt to diversify the offer and develop opportunities for the active use of the spaces, ranging from the cultivation

of hobbies to the realisation of business-oriented projects. These new centres therefore tend to develop as incubators of new projects of youth initiative through the internal creation of a hub of diverse tangible and intangible resources (equipment, information, relationship networks, learning experiences, etc.).

These experiences of centre-based youth work, however, are now confronted 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. Furthermore, the Ministry of Youth was abolished in 2011, ushering in the present situation of a weak focus on youth policies.

The ongoing challenge for these new youth centres, therefore, is that of breaking away from a dependence on public funding through the diversification of sources of finance (the sale of products or services, identifying donors and sponsors, public commissioning, crowdfunding, etc.), while avoiding management geared towards the market that could put their social mission at risk.

The lack of national support reflects a legislative vacuum in national youth policy, including public regulation of the specific professional figure of the youth educator. Various regulated professions in the sphere of education (e.g. the professional educator, socio-cultural educator, community worker, social worker) are still not focused on young people, while experience in the field remains the only viable pathway for specialising in youth work. This shortage seems indicative of how a vision still prevails in Italy of youth work understood as work based mainly on voluntary and “front line” reparative activity (thus focused only on young people at the margins), out-of-school education oriented towards a specific ideology (religious or political), or the ability to plan and implement projects financed by EU 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 is a challenge that the various associations and youth centres in Italy are still struggling with (Bazzanella 2010; Dunne et al. 2014).

Past to present

In the religious sphere, the most widely disseminated educational spaces in Italy are currently Catholic parish oratories, where religious education is combined with recreational activities and initiatives in social volunteering. The Oratories National Forum (Forum Nazionale Oratori – FOI) was established in 2009 in order to support the development of the 6 500 Catholic oratories across the country.³⁷ Specific areas dedicated to the education of adolescents and young people are found within Catholic Action (Azione Cattolica – AC), the oldest Catholic association in Italy (founded in 1867), present in almost every diocese (219 of 226) and with 360 000 members. The largest Scout association in Italy, AGESCI, also has an explicit Catholic orientation, with more than 180 000 members. Conversely, the CNGEI is explicitly anchored to the principles of secularism and now numbers 12 000 members.³⁸

37. See www.oratori.org, accessed 11 March 2017.

38. See www.cngei.it, accessed 11 March 2017.

Among youth Catholic associations, a clearer orientation towards political commitment is represented by the Youth of ACLI (Giovani delle ACLI), a movement still active in the Catholic union, the Italian Christian Association of Workers (Associazione Cristiana dei Lavoratori Italiani – ACLI).³⁹ Finally, a significant Catholic presence can also be identified in not-for-profit welfare services for young people. A census by the Italian Episcopal Conference (Conferenza Episcopale Italiana – CEI) revealed that ecclesiastical institutions that manage health, social care and education facilities in Italy numbered 14 241 in 2011, almost 40% of the non-profit organisations in the same sector (36 010).⁴⁰

While Scout organisations and Catholic youth associations are traditionally oriented to personal development or character-building objectives, ARCI is one of the largest national secular networks of reformist cultural spaces engaged on a political and social level. ARCI defines itself as the “heir to a tradition and a long history of mutual association, that of the popular and anti-fascist movements that helped build and consolidate democracy founded on the Italian Constitution”.⁴¹ In 2011, it counted 4 987 local branches, of which 21% (1 020) were youth associations (Monticelli, Pincella and Bassoli 2011). In 2013, ARCI had 1 115 747 members (ARCI 2013).

The thematic area of “New generations and youth creativity” is part of the national ARCI work groups (along with culture, welfare, immigration, law, the Mafia, the environment, peace and international co-operation). ARCI has not developed an educational tradition explicitly aimed at young people; the awareness of the educational value of a significant portion of its activities began to mature recently, as of 2013. Indeed, as noted in an annual report, ARCI has also begun to consider itself an association possessing “a strong inter-generational nature that was never really put into focus, let alone valued”.

Explicitly educational associations involving teenagers and young people also include Arciragazzi, founded in 1983 and federated with ARCI. Arciragazzi has around 80 affiliated clubs in almost all Italian regions, in addition to 10 social co-operatives for the management of foster homes for children and adolescents, educational services and training.⁴²

The youth culture of opposition towards institutions and criticism of the dominant models of economic development from the 1970s to today has found one of its main areas of continuity in self-managed social centres. The specific features of these spaces include self-management, autonomy from institutions, employment and reuse of public spaces for activities ranging from cultural production to social commitment. Although primarily born from radical leftist movements, there are also social centres of the right, such as those that gave rise to the Casa Pound political movement of the extreme right.⁴³

39. See www.acli.it/le-acli/soggetti-sociali-e-professionali/giovani-delle-acli, accessed 11 March 2017.

40. Industry and Services Census, 2011, Italian National Institute of Statistics, available at www.istat.it, accessed 11 March 2017.

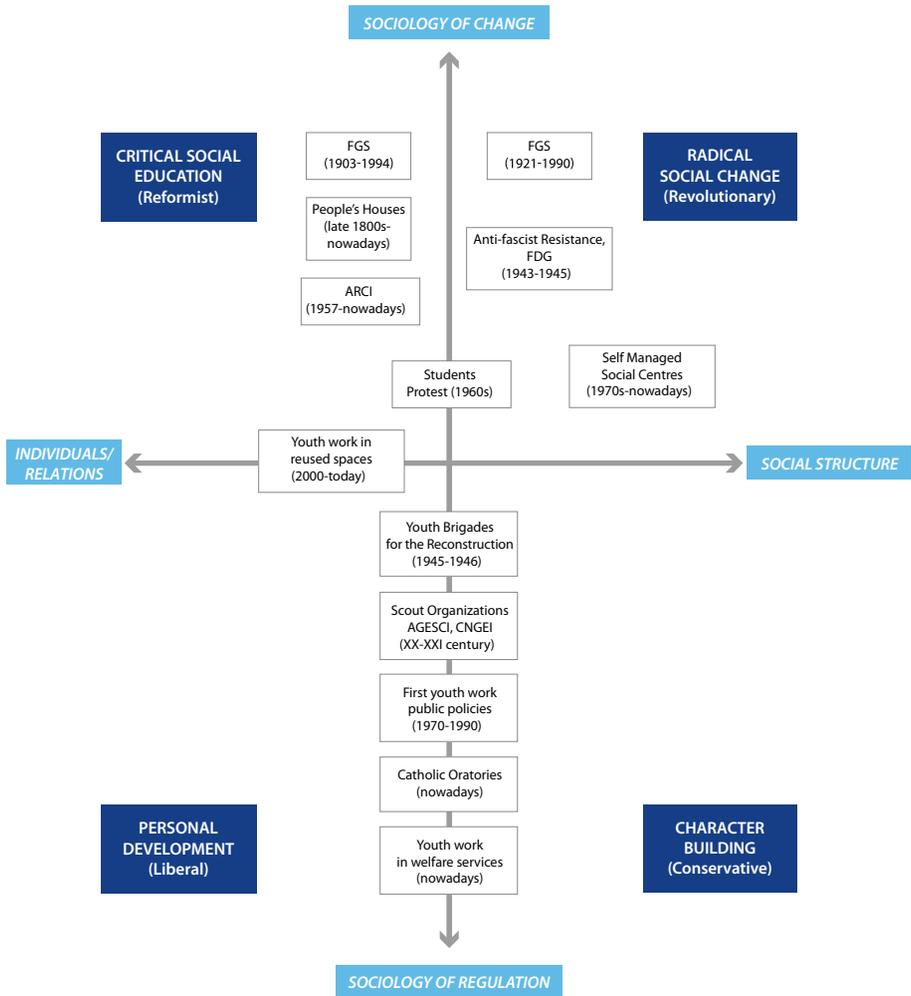
41. Available at www.arci.it, accessed 11 March 2017.

42. See www.arciragazzi.it, accessed 11 March 2017.

43. See www.casapounditalia.org, accessed 11 March 2017.

Hurley and Treacy’s work (1993) helps in classifying, from a sociological perspective, the different practices of youth work through history in Italy. Based on the historical reconstruction detailed in this article, Figure 3 offers examples of youth work practices in Italy oriented to social change (reformist or revolutionary) or to social regulation objectives (liberal or conservative).

Figure 3: Models of youth work practices in Italy, based on Hurley and Treacy (1993), as summarised by Cooper (2012)



Conclusion

Except for the unique youth education system created by the fascist regime, youth work in Italy has never been part of an organic public policy at national level. Resistance would seem to have been nourished by two key events apparently not yet metabolised: on one hand, the totalitarian projects of the fascist regime and its experiment of state mass youth education; on the other, the student protests of 1968 and the inability of the state to address its demands for change.

The tendency to support a pluralistic private offer of association-based youth work appeared, therefore, to provide a way to prevent the risk of exposing public institutions to new totalitarian youth education political programmes, such as that created by fascism. On the other hand, the public funding of youth work spaces or projects managed by private associations from the early 1980s seems also a strategy to contain those forces of youth protest inherited from the youth movements of the 1960s, having repressed their violent expression during the so-called Years of Lead (the 1970s). Actually, as noted by Neri Sernerì (2011), the students' protest was often associated with terrorist violence during the 1970s. The state therefore began supporting non-profit youth work spaces and projects on the condition that the need for change as expressed by young people be at least embedded into reformist routes.

Following the development of the youth education system by the fascist regime, the only direct state intervention in the youth work field in Italy has been that established by local welfare policies, focused on the prevention of youth problems. After the short period of the national youth policy supporting the regions in new programmes strongly committed to youth participation and values of social emancipation, youth policy in Italy has returned to a condition of uncertainty, with low public funding and a strong dependence on local initiatives. Many new youth spaces funded from 2006 by the regions now face the challenge of mobilising new, non-public funding sources, as well as developing new forms of co-operation with businesses.

Neither public intervention, nor the incentives of the European Commission and the Council of Europe, seem to have yet generated a thrust strong enough to identify a possible convergence for the profession of the youth worker in terms of skills, an ethical value base, specific outcomes and working process, and professional and educational standards (Morciano and Scardigno 2014). Instead, internal training of educators prevails (as in the sphere of Catholic associations), or a tendency towards non-clarification or denial of educational aims, often motivated by the desire to avoid an asymmetry in the relationship between adults and young people (as may be often seen in reformist associations of the secular sphere). This general attitude causes difficulties when research aims to "identify the pedagogical choices that guide the internal life of associations" working in the youth sector (Dal Toso 1995: 286). Despite participation in associations continuing to significantly influence the free time of young people (Istituto Giovanni Toniolo 2014), Italy still lacks evaluative research (Morciano 2015b) on the effects that participation in youth work can have on the life paths of young people.

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Appendix: acronyms in text

API: Associazione Pionieri d'Italia (Pioneers Association of Italy)

ARCI: Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana (Italian Recreational and Cultural Association),

ASCI: Associazione Scautistica Cattolica Italiana (Italian Catholic Scout Association)

CAG: Centri di Aggregazione Giovanile (Youth Aggregation Centres)

CNGEI: Corpo Nazionale dei Giovani Esploratori (National Body of Youth Scouts)

DC: Democrazia Cristiana (Christian Democracy)

ENAL: Ente Nazionale Assistenza ai Lavoratori (National Body for Assistance to Workers)

FDG: Fronte della Gioventù per l'Indipendenza Nazionale (Youth Front for National Independence)

FGC: Federazione Giovanile Comunista (Communist Youth Federation)

FGS: Federazione Giovanile Socialista (Socialist Youth Federation),

FOI: Forum Nazionale Oratori (Oratories National Forum)

GIAC: Gioventù Italiana di Azione Cattolica (Italian Youth for Catholic Action)

GIL: Gioventù Italiana del Littorio (Littorio's Italian Youth)

GUF: Gruppi Universitari Fascisti (Fascist University Groups)

ONB: Opera Nazionale Balilla (National Balilla Action)

ONL: Opera Nazionale Lavoro (National Action for Work)

REI: Ragazzi Esploratori Italiani (Italian Boy Scouts)

UISP: Unione Italiana Sport Per tutti (Italian Union Sports for All)

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