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Introduction to the Special Section: Youth Work, Non-Formal Education and Youth Participation

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Introduction to the Special Section: Youth Work, Non-Formal Education and Youth Participation

*Daniele Morciano**, *Fausta Scardigno*** and *Maurizio Merico****

New challenges for youth and educational research

This special issue of the *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education* deals with “Youth Work, Non-Formal Education and Youth Participation”. These three dimensions have become, over recent years, among the main drivers in youth policies (Bendit & Hahn-Bleibtreu, 2008; Chisholm, Kovacheva & Merico, 2011; Belton, 2014). This is largely evident at a European level. Specifically, the development of youth work is nowadays a priority for the European Commission and the Council of Europe, within a broader framework directed towards the recognition and validation of non-formal education, the promotion of youth participation, and the wider rethinking of youth policies (Milmeister & Williamson, 2006; Williamson, 2007; 2008; Denstad, 2009; Devlin, 2010).

It is also worth noting that, often thanks largely to appeals and pressure at both a national and European level, social research (in particular youth studies) is gradually generating a greater level of interest in terms of several key issues: the analysis of youth work, its history, traditions, key features and methods; the role and relevance of non-formal learning/education, the dimensions involved, its validation; the pathways towards recognition and

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professionalization of youth workers; the impact of the various initiatives to promote and enhance youth participation, the role of youth organisations; the strengths and weaknesses of youth policies at both a national and supranational level; finally, of no lesser importance, the relationship between youth work, non-formal education and youth participation, their roles as incubators for youth innovation and their impact on young people's life trajectories (Chisholm, Kovacheva & Merico, 2011; Morciano & Scardigno, 2014; Taru, Coussée & Williamson, 2014).

In this respect, this special issue was intended as an opportunity to bring together papers accounting for different perspectives, methods, and knowledge, with the principal aim of analysing some of the issues mentioned above and of exemplifying the variety and richness of challenges that arise when the social sciences delve into the study of youth work, non-formal education and youth participation. Moreover, these three dimensions seemed particularly appealing since they offer – as will hopefully become evident throughout the papers – a chance for bridging and integrating the sociology of youth with the sociology of education, as well as youth studies and educational research.

There is also a further reason for pushing towards the notion of editing an issue on these topics. Despite their relevance at a European and international level, and the importance – just to offer an emblematical example – of figures such as Don Bosco to the history of youth work (Coussée, 2008), scarce attention has been paid to this issue in Italy. In the words of international observers on the developments affecting youth work in Italy: “No law defining or regulating youth work [exists] and youth work is generally not perceived as a policy priority” (Dunne, Ulicna, Murphy & Golubeva, 2014, p. 206). At the same time, with a few recent exceptions, the social sciences in Italy have not paid specific attention to youth work and its relationship to non-formal education and youth participation. In this light, this special issue is also intended as an invitation to take on board the new challenges that such dimensions present in relation to key aspects of sociological research and theories on youth and education.

Finally, and of equal importance, this special issue aims – in line with one of the main objectives of the IJSE – towards activating, promoting and enhancing exchanges between Italian and foreign scholars on the abovementioned themes.

Shaping the identity of youth work

Moving from this brief description of the aims underpinning this special issue, and prior to illustrating the contents of the papers, it seems appropriate to focus attention on an aspect that, in our opinion, may embody the dimensions analysed by the authors of the following papers: the identity of youth work and its relation to non-formal education and youth participation.

Being – as is often portrayed – a “polyvalent and multifaceted practice”, whose main distinctive feature is its *versatility*, “youth work [...] seems to suffer from a perpetual identity crisis” (Coussée, 2009, pp. 7-8). In other words, it is difficult to definitively determine its key features. It thus seems imperative to further analyze its perennial tensions and contradictions, flexibility and diversity, as well as to explore new directions for shaping the identity of a social practice that constantly lies on “the boundaries between the private lifeworld and the public system” (Coussée, 2012, p. 10).

In this respect, among the various efforts made over recent decades, a key role has been played by European institutions: indeed, since the early 1990s the European Commission and the Council of Europe have supported comparative researches on youth policies and youth work in a European context (Chisholm & Bergeret, 1991; Schizzerotto & Gasperoni, 2001; Institut für Sozialarbeit und Sozialpädagogik, 2008). Despite the difficulties faced in collecting and comparing data on youth work in different national contexts, such research provides a significant contribution to the study of the continuities and discontinuities of youth work across Europe.

Yet, the question of its distinctive contribution to the lives of young people still remains a burning issue and a meaningful field of research. This is especially true for Member States in the Mediterranean area, where, in part due to a delayed direct public intervention in the youth sector, youth work has been based mainly on voluntary action rather than on professional practice. However, even in those national contexts with a longer tradition of professional youth work, the typical features of youth work actually risk being dissipated by the pressures towards reparative policies, which aim at providing an immediate response to youth issues (e.g. youth unemployment).

Therefore, as argued by the Council of the European Union (2009, p. 10) in its Resolution on a “*renewed framework for European cooperation*

in the youth field (2010-2018)”, “The ways in which youth work can contribute to achieving the overall objectives [...of creating a greater number of and more equal opportunities for young people in addition to promoting their active citizenship] – as well as be supported and recognised as an added value for its economic and social contribution – should be further examined and discussed”.

Since 2008, the Flemish Community in Belgium and the Youth Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe have organised a series of workshops on youth work and its relevance to youth policy, where the examination of today’s youth work identity has been rooted within the histories of youth work in different national contexts¹. One of the most significant traits of youth work highlighted within this debate is the fact that it always operates *in the middle* of a field of tension, between young people as an active social force, on the one hand, and the need to preserve the social system on the other. This is evident, for example, in the list of youth work practices – which includes, among others, the integration of recreational activities and learning opportunities, the voluntary participation of young people, educational work focused both on individuals and groups, the cultivation of associative life and promotion of self-governing experiences (Davies, 2005).

At the same time, should one attempt to identify the borders between other services and activities for young people and youth work, the question of the specific contribution of the latter remains open. Indeed, as noted by Dunne et al. (2014), it is difficult to mark a clear boundary between youth work(ers) and other services (or professionals working) for young people. If anything, the value of youth work lies in how it is also relevant to other policy areas (i.e. formal education, health, sport, careers guidance). Evidently, “who ‘youth workers’ are and what they actually do, or should do, is still badly understood outside the youth field” (Chisholm et al., 2011, p. 38). Therefore, the problem is (still) that of understanding the specificity of the contribution of youth work and how it is produced.

When taking the perspective of evaluation research into consideration, the problem becomes not only searching for evidence of youth work outcomes, but also identifying the mechanisms able to produce them.

¹ See the four volumes published up to now: Verschelden, Coussée, Van de Walle & Williamson (2009); Coussée, Verschelden, Van de Walle, Medlinska & Williamson (2010); Coussée, Williamson & Verschelden (2012); Taru, Coussée & Williamson (2014).

Indeed, despite the attention paid to the association between youth work activities and their educational outcomes, there is still a lack of evidence on how youth work processes generate expected outcomes (Mahoney, Larson & Eccles, 2005; Smith et al., 2010). Moreover, a lack of theoretical discussion can also be revealed. For example, in the latest report on youth work in Europe (Dunne et al., 2014), the authors seek to identify possible similarities among the numerous definitions of youth work in the Member States. Yet in doing so, they seem to bring together youth work objectives inspired by a regulatory theoretical framework with others directed towards social change. In this respect, a more critical discussion of the theoretical basis of the different objectives of youth work could help, for example, to look not only at how institutions shape youth work in order to preserve social systems, but also at how youth work becomes a driver of social change. Indeed, as a dynamic dimension, the relationship between youth workers and young people may also lead to critically scrutinizing the status quo and, at the same time, developing innovation processes at a social, cultural or economic level (Skott-Myhre, 2005).

In this perspective, the special issue focuses attention on participation and non-formal education as two key-dimensions in youth work when striving to operate *in the middle* of the tensions between the intent of the social system to preserve itself and young people's aspirations for change (Percy-Smith, 2006).

Participation can be considered as a process that occurs within a *dynamic space* where institutions and young people interact (Naima, Wong, Zimmerman & Parker, 2010; Morciano, Scardigno, Manuti & Pastore, 2013). In this space, the endogenous forms of youth participation strive to transform institutions, so that participation may genuinely make a difference in the decision-making process. Therefore, the ability to reduce the distance between youth lifeworlds and the socio-institutional system can be identified as one of the principal key-features of youth work.

The educational dimension takes the shape of non-formal education processes. One of the peculiarities of non-formal education is precisely the importance provided to supporting the construction of autonomy (spirit of initiative, freedom of choice, self-efficacy, skills practice) in a relational space where young people and adults negotiate objectives, methods and rules. Considered from this perspective, a challenging task for youth workers is that of helping young people to cope with two kind of attitudes, both working against participation conceived as an experience of youth-

adult interaction: on the one hand, the tendency to absolutise their own experiences, concentrating their attention on their inner world; on the other, the sense of powerlessness towards a social system that seems to impose compliance and to reject those self-realization aspirations perceived as more genuine (Petrelli, 2000).

Contents of the special issue

The papers that constitute the special section of this issue approach several of the aspects involved in analysing the dimensions of youth work, non-formal education and youth participation from a range of vantage points. The papers have been selected on the basis of an open call for papers, to which (young and more experienced) scholars from different countries and differing backgrounds² have replied. It should therefore be noted that they do not present, and are not intended to constitute, a coherent and/or comprehensive picture of the manifold aspects involved in the issues introduced above. As is often the case, some aspects risk overrepresentation while other focal aspects may be neglected. Nevertheless, we hope that the papers may allow the reader to explore, through the various theoretical, methodological, professional, and cultural perspectives³, several of the issues emerging from the analysis of youth work, non-formal education and youth participation, as well as consider the relationship between these different subjects.

The issue begins with a paper by Dana Fusco and Michael Heathfield, from CUNY York College and Harold Washington College in the United States. In *Modeling Democracy: Is youth 'participation' enough?*, they critically reconsider a range of models employed in the conceptualization of youth work in Anglophone countries: namely, England and Ireland in Europe, in Australia and in the United States. In particular, through an appraisal of the contradictory range of meanings and practices of youth participation, they examine the strengths and weakness of the different models of youth work, with the main aim of understanding “how

² We would like to express our sincere gratitude for the efforts and contributions of those authors whose papers, for various reasons, we were unable to publish in this issue.

³ Furthermore, it is worth noting that the papers published in this special issue provide a picture covering a wide range of European countries (Finland, Ireland, Portugal, Estonia, Germany, the United Kingdom and Italy), together with a paper by two American scholars.

democracy might be more consistently modelled within the practices of youth work”.

In the second paper, Helena Helve, professor emerita of Youth Research at Tampere University, presents an analysis based on four follow-up studies on value changes among Finnish young people between 1989 and 2011. In particular, seven citizenship types are identified with their own belief systems, values and doctrines: *Egalitarian*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Ecological*, *Cynical*, *Authoritarian*, *Ethno-national*, and *Neoliberal*. On this basis, moving from theories of social capital, identity formation, and action competence, the paper examines the recent transformations in the forms of youth participation and the role played by youth work and youth policy in developing the autonomy, empowerment, and citizenship of young people.

The paper by Daniele Morciano attempts to develop a theoretical framework for evaluating the non-formal education provided by youth work. In particular, the paper offers a possible theoretical basis for evaluation research that strives to provide evidence of those less predictable outcomes and mechanisms of non-formal education. The ability to appeal to the unpredictability of the relation between youth workers and young people is highlighted as one of the possible distinctive features of youth work.

Brian Melaugh, from the Department of Applied Social Studies at Maynooth University, Ireland, illustrates the results of a qualitative research project on the impact of austerity on youth work identity and practice in Ireland. It is worth noting that, together with the negative effects produced by the reduction of funding, the interviews clearly highlight the potential opportunities arising from a “programme that is challenging [...the] identity and legitimacy” of youth work in Ireland: the impetus towards innovation, the creation of new youth work associations and a renewed debate on the recognition of youth work.

Together and *Cortocircuito* are two case studies of youth initiatives and participation analysed by Rita Bertozzi, researcher and lecturer at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia. Starting from the reconstruction of the history and the theories of youth participation in Italy, the author develops an analysis of the effects of the two projects on the young people involved in their design and implementation. The article highlights the positive effects of youth-led participation to the sense of belonging to the community, critical awareness and political engagement. However, the author also highlights the risk that youth-led participation may present due

to the lack of interaction with adults: a poor effect on the decision-making process.

The same risk highlighted by Rita Bertozzi is revealed in the paper by Mariana Rodrigues, Isabel Menezes and Pedro Ferreira (from the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences at the University of Porto) on the organisational and educational framework of the Portuguese Catholic Scout Association. Although the scout association was founded on the principles of representative democracy, younger scouts are excluded from the decisional processes at the top level of the organization. Therefore, even a youth work organization strongly oriented to the valorisation of youth-adult interaction may restrict spaces and forms of youth participation due to the vision of young people as “citizens-in-making”.

In *Estonian experience of implementing the new forms of youth participation in youth policy*, Tania Dibou, from the Institute of Political Science and Governance at Tallinn University, presents research on new forms of youth participation in Estonia. Following a review of the national legislation on youth policy and youth work, the author discusses the results of interviews with stakeholders, focusing on the effects of youth participation on the decision-making process in youth policy.

The paper by Frank Greuel, Frank König and Stefanie Reiter, researchers at the German Youth Institute, reviews pedagogical approaches of anti-prejudice education, attempting to identify new trends and innovative strategies for collaborative activities between formal and non-formal educators. The core of their analysis is based on the results of the evaluation of the German federal programme against right-wing extremism and pro-democracy building, within which numerous small-scale pilot projects in formal and non-formal educational settings have been implemented. On this basis, the authors conclude that the hybridisation between forms of formal, non-formal and informal educational settings shows a significant potential for embedding anti-prejudice approaches and for improving the effectiveness of programmes for preventing prejudice.

In *Non-formal youth development and its impact on young people's lives*, Karen Stuart and Lucy Maynard invite the reader to consider the perspective of practitioners, presenting a case study on a youth development charity which has been working with young people in the UK for over 65 years. The discussion of the case study offers a number of suggestions, in particular regarding both the strengths and limitations of the

different approaches used for exploring the impact of youth work on the lives of young people.

Finally, in *Recognition of prior learning in youth work in the European Union*, Jooris Schut, from the University of Twente in the Netherlands, presents the main results of two studies on the validation of non-formal and informal learning and the recognition of prior learning (RPL): the first concerns the limited use of RPL in youth work in the European Union; the second proposes a model which helps to identify and describe four types of RPL and compare different practices and RPL systems in Europe, as well as identify new areas for future study.

When this special issue was first conceived and the call for papers launched, our purpose – as already outlined – was to offer an (unpretentious) contribution to the discussion on youth work, non-formal education and youth participation, as well as gather (from the papers submitted from diverse national contexts) useful methodological and theoretical suggestions for stimulating and supporting the emergent research on such issues in Italy. We are fully aware that the publication of the results of a scientific endeavour does not always equate to the latter reaching its (even partial) conclusion: in this specific case we are, however, conscious that, both in terms of the papers that follow and for the purposes underpinning this special issue, there is still the need and plenty of room for further analysis and discussion. Our genuine hope is, therefore, that the following papers stimulate new research questions, lead to developing future lines of inquiry and offer new challenges to the interaction between the sociology of youth and the sociology of education in the analysis of youth work.

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