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The Cultural Integration of Young Refugees: an Experience Within the Italian Academic Context

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Abstract: Cultural and academic integration of migrants and refugees is a structural social need of Mediterranean Europe. Despite often being managed and experienced as emergencies, they call for effective tools capable of creating new opportunities both for newly arrived and the hosting communities. The paper sets out to highlight how the results of sociological research, in an interdisciplinary approach, may constitute useful tools for the clarification of previous studies undertaken on refugees and students, to the point of creating outcomes that may be considered genuine practices of social and cultural inclusion (Dryden-Peterson, S. 2011), necessary for reprogramming European inclusion policies and for turning around the perspective of migration from a problem to an opportunity for new human capital, avoiding the waste and erosion of 'migratory resources'.

Keywords: inclusion, academic integration, European policies, refugees, educational credentials.

The valorization of cultural capital of migrants and refugees: theories and good practices

The policies of integration and inclusion based on the valorization of people's cultural and professional heritage, whether refugees or not, always take on stronger connotations of a contextual and local character (Ambrosini, 2017; Timm & Student, 2016) within a now structural dynamic of migratory flows that involves the countries of Southern Europe to an ever greater extent. The social processes of integration, being bound up in very specific territorial conditions (operative institutions, welfare, civil society, the employment market and the cultural context) and a range of different migratory dynamics (by ethnic composition, type of immigration, numbers and social impact), undergo local interference even when they are couched within frameworks provided by national and European policies. The classic management models of migratory flows lose their standard connotations in the sense that little by little, despite maintaining a single and coherent canon, they take into account the relational context in which the integration process takes place and develops: people's identity owes a lot to local interactions, to everyday exchange, to their actual living conditions, to ties with civil society, rather than with single policies of integration that correspond more to the normative framework of reference than to inclusion practices. This entails that good local practices may be transformed into national and European driving forces if people are capable of grasping their innovative potential, without considering that grassroots experiences may make up for the lack of adequate national policies through the expertise acquired on a local level. In this sense, over on the European policy level, solutions have been sought over recent years that have attempted to surpass the assimilation perspective (Park & Burgess, 1924), simplistic in its aims and ineffective in its results, as well as the utilitarian approach, viewing migratory movements in terms of being functional to the needs of the economic and demographic system of the hosting society, instead aiming to valorize the cultural and ethical implications of migrations, taking into account the dynamics by which those who arrive undergo a natural process of marginalization, both in terms of exposure to the risk of social exclusion, and as a condition of the questioning of identity. Feeling on the margins, different, foreign and also professionally 'useless' does not just mean not belonging to a social community and not sharing the formal bond this entails, but also questioning one's own identity on the basis of new parameters. This double-edged condition of hardship could be turned around if only certain interpretational frontiers of some of the current social processes linked to migration were taken into account. With regard to contemporary liquid society, the traditional catego-

ries of immigrant and emigrant appear surpassed and obsolete (Ambrosini, 2011).

An important aspect in the tightening of policies for the inclusion and integration of migrant subjects in Mediterranean Europe is made up of the academic social research, which in various Italian universities has been placed at the service of public policies for inclusion, activating processes of support and accompaniment of the insertion and cultural integration of refugee students. Universities in fact have the independent (and formal) duty to adopt the forms that best guarantee on one hand the right to study and on the other to ensure the authenticity of the documentation produced by those requesting recognition, especially when it is not possible to obtain original copies, in order to activate processes of real cultural integration. In this sense, sociology, in its dimension of applied social research, may be of great support to the policies of inclusion in Southern Europe, above all in the light of the experiences activated in the contexts of local and micro-territorial inclusion. The research carried out by the academic *Center of Lifelong learning - Centro di Servizio di Ateneo per l'Apprendimento Permanente* - University Aldo Moro in Bari (from here on, *CAP*) and coordinated by a group of researchers in sociology, pedagogy and the psychology of labour, moved along the lines of the reconstruction of the trajectories of life and also of the acknowledgement of previous educational credentials of refugees in Italy, through the deployment of procedures for the comparability of study titles with a view to academic re-enrolment and the certification of professional competences and soft skills for the facilitation of insertion in the world of work.

In the last few years, many inclusion projects of the European Union have fostered the spread of national good practices for integration in order to valorize local experiences with a view to promoting actions deployed rather than programmatic expectations and intentions. This is the case of *inHERE*: a European Union project which was founded to facilitate the integration and access of refugees to European institutions of higher education, strengthening the sharing of knowledge, reciprocal support and academic partnerships *inHERE* does not dictate operative schemes but implements the acknowledgement of good practices among the initiatives deployed in the world of higher education in order to respond to a variety of emergency situations of refugee students, so as to identify integration models that, having proven themselves successful, have the potential to be extended. The Good Practice Catalogue of *inHERE* is designed to offer a source of information, inspiration, exchange of experiences and collaboration for academic communities, identifying a series of good practices and skills concerning the integration of refugees. The cases featured in the Catalogue were selected on the basis of criteria considering the real or potential impact of the initia-

tives, with particular regard for the integration of refugees in the education system and in social life. While on one hand universities were asked to state the number of students and researchers reached, more importance was given to the potential of transferability of the way of working to other systems of higher education and university contexts. Among the over 300 initiatives monitored in 32 countries, there is the work of the CAP at the University of Bari. Its good practices were ascertained and highlighted for three of the 11 parameters taken into consideration, in particular for the aspects concerning the recognition of the qualifications of refugees on the basis of the normative guidelines of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, as well as for collaboration with other universities, local bodies, associations and non-governmental organizations, etc., and lastly for the financial support conceded to refugee students through study grants, exemption from the payment of enrolment fees, and a contribution to meet the living expenses during the period of study.

Another European project for the valorization of good practices in the inclusion of refugees is *Skills 2 Work: Valuing Skills of Beneficiaries of International Protection*, a project coordinated by OIM and designed for the promotion and dissemination of good practices for the validation of the qualifications of asylum seekers and refugees through the establishment of a platform that represents a tool aimed both at beneficiaries of international protection and asylum seekers as well as representatives of the world of work for the gathering of information and services useful for social inclusion, the identification of available bodies, access to information on the norms concerning the recognition of qualifications and the itineraries of administrative integration for access to services. Through the creation of sustainable employment opportunities, *Skills 2 Work* promoted the socioeconomic integration of foreign workers through a better management of the system of ascertainment of the skills of beneficiaries of international protection and refugees, on the basis of the good practices found in the nine European partner countries. Also in this project, the practice deployed by the University of Bari appears on the *Skills 2 Work* – OIM digital platform.

Italy, in fact, adheres to the inclusion policies of refugees set up in the European Union also through the National Integration Plan which, being aimed at the more than 74,800 beneficiaries of international protection as surveyed in September 2017 on the Italian territory, considers the social and employment insertion of beneficiaries of international protection as a priority, insofar as it is employment that makes people an active part of the economic and social system of the community, and where integration is seen as a complex process that starts from their initial reception and aims to achieve personal autonomy. Never like in this case, as stated in the foreword to the National Plan, has it been necessary for positive synergies to be built on a territorial level between public bodies and production categories, with

a view to the ideation and implementation of sustainable initiatives. Again, in the premises, when referencing the constitutional values on which it is based, the text also underlines the mention of values, basic rights and responsibilities, attributing them to the same degree to both the hosts and the hosted, drawing on that underlying bi-directionality on the basis of which the integration process is based (Cesareo & Blangiardo, 2009).

The National Integration Plan calls on a multilevel governance and a polycentric network of services, confirming a horizontal and not vertical structure in the management of migration policies. In stating the itineraries, the programmatic priorities and the deployment tools, in fact it cites “*access to education and the recognition of qualifications as a factor behind the facilitation of the social inclusion of beneficiaries of protection*”. Today, the formal recognition of foreign study qualifications foresees a very complex procedure hard to put into practice for beneficiaries of international protection: the time required, the costs and the complex bureaucratic passages are in many cases a strong disincentive. Furthermore, beneficiaries of protection often do not have the original certificates of the qualifications obtained, and by virtue of the same reasons that led them to migrate, cannot turn to the consular authorities of their countries of origin in order to obtain them. Among other things, the National Plan foresees the enhancement of measures to support the continuation of higher education and university studies, promoting the positive initiatives implemented in various universities, and assessing the possibility to enhance secondary school courses of first and second level for foreigners, to uniform the procedures for the recognition and valorisation of previously obtained qualifications, standardizing alternative methods of evaluation in the case of the unavailability of official documents.

The experience matured by the CAP of the University of Bari is part of the recent guidelines given by the General Directorate for Students, the development and internationalization of higher education of the Ministry for Education, Universities and Research, concerning the procedures for the access of foreign students requiring visas to 2017–18 higher education courses.

In the final report of the Focus Group on the theme of integration in April 2017, the UNHCR points out, however, that while such norms are potentially of great impact, they are fragmentary and sporadic. The CAP works on the preparation of effective procedures together with the Information Centre on Academic Mobility and Comparability (CIMEA). The CIMEA, as the official Italian hub in the international ENIC-NARIC network, has worked since 1984 as delegated by the MIUR (Ministry for Education, Universities and Research) for the ordering of methodologies and tools used by Italian academic institutions for the recognition of foreign study qualifications, and in particular for the beneficiaries of international protection. The aim thus lies in identifying measures concretely supporting secondary and higher ed-

education and in guaranteeing the recognition of studies and skills acquired, and it was on this specific aspect that the good practice of the university was consolidated, thanks to and in the light of the direct connection between sociological research and innovative interventions of academic integration, also arising from the interdisciplinary nature of social research.

From life stories to the certification services for the academic integration of refugee students: the methodological framework

The recognition of individual training assets, independently of their occupational applicability and the fundamental contribution that it can give to the process of social inclusion of the individual, has obvious social knock-on effects that, however, cannot be taken for granted nor considered automatic. The socio-economic integration of the beneficiaries of international protection represents a major challenge for the European Union and for national societies. The work is both a crucial component of the inclusion process, but it is even more so for the contribution that these subjects may bring to the hosting society, without forgetting that work highlights this contribution, making it transparent and bringing it to light, regularizing it both from a normative and a social point of view. It must nevertheless be considered that with regard to their already difficult occupational insertion, specific factors of weakness also weigh down on this category of migrants, such as psychological vulnerability (due to the traumas experienced prior to departure and during the journey, of the difficulties inherent to their insertion in a new living context, of their uneasy living conditions and uncertain expectations), the impossibility to choose the country of destination on the basis of evaluations of suitability, the absence or lack of social support networks in the hosting context. If to these inequalities, also the unfairness of a lack of recognition of educational credentials and previously acquired qualifications are added, these subjects will be (predictably) overcome by processes of progressive professional de-qualification, even more markedly than those who are victims of underemployment and unemployment.

Working to guarantee this recognition, promotes a better crossover between the supply and demand of labour, favours professional mobility and encourages migrants to invest in their own professional capital, in some cases wasted and eroded by the absence of incentive mechanisms and transparent procedures. Every day, the CAP researchers come across life stories, new biographies, interrupted paths and trajectories, with regard to which the attempt is made to give a (formal and substantial) response that takes the shape of a document/certificate of academic equivalence or comparability; a document clarifying previous qualifications to be sent to the governing board of the university, presented in a folder highlighting the professional

skills and individual soft skills required to obtain a qualification recognized by regional professional registers, and responding to European and international guidelines on the cultural integration of refugees.

Before providing the service of the certification of skills and recognition of qualifications for refugees, the *CAP* researchers (sociologists and psychologists) had worked in the field of two projects financed by the European Integration Fund (EIF, now AMIF), in which they dealt largely with the valorization of human capital of numerous migrants and citizens of the third-world countries. Since June 2014 up to the present day (July 2018), the *CAP* has welcomed 306 migrants (asylum seekers, bearers of permits to stay and residents in the provinces of Bari, Lecce and Foggia). In particular, of the 306 users accepted, 74 are women and 232 men (average age 34.6). They largely come from Nigeria, Senegal, Pakistan, Morocco, Georgia, India and Albania.

The qualification held by these users is medium to high: 140 possess elementary or middle school certificates, 94 have higher degrees and 72 have a university degree. Of the 72 graduates, 20 are enrolled in degree courses at the University of Bari and frequent study courses in which the study credits attributed to them in their countries of origin were acknowledged.

As concerns the training needs that the users declare to have, again with the view to facilitating their entry to the Italian labour market, the need emerges to undertake study paths on business development (23.9%) and understanding of the labour market and of juridical norms (15.7%).

Lastly, of the 306 users who have taken advantage of the service offered by the *CAP*, 122 users have requested the assessment evaluation and certification of soft skills. Hence, this group of users underwent itineraries of self and hetero-evaluation of the transversal skills useful to enhancing their own employability on the Italian labour market. It is interesting to note that the assessment of soft skills in the sample of *CAP* users shows on average rather low scores in the dimension of openness to experience, which should be fundamental with regard to the need for inclusion and valorization shown by them in the various phases of consultancy.

From this datum we decided to set out to make the activity carried out at the *CAP* even more useful and valorize the forms of academic integration, in the institutionalization phase of the finalized recognition service (starting from 2017), aimed specifically at beneficiaries of international protection status, foreseeing a specific activity of biographical listening, using the techniques of social research of a qualitative and narrative nature, that made it possible right from the start to create a relationship of mutual listening and trust between the researcher and user. In this sense, probably, alongside the effort to bring to light the 'migrant' human capital, the *CAP* over the coming years will make an ever-greater commitment to constructing a culture of acceptance, capable of looking at people as a resource, whatever language

they speak, and of viewing the opening to difference as a crucial skill in all professional profiles.

Therefore, on the methodological level, ever since its formal founding phase in 2017, the service has used the tools of ethnographical research above all in the early stage of welcoming refugee users, with particular reference to the reconstruction of their life stories through the technique of the semi-structured interview (Moro, Jacobone & Scardigno, 2009) in order to gather – through a dialogic and empathic form – the information useful for reconstructing the baggage of experiences and sensations that characterize the difficult transition of the refugee up to the decision to put down roots in another culture. In particular, the thematic areas investigated in the life stories are: planning to leave their homeland, their current situation, the conditions of integration, weighing up their migration experience, their expectations of integration. Each interview is carried out individually, in order to guarantee the conditions of intimacy needed to bring to light particularly delicate episodes in the life stories gathered, and on average, it lasts an hour. The protocol foresees that the interviews are subjected to a thematic analysis of their contents (Granheim & Lundman, 2004; Bichi, 2002), through the examination of the text of the interview report, transcribed word for word by the researcher.

The correspondence between the registration and the contents of the transcription is verified independently by two authors belonging to the research group and responsible for data analysis. The qualitative analysis of the content based on the narrative data makes it possible to thoroughly understand the influence of the experience on the study careers of the refugees and the type of recognition service (of qualifications, of professional skills and/or of soft skills) most useful for the type of need that emerges from the biographical interview. In specific terms, after a careful reading of the entire transcript gathered in phase 1, the clear contents of each interview is analysed (phase 2) with a view to highlighting areas of contents referring to the three semantic categories linked to the type of service most in line with the needs expressed in the acceptance phase and that of ethnographic research.

Alongside the work of extraction of the thematic areas case by case, the first researcher (from the field of sociology of cultural processes) creates the report on each interview which is then reread by two researchers with expertise in certification (from the field of the psychology of work, didactics and formative assessment), who verify the presence of common areas in the various interviews examined, and integrate those categories that, although expressed with lexical differences, may be attributed to the same semantic framework as concerns the specific need for certification expressed by the refugee using our service. In the third stage, the three researchers (of sociology, psychology of work and didactics/formative assessment) compare

differences and similarities between what is expressed by the interviewees. The differences are discussed and reviewed by the three researchers responsible for data analysis and the reflection process is the upshot of the result of their agreement on the categories identified which reconstruct the need for certification. Beyond the comparison carried out, each case examined is for us researchers, and in particular for the strictly sociological research phase, a unique and particular story, both in terms of the wealth of experience narrated and for the possibility, it offers to learn lessons and gain global insights for the improvement of the certification service.

The group of refugees currently involved by the *CAP* Service is made up of users from countries in a state of crisis, war or extreme poverty (Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Yemen, Cameroon, Gambia and Palestine). The analysis of the transcripts of the interviews carried out with all 16 users of the service in the phase in which they turned to the consulting helpdesk of the University of Bari allowed us to organize the contents that emerged with regard to the key themes investigated in the interview. In particular, the focus of the attention concerned the reasons for leaving their homelands and the conditions that may facilitate the process of their economic, cultural and social integration. As regards this theme, the participants interviewed stated a certain homogeneity in the reasons why they had left their countries of origins. Most of them declared that the main reason behind their desire to migrate was a precise desire to improve their cultural, economic and working conditions. Only two participants attributed the reasons for their departure to strictly family and personal elements, which they had great difficulty talking about.

They all expressed the desire to remain in Italy, despite displaying the desire to be able to return to their countries of origin. However, within the category of the subjects that expressed the desire to remain in Italy it is possible to identify a diversification between those who express positive aspects of their stay and those who, on the other hand, mention strongly negative elements attributable largely to two mechanisms: difficulties with the language and with finding work. The analysis of the narrative data gathered in this field research phase through the life-story tool turned out to be particularly precious to reconstruct the conditions under which the plans for migration of the young refugees in our country experience this difficult moment of transition. Whatever their motivations, be they intrinsic or extrinsic, which guided their choice of rethinking their life plans in a different cultural context, their stories highlighted the great effort made by young refugees on a personal, family and professional level, but also the wealth of formative and study experiences acquired: a capital which risks being wasted if not entirely eroded in the absence of a phase successive to that of social research. The recognition of formative and professional experiences, of the cultural and academic qualifications of the young interviewees in fact showed the wealth

of cultural assets that they possess, constituting a precious bonus to valorize the contexts in which they are inserted.

This is the case of one of our 16 current students, who is 27 and has been in Italy for two years, having graduated already in his country of origin (Syria).

“Before getting a degree, I worked in an office as an accountant, and I worked in a studio as a teacher of accounting programmes in Damascus. After a year, I went on to work in private institutes as a teacher for about six months because I had exams to do at university; I worked in the medical-health sector where I dealt with the purchase of great quantities of medicines and their sale to the pharmacies of Syria. In Egypt I worked as an administrative secretary in a building company for eight months”.

A. also has a rich and passionate background, which following the phase of clarifying his skills, brings to light a passion for sciences, but in fact chooses an academic education path in the field of linguistic mediation. He comes from Cameroon, and is 22 years old:

“I have a high school diploma. Then I started studying mineralogy because I’m very keen on geology. Since the first year is the same for everyone before taking various specializations, I studied mathematics, chemistry and physics. Here it would be the faculty of Earth Sciences. I worked in tourism for three months as a receptionist in a spa resort where I would welcome French and English tourists, because I know other languages and not just Arabic like the others.”

There are also those who, following an interruption in their study career, would be willing to go back to studying even if forced to go back to restart the first academic lessons of foreign languages. F. is a young and beautiful Iraqi woman who tells us:

“In 2003 I began studying in Baghdad. In 2006, I moved to the north, where the situation was more peaceful. That’s where I finished high school. In 2007, I attended university for four-five years and then I came to Europe. I have a four-year degree in English language, and I perfected my pronunciation. It’s a difficult course with lots of exams and American professors. I worked for a number of months in a middle school as an English-language teacher in my country. Now I would be willing to restart everything from scratch”.

Among the 16 students enrolled in our courses there are also those who studied not in their country of origin but in a second transition country before ultimately choosing Italy to start their real inclusion process in earnest:

“I studied in Palestine up to high school and then I went to study in Russia where I graduated in computer engineering and where I began

a doctorate which I did not complete. I worked in Russia as a university researcher. Then in Palestine as an IT teacher in middle school for a year, and I also worked as an IT engineer.”

Starting out from such empirical evidence that shows the wealth of human cultural capital resources among the ‘international students’ with refugee status, the project was founded for the institutionalization of the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Bari. This is rooted in the awareness that the future of our society will depend greatly on the ability to valorize the human, professional and personal resources of all its citizens, first and foremost those who for personal or family reasons have had to take steeper and more twisting paths in order to achieve their goals, just like the young refugees who took part in this study. In fact, to this day, there are some 16 students under international protection enrolled in the study courses offered by the University of Bari and who, in the light of the activation of the ‘finalized recognition’ procedure (in compliance with law 148/2002), has been granted the real possibility to obtain a valid assessment of their previous studies, recognized in terms of comparability with the Italian academic system (through the CIMEA). The CAP thus currently works to apply the combined guidelines of articles 22 and 25 of the Geneva Convention, of art. 2 of Law 148/2002, of art. 39 of the TUIM paragraph 5, the procedure laid out in the *Testo Unico* on immigration (legislative decree No. 286/98, directive 2011/95/EU – legislative decree 16/2014 – recognition of qualifications in lieu of original documents, the procedure foreseen for law No. 148/2002 following the Lisbon Convention).

On the basis of this normative framework, the CAP operates on three main services of recognition and valorization of the human capital of refugees, i.e.:

- The recognition of previous qualifications with a view to academic integration;
- The recognition of on-the-job learning with a view to the certification of professional qualifications as acknowledged by the regional council of Apulia;
- The vocational/aptitude recognition with regard to the highlighting of the soft skills of service users.

The (interdisciplinary) practice of social research, applied to and of support to the public policies of inclusion, specifically concerns the recognition and assessment of the qualifications of people granted political asylum, refugees and beneficiaries of international humanitarian and subsidiary protection, cases in which it becomes a “moral and ethical obligation” (Trimble & Fishe, 2005) to make it possible for them to obtain an initial assessment by the host university on the equivalency of their qualifications granted in

their countries of origin and of which no original copy is available. Given that the refugees have a well-founded fear of persecution and cannot turn to the authorities of their own countries, including consular representatives abroad, the state in which the refugee resides is obliged to deal with their situation, to activate all the necessary and substitutive procedures to understand the juridical status of the person as well as the formative and scholastic career they come from, both to access new scholastic transitions and to obtain certification of comparability of their previous academic career. The itinerary set up in 2017 therefore addresses a completely new target for our University, one that challenges the logic of inclusion based on the criteria of income and social status.

Certifying the professional qualifications of refugees with formal and informal educational credentials

Another result in terms of connection between social research and contextual policies of cultural and academic integration is that obtained in 2017 through an operative protocol adopted by the Regional Council of Apulia and the *CAP*, later extended to the Universities of Foggia, Salento and the Polytechnic of Bari in June 2018. The protocol concerns the construction and implementation of the Regional System of Validation and Certification of Skills of the Apulia Regional Council (SRVCC), which embraces the experimentation set up for the issue of the certification of skills/qualifications acquired in non-formal and informal contexts in terms of heritage acquired by the individual over the course of his/her life, which must be valorized, clarified and recognizable, with particular reference to the target of political refugees or beneficiaries of international protection, the *CAP* users. The researchers of the *CAP* and the Professional Training Section of the Apulia Regional Council collaborated on the definition of an experimental working methodology for the provision of the service for the identification and validation of skills, and the *CAP* of the University of Bari was acknowledged as 'certifying authority' for the identification and validation of skills.

The experimentation began with the request, sent to the *CAP*, to examine the experiential and training background of two users of Afghan origins, who had been in Italy for a few years, involved on a daily basis in intercultural mediation at acceptance centres, public structures and bodies. The two users aspired to carry out their professional activity with the formal recognition of the qualification of 'intercultural mediation expert'. The service centre of the university accepted this innovative request, making the commitment to lay down the bases of an ever more structured service, accessible also to those who might need it in the future. The activity started with the drafting of the request for participation and the compilation of the

‘Consent to the itinerary for the identification and validation of skills’ sheet. Those responsible for the acceptance and validation at the *CAP* therefore undertook the itinerary for the recognition and clarification of formal qualifications as well as non-formal and informal experiences, in view of their potential certification by the Apulia Regional Council. The starting point, from within the Regional Repertory of Professional Figures, was to identify the profile for which certification had been requested. The description sheet of the skill units and the relative knowledge and skills was compared with the curriculum presented by the users to verify any similarities. The figure identified as the target of their certification for both users appeared to be made up of three areas of competence: the acceptance of foreign citizens, the facilitation of the exchange between foreign citizens and their territory of reference, and the development of social integration activities.

Starting from there, individual interviews were carried out in which the *CAP* researchers asked the users to provide a description as detailed as possible of their formative and professional experiences relevant to the field of reference. This information, documented by proof (letters of reference, work contracts, certificates of participation, diplomas etc.), was included in the clarification document, which highlights the experiences and the activities carried out, translating them into meaningful and documentable learning processes. In particular, by making reference to the experimentation carried out with the two users, respectively citizens with subsidiary protection and international protection, the analysis of the curriculum and its translation in the clarification document highlighted major overlapping between the skills, knowledge and abilities outlined in the sheet of the Regional Repertory and the studies documented by various sources of proof, numbered so as to make them available in the confirmation process as foreseen by the certification itinerary. The *CAP* then contributed to enhancing the curriculum of the two users, inserting among the documented studies and those in progress the so-called soft skills, i.e. interpersonal skills useful for carrying out the role of intercultural mediation expert alongside their other technical skills.

The vocation of the *CAP*, as a university service for the valorization of lifelong learning among adults, is expressed in the service offered to the users of the self and hetero-assessment of soft skills, rendered through a profile of skills useful for new employment and the paths of ongoing training, and made possible thanks to the interdisciplinary work carried out by researchers in the areas of sociology, psychology of work and didactics/formative assessment. In specific terms, the folder of transversal skills enhanced the profile of the two users, in line with the skills required by the professional figure in question, as highlighted in the judgement given by the operators and provided together with the clarification document.

The phase following the drafting of the clarification document consisted in the validation of skills, which in concrete terms entailed the analysis of the evidence produced to support the studies declared. Once the reconstruction phase was completed, the itinerary foresaw the possibility – in relation to the percentage of coverage of the skills expected by the users – to complete the itinerary with the definition of a plan of action regarding the potential completion of study careers, and/or the integration of relevant professional experiences. In the case of the two users, given that the percentage of coverage of the three areas of competence investigated was over 70%, it was possible to continue along the path of formal certification. The validated skills were formalized in the Certificate of Validation, and this stage came to an end with the identification of the contents to investigate in the direct assessment followed by the official request for the constitution of a third-party evaluating commission, made up of experts in the subject area in question, as well as experts in validation and certification from the *CAP*, representatives of social sectors, of the Ministry of Labour and the Sector of Professional Training of the Apulian Regional Council. The exam consisted in a technical-practical test of the skills not covered by the users' curricula. The itinerary came to a close successfully, with the awarding of the certificate of professional qualification as 'intercultural mediation experts' for both users, the first two beneficiaries of international protection in Italy to receive a professional qualification recognized by the Regional System of Education and Training.

The agreement was based on the common institutional interest in guaranteeing to every individual the valorization of the skills acquired in all learning contexts, coupled with the possibility of putting such skills to use in the various fields of lifelong learning (education-training-work).

On the basis of the protocol, access to the services for the identification and validation skills acquired in non-formal/informal learning contexts will be possible in service centres and lifelong learning centres or university structures with placement services (career guidance) offering the recognition and acknowledgement of skills in the universities of Apulia. The Apulian universities and the Puglia Regional Council will be called upon to guarantee the matching of training and university courses for the recognition of university training credits (CFUs) and, should the competence remain on a regional administrative level, foresee the methodology of issue of the certification of skills/qualifications, analysis of the access requirements to the roles of the SVCC-RP, training of operators, the definition of a regional repertory of soft skills, the formulation of a methodology of credit recognition covering training paths and university careers for the purposes of student placement, with particular reference to our target group of international students and refugees.

The attention given by the *CAP* to the valorization of learning acquired in all kinds of context arises from the reflection on the radical changes that the labour market has been subjected to, effectively imposing a rethinking of the framework of professional competence. The fluid and uncertain edges of post-modern careers call not only for technical skills but also soft skills, such as independence, flexibility, spirit of adaptability and orientation (Bauman, 2007). The skilled worker is not merely one who possesses qualifications and experience, but one who is able to demonstrate his/her skills and knowledge on the field, in relation to specific requests of the context. In order to understand the cognitive aspects of the learning process, it is useful to make a distinction between three terms: knowledge, skill and competence. One may know information, a fact, a theory or a procedure. The skill lies in the capacity to apply such knowledge in order to carry out tasks and solve problems. Having competence means having the capacity to use knowledge, skills and information in real situations of life and work. This dimension of expertise is closely linked to on-the-job learning, i.e. all those forms of learning that take place tacitly and through informal channels, preliminarily via relations. This reflection, supported by evidence gathered in contexts of work and by the results of scientific research on a national and international level (Colley, Hodkinson & Malcolm, 2002; Jacob & Parks, 2009; Kyndt, Dochy & Nijs, 2009; Manuti et al., 2015), is broadly confirmed in the attention which over recent years the European Union has dedicated to the role played by the informal and non-formal contexts of life for the development of competences. Individuals learn and acquire skills not only in the traditional scholastic and/or university context (formal learning), but also and ever more often in alternative contexts: through participation in the organizations of civil society or in the virtual field of Internet and mobile devices, either individually or among peers. These forms of informal and non-formal learning frequently take place without a full awareness and intentionality on the part of the protagonist, who thus finds it hard to acknowledge them and attribute them to him/herself.

Over recent years, this challenge has been taken up and pursued by the Italian University Network for Lifelong Learning (RUIAP), of which the University of Bari, through the *CAP*, is a member. Among its aims, the network sets out to promote services useful for favouring the recognition, validation and certification – both on a university and non-university level – of previous learning (knowledge and skills).

To this scenario we might add the reflection on the role of universities: a key factor in socialization and also responsible for the learning processes of future workers, which must overcome its staid image and genuinely implement lifelong learning, focusing in particular on the construction of

‘leaving skills’, meant not as abilities as an end to themselves but as “abilities connected to the rest” (Palumbo & Starnari, 2013).

From practices to policies: the European space of trust

A process of integration and inclusion involves multiple aspects, from economic independence to the creation of a relational fabric, from the acquisition of linguistic and cultural skills for full participation to the political dimension of citizenship, and may be achieved over different time spans and to various degrees (Cesareo & Blangiardo, 2009). Presupposing a multidimensional approach to operational solutions, and to ensure the result is extended to cover various generations, it is fundamental to work on the possibility to diminish social inequality starting from interventions of a cultural nature. Contrasting all approaches of a structuralist kind, it is fundamental to consider the relationship between education and social mobility in order for a high-level qualification and a qualified job to make it possible for people to improve their initial social position. As acknowledged by the ISMU in the paper *Nuove metodologie per la valutazione delle qualifiche accademiche dei beneficiari di protezione internazionale in Italia* in March 2018, the useful aspect of the experience of the valorization of the cultural basis of migratory resources lies in the “*ability to create synergies between the recognition of formal, non-formal and informal learning*”. At least potentially, this opens the way to innovative possibilities for the customization of university study careers on the basis of the recognition of skills already possessed and on the identification of those yet to be acquired. This is a horizon that is still largely unexplored, but very promising in terms of the democratization of opportunities and the valorization of human capital, with a view to lifelong learning. In particular, the acknowledgement of cultural differences as the constitutive and emerging properties of social reality may trigger mechanisms of discontinuity between generations in the processes of the choice of education and learning (Santagati, 2011; Besozzi, 2005) and in the access to opportunities of social mobility: in fact, from some research it emerges that the structural variable of ascribed cultural capital continues to have great influence over life opportunities to a higher degree than socioeconomic status, yet at the same time does not ensure a clear and defined sense of continuity. It should be borne in mind, for example, that just as the foreign citizen represents a provocation (Besozzi, 2011), also the second generations measure the actual level of integration over the mid-term, representing a challenge for the social cohesion and the evolution of hosting societies (Ambrosini & Molina, 2004).

If, therefore, this double transition of ethnic belonging and unrecognized cultural capital is not taken into consideration by the policies of social inclusion, one runs the risk of reproducing a perverse yet predictable effect: one

of secondary inequality (McBrien, Dooley & Birman, 2017), also in the face of necessary acceptance choices, useful but not sufficient for the growth of the whole of Mediterranean Europe and beyond.

Another element often undervalued by the hosting community, called upon to work for integration, is the desire for autonomy among migrants, their wish to move away from a welfare-based dimension in order to affirm their own capabilities and skills. This aspiration is very often frustrated by the objective difficulties that they encounter but even more by the subordinate level to which not only their contribution is relegated – often downsized compared to their professional potential – but also their social position. The step forward that the hosting societies are called upon to make, as expressed also by the UNHCR, consists of placing the refugees in the condition to be able to state their own needs and take part actively in decisions concerning their own lives. When they are in a position to be able to take part in the definition of strategies and policies, it will at last be possible to speak of the real empowerment of the refugees themselves.

For these reasons, working in terms of valorization and enhancement of the cultural capital of migratory resources represents a real turning point for inclusion policies (Colombo & Scardigno, 2019), a focus on the unexpected effect of unfairness (Peterson et al., 2017) that may be triggered in processes that – despite activating acceptance itineraries – does not make the step of promoting real recognition of human capital and the economic and cultural advantage of valorization and integration. The young refugees who make use of the *CAP* services constitute a unique opportunity for us as researchers in the field (not by chance an interdisciplinary team made up of academic researchers of sociology of education, psychology of work and didactics) to reflect discursively on the quality of our work and above all, on the potential of these tools to respond not only to criteria of internal and external validity, but to also be able to provide useful and applicable answers. This is a local perspective on integration processes which valorizes experimentation and concrete, contextual inclusion practices, capable of creating virtuous circles that may also indirectly counter the emergence of new forms of populism and racism (Zanfrini, 2015), as community-based responses to the widespread sense of fear and disorientation among autochthonous citizens.

As Laura Zanfrini states, it is therefore a matter of creating that “requisite of citizenship” (Zanfrini, 2010) as a dimension of identity and of belonging to a community, of transnational civic citizenship that allows everyone to feel like a member of their original society and that of residence, and to feel part of a nation not as a state but as humanity as a whole, even beyond the mere formal recognition of the right to citizenship. The theme of transculturalism in terms of the societal belonging to a global and local culture, echoes the call for a “generational commonality” (Besozzi, Colombo & Santagati, 2009,

p.18), i.e. the scope for integration that goes beyond the view of assimilation or differentiation, through a negotiating and dialogic perspective that views cultural differences as morphogenetic “identity structures” (Archer, 2015), constituting a cultural reality characterized by emerging properties of relating, sharing and mixing (Nederveen Pieterse, 2005).

We have an urgent and pressing need for new social bonds, and Putnam’s work (1993; 2000) still has a strategic value when the scholar refers to the social capital characterized by a certain stability over time, identifying it with the thick network of cooperative relations (formal and non-formal, inclusive and exclusive, ascribed and acquired) based on trust, the sense of civic duty and norms of reciprocity. While it is true that the social construction of economic processes (Granovetter, 1985) also exploits the relational mechanism of reliability (according to which an employer often makes use of a guarantor and, in the absence of other credible selection criteria, relies on the network of relationships among immigrants to obtain necessary manpower, having seen that these networks yield trustworthy and willing workers, also our student refugees have verified the structural importance of the cooperative relations of trust. The experience of inclusion in academic paths through the valorization of professional skills – which facilitates their insertion into the job market – and the certification of soft skills, allows the self-recognition of their communicative and relational skills. In other words, it becomes a mechanism capable on one hand of facilitating integration processes, and on the other, it becomes a force for enhancing faith in themselves and their own potential.

Trust is a gratuitous exchange value, a “relational asset” (Donati & Solci, 2011), often so difficult to deploy in integration processes, a value that almost magically activates an extraordinary force in those who use it and those who express a need. In this sense, we believe that integration offers a real chance also to enhance the relational capital of institutional and academic structures, and provides concrete and realistic support to the connection between sociological research and public policies (Moro, 2015).

Bonds of trust are the fundamental prerequisite for cohesion within a community. Durkheim conceived social cohesion as interdependence among the members of society, a shared sense of loyalty and solidarity which – according to Berger-Schmitt (2000) – is founded on the reduction of inequality and social exclusion on one hand, and on the other, on the strengthening of social relations, of interactions and bonds based on the values of trust, of sentiments of common identity and belonging to the same society.

Social capital and relations are constitutive elements of social cohesion which make sense in the measure to which they are perceived as real possibilities to do something for society (Jenson, 2010), resources that become even more crucial in the territories and contexts such as that of our inclu-

sion practice, in which other forms of capital are lacking, and provide the sense horizon and framework of reference to be able to include subjects in difficulty, promoting the collective assumption of responsibility, perceiving problems as shared issues and not circumscribed to single people or vulnerable groups.

In these terms, social cohesion is not simply a form of contrast to social exclusion, but consists in the real desire to valorize diversities, viewing them as a source of mutual enrichment and not a factor of conflict. The cultural integration is considered a process that concerns both the individual (trying to be included and to coexist within the new context of arrival), and the hosting society, i.e. it is viewed as a two-sided path and not as a mere one-way adaptation of the foreigner to the hosting community (Colombo, 2013).

Helping to shape life trajectories, social capital is a key predictor of integration processes (Bourdieu, 1980). However, since it produces and reproduces power relations, it is also urgent to intervene to alter any negative dynamics and, vice versa, foster progressive dynamics. Knowing for example that the European Commission foresees by 2025 an increase of 23% in highly qualified professional positions, while the scientific and technological sectors have registered situations of labour shortage for years, shows us just how urgent it is to work in terms of trust in the European dimension to make up for these structural deficits of society's acceptance, also by drawing on the cultural and professional assets of the refugees.

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