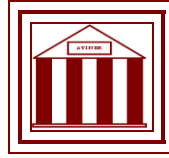


**Athens Institute for Education and Research
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**Lifelong Learning Universities and
Social Inclusion Policies**

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Lifelong Learning Universities and Social Inclusion Policies

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Abstract

The best practices of lifelong learning universities are part of the debate on the changes of the "European social model". In this model, all Europe countries share the same forms of welfare state, regardless of the differences in quality and extent of performance. Since two decades there is an open debate about ESM economic sustainability and political connotation. The cuts in public budgets, due to the so-called first "fiscal crisis" of state and the global economic crisis, have led the major European countries to rethink their policies involving citizens in working age (Giddens, 2014). The "Social Investment Package" announced by the European Commission with "Europe 2020", enhancing the direct involvement of universities in projects for social inclusion, is an opportunity for people of all ages to strengthen and expand their knowledge and skills and thus their chances in the labour market.

Keywords:

Introduction

Educational institutions, which constitute the frame of the social life, have to redefine continuously their own functions and objectives in order to expand the cognitive repertoire and the citizens' dimensions of meaning since they represent "the collective intelligence heritage that a society owns to define and to deal with goods and with common problems" (De Leonardis, 2001, 151).

In this perspective, the ability to learn throughout one's own life is a way to give actors more responsibility as "agency", thus redefining citizens' expectations towards institutions and laying the foundation to new social policies (Griffin, 1999). The self-awareness of the enlargement of one's own cultural horizon is perceived as the acquisition of the possibility to choose. This process is opposed to an obliged and over-determined vision imposed by external conditions. Within the "capabilities approach", this is a fundamental result which highlights all the emancipatory potential of education (Sen, 1997), which is not adequately emphasized in other theories, such as those known as "Human Capital" (Schultz, 1963; Heckman, 1976).

The citizens' networks, sharing learned experiences and working together to achieve both their personal and collective development, are called "learning communities". Unlike the '90s during which the scientific literature connected the concept exclusively to the American university education (Smith, 1991; Lemmons, Saboski, Morgan, Carter, Grumbling, Hylton, 1992 ; Goodsell Love, Russo, Tinto, 1993; Lenning, Ebberts, 1998), this model is today associated to all fields of political institutions – social actors as well as the different "community of practices" (Wenger, 1998) – as a result of a "collective mind" (Douglas, 1990). This brought about the design and the implementation of social and economic innovations in a process of hybridization of heterogeneous cultures.

The issue is part of the broader discussion on the so-called learning society that, in 1995, Richard Edwards identified with three different types. These are respectively related to the concepts of: "free, democratic education society" (the same opportunities to access the various forms of formal learning is granted to each member), "free education market" (the different educational institutions provide an economic subsidy to the training), and finally "open learning networks" (characterized by numerous options to access to knowledge and skills). The debate was enriched over time with scientific contributions from different perspectives (Castells, 1996; Jarvis 2000; Castells, Cardoso, 2006; Kuhn, 2007; Méhaut, 2006; Weidemann, 2009; Simmons, 2013).

With a political agenda strongly oriented to formulate a new strategic vision for the welfare interventions (Bauman, 1991), "we can, from a postmodern perspective, begin to think of the learning society or the learning cultures as themselves integrative ideologies of social policy" (Griffin, 2002, 143). Moreover, in the recent sociological literature, social exclusion is considered a multidimensional phenomenon, not reducible to economic and income factors, connected to life chances through concepts that highlights the

dynamic aspects of reduction and extension of personal freedom: concepts such as “functioning” and “capabilities” (Sen, 1999).

Operative Models for Social Inclusion Policies

The practices of lifelong learning for the social inclusion of European citizens have a number of specific characteristics descending from the different institutional contexts (Appleby, Bathmaker, 2006). The different national guidelines (Bradbury, Frost, Kilminster, Zukas, 2012), and organizational structures at the local level, where most decisions are made in order to combine efficiency and flexibility of intervention (Guidicini, Landuzzi, 2006) should be taken into account for the implementation of any theoretical-operating model of social service.

The evolution of the theory of social service in Italy, starting from the model of teamwork “interactionist”, has been enriched by reflections on the relationship between the actor and society (Ferrario, 2011; Gui, 2004), taking ideas from constructivism, by interactionism and cognitive psychology. Through dialogue and relationship, the professional social worker has the objective of strengthening the empowerment (Griffin, 1999), enhance the agency and the level of autonomy (Giddens, 1991). This approach redefines the role of social work within groups, focusing on the relationship between the actor and the social structure (Campanini, 2002).

Scope of lifelong learning becomes the group. The goal of the operator is to enhance functioning and capabilities (Nussbaum, 2001) to define the objectives of the action based on the mutual interactions of the members. The perspective is to achieve the development of a holistic model of social service, to enhance the dialogue with users and to enable them to grasp the meaning of events to build up together with them the situation analysis and intervention strategies. The degree of reflexivity of the operator is decisive in this key, to question their own assumptions cognitive (Sicora, 2005). Learning to learn, therefore, just the perspective of lifelong learning, to meet the need of unity of the methodological approach implied in the Italian local social services characterized by an “trifocal optical” addressed to individuals/families, communities and institutions (Dal Pra Ponticelli, Pieroni, 2005).

A Case of Study

“Learning cities” and “learning regions” have become common terms because “local and regional governments have recognized that a more prosperous future depends on the development of the human and social capital in their midst” (Longworth, 2006, 1), acknowledged that human and social capital development brings a bright and better future. Each “learning region” is presented as a complex system in which building networks between the different social actors emphasizes the functions of connector of ideas and

repository of knowledge (Florida, 1995). Also “each learning region” is able to readjust their own governance strategies, in response to systemic changes, through “double loop learning” governance (Argyris, Shon, 1978). Thus learning from their own mistakes and thus adopting substitute strategies up to question their own “governmental variables”. The central theme is the need to emphasize the right to education through a “political approach to learning” (Van Der Zee, 2006), and to deeply redefine adult education (Selwyn, Gorard, Furlong, 2006) starting from the new “lifelong learning” paradigm (Field, 2005; Walters, 2009).

In this perspective, the case study is placed: the empirical research refers to the direct actions of some Italian universities in the design and implementation of training programs for adults, with a specific reference to the issue of “parenting”, financed by the European Social Fund. The training modules, more than 200 hours, were meant to provide parents with tools to facilitate communication of familial relationships and inform them on social services and employment agencies in the area, making the exercise of active citizenship operational. The projects were proposed by universities with specific addresses in Sociology, Psychology, Communication Sciences and Educational Sciences in partnership with hospitals, schools and training institutions to work. The interdisciplinary approach was highlighted by the involvement in the activities of professionals such as social workers, guidance experts, doctors and psychologists.

Moreover, through the design and the implementation of action-research and teaching activities, an “Adult Education Permanent Observatory” was built in Campania, with the objective to become a “Learning community” involving networks of citizens and academic researchers in a cumulative process aiming to increase both the human and social capital (Field, 2005). The Observatory has evaluated further training modules of the Adult Evening Classes (more than 800 hours), and further training modules of the Regional courses (more than 400 hours).

Methods

The mix of “innovation policy instruments” that operates on the governance of local contexts (Flanagan, Uyarra, Laranja, 2011), raises the issue about the way each assessment process can facilitate both institutional learning related to the outcomes of policies and citizens’ participation in government choices. The need to define boundaries and to identify different actors even at local levels, becomes a priority if one considers the role of policy makers in the transition from a “welfare state” to a “social investment state” focused on “lifelong learning” (Giddens, 2014).

From the methodological point of view, compared to traditional methods of evaluation of social investment, we have chosen an innovative way of integrating reading “standard” data with a “qualitative approach” (Cipolla, De Lillo, 1996), and we place the centre of the analysis directly on the people,

starting from a situation of disadvantage, until they start joining social inclusion paths. Under the so-called “biographical approach” (Bertaux, 1980), “tales” and “life stories” allowed the identification of success not so much in terms of professional training, but as the turning points and the factors that have set in motion the social actors (Bonica & Cardano, 2008).

The analysis of the information has therefore consisted of a study conducted in phases, through a series of biographical interviews with the beneficiaries of the courses. The aim was to understand the relationship among their learning, their identity and their actions: “Increasingly, we define our identity by the jobs that we choose to do and the goods that we choose to buy, and where we are able to do so, we choose jobs and goods that match our idealised vision of the way we wish to live our lives” (Bronk, 2009, 303).

The interviews were carried out with the aim of rebuilding through the stories the “genealogy of context”: “The self and the narrative are always produced in interaction with the cultural context - they are social and cultural productions in that sense” (Goodson, 2013, 26). In this sense, the stories of life explore the interface between individuals’ representations and the reference context which affect these portraits and that allows the data interpretability in the transition from “life stories” to “life histories” from a sociological point of view: “Life stories are only constructed in specific historical circumstances and cultural conditions - these have to be brought into our methodological grasp” (Goodson, 2013, 31) and have to give a sense to that life path.

The interviews, conducted through a semi-structured track, were recorded with the aid of a digital device and later transcribed in full. Interviewees were granted a broad discretion for the chronological and narrative reorganization of their own life. This became the subject of investigation and allowed them to show the social processes that, directly or indirectly, were involved in the structuring of ones’ own life path (Atkinson, 2002, 19).

The Narrative Descriptions

The training programs for adults with a specific reference to the issue of “parenting”, are created with the aim of promoting a different consciousness of being a parent. They are meant to encourage collaboration between partners and to promote family harmony, developing the ability to solve conflicts in a peaceful manner. Students are, in almost all the cases, women who tend to emphasize their sufferance due to their spouses’ absence. As a matter of fact, they would like their partners on their side, since the specific type of courses address to parents:

I liked the course, but unfortunately parents are two, so I’ll go ahead and my husband instead will stay behind. In the past my husband was not working, but now he has a permanent job and our times are pretty different and it is difficult to meet (Francy, 27, housewife).

My husband attended the meetings for dads; at the beginning dads were all a bit skeptical, they believed we go to the courses just to get away from

home, as any place is good to escape from family life and enjoy. However, when he came to the course he changed his mind (Anne, 34, housewife).

The interviewed women look tired, full of doubts and expectations. They are the mirror of the Pillars of Hercules of the gender, of the impassable boundaries beyond which to continue is taboo. They are passionate and intelligent, sensitive and courageous, sometimes disoriented but always combative, they answer questions and make new ones. They inquire about their duties as wives and mothers, and about their too absent husbands and about their extremely needy children:

I seriously want my children to have wings; I'll explain, up to before following this course I still felt like a daughter, I could not see myself as a mother. I live with my mother and I am still very attached to her, she is my point of reference, I have never managed to cut the umbilical cord. From a certain point of view I'm glad, I would like my children to be close to me as I am with her, but at the same time, I wish they had their wings, I would like them to feel completely free, of thinking, of making their choices unconditionally. I do not want them to have the problem of being too dependent on me (Mary, 31, unemployed).

Sometimes I would like to run away from here, because to be honest, I do not like southern culture, it suffocates you. You always focus on your home, husband and children. And then you look for something else to do in order to not get crazy (Annelise, 34, housewife).

These interviews put into evidence that, nowadays, like in the past, it is not easy to be a woman. While cradling strollers, they have to rush in order not to be late, while in the classroom, among countless uncertainties, they lay bare and confront each other with the aim to understand where to go. They examine the women's role in society, where they are destined to do care works since they have been born:

Occasionally, I work as a housekeeper, but I am not satisfied and I am looking for a different job. However, women can only work as a housekeeper. Moreover, I have two children and have my home to take care of (Mary, 27, housewife).

I'd like to find a job to become independent. However, if I found a job I would try to fit work schedules with my family's needs, but it is very difficult especially with children, because you need to find a babysitter for them (Anna, 30, housewife).

Studies on women tell about their heavy task of taking care of their family, which however does not support their choices:

The problem is that he is very narrow minded (husband, editor's note), moreover, he is not very present in our girls' lives. I'd like to solve this problem, in fact, I also took an appointment to do couples therapy; I was glad that he agreed, it is a little step forward (Terry, 27, housewife).

My mother often tells me that I am wasting my time, I do not think so. I

wanted to separate from my origin family. Let's say that my roots are not well founded, I have tried to create my own family, but also mine has not started in the best way. I am working, but it is hard because I am alone, then I hope to be able to change things [...] I do not lose all my hope because both my husband and me are young; also the love for my girls pushes me to keep going, and luckily there are these cooperatives that can help a lot, even in the most difficult places like this one (Nunzia, 27, housewife).

A story told by a student is emblematic of how a course of this kind can improve people's quality of life:

Without specifying names, I was impressed that when their husbands attended, one of them congratulated his wife, and jokingly told the operators: "I can not recognize my wife any longer! She has been changing her attitude since her participation in the course, before we used to fight every day, now she is calmer thanks to this course". The day after when we told her about her husband's nice comments, she said she did not expect it because her husband was not a person who easily shows his emotions, that nice moment was shared by all (Lorna, 31, unemployed).

Findings

The analysis of the collected interviews show how the participation in a course for adults affects the individual biographies. A very diverse picture emerges on the reasons leading people to participate in activities of lifelong learning, about the diversity of the objectives and of the expectations on the results of this experience. From this point of view, it is not an easy task to describe the complexity emerging from the interviews during the course of this research. The common difficulties that usually accompany the analysis of qualitative interviews, in our case are amplified due to individuals' heterogeneous motivations.

How does the participation in a course for adults enter individual biographies? Is it just a way to fill one's own free time and to meet other people thus widening own social networks? Is this a not very expensive opportunity, to follow a passion, or is this part of a broader strategic plan aiming at improving one's own empowerment for the labour market?

In many cases, the interviewees do not express a single and specific reason about their participation in the courses, but they mention a series of advantages and opportunities that their attendance to such training can bring. It is a mechanism of reflexing monitoring of action that each agent performs continuously in an attempt to understand the reality and to make their own strategic plan more effective, according to the set of owned capabilities (Giddens, 1984; 1991). The result is, of course, a constant re-negotiation of one's own identity. It occurs every time a social actor has to explain his choices, as for example happens during an interview. In other words, in an attempt to demonstrate some consistency, first towards himself then towards

the interviewer, the man rereads his aims influenced by current circumstances. He elaborates a mix of his original motivations and those that he had the opportunity to acquire by teachers or developed by himself (Elster, 1989).

As concerns the Adult Evening Classes, regardless of the local context, most of the interviewees said to attend classes to improve their employability. In the case of these young adults with a maximum age of 35 years, the work opportunities offered after getting the diploma, seem highly related to the acquisition of skills to use in the labour market or in the aftermath academic career. Alongside this type of learners, there is a large proportion who wish to improve their employability just by acquiring the school certification, regardless of the content provided during the training process. Essentially, the average age of individuals make the difference between the two previous groups and it is significantly higher in the second case. In many cases it is the lack of work that has generated this disenchantment and an exclusive interest towards the formal aspects of the experience.

The attendees of the Lower Secondary Level also desire to be a good example for their children, so that they do not have to repeat their parents' negative school experience. This emphasizes the desire for redemption and for personal satisfaction for having achieved a goal that, due to economic and family difficulties, they had failed to attain before.

Most of the attendees of the Regional courses, with a less demanding education program which lasts not longer than one year, declare instead to attend courses only to follow their passion and to enrich their own personal culture. They include old retirees seeking for a way to keep their mind trained and housewives looking for a different way to spend their time other than with their children. Even simply reading an advertisement about educational school programmes may stimulate the enrolling in a course. In many cases, social networks play a critical role in the decision to go back to school. Teachers, beyond their educational task, contribute significantly to the success of the courses by establishing an informal relationship with the participants. This aspect, decreases the number of failures and explains the positive opinion that interviewees have expressed in regard to their educational experiences. Even when judgments are less positive, students stress teachers' utmost commitment and professionalism.

Conclusion

In Italy, the activities, the desired objectives and the target design of social inclusion policies are part of a wider prospective of the deep changes related to the European Social Welfare Model. Even lifelong learning universities represent a "clearing house" of the institutional systems dystonias, which are observable through the "social agency" of the decision makers towards the design and the implementation of training programs for adults financed by the European Social Fund.

From the overall results of our study, the European target of a transition

from welfare to “learnfare” is still very far (Colasanto, Lodigiani, 2008). In fact, even a very broad offer of training opportunities does not prove able to overcome limits of a system that, effectively, separates “adults’ education” which is under state jurisdiction, from the “adults’ training” under region jurisdiction. In line with the initial assumptions of the research, there is also a strong risk of dispersion of available community resources, due to the overlap of operations supported at a national level (National Operative Programme - PON funds) with those supported at a local level (European Social Funds - ESF). This problem is directly connected to the dichotomy that characterizes the State-Regions Agreement. These critical issues highlight the difficulties in building a lifelong learning system that can expand the possibility to choose and make users’ participation easier.

Both the decision of the Regional Administration to indicate the “Adult Education Permanent Observatory” as an example of best practice of POR Campania 2007/2013 (Regional Operative Programme), and the attention of the “European University continuing education network”, point out some results achieved by the local policies in Campania. The entire scientific community’s careful evaluation activities will verify if the path adopted by decision makers, through the implementation of policies, is the result of a changing pattern of public decision. Administrative procedures will be considered both as “overall categorical framework”, and as a specific “medium of communication”. In a continuous process of administrative action revision aimed at improving the performance, the actors involved in the various levels of implementation, will thus be able to get the tools to enable a critical and conscious self-observation.

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