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Social housing, multi-ethnic environments and the training of social educators: combined anthropological and educational perspectives

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Abstract

The paper presents part of a broader project that explores the role played by informal citizenship learning in social housing urban environments (SHe) and the related educational challenges for social educators, NGO practitioners and also researchers. In this article, in particular, I focus on issues related with social educators' and NGO practitioners' professional training. The aim of the paper, in this perspective, is to offer some introductory theoretical and methodological remarks for the training of NGO practitioners working in SHe. The basis for this reflection is the idea of informal learning (Schugurensky, 2000), the concepts of learning for reflexive citizenship and learning for active citizenship (Johnston, 2005) and anthropology of citizenship (Ong, 1999, 2003). In the research process, we have intersected instruments and methodologies coming from the different fields of anthropology and educational sciences. Our hypothesis consists in considering the possibility that exploring the professional field of social educators in SHe with an ethnographic approach could contribute to improve reflexive attitudes of social educators and shape their educational attitudes.

Keywords: Social housing; multi-ethnic environments; training of social educators; interdisciplinary research tools

Introduction

Cities are places where we can invent alternative visions and ways of life. (Vandenabeele, Reyskens & Wildemeersch, 2011, p. 201)

The paper presents part of a broader project which explores the role played by informal citizenship learning in social housing urban environments (SHe) and the related educational challenges for social educators, NGO practitioners and also researchers.

In this article, in particular, I focus on issues related with social educators' and NGO practitioners' professional training and the interplay between professional skills

acquisition and certification and educational aspects entailed by social work in marginal and heterogeneous urban environments.

The aim of the paper, in this perspective, is to offer some introductory theoretical and methodological remarks for the training of NGO practitioners in social housing environments.

The basis for this reflection is the idea of informal learning as conceptualized by Schugurensky (2000, p. 4) and the concepts of *learning for reflexive citizenship* and *learning for active citizenship* as expressed by Johnston (2005, p. 48). These concepts entail dynamic connections between citizenship as status and citizenship as practice (Lister, 1997; Delanty, 2000) and the interplay between these connections and the related forms of learning in formal, non-formal and informal contexts.

To explore this interplay we have intersected instruments and methodologies coming from the different fields of anthropology and educational sciences in order to reinforce, on the one hand the critical approach on the key issues of citizenship and social inclusion, and on the other hand to look for different methodologies in the framework of citizenship learning.

In designing the activities we have realized, we focused on the following research questions:

- How do social educators and NGO-practitioners perceive the educational aspects of their professional role?
- Which kind of dynamics are stimulated by these educational interventions in multicultural neighbourhoods where ambivalent feelings on diversity and plurality are shared by local and foreign inhabitants?
- How can professional training of NGO practitioners stimulate reflection and in-depth understanding of living together in multicultural urban contexts?

We use the Johnston's framework (2005, p. 60) as key tool to plan activities and to analyse the results. We have tried to understand how this framework could contribute to design the training of social educators and to develop education paths.

As stated by Johnston, in exploring new forms of learning for citizenship 'it may also be necessary to move beyond the boundaries of conventional adult education literature and engage with different but allied discourses' (Johnston, 2005, p. 55).

Mainly we refer to two different kinds of such discourses.

On the one hand there is Ong's discourse on the relation between social educators' identity and professional role and the kind of citizenship shaped in social services (Ong, 1999, 2003). We are interested in exploring how different integration practices contribute to create situated conditions of possibilities and constraints for both migrants and education professionals working in heterogeneous contexts (Ong, 2003). At the same time we take into consideration the anthropological reflection on the interplay between local and global in building citizens' identity in the context of globalized arenas (Appadurai, 1996). In this anthropological exploration we have considered as a central issue the imaginary related to the area and the issues investigated (Collier jr., 1967, 1995). For this reason we have used photo-elicitation interviews (PEI) in the research process. PEI is a qualitative methodology which introduces photographs into the interview context. 'Elicitation interviews connect core definitions of the self to society, culture and history. This work corresponds to postmodern sociology decentered narrative; of the sociology of the body, and of social studies of emotion' (Harper, 2002, pp. 13-14). The photographs used in PEI can originate from the interviewee or the researcher. Researchers can use photographs as a tool to expand on questions and simultaneously, participants can use photographs to provide a unique way to

communicate dimensions of their lives. In this case we have used photos of the area in order to discuss changes in spaces, related concerns of new and old inhabitants and perceptions in terms of feelings of belonging and identity.

We have intersected this anthropological point of view with the analyses on educational spaces and the relevance of spaces in learning processes (Roets, Vandenabeele & Bouverne-De Bie, 2012; Biesta & Cowell, 2012; Wildemeersch, 2012; De Visscher, Bouverne-De Bie & Verschelden, 2012).

From a methodological point of view we have explored the opportunities offered by the ethnographic approach to investigate this kind of learning for reflective and active citizenship. We refer to the ethnographic approach as an opportunity to highlight the continuous representational interplay of differences which characterizes the complexity of contemporary world. This complexity affects all of us, as humans, citizens, social workers and researchers (Clifford, 1988) and affects the roots of our opportunities to read, observe and study social realities and the cultural practices they are shaped by. The work of anthropologists like Geertz (1973) shows that every description is in itself a hermeneutic act and open the possibility to consider ethnography like a highly reflexive practice in which the *self* of researchers is involved. This implies to deepen and question the same idea of field work, considered as the basis of ethnography, and the way in which field work is constructed, represented and interpreted (Rabinow, 1977). In this sense ethnography, considered as the basis of anthropological method and research (Lévy-Strauss, 1958) becomes a specific situated way to understand and describe situated contexts and to show the interplay between reciprocal representations and the construction process of research subjects, objects and results.

Our hypothesis consists in considering the possibility that exploring the professional field of social educators in SHE with an ethnographic approach could contribute to improve reflexive attitudes of social educators and shape their educational attitudes.

In fact, in our work the goal of the anthropological method and research in investigating citizenship learning processes is not the accumulation of ethnographic data by an academic anthropologist/ethnographer in order to produce an interpretation of the observed cultural reality.

Instead, the anthropological method is understood as an engaged empirical field-based practice strongly grounded in critical observation, reflection and production, which is shared by a group of expert and non-expert researchers who use the knowledge gained in the process to act upon socio-cultural reality. The anthropological method is, therefore, a learning process which brings the researcher and the researched together in an empirical encounter that has a transformative and possible emancipatory potential. (Cervinkova, 2011, p. 183)

In this paper I present the general project framework and the specific actions related with the training of social educators and NGO practitioners in connection with the specific city district where the project took place. Finally I try to propose some emerging issues and guidelines for social educators' and NGO practitioners' training.

The project

This contribution presents the reflections and results that emerged in a two years Grundtvig partnership project called 'ACtS: Active Citizenship and Social Housing:

learning citizenship living together', realized by a partnership of three Universities and two civil society organizations based in Italy, the United Kingdom and Finland.

The aim of the project is to explore which kind of contribution informal learning in the context of social housing could give to reinforce 'social cohesion, active citizenship, intercultural dialogue, gender equality and personal fulfilment' (EACEA, 2010).

The project addressed theoretical and methodological issues in informal citizenship education with disadvantaged groups with the aim to develop guidelines for training of social educators acting as adult educators in these environments.

In this paper we present the qualitative methodologies we have used to explore social educators' representations as a starting point to plan the training.

There has been a revival of interest in social housing as one way in which governments can meet the increasing overall requirement for housing that stems from demographic and income pressures. In many countries there is interest in increasing new supply - although so far not much in the way of action or money. [...] Ethnic minorities live disproportionately in social housing, often on large estates - mainly because of poverty, household composition and restricted access to other tenures. The residential pattern of minorities is becoming a political issue in some countries, with concentrations of particular groups being seen as problematic. There is increasing recognition of the tension between providing social housing for long-time local residents, and providing it for those in greatest housing need (often immigrants with few local ties). [...] Overall the tensions and pressures across Europe are surprisingly similar, whatever the original role of the social sector in each country. The emphasis is very much on partnership and mixed communities with particular concerns about segregation and the position of vulnerable households. While there is, if anything, a growing commitment to social housing in the political rhetoric, few countries have identified new funding streams to ensure that the investment necessary to meet the need for affordable housing will actually occur. (LSE, 2007, pp. 5-7)

While the largest part of social-housing programs are PPP (public/private partnership) led programs, the educational and support programs are often carried out by private players like NGOs, charities, voluntary based organizations which act as social-inclusion agents. Normally Local Authorities funding these services ask the providers to assure informal citizenship education notions to beneficiaries to reduce conflicts in mixed living environments and to assure a better integration process in the local community.

We have explored the identified issues:

- using comparative field research on informal learning practices
- considering NGO practitioners, social educators and beneficiaries point of view
- comparing methods and learning achievements
- exchanging practices
- selecting recommendations for professional training of NGO practitioners working in the specific sector of social housing
- selecting skills and methods adult-educators in informal environments should master to face the challenge of enhancing participation, democracy and active citizenship in disadvantaged group members living in social housing environments.

This paper explores the second and fifth point of this list, showing how different points of view coming from different disciplines, in particular anthropology and educational sciences could contribute to enhance reflection and action in social housing contexts, relating social educators' practices to a specific urban contexts.

Space(s)

Places as well as people can be educative in the sense that they 'challenge' what is taken for granted in our everyday lives. (van der Veen & Wildemeersch, 2012, p. 11)

In Italy we worked throughout the project process with a local NGO called 'Vicini di casa', working in the field of social housing services.

We decided to choose as case study area a town district called Borgo Stazione in the southern part of the town centre, including the railway station.

The reason for this choice is related to the fact that the district has a high percentage of foreign inhabitants (22,28%) compared with the rest of the city (14,30%). This percentage has increased during the last ten years. In addition, some of the activities realized by Vicini di Casa are concentrated in the area. In particular the NGO manages a social housing building in the area; supports economically and from a social point of view different persons living in the area; and was in charge of an information office at the bus station.

At the same time the area has a very controversial reputation in the town.

When googling Borgo Stazione in April 2013, the first 10 results were related to security issues (4 of them), housing issues (4 of them) and social issues (2 of them related to the same event). If we move to Google images related to the area, we find as the first result a photo of the railway station; the second an image of a leaflet claiming for an Hungarian solution to the security problems in the area, depicted as "Udine Kasbah"; the third result an advertisement of administrative services for foreign people related to residence permit and other bureaucratic practices. From this point on there are a lot of images related to security issues: police inspections, policemen walking in the area, police cars inspecting the area, prostitutes walking in the street during the night...

During a mapping workshop, Vicini di Casa social educators mapped the area and the general view of the area as unsafe, dangerous and at risk of criminality was largely confirmed, even if the perceptions changed according to the age of people interviewed, and to the fact whether they were residents or travellers who were passing through.

Vicini di Casa social educators are involved in a wide range of interventions at different levels in the area, aiming at building citizenship processes and inclusion activities in this very badly reputed context.

We assume that the views they have on citizenship, social housing, their role, the spaces and the people they work with are very relevant to the educational results they could get.

Changing the professional imaginary

[...] education is about developing imaginative, workable, ethical communities, which do not suppress differences or cause the proliferation of fragmented and weak communities, but strive to develop values of critical understanding and resilience. (Maginess, 2011, p. 212)

Our assumptions of implicit roles as adult educators of social educators in SHe relates not only to the centrality of relational aspects in the work they did, but also to the fact that through their technical intervention and their professional everyday practices they contribute to build a certain kind of citizenship that concerns both educators and educated citizens (Ong, 2003).

The project idea arose in little talks with Vicini di Casa social educators. They highlighted the fact that the new social housing projects promoted in Italy by the Integrated Real Estate Fund System (Sistema Integrato di Fondi immobiliari - SIF), dedicated to social housing projects, entail a completely renewed role of social educators in SHe. The new system was introduced by Article 11 of Decree Law 112/2008, transformed into Law 133/2009. The system aims to promote and test innovative financial instruments and methodologies that enable participation by a wide range of social and financial categories who are capable of contributing and integrating planning, design, and financial resources on behalf of social housing projects. Social Housing projects under this new legal framework imply the role of Social Manager.

By social management we mean the whole set of the activities related to property management, and to the management of the interaction among the people who live in that property. The manager selects the tenants and involves the residents in actions designed to develop a sense of community and belonging. This professional figure is of fundamental importance to effectively guarantee the respect of the common good by the residents, and to avoid the risk of early physical and functional obsolescence of the buildings. In fact where integration and involvement of the inhabitants of a real-estate complex are indispensable for the success of the whole operation, the traditional activity of facility and property management incorporates the management of social aspects as well. (Del Gatto, Ferri & Pavesi 2012, pp. 112-114)

This means that Vicini di Casa social educators should update their working profiles and acquire new competences in order to play this new role.

The first social educators' request during the project activities relates to the need to reinforce the social educators' professional profile by mapping their competences and exploring their needs in order to cover new roles.

In our work with Vicini di Casa we used a four step analysing process in order to design the professional profile fostering organizational learning:

- self-analysis of the working profile (present and future)
- self-evaluation of skills and individuation of weaknesses
- narrative collection of case studies
- exploration of social representations of key issues.

We held two workshops with social educators and proposed them to analyse their current competences and roles in the framework of Vicini di Casa organization. The result was the map of current skills social educators consider to master. During the second workshop we asked them to imagine the expected changes they envisaged in their role, in order to match with the new framework of Social Housing social managers. The results have been compared with data and information emerging from interviews with Vicini di Casa management committee.

After this first mapping step we have explored work biographies of social educators in order to investigate the significance of critical change processes for their individual and collective learning (Evans, 2013). NGO practitioners and social educators were questioned about their work experience, their perception of strengths and weaknesses in their work approach and the meaning they attribute to key issues in the project.

We have classified the material collected, identifying actual (social mediation, effective communication, professional self-awareness, education in social housing contexts, support and information in home searching, networking with social services, legal and administrative support activities) and future (community work, social planning, social management of social housing communities, property management and

facility management) work areas. The profile descriptions have been validated during two focus groups with all the social educators working in regional NGOs in the social housing field.

The exploration of social worker profiles has been intersected with adult educators' profiles as defined in the document "Key competences for adult learning professionals" (Buiskool, Broek, van Lakerveld, Zarifis & Osborne, 2010). The central idea emerging is that educational aspects are implicit in many social educators' profiles, from nurses to NGO practitioners.

In fact our exploration demonstrates that the general key competences of social educators in SHe are exactly the same of those described in the document "Key competences for adult learning professionals", even if the social educators who take part in the workshops and focus groups do not describe and perceive themselves as educators in the first instance. They tended to consider first of all the technical, administrative and legal aspects of their profiles, while when discussing and collecting their professional biographies, very different points emerged.

They consider as the most important aspect of their work personal and supportive relations with people involved in SH interventions, while the socio-economic condition of people is considered as the decisive risk factor for projects aiming at social inclusion of marginalised people.

The very interesting thing is the fact that while the first factor is completely under professional control of social educators, the second is completely out of their control, subjected to difficult conditions of the labour market and to the weakening of welfare system protection following the financial crisis. In fact another very weak point underlined by the NGO practitioners is the fact that they feel themselves as the last bastion of a collapsing welfare system. Even if they cooperate in integrated approaches with social services, they mainly manage the "last chance cases". They feel like the terminal of a social protection system which tends to marginalise the marginalized because of the reduction of resources and the growing competition for social services among poor Italians and foreigners. Finally they are in a certain sense expected, as private (and marginal) players of Civil Society Organizations, to solve the effects of social crisis that public services are not in a condition to cope with.

In this sense NGO practitioners are invited to assume the role of empowering marginalized people following the general approach of persuasion, normalisation, and inclusion (Rose, 1996; Vandenabeele et al., 2011). In this sense NGO practitioners also in the new Italian SH framework risk becoming part of those social technologies which assure the possibility to govern spaces and encounters with regulatory effects (Ong, 1999).

In our research trajectory, we tried to stimulate ourselves as researchers and the social educators we work with to reflect on the relation between citizenship, places and educational processes, working on images, imaginary and representations. In the interplay between these three dimensions, different ideas of citizenship emerged. Both immigrants, social educators and NGO practitioners are described or describe themselves as participating (or non-participating) and relational (or non-relational) citizens (Vandenabeele et al., 2011, pp. 196-201). Our attempt in planning research activities was to stimulate the reflection on a third idea of citizen: the indefinite citizen. 'The citizen we encounter in these circumstances [characterized by openness and indefiniteness] is an indefinite citizen. She is, just like us, a passer-by' (Vandenabeele et al., 2011, p. 204). NGO practitioners as adult educators have been invited to reflect on alternative ways of thinking educational processes in SHe in Borgo Stazione, where citizens learn citizenship living-in and passing-through. In these spaces education could

be considered not only as an imperative of integration and fraternity, but also as ‘a space where the foreign, the frictions, the dilemmas and conflicts can be articulated’ (Vandenabeele et al., 2011, p. 204). In this sense education means ‘the exploration of spaces which are anomalous or alienating rather than ‘pleasant’ or ‘nice’, and therefore enable us to envision a kind of citizenship which reflects our present-day ways of living together’ (Vandenabeele et al., 2011, p. 204).

She could be conceptualized as spaces where these ways of living together are being experimented and ‘where education and learning are again connected to societal issues, under the inspiration of old and new values such as democracy, social justice, sustainability, freedom, responsibility, equality and solidarity’ (Wildemeersch & Olesen, 2012, p. 13).

In the process of supporting NGO practitioners we have tried to enhance a self-reflective path, mapping the professional profiles as mentioned above and working on professional imaginary of NGO practitioners at three levels according to the following principles:

- the research process as learning and changing process
- self-analysis and evaluation as a basis for building professional learning
- centrality of exchange among different social actors
- centrality of interaction between learning and action (Alessandrini, 2005, p. 163).

At a first personal and group level, we have tried to map social representations of social educators of issues at stake in the project. We have used the social representation theory (Moscovici, 1989) because relevant research in Italy has been realized in the area of housing problems (Massari, 2000; Cardano, Meo & Olagnero, 2003).

At a second comparative level, we have exposed social educators to different experiences of community working in different countries and we have invited Vicini di Casa to organize in Italy workshops to host NGO practitioners from different countries to present them their intervention model and their activities.

Thirdly at a reflexive level, we have realized some sessions of shadowing, following social educators during their normal work activities and we have discussed with them the materials collected.

We have discussed the results of research activities with social educators with the aim to propose possible directions for social educators training.

Some preliminary results

[...] education could be conceived as creating conditions in which people's identities are interrupted by the presence of others who articulate opinions, or different expressions of what life and living together is about. (Wildemeersch & Kurantowicz, 2011, p. 130)

Some preliminary results emerge from our action research.

The first one is the fact that social educators tend to oversimplify their vision of challenges and solutions in SHE, while questioned on models and methodologies of intervention.

The answers given by NGO practitioners tend to be similar to those given by other social educators in different contexts in terms of explanatory models and typologies of intervention (Massari, 2000; Cardano et al., 2003).

The first part of our work tended to make social educators aware of this explanatory models leading their work.

We tried to achieve this aim in three different movements: inviting people to look at similar problems in other places; inviting people to look at the same problems with other eyes, assuming the point of view of external observers visiting their work place; shifting social educators point of view from a single case based approach to a community approach, where different points of view on problems and solutions are in reciprocal dialogue.

We presented to social educators materials collected with PEI in the Borgo Stazione area in order to stimulate their reaction and interpretation in relation to inhabitants' self-representations of the case study area.

To a certain extent we have conceived the research process trying to make *the strange familiar and the familiar strange*. This classical anthropological approach allows to make ostensibly strange cultural practices comprehensible, like the use of arts to work on poverty, and to make social educators' professional culture worthy of analysis.

The second part of our work was aimed at exploring alternative and supposedly innovative ways to face social problems in marginal areas and with marginal people, trying to shift social educators' point of view from a rational based intervention to a creative and innovative way of thinking social change (van der Veen & Wildemeersch, 2012).

We explored community mapping and community arts as opportunities to look at social problems, and possible solutions, with other eyes: referring less to concrete and functional interventions, while rather attempting to imagine a new kind of citizens' participation. The guiding idea was that all kinds of social intervention are a meta-narrative of our way to give meaning to the world and to justify our actions in the world (Andreotti, 2010). From an educational point of view educators have to be aware that their meta-narratives contribute to build one of the possible stories of persons, places, problems, social services.

In this sense also the new Social Housing framework in Italy and the entailed role of social manager are one of the possible narratives on living together in complex societies. Social educators need to pluralize epistemologies and ways of thinking and practicing their role, to become autonomous and intellectually equipped educators (Andreotti, 2010), experiencing new ways of learning (and teaching): learning to unlearn, learning to listen, learning to learn and learning to reach out (Andreotti & de Sousa, 2008, p. 4). This kind of exercise could allow social educators to avoid implementing, uncritically, policies coming from outside and above, even those aimed at social inclusion and social cohesion.

Conclusion

What do our findings mean in terms of designing training for social educators and NGO practitioners working in SHe?

It could mean a shift from a training centred on contents and methodologies, to one centred on processes and professional reflexivity.

It could mean a shift from a training centred on reproduction to a training centred on innovative and creative ways to think of what it means to be citizens in these times of crisis.

It could mean to shift from passe-partout educational solutions to context related solutions, when educational processes are strongly embedded in places.

It could mean a shift from theories of citizenship and social inclusion to citizenship practices.

It could mean a shift in SHe from practices of social cohesion and inclusion to social laboratories of practiced citizenship (Roets et al., 2012; Biesta & Cowell, 2012), taking into account the complexity of differences in terms of classes, ages, gender, lifestyles and ethnic background and the global/local interplay among these elements.

Social Housing neighbourhoods seem to be one of these possible laboratories of practiced citizenship, where people coming from different contexts and different backgrounds learn day by day how to live together, taking decisions concerning common good and common spaces, learning values, skills and competencies, conflicting and negotiating the actual possibilities to exercise citizenship (Mündel, Duguid & Schugurensky, 2006).

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