

scutrea

Standing Conference on University Teaching
and Research in the Education of Adults

Adult Education for Inclusion and Diversity

Conference Proceedings 2017

Centre for Research in Education
Inclusion & Diversity (CREID)
University of Edinburgh
4-6 July 2017

Editors,
Grace Kong, conference administrator
Ellen Boeren, conference host, Chair SCUTREA

SCUTREA Proceedings 2017

Published by the Centre for Research in Education Inclusion & Diversity, University of Edinburgh, in conjunction with the Standing Conference on Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults, SCUTREA

Copyright 2017 SCUTREA and the individual authors

The authors of the papers reproduced herein have asserted their moral rights to be known as the authors thereof under the terms of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

www.scutrea.ac.uk

Introduction

The 46th SCUTREA Conference: *Adult Education for Inclusion and Diversity*

Adult education matters. It matters at home, in work, and in the community. It matters to families, to the economy and to our health and wellbeing. Austerity policies are marginalising adult education. Its decline is indicative of the huge price this and future generations are set to pay for the politics of austerity. Yet it could be argued that we are living through times that demand more adult education and learning, not less.

It is far too easy to cut adult education. So what can be learned from ongoing initiatives and projects in these areas? What messages can be sent back to government politicians and policy makers? The papers from this conference explore the education of adults within the contemporary context of austerity, neoliberal economic policies, increasing inequalities and the positive impacts and benefits of adult education.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ellen Boeren', written over a horizontal line.

Dr Ellen Boeren

Centre for Research in Education Inclusion & Diversity, University of Edinburgh

Transitions to adulthood and processes of social inclusion: A biographical research on careleavers' experiences

Andrea Galimberti, Mirella Ferrari & Laura Formenti
University of Milano Bicocca, Italy

Introduction

A 'care leaver' is a young adult who has been in foster care, separated from a sentenced abusing or negligent family, and faces a dramatic change in his/her life. The huge investment of resources to protect children sustains a system of intervention that produces learning, at many levels, but what kind of learning? Is it functional to freedom, self-direction, reflexivity, and a meaningful life (Jackson & Martin, 1998)? Which conditions bring to a 'good enough' learning experience (Reid & West, 2015) and allow these young adults to cope with a difficult transition, from school to work, from protection to agency, from a 'welfare life' to self-direction and responsibility?

This paper presents an ongoing research project in Lombardy (Italy), where biographic interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires are used to understand this transition. We identified different labels used in literature to name these subjects: *vulnerable* children and adolescents (or even *at risk*), *NEETs*, *Looked After*, and *Care Leavers*. After using ourselves these terms interchangeably for a while, we realized how much they illuminate discourses of vulnerability, each associated with a different systemic level: macro, meso and micro (Formenti, 2014, 2015).

From vulnerable children to NEETs: a self-fulfilling prophecy?

At the macro-level, the widespread use of the category of 'vulnerability' functions as a rationale for policy makers and professionals to intervene, e.g. to justify separation from home. However, an Italian survey (Belotti, 2010) signalled that among 39,698 minors who experienced separation from their family, only 2% were orphans; 8% fatherless; 7% motherless; 33% were referred for 'serious relational problems' within the family; 23% for parental inadequacy, mostly related to addiction (27%) or neglecting conduct (67%), and 26% for *severe economic problems*. These figures draw a map of vulnerabilities, where poverty is among the main factors, a sheer violation of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, and the Italian Constitution. The dominant narrative says that separation is done in the name of the 'vulnerable child'; in fact, after completion of major age, these people disappear from records: they cease to belong to a targeted category.

Another macro-level category is NEET (Not Education, Employment, Training), i.e. young adults who exit formal education and do not work; OECD and EUROSTAT use this category to measure the risk of social exclusion and to estimate the labour market dynamics. In 2015, Italy counted 2.500.000 NEETs, among the highest rates in Europe (Rosina, 2015). Young adults who experienced fosterage seem at risk to intersect this category, especially in the transition, due to lack of social capital (Field, 2008) and family support; lack of father increases risk of exclusion from labour market (Alfieri & Marta, 2014).

Looked after people: the reproduction of care and control

The 'looked after' category highlights, at a meso-level, the position of these subjects in the care process, within their proximal system of interactions. Being 'looked after' (not necessarily entailing being 'seen') is a passive verb with a connotation of dependence: by

receiving care and attention, the subject is *proved to be* needing, vulnerable and not enough competent or autonomous. There is also a connotation of surveillance: in fact, life within foster houses is constantly monitored. Analysis at this level should focus the hidden assumptions (and related practices) of child protection agencies and professional educators. In Italy, while children are more likely placed in families, teenagers are more easily directed to residence (Belotti, 2010); systematic research on these practices and models of social intervention is lacking, but different models are implemented, due to regional differences (Belotti, 2010). At European level, comparative research (Eurochild, 2010) has shown fragmentation (Thoburn, 2010; Berto, Canali, 2012) and lack of data; e.g. none of the six countries considered by ANCI (Germany, France, Britain, Italy, Belgium and Spain) produced regular statistics (ANCI, 2012, p.19); besides, the absence of a standard model hinders collection of comparable data.

More qualitative data show that institutionalization becomes too easily repetitive and chronic: in Italy 1/3 fostered minors had a previous experience of outplacement; average duration of fosterage (a 'temporary measure'!) is 4,2 years (law suggests no more than 1). Once entered the system, being discharged is rare, also due to lack of intervention on the problems that originated the outplacement. These minors can be seen as 'victims' as well as 'experts' of the fosterage system.

Care leavers: biographical transition and challenging transformations

The 'care leaver' label shifts our focus to the micro-level: a subject is developing a (new) identity related to a change of context. Leaving care is an active verb of movement, signalling the process, more than individual features: it entails interactions, new challenges, and transforming narratives. 'Care leavers', as a category, points to the moment when these young adults are asked, authorized, or forced to leave a protective environment and to take responsibilities, hence to think of themselves as independent and autonomous adults (or not). Research suggests that this transition is accelerated and compressed, as a consequence of the sudden demand to pass from being 'looked after' to living independently (Allen, 2003; Stein & Munro, 2008, Pandolfi, 2015). Research from the Children's Rights Director (Morgan, 2011) consistently shows that most care leavers are not prepared; furthermore, they may be hindered by lack of cultural and social capital (Field, 2008), leading to poverty, isolation or crime (higher rates than general population, see Carr & McAlister, 2016). Following Belotti (2010), 50% care leavers decide not to re-enter their system (family of origin, relatives, or acquaintances); 11% begin a life of their own by searching a job; foreigners choose autonomy three times more than Italians. National data (ISTAT, 2013) showed these figures: 8% care leavers went independent; 31% returned to their families and 24% were in secondary care protection. Similar findings were outlined for previous years by Belotti (2010).

Our study: methodology

Our research is based on stories and a participatory process of critical reflection on them, developed through different phases. We decided to start with auto/biographical interviews (Merrill & West, 2009; Formenti, 2015; Reid and West, 2015), to enter the phenomenon from the insiders' perspective. We invited professionals who work in residential units to join our research; a meeting with four of them enhanced a rich conversation that challenged from the very beginning our ideas and revealed hidden assumptions on both parts. They helped us to define a sample of eight young adults (6 men; 2 women), not meant to be representative, but diverse and heterogeneous, in order to nurture reflexivity by difference.

Auto/biographical interviews started with an open question: *This interview is about your*

experience as a fostered child... from where would you start to tell? We let the narration flow, but we also had a guideline of four topics/questions to explore: information about past, present and future, education and training, relationship with the foster system and professionals, becoming adult.

After the interviews, participants checked the transcript and were invited to further meetings. In the present phase, we are organizing meetings with both groups in order to reflect together on the results of our analyses.

Interview analysis: an example

In our analysis we assumed that participants positioned themselves during the interview, and developed their personal theory, in relation to received stories of stigma, failure and lack of resources (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004). How do received narrations enter in the development of adult identity? Are there clues of a self-fulfilling prophecy? We searched for their positioning in relation to the categories presented above. The following is an example of analysis based on one participant's (Marco) narrative.

The macro-level

How do our participants position themselves in relation to 'the vulnerable child' (and consequently vulnerable adult) or NEET categories? Does their past predict their future? How are past and present related?

Marco immediately faces an eventual prejudice on himself, refusing to indulge in the "negative situation" he lived at home and that resulted in a child residence centre. He declares to remember few things of living together with his mother ("alcoholic and depressed") and his father ("absent"), and, anyway, "I could tell you these old episodes but I would not have a distressed attitude... if this is what this experience [the interview] expects from me ..."

The meso-level

We explore the way of positioning in relation to family, foster family, peer group at residence centre, social care professionals, schoolmates, teachers, etc. How do stories received in these relationships and contexts evolve? Are myths, social representations, identities created? How is being 'looked after' related with the building of identity?

Marco, along the whole interview, expresses his ideas on the "right" way to be an educator in a child residence centre. He complains that he met few persons and many "professionals" who tried to understand, interpret and explain his behaviour: "sometimes for professional reasons they [educators] forget that they deal with children and not with other professionals... I felt more psycho-analyzed than listened to". Educators and other professionals (social workers and psychologists) are a constant reference in Marco's interview. Criticized, as well as desired, as someone who could give attention. This was a titanic endeavour in the residence centre, as other seven young boys were also asking for attention, by crashing doors or coming home under drugs effect. How did Marco try to gain the educators' attention? "I always tried to be part of them and not the pupil to take care of. I still have all the residence keys, I knew all the educators' shifts, the amount of money given to the other boys... that was my way to have attention." His effort to be level to adults around him often resulted in violent quarrels: "sometimes I provoked the other just for the taste of it, just to face him/her and hold my head high, just to prove that I am not a young boy but your equal, even if I wasn't like that. I felt myself growing up through this feeling of being equal with adults". Deep down Manuel doesn't feel ready to take the place of the educators he met, even if he struggled to be considered equal of

them.: "I know that I am not ready to take care of another person... it is probably something that is related to my experience... I still feel like the one to be taken care of."

The micro-level

We are interested in how participants deal with their story. Which kind of learning processes have happened in the past and are going on in their lives? What representation/myth of themselves did they elaborate in relation to this? How do they relate their experience of 'leaving care' with their own identity? Do they perceive themselves as adults?

When Marco left the residence, a difficult period begun for him: "when you go back home you receive all the packs in a row". Even if the residence was considered "home", after leaving he realized that it was also a "bubble" that had not prepared him to the future: going back to his father, no friends, job difficulties, poverty. Marco worked through thanks to significant others' help: his grandparents bought him a car to move and a neighbour found him a job. Now, at 25, Marco is engaged with a 43 years old man "that for me is the best choice as he is youngish - we do the same things - and at the same time he has experience that allows him to be my mentor and my guide." Marco draws a thread between his present relationship with his partner and his previous relationship with the educators: "I am glad when he simply hugs me. But the pupil in the residence has the same desire... he/she's just not interested in someone standing on the other side of the desk and trying to understand him/her". Today Marco does not represent himself like an adult, as he feels that he "doesn't face the world all alone yet". Living with his boyfriend - and his mother - means that he does not need to care about many fundamental things: "I still have to learn how to manage bills and rent payments...".. This advantage has a reverse side: "after 25 years I still don't have a place I consider mine". What makes him feeling different and "more adult" is a different perspective of himself on him and his life: "the unique thing that makes me proud about my life is that it didn't crash me... I didn't defeat my life and I was not defeated... I just make my life part of myself... I might live it with coldness but I remember it warmly. I don't see my life like a tragedy, I don't see it neither happy nor sad. It is the route that I made to get to be myself, as I am now."

Conclusions

What kind of learning are our participants showing and witnessing? Being positioned by categories, from social discourse and professional care discourses might lead to adaptation ('I'm exactly like that'), counter dependence ('I'm different'), or to a process of questioning and re-positioning. We consider re-positioning as a complex process, whose different levels can generate questions that may result in disorienting dilemmas. Following Mezirow's definition of transformative learning (2012) disorienting dilemmas have the power to disclose those frames of references that structured a life world and its 'truths'. A crisis, then, is the blessed occasion to take a reflective stance and, potentially, trigger transformative learning (Illeris, 2014). Transitions (Field et al 2009, Field, 2015) from foster care to the "world outside there" are a crucial moment, and narratives reveal subjective processes of micro-positioning within a network of relationships; each subject develops his/her own idea of adulthood, and an adult identity in continuity/discontinuity to received discourses, both from the proximal system that 'looked after' him/her and from the dominant social discourse representing him/her as a vulnerable person and potential NEET. The tension between falling into a mainstream category and developing a new script, a different identity/theory, or even a deeper understanding of the action of social determinants ("biographicity", see Alheit & Dausien, 2000) is always present and has no linear or permanent solutions. It may be considered another dilemma itself.

References

- Alfieri S & Marta E (2014) 'Transizione all'età adulta tra affetto ed etica: Quali effetti per i giovani?' in Ist Toniolo La Condizione Giovanile In Italia Rapporto Giovani.
- Alheit P & Dausien B (2000) 'Biographicity as a basic resource of lifelong learning' in P Alheit et al (eds) *Lifelong learning inside and outside schools*, Roskilde, Roskilde University.
- Allen M (2003) *Into the mainstream: Care leavers entering work, education and training*, York, England, Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- ANCI (2012) I minori stranieri non accompagnati IV Rapporto ANCI Cittalia, Fondazione Anci Ricerche, retrieved at: <http://www.cittalia.it/index.php/welfare> (accessed 1st March 2017)
- Bamberg M & Andrews M (Eds) (2004) *Considering counter-narratives: Narrating, resisting, making sense*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins.
- Bastianoni P & Taurino A (2014) *Le comunità per minori*, Roma, Carocci.
- Belotti V (Ed) (2010) *Bambine e Bambini temporaneamente fuori dalla famiglia di origine*, Istituto degli Innocenti, Firenze, Centro Nazionale Documentazione e Analisi per l'Infanzia e l'Adolescenza.
- Carr N & McAlister S (2016) 'Double-bind: Looked after children, care leavers and criminal justice' in P Mendes & P Snow (eds) *Young people transitioning from out-of-home-care: International research, policy and practice*, The Netherlands, Springer.
- Eurochild (2010) *Annual report*, Brussel, Belgium, retrieved at:
- Field J & Lynch H (2015) 'Getting stuck, becoming unstuck: Agency, identity and transition between learning contexts', *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, 21, pp.3-17.
- Field J (2008) *Social capital*, London, Routledge.
- Field J, Gallacher J & Ingram R (2009) 'Learning transitions: research, policy, practice' in *Researching transitions in lifelong learning*, London, Routledge.
- Formenti L (2015) 'Autobiography: A relational journey' in H Reid & L West (eds) *Constructing narratives of continuity and change: A transdisciplinary approach to researching lives*, Oxon, Routledge.
- Formenti L, West L & Horsdal M (Eds) (2014) *Embodied narratives: connecting stories, bodies, cultures and ecologies*, Odense, University Press of Southern Denmark.
- Free E (2006) 'Local authority support to unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people: Changes since the Hillingdon judgement', *Save the Children England Programme*, pp.9-30.
- <http://www.eurochild.org/fileadmin/public/05Library/Eurochild-Annual-Report-2010.pdf> (accessed 12 January 2017)
- Illeris K (2014) *Transformative learning and identity*, New York, Routledge.
- Jackson S & Martin P (1998) 'Surviving the care system: Education and resilience', *Journal of Adolescence*, 21, pp.569-583.
- Merrill B & West L (2009) *Using biographical methods in social research*, London, Sage.
- Mezirow J (2012) 'Learning to think like an adult. core concepts of transformation theory' in E Taylor & P Cranton (eds) *Handbook of transformative learning: Theory, research, and practice*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.
- Morgan R (2011) *Children's care monitor: Children on the state of social care in England reported by the Children's Rights Director for England*, London, Ofsted.
- Naldini M & Saraceno C (2008) 'Social and family policies in Italy: Not totally frozen but far from structural reforms', *Social Policy Administration*, 42, 7, pp.733-748.

- Pandolfi L (2015) *Costruire resilienza: analisi e indicazioni per l'accompagnamento educativo in uscita delle comunità per minori*, Milano, Guerini.
- Reid H & West L (Eds) (2015) *Constructing narratives of continuity and change: A transdisciplinary approach to researching lives*, London, Routledge.
- Rosina A (2015) *NEET. Giovani che non studiano e non lavorano*, Milano, Vita e Pensiero.
- Stein M & Munro R (2008) *Young people's transitions from care to adulthood*, London, Kingsley.
- Thoburn J (2010) 'Toward knowledge-based practice in complex child protection cases: a research-based expert briefing', *Journal of Children's Services*, 5, pp.9-24.
- Tibollo A (2015) *Le comunità per minori*, Milano, Franco Angeli.
- West L & Carlson A (2007) *Claiming space: An indepth auto/biographical study of a local sure start project*, CCCU, CISDP.