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The identity of youth work as an agent of social equality

Daniele Morciano[*] *and Fausta Scardigno*[**]

Abstract: The current formulation of European Union youth policy is not sufficient for a full understanding of what distinguishes youth work from other services or educational practice for young people. Youth work in Europe has a diverse range of fields, goals, and methods of intervention. Such diversification is considered one of the strengths of youth work, inasmuch as it is associated with its ability to adapt to the variety of problems it faces. Such flexibility is, however, likely to generate vagueness in terms of the knowledge of the special contribution expected from youth work and its execution. As a contribution to lead evaluation research to produce empirical evidence about the key-features of youth work, a theoretical framework is presented in this paper that help to identify the peculiar expected outcomes of youth work as well as those mechanisms able to generate them. Specifically, this paper focused on the ability of youth work to affect a more equal distribution of personal development opportunities for the young outside the formal education. For this purpose, sociological theories on non-formal education, educational inequalities and youth participation have been intertwined with psychological research on transition from adolescence to adulthood and with the theory of educational accompaniment in social pedagogy.

Keywords: youth work, youth policy, youth development

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Introduction

Youth work is, for the European Union, a form of "out-of-school education managed by professional or voluntary youth workers that contributes to the development of young people" (European Commission, 2009, p. 11). Exchange between youth workers has been, since the Treaty establishing the European Union in 1992, one of the actions aimed at developing the European dimension of education policy[2]. Over a period of two decades, European Community institutions have given increased priority to the professional development of youth workers, with particular attention to the validation of their skills and the development of "innovative services, pedagogies and practice" (European Commission, 2009, p. 11).

Indeed, youth workers and their educational practices are called upon within all intervention areas of European youth policy. In particular, European Commission recognizes the role of youth work in youth policies aimed at employment ("youth work as a resource to support youth employability", European Commission, 2009, p. 6), health ("collaboration between youth workers, health professionals and sporting organizations", European Commission, 2009, pp. 7-8), social inclusion ("youth work and youth community centres as a means of inclusion", p. 9), and entrepreneurship ("contribution of youth work to the creativity and entrepreneurship of young people", European Commission, 2009a, p. 7). Over several passages, the notion of complementarity emerges between youth work organizations and other stakeholders specialized in the areas of intervention mentioned above. Indeed, European Union youth policy aims to develop "greater collaboration between youth policies and other policy areas such as education, employment, inclusion and health (...), with youth activities and youth work playing a supporting role (...)" (European Commission, 2009, p. 4).

Nevertheless, the current formulation of European Union youth policy is not sufficient for a full understanding of what distinguishes youth work operators from other services with whom collaboration is required. In this

[2] Youth workers are known as "socio-educational instructors" in the Treaty establishing the European Union (1992), art. 149, paragraph 2, Official Journal of the European Union no. C 191 of 29 July 1992.

context, the European Council has called for a better understanding of the specific *modus operandi* of youth work. Indeed, as stated in a recent resolution, "the ways in which youth work can contribute (...) - as well as be supported and recognised as an added value for its economic and social contribution - should be further examined and discussed" (European Council, 2009, p. 10).

At European level, therefore, a debate between researchers, policy makers and practitioners about the key-features of youth work has been promoted since 2008 by the European Council (Verschelden et al., 2009; Coussée et. al, 2009; Coussée, Williamson, & Verschelden, 2009). Core characteristics of youth work underlined by this debate include the integration of recreational activities and learning opportunities, the voluntary participation of young people, educational work focused both on individuals and groups, and the cultivation of associative life and promotion of self-government experiences (Davies, 2005). Furthermore, an important part of the European debate on the recognition of the peculiar contribution of youth work has been nourished by the debate on the recognition of non-formal education of young people[3]. In this context, the European Union and the Council of Europe have, over the last decade, progressively urged recognition of youth work as a provider of specialized non-formal education for youth. Consistently with the research literature on youth work, youth participation and non-formal education in Europe (Jans & De Backer, 2002; Siurala, 2004; Young, 2006; Evans et al., 2009; Sapin, 2009; McPherson, Fouché, & Elliot, 2012; Ord, 2012; Loncke et al., 2012) a number of key characteristics of youth work as a non-formal educational practice may thus be identified by this debate. Specifically, organizations working within the field of youth work (public or private, formal and

[3] In December 2010 European Commission the Commission has launched a public consultation on possible action to support the promotion and validation of non-formal and informal learning (European Commission, 2010a). One of the first documents about non-formal learning of young people has been published by the Youth Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe in February 2004 (European Commission & Council of Europe, 2004) and uptodated seven years after (European Commission & Council of Europe, 2011). For other relevant documents published between 2004 and 2011 see Council of Europe (2009), Council of Europe (2010), European Commission (2010b). SALTO (2011) has prepared a state of the art about validation of non-formal learning in December 2011.

informal, run by adults and/or youth) are required to train young people in both basic skills that fall within the social and relational spheres (e.g. the teaching of values) and those relevant to employment. Educational objectives are thus specifically reconnected to the core competencies of the European framework on *lifelong learning* (language, mathematics, science and technology, digital, civic, business, cultural expression and self-learning skills) (European Parliament & European Council, 2004). With regard to educational methods, youth work places particular importance on informal learning that may occur spontaneously during leisure time (European Commission, 2001; Beckett & Hager, 2002). In addition, the dynamics of social and emotional learning experiences are given greater priority in youth work, in contrast to that which takes place in formal education organized by schools, focusing leverage primarily on cognitive resources. The educational methods of youth work therefore place particular emphasis on the centrality of the learner and the voluntary nature of participation (SALTO, 2011).

The recognition of youth work as an educational agency, however, is still tied to the ability to demonstrate its working methods and the impact on the lives of young people (European Commission & Council of Europe, 2004). Especially from the European debate on non-formal education emerges a clear demand for *evidence-based* evaluation that social and evaluation research is called upon to provide (European Commission & Council of Europe, 2002). Indeed, despite extensive research able to empirically test the association between activities carried out in youth programmes and determined educational outcomes, there is still a lack of considerable evidence on how programmes work in order to generate expected outcomes (Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005; Eichas et al., 2010; McPherson, Fouché, & Elliot 2012; Smith et al., 2010). In this regard, the model of theory-based evaluation (Weiss, 1997; Funnell & Rogers, 2011) can be considered as particularly appropriate for investigating the causal sequential psycho-relational mechanisms influencing youth-work *outcomes*. In this evaluation model, the existing hypothesis according to which an intervention leads to certain results contributes to forming a "programme theory". According with Funnel and Rogers (2011) a programme theory should include a theory of social or individual change

(*theory of change*) and a theory of how such change can be activated via an external intervention (*theory of action*).

In order to contribute to a theory-based evaluation of the core-features of youth work, therefore, this paper tried to develop a theoretical tool for *tailor-made evaluation designs* (Rossi, Freeman, & Lipsey, 1999) of youth work projects or services. As a tool for evaluation research to produce empirical evidence about the key-features of youth work, a theoretical framework is presented in this paper that help to identify the peculiar expected outcomes of youth work as well as those mechanisms able to generate them (Morciano, 2012b). Specifically, this paper focused on the ability of youth work to affect a more equal access of young people to personal development opportunities outside the formal education. For this purpose, sociological theories on non-formal education, educational inequalities and youth participation have been intertwined with psychological research on transition from adolescence to adulthood and with the theory of educational accompaniment in social pedagogy.

Expected outcomes of youth work: working for social equality

The ability of youth work to generate social equality in non-formal educational is one of the core-features stressed by the research on the history of youth work in Europe promoted since 2008 by the youth partnership between the Council of Europe and the European Commission (Verschelden et al., 2009; Coussée et. al, 2009; Coussée, Williamson, & Verschelden, 2009). In this regard, the European Union recognizes youth work organizations are policy players in which to invest in order to bring about a reduction in social inequalities among the young (Değirmencioğlu, 2011). Protecting the specific identity of *youth work*, therefore, means specifically to assert and proclaim its mission to effect a more equal distribution of opportunities for the young (Coussée, 2008).

In the European context, forms of youth work may be more universal or selective depending on the orientation towards the undifferentiated involvement of young, or to the selection of those falling into specific categories of need. The "universalism vs. selectivity" axis is also one of the variables forming the basis of the differentiation between different *youth*

work welfare regimes in Europe. A universal orientation also tends, furthermore, to look to young people as active citizens capable of expressing their own unique potential at a young age. Selective orientation, however, proposes a compensation for specific deficiencies in young individuals in order to support social inclusion and the transition to adulthood (IARD, 2001; Siurala, 2004).

Whether universal or selective in orientation, in both cases there is, however, a need to empirically test whether and how youth work can offer growth opportunities regardless of the advantageous conditions presented by the young at the outset. While universal youth work essentially represents the opportunity to realize potential and develop participation in social and political life, attention shifts in selective youth work to the opportunity to develop those skills considered necessary for becoming an adult and, as such, taking on a socially recognized and legitimized role.

The perspective of educational sociology

From the perspective of educational sociology, the point is to understand how non-formal education delivered by youth work can offer opportunities regardless of the advantageous conditions presented by the young at the outset (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1972). As mentioned in the sociological literature on educational inequalities, the conditions of individual advantage may relate to the higher socio-economic status of the own family or, more generally, comparatively better value in terms of the initial personal resources that education aims to enhance (Bourdieu, 1985; Wildhagen, 2009; Besozzi, 2006; Giancola, 2009; Colombo, 2011). Furthermore, social inequalities are nourished by social discrimination relating to ethnicity, gender, disability, religion, sub-culture membership and sexual orientation (Değirmencioğlu, 2011).

For the specific topic of youth work, adopting this sociological perspective means addressing the paradoxical problem that occurs when the best youth work services tend to involve those young people more capable, motivated and supported by their family network. Indeed, the results of research on this issue (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Quane & Rankin, 2006) led Coussée (2008) to highlight the risk that "youth work that works is not accessible, and accessible youth work does not work" (Coussée, 2008, p. 8) and to imply the doubt that "it is not youth work that produces active,

healthy, well achieving citizens, but active citizens that create youth work" (Coussée, 2008, p. 3). In this regard, Durlak, Weissberg & Pachan (2010) carried out a meta analysis of 75 reports about 69 different out-of-school programmes, finding difficult to analyse selection dynamics because of "many reports lacked data on the racial and ethnic composition or the socioeconomic status of participants" (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010, p. 304).

The issue of social equality in *youth work* can be also analysed from the perspective of creating new educational environments in which the young may enter into a relationship with adults able to convey useful resources for growth (Verschelden et al., 2009; Smith, 1988; 1999). Creating such a relationship means feeding a brand of social capital conceived as providing better access to new resources made possible by the educational relationship (Lin, 2001; Coleman, 2005). The relationship between the young and the adult can, therefore, generate "relational goods" based on reciprocity and trust (Donati & Tronca, 2008). In order to investigate such a relationship it is therefore particularly useful to adopt a definition of social capital that examines the resources that may be accessed through social relations (*resource social capital*) rather than the moral resources that collectively act with functions of social integration (*normative social capital*) (Dika & Singh, 2002; Fulkerson & Thompson, 2008).

Conceived in terms of relational resources, social capital can, therefore, contribute towards building an evaluation of the success of a non-formal education experience in youth work that not only takes into account inherited resources (cultural, economic and social capital of the beneficiaries and the family of origin) but also of the new capital being developed during the experience. Indeed, if the creation of new social capital is defined as the access to new resources *embedded* in relationships and social interactions, the process may be observed as an increase in *life chances*, defined as opportunities for personal growth, the fulfilment of capabilities, desires and hopes (Dahrendorf, 1981). In terms of a *youth work* service, there is, therefore, the need to identify the conditions in which *life chances* develop.

The pedagogical perspective

The issue of educational inequalities in youth work has been addressed from the perspective of pedagogical issue of education divided between control or emancipation purposes (Verschelden et al., 2009). This dilemma is in some sense a reflection of the European debate between concept of young people as a *problem* or as a *resource* (IARD, 2001). In turn, the debate had accepted the invitation of positive psychology in shifting from approaches focused on prevention, repair or deficit compensation towards others more aware of the potential of the individual and relations within a social context (Massimini, 2005). Similarly, the field of research and practice of *Positive Youth Development* (Benson et al., 2007; Lerner et al., 2009; Villarruel et al., 2003) developed out of the assumption of the plasticity of development pathways in individual life courses. This assumption leads to observing life pathways as formed on the basis of the intentional actions of the young rather than due to the deterministic influence of pre-existing structural factors.

Returning to the "control vs. emancipation" dilemma in youth work, it is possible to theorize the existence of youth work practices tending more towards one end of this dichotomy or the other. *Control-oriented youth work* aims to integrate youths into the given social system. This means helping the young to take on approved social roles based on the existing formal and informal norms. Otherwise, *emancipation-oriented youth work* aims to help young people in realizing their full potential, even if some change in the given social norms and rules is required. *Control-oriented youth work* considers young people as an issue of social integration. Thus, youth work services attempt to compensate for mainly individual deficits that impede this integration such as a lack of capabilities, information, personal responsibility and income. *Control-oriented youth work* consequently reacts to the immediate needs of the young in order to either face or to avoid personal hardship and social deviance. Differently, *emancipation-oriented youth workers* tend to consider young people as a resource and place primary focus on those already existing youth capabilities. This leads to the resources of youth workers as being less important than those already owned by the young in the form of ideas, projects, dispositions, potential and actual skills, social support, informal and formal networks and so on.

Youth work traditions and social equality

The work of Smith (1998) helps to focus on these forms of youth work among the different "patterns of thinking and practice" that have historically taken hold in continental Europe as well as in the Anglo-Saxon context (Figure 1).

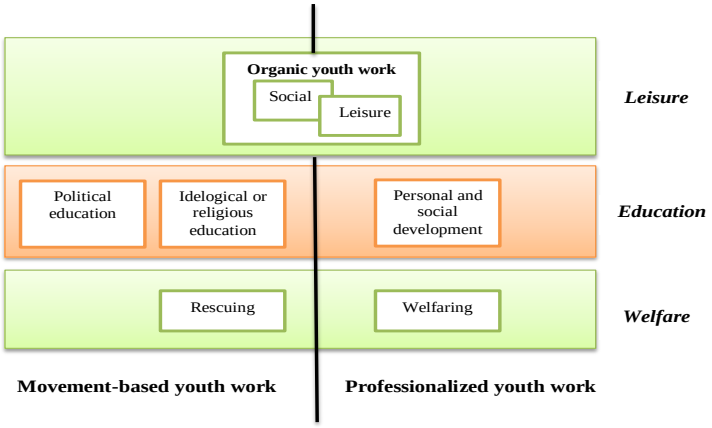
The macro-sectors of intervention (fun, education and social welfare) are shown in Figure 1, within which may be located six traditions in youth work. These are, in turn, classified according to their orientation towards specific ideologies (political, religious) or towards professional skills and roles. This difference relates, in particular, to the presence or absence of an explicit desire to educate the young according to a specific belief, the acceptance of which is a condition to accessing educational opportunities.

The *control-oriented* educational traditions seems to correspond to those developed over a longer period of time and are fed by social movements with an ideological basis whose purpose is to train the young as followers of religious institutions or as activists of party-political organizations. Conversely, *emancipation-oriented* youth work would appear to be inspired more greatly by the tradition aimed at the personal and social development of the young, located alongside Smith within the more professional section of the pedagogical or psychological matrix. While within traditions rooted in a specific ideology the underlying intent is that of integration within the social order achieved through a process of political or religious indoctrination, in the professional sphere emphasis is placed on the development of personal potential, whether this leads towards questioning the status quo (e.g. the claiming of rights or contesting the social ideology of the ruling classes) or tends towards leading the young to seek a compromise between, on the one hand, their aspirations, and (limited) opportunities available in the social system on the other.

With further reference to the professional section of figure 1, Smith (1998) also includes the specific educational tradition developed within public welfare systems. Mirroring this within the ideological section of the matrix is the educational tradition of assistance and social protection overseen by the Third Sector. In both cases, such traditions of youth work operate within the field of health issues (e.g. alcohol abuse, drug addiction) or with groups of young people exposed to conditions of social exclusion,

violence or poverty. Such practices in youth work can be classified as *control-oriented* or *emancipation-oriented* depending on the underlying intention to deal with youth issues as threats to the social order (*control*) rather than as personal limitations to achieving their potential (*emancipation*). Smith (1998) also identifies a growing third *emancipation-oriented* tradition in youth work in the sphere of leisure, responding to the aim of *personal self-actualization*. The author defines such tradition as "*organic youth work*" as a result of the initiative and efforts of social actors who do not clearly align themselves either to specific religious affiliations or work exclusively on the basis of specific professional knowledge. Their inclusion in Figure 1, however, indicates that this tradition in youth work has developed also thanks to the contribution of professionals (both public and private) and ideology-oriented organizations.

Figure 1. A modelling of youth work practices



Source: *Smith, 1998, p. 57*.

The particular characteristic of such a tradition is, however, its promotion and fostering predominantly by informal groups of citizens. Even when such groups present themselves with a formal role (for instance, through the creation of an association), the educational processes they nurture remain largely anchored to the values of reciprocity, mutual support and trust.

Smith (1988) identifies two specific orientations within this more spontaneous, popular and tendentially non-ideological form of youth work: the first more directed towards creating recreational spaces of social gathering (shown in Figure 1 as "social"), the other aimed at providing more structured learning opportunities within an amateur framework.

The first form tends towards the creation of informal environments in which to cultivate social relationships and spend time. Such experience assumes a role more closely aligned to informal learning (European Commission, 2011) inasmuch as they are essentially *embedded* in everyday life. They play a central role in the dimension of enjoyment, the perception of positive social energy (named as "buzz" by Smith, 1988, p. 52) and an environment in which new and interesting events may occur ("atmosphere and sense of occasion and of things happening", Smith, 1998, p. 52). In such forms of youth work, the adult is primarily a sympathetic figure, able to empathize and listen without judging.

The second form of popular youth work identified by Smith (1988) is one in which more highly structured learning activities are located alongside the convivial and playful dimension. Specifically, it also includes opportunities to learn, share and practice hobbies in the arts or sports. In this case, the adult tends to take on the role of transmitting knowledge and the facilitation of learning, while providing a means to engage the interests and aspirations directly expressed by the young.

How youth work generate social equality: an inter-disciplinary framework

Sociological mechanisms: liaising between youth life worlds and institutions

The capacity of youth work to position itself *in the middle* of the relationship between the life worlds of young people and the system of norms governed by adults is one of its identity traits as highlighted in the European debate on youth work (Verschelden et al., 2009; Coussée et. al, 2009; Coussée, Williamson & Verschelden, 2009). Routes of sociological research may be developed from such a characteristic role played by youth work located in the area of tension between young people as actors pressing

for social change and institutions that tend to preserve the given social order (Ceri, 1996; Merico, 2004; Skott-Myhre, 2005; Barber, 2007; Morciano et al., 2013).

The European Commission and the Council of Europe have, since the early 1990s, promoted a "strong" concept of participation (Gallino, 1988) implying the possibility for the young to influence those policy decisions that affect them. From the impulse provided by the Council of Europe in 1992 with its *European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life* (Council of Europe, 2003), the European Commission has viewed the participation of the young in social and political life as a breeding[4]. This interest arises particularly in the context of two observations: firstly, the weakening of traditional forms of youth participation based on the electoral vote or party membership, and secondly, the emergence of new forms of involvement by young people in issues of public interest (Siurala, 2004; European Commission, 2009b)[5].

Such a concept of participation is primarily unconstrained by traditional party or trade union affiliations. Alternatively, priority lies with the creation of new forms of "participatory democracy" (Allegretti, 2010; Bobbio, 2002) with the intertwining of the relational and political levels (Altieri, 2009). On the relational level, a greater role is bestowed on such forms of democracy in informal networks (friendships, neighbours, virtual networks, etc.), associations, youth movements and other stakeholders (both private and public) who, in various ways, provide non-formal education services aimed at young targets. On a political level, the European Commission insists on the principle of "structured dialogue" between civil society and public institutions (European Commission, 2007).

The notion of participation as adopted by European institutions would therefore appear to observe with interest the processes of participatory action aimed at "transforming the vertical relationships and decisions imperative in horizontal relationships and consensual decisions" (Ceri, 1991, p. 511). The needs addressed by such participation are not only those

[4] For a detailed reconstruction of the EU policy framework about youth participation, see the dossier prepared by the European Knowledge Centre for Youth Policy, online available on http://youth-partnership-eu.coe.int/youth-partnership/ekcyp/BGKNGE/Participation.html (accessed 10 Apr 2013).

[5] See also the Report on Youth of the EU, 2009, SEC (2009) 549 final.

raised by group membership but issues of common interest generating engagement in a voluntary manner. From the perspective of public institutions openness to this type of participation implies a willingness to consider youth as a social force viewed as able to change the means and/or objectives of those public policies that affect them. According to the "transitive" paradigm as proposed by Lazzari and Merler (2003), *technical-decisional participation* may therefore be seen as seeking to change the means, *reformist participation* as pushing towards the formulation of new objectives, and *revolutionary participation* when tending towards challenging both the means and the ends of political action on the basis of an alternative overall vision of society.

The starting point to recognize the power and the responsibility of young people to affect decisions on public policies requires moving beyond adult-centric theoretical models like those inspired by *Positive Youth Development* (Lerner et al., 2009). The *5Cs models*, for example, appears to entrust education with the task of developing a range of skills among young people as a necessary condition for inclusion in the social order established and ruled by adults (*Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, Caring*). This model would appear, on closer inspection, to be inspired by a functionalist and adult-centric view of relationships between education and society (Besozzi, 2006). It was noted, in this regard, that the practices guided by the *Positive Youth Development* paradigm are not particularly attentive to the structural factors affecting the unequal distribution of opportunities for the young (Coussée, 2008, p. 114).

In contrast, the theory of reflexivity (Archer, 2006) applied to educational processes (Morciano, 2012a) may help to pay closer attention to the possibility that young people affect the structural conditions that constrain their growth trajectories at a young age (Colombo, 2011). Similarly, life course research stress the individual's ability to influence the trajectory of an individual's own life (Hitlin & Elder, 2007), basing on the assumption that an individual is able to reflect on their own subjective abilities and their own life context. One can, for this reason, act deliberately in order to exploit the opportunities of one's own context as well as taking into account its limitations (Elder & Johnson, 2002). From this viewpoint, Donati and Archer (2010) have defined *agentic power* as the "generative process" in which the reflective thought of multiple individuals may

succeed in modifying the existing social structures and replacing them with the new.

In order to move beyond adult-centric theoretical models, evaluation research on youth work should pay more attention to the concept of youth as a specific stage in the development process, experienced from early to late adolescence. This phase has various individual and social features (languages, art forms, lifestyles, values, desires, needs, etc.) that often conflict with the demands and constraints imposed by institutions (educational, political, economic, etc.). In the context of this space of tension, youth work is called upon to *take youth seriously* as a social force capable of generating change. This requires an educational approach aimed at supporting young people in experiencing youth as a specific life stage ("young people's experience as young people", Young, 2006, p. 58) and in sharing it with their peers ("being young together", Verschelden et al., 2009, p. 138). This aim draws attention to the development of the young as *people*, already in possession of the skills, dispositions and attitudes that the educational relationship can help to develop, from a perspective rooted in the paradigm of humanistic psychology. In addition, drawing on a perspective aligned to the emancipatory paradigm of social pedagogy (Lizzola, Noris, & Tarchini, 2000; Lorenz, 2008; Smith, 2009; Cameron & Moss, 2011), this requires recognizing the right and the possibility for young people to act as a social force able to critically scrutinize the modes of operation of the social system, identify mechanisms of social inequality and assert their right to influence public decisions that affect them (Verschelden et al., 2009; Coussée et. al, 2009; Coussée, Williamson, & Verschelden, 2009).

From this vision of the world of the young[6], evaluating youth work means focusing on its ability to create spaces and opportunities in which

[6] One of the main difficulties in wholly adopting this vision of the young consists in resisting the social and institutional pressures of dealing with situations of weaknesses, vulnerability or social dangers for groups of young people at risk, especially during moments of social crisis, economic hardship or political instability (IARD, 2001, p. 82). Such pressures towards a reactive crisis-based approach tends, in fact, to confuse youth work with other areas of appropriately specialized support policy, leading towards either transitional tasks (employment policies, formal education) or towards issues of hardship or social deviance (social and healthcare policies).

young people can acquire a critical understanding of the relationship between different living conditions (present and future) and the functioning of the existing social and economic system in order that they are able to express any disagreement in a constructive manner (Coussée, 2008). At the same time, *youth work* is required to stem the possible individualistic tendencies that may endanger the preservation of social order and lead to forms of protest justifying the use of violence. Indeed, as highlighted in a seminar on the history of youth work held in Belgium in 2008, "a lifeworld perspective fosters authenticity and identity development and takes youth seriously as a force in society, but lifeworld without system can foster gang subcultures and also contains discrimination, nationalism, colonialism and racism. A system perspective is more outcome-focused and can easily lead to authoritarianism, ideological exploitation and closing down any possibilities for critical examination of living conditions. Lifeworld and system are intertwined: either without the other is unliveable" (Verschelden et al., 2009, p. 141).

The inability to establish a position in this field of tension between the young as an active social force and the necessity to preserve the social system is likely to generate discrimination and social inequality (Verschelden et al., 2009, pp. 143-145). Youth work organizations devoid of channels of dialogue and cooperation with public institutions are, on the one hand, likely to focus exclusively on the interests of its membership base, assuming a position either excessively selective or elective. This outlook helps to create an *apolitical* conception of youth work due to the reluctance to act as an agent of social change and the tendency to defend the interests of youth groups united by a common ideological matrix (religious, political or cultural). On the other hand, should youth work operate primarily as a technical tool for public institutions, it risks moving towards a different reading of youth according to the specific needs or problems to be addressed. In this way, dividing lines are liable to be created between social groups of young people "at risk" and the rest of the youth population. The result is an *ahistorical vision* that prevents youth work from acting as a driving force for social change and from playing a critical role in the existing social order.

In order to avoid the opposing risks of either an apolitical or ahistorical concept of youth work there is, therefore, the need to develop forms of

youth work able to mediate between the regulatory pressures of the social system and the claims of autonomy and participation of youth. As highlighted at the aforementioned seminar on the history of youth work in Europe, it is essential to "keep boundaries open and create space to interrogate and jointly construct society" as an alternative to the tendency of "protesting against or even abandoning society" or acting in order to achieve "integration in a predefined society" (Verschelden et al., 2009, p. 141).

In a certain sense, the historical and political significance of youth work is linked with the idea of a "creative" interaction between the world of the young and the adult. The adjective "creative" refers, in particular, to the potential to create new opportunities for growth and self-realization and, at the same time, new solutions for the gradual evolution of the social system towards models of greater social equality. As stated by Skott-Myhre (2005), "it is what youth and youth workers do together that produces a social effect and creates a certain force. This force (…) has direct use in shaping the life and lived conditions of the people who produced it" (Skott-Myhre, 2005, p. 146)

On a more operational level, the symbiosis between leisure experiences and learning opportunities can be considered as a distinctive ways in which youth work attempts to play a mediating role between individual instances of change and institutional pressure to maintain the status quo. The possibility of locating places and ways of having fun, relaxing or simply not getting bored during free time (Davies, 2005) is combined with opportunities for getting involved in activities that facilitate the sense of being "young people" through, for example, the exploration of identity, reflection and consideration of values, the exercise of critical thinking and reflection on ethical issues (Young, 2006) and the possibility of experiencing direct responsibility and self-government (Verschelden et al., 2009). At the same time, equally important are those activities useful for cultivating awareness in young people of their role in the broader social context, with particular encouragement towards activities involving membership and opportunities to influence policy choices that affect their lives or the society in which they are to assume an adult role in the future (Merton, 2004).

Psychological mechanisms: creating transitional spaces of youth development

The challenge of operating within the area of tension between instances of individual emancipation and socio-institutional regulatory dynamics focuses attention on a number of psychological experiences peculiar to the stage of late adolescence. In particular, it refers to that specific task of development that, according to the theory of the transitional object of Winnicott, can be described as a complex transition from a subjective sense of omnipotence to the sense of shared reality (Winnicott, 2006). Such a perspective can help evaluative research to investigate the psychological mechanisms of change set in motion by a youth work straining to contain the negative impact of structural factors of social inequality.

Psychological studies of adolescence highlight the adolescent tendency to absolutize their experience and focus attention in a narcissistic manner on the self (Piaget, 1967). Becoming an adult thus is a form of "decentralization" in the sense that Piaget uses this term to refer to the process by which an individual learns to relativize one's point of view in relation to a broader social context. The ability to successfully deal with this delicate transition of growth depends primarily on the opportunity of not perceiving the authority of "adults" (educational agencies, political institutions, regulatory requirements, etc.) as a necessarily restrictive force compared to their inner world. The experience of adolescence is, in fact, characterized by a strong need for self-reflection, discovery and self-knowledge (Petrelli, 2000, p. 91) that the adult authority can accompany and facilitate, but may also force through inquiring attitudes and sanctions (Petrelli, 2000, p. 82). Furthermore, above all in studies on late adolescence and the transition from the formative phase of growth towards placement in the world of work, the loss of one's authenticity is perceived as one of the principal threats of the "adult world". This signifies, for the young, being exposed to the complete abandon of their dreams, losing their ability to live out emotions and the vital force of ideals (Petrelli, 2000, p. 105). This represents the fear of being induced to construct what Winnicott describes as the "false self", a form of acritical appeasement of a system of obligations, without energy and vital force (Winnicott, 2006).

Offering to young people, therefore, times and places in which to address such fears is seen as one of the fundamental tasks of youth work,

provided that there exists the will to act as an agent of "mediation" and accommodation between the demands of autonomy and authenticity of the young and the pressures towards social integration originating from institutions. This requires the provision of a form of "transitional space" of experience that, like the transitional object theorized by Winnicott, is presented to the young as a "third" space between their subjective world and the real world. It represents a form of "neutral space" where the young, able to exercise their creativity to explore and represent their inner world, can draw on their creative armoury as a symbolic *medium* for reflecting upon oneself as well as beginning to experience a form of relationship with the adult world that is free from the sense of "omnipotence" towards their inner world or, at the other extreme, the sense of "helplessness" towards a social system that imposes compliance and a refusal of the authentic self. Indeed, creativity can be seen as a form of encounter with reality, an experience through which an individual learns to judge oneself in terms of the limits of the real world and that of your inner world. Therefore, such a process allows for the expression of oneself in adult society and, at the same time, allows for the maintaining of contact with one's own true self (Winnicott, 2006). A similar function has also been observed in the experience of relationships with peer groups and their role in supporting the adolescent to develop symbolic thinking and to relate creatively and constructively to external reality (Lanfranchi, 2011).

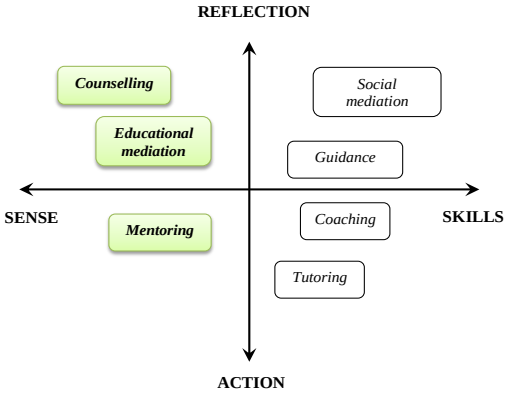
Pedagogical mechanisms: educating through relations of accompaniment

The relational and interactive dynamic between the young and youth worker is considered a focal point of the process of implementing a youth work service or project (Young, 2006). In this area, an educational role based on *accompaniment* (Biasin, 2010; Cameron & Moss, 2011) appears to represent a complementary route of educational research to those of the sociological and psychological spheres described in the two preceding paragraphs. Biasin (2010) defines *accompaniment* as an attitude of educator "to go alongside" the young and to create the necessary conditions for the facilitation of self-knowledge, the expression of thought, imaginative and creative abilities, the formulation of proposals, the ability to make choices and to take responsibility for putting them into practice. Such an educational role aims, therefore, to "enact the conditions whereby the

subject can be facilitated (...) in deciding about themselves and their professional, social or relational life (...) supported by an indirect and psychological *scaffolding* approach" (Biasin, 2010, p. 111). In such a "supportive relationship" (Cameron & Moss, 2011, p. 121) the adult does not use their position of authority in order to induce an expected change in the young but tends, rather, to create a peer relationship in which "dialogue, listening, empathy, and respect (...) create the conditions to make the two partners co-authors of the pathway, each moving according to their own outlook and creating their own perspective on the world" (Biasin, p. 116). The youth worker thus appears as a brotherly and friendly figure (Young, 2006) and the relationship with the young is "explicitly personal *and* professional, informed by the concept of a *professional hart*" (Cameron & Moss, 2011, p. 121).

Adopting the classification of *accompaniment* practices as proposed by Paul (2004) (Figure 2), those most consistent with the specific purposes and objectives of youth work tend to facilitate reflection, introspection and dialogue (*reflection*) rather than accompany the "implementation of activities and the on-going process of carrying out a task (*action*). At the same time, focus seems to move more towards the co-construction of meanings (*sense*), rather than the technical ability to produce results (*action*).

Figure 2. Classification of accompaniment practices



Source: Paul, 2004, p. 73.

However, the risk of an *accompaniment*-oriented educational relationship is that of completely annulling the asymmetry of roles between educator and the young, potentially producing a state of fusion that does not stimulate the desire and commitment to undertake educational change. As observed for the informal socialization processes, the risk is that of losing the comparison with others as "ideals to be realized (...), a model that frequently justifies the commitment and effort to grow" (Besozzi, 2006, p. 293). For this reason, the non-formal educator is required to be "like a friend", due to the creation of a mutual respect, freedom to choose whether to enter into a relationship or not and the suspension of judgment, yet "not a friend" as they are charged with a social and institutional mandate, has more experience and knowledge and is called upon to be a role model (Young, 2006, p. 72).

Nevertheless, the challenge of operating in the area of tension between the "asymmetry of roles" on the one hand and "equality in power relations" on the other requires a skill set on the part of the "*accompanying* educator that is difficult to standardize. Similarly, in such an educational relationship there exists a tension between the desire (and often the mandate) to help the other and that of setting them free (Biasin, 2010, p. 125). Consequently, the non-formal educator is operationally located between pressures deriving from institutions towards professional growth (European Commission & Council of Europe, 2004, 2011) and the need to remain tied to a system of ethical and vocational values typical of *accompanying* educational figures (Biasin, 2010, p. 96). Such contradictions render youth work educational practice undoubtedly complex. However, avoiding the challenge of dealing with such complexity in practice means youth workers exposed to the risk of being exploited as "professional" or, at the other extreme, withdrawing into a world of values, ethics or ideology characterized by self-reference.

Conclusion

The theoretical framework developed in this paper can be a valid tool for better understanding of how youth work can develop in order to gain greater recognition as agent of social equality from political, social and

economic systems (European Commission & Council of Europe, 2004, 2011). In particular, an inter-disciplinary model of youth work has been developed by drawing from theoretical frameworks of sociological, psychological and pedagogical research.

The sociological perspective has been guided by the conception of a dialogical interaction among structural constraints and intentional acts (by individuals, groups, social networks, etc.) (Besozzi, 2006). This perspective helped to clarify the role of youth work as an agent of mediation between the instances arising from both the life worlds of youth (individual aspirations, group projects, cultural movements, etc.) and the pressures of the system of norms or expectations (codified or tacit) of the existing social context (family, community, educational institutions, public governing authorities etc.). Youth work should, in particular, attempt to grasp the creative and constructive component of this tension (Skott-Myhre, 2005) in order to generate new opportunities for the personal fulfilment for the young and to channel their skills in social contexts as drivers of cultural, economic, social and political-institutional innovation (Chell & Athayde, 2009). On the basis of this model, youth centres operate therefore both as incubators of youth skills and as vehicles for their potential for social change. This perspective has led the present work to conceiving of youth work as an agent of social equality, basing its work on the interaction between youth and adult youth workers. Youth centres can, therefore, be designed and developed as places in which young people and adults together seek to identify the mechanisms of social inequality in their life contexts (Coussée, 2008), and to build networks of participatory action that aim to contain or inhibit them.

Developmental psychology can help to understand the intra-psychic and micro-relational processes set in motion when the youth worker attempts to play a role of social mediator between youth lifework and the institutional system, containing the risk of a permanent polarization of conflict or, at the other extreme, of an acritical adherence of the young to the expectations and requirements of institutions and adults. The youth centre can, from this perspective, become a "transitional or potential space" (Winnicott, 2006) that helps the young to mature internal predispositions and skills useful for taking on a social role without feeling obliged to surrender their desire for authenticity and personal fulfilment.

Finally, the pedagogical perspective can help to build effective educational methods with respect to the objectives proposed by sociological and psychological research. This research has, in particular, focused on the educational methods rooted in the principles of *accompaniment* (Biasin, 2010; Cameron & Moss, 2011), as well as those progressed by the tradition of social pedagogy (Lizzola, Noris, & Tarchini, 2000; Lorenz, 2008). Such methods have also been located in the youth work practices of public centres in England (Smith, 1988) as well as in the debate on youth work in Europe (Verschelden et al., 2009; Coussée et. al, 2009; Coussée, Williamson, & Verschelden, 2009). The effectiveness of such methods lies in the offering of educational resources belonging to the adult world on which young people feel they can rely in order to build their own autonomy, express their individuality and exercise their potential. In this light, the youth worker differs from other educators bound by specific institutional mandates (e.g. the completion of compulsory education, refraining from deviant or unhealthy conduct, developing skill sets in the present for immediate entry into the labour market). In addition, such youth work differs from other forms of relationships that tend towards the complete annulment of the asymmetry between the roles of young people and adults (Besozzi, 2006) with the latter unable to provide early stimulation or appropriate role models (for example, youth centres which tend to provide more elusive spaces, or a place of ideological expansion yet closed to institutional dialogue). Conversely, the youth worker should be supported as a third and neutral agent of mediation between young people and others institutional actors called upon to engage (schools, social services, employment services, the judicial system, etc.), in order to build models of joint negotiated dialogue. Thus conceived, the youth worker can also contribute in terms of locating forms of complementarity between the different roles played by formal, informal and non-formal educational agencies operating in the area (Scardigno, 2009).

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educational sociology – The pedagogical perspective – Youth work traditions and social equality – How youth work generate social equality: an inter-disciplinary framework – Sociological mechanisms: liaising between youth life worlds and institutions – Psychological mechanisms: creating transitional spaces of youth development – Pedagogical mechanisms: educating through relations of accompaniment are the work of Daniele Morciano, paragraphs *Introduction* and *Conclusion* are by Fausta Scardigno.

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