Transformative Evaluation in Youth Work and Its Emancipatory Role in Southern Italy

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Abstract: This article draws on the experiences of a group of Italian youth workers who used Transformative Evaluation (TE) to evaluate their practice as part of a wider European research project funded by Erasmus+. The youth workers generated 151 stories of change with young people in their projects. These stories were collectively analysed and through this process the youth workers developed a greater understanding of the impact of their work and of some of the causal mechanisms that enable change to happen. Transformative Evaluation, with its sensitivity to the complexity and the critical potential of 'lived experience', is able to illuminate outcomes and process. The empowering and emancipatory potential of transformative evaluation is seen in the way in which it fosters youth workers' and young people's self-reflection.

Keywords: transformative evaluation, causal mechanisms, participatory evaluation, non-formal education

1. Transformative Evaluation

The Transformative Evaluation (TE) methodology, developed in 2011, sought to offer an alternative approach to evaluating youth work to address the lack of 'evidence' available to demonstrate its value in an environment of reducing public resources. The aim was to design a participatory methodology that could generate evidence of impact *and* redistribute the power inherent in the evaluation process in such a way that practitioners could re-engage with what is an essential aspect of their professional practice. In Transformative Evaluation, youth workers have a central and active role, they are positioned as the 'evaluators', not simply as data collectors. Additionally, the design was shaped to maximise the 'process use' of evaluation (Patton, 2008) with the aim that the 'doing' of evaluation would bring about improvements in youth work practice and outcomes. TE synthesises aspects of the transformative paradigm and transformative learning, appreciative inquiry, most significant change technique and practitioner evaluation (see Cooper 2018 for detailed account of methodology).

Transformative Evaluation is not a 'one-off' activity, it is a cyclical process, and is designed to be shaped by those who use it as they learn from its use. Essentially it involves the generation of a number of young people's Significant Change stories during a given time period and the systematic collective analysis of those stories. Transformative Evaluation follows a four-stage process:

1. Story generation - this involves youth workers generating significant change stories with young people. A Significant Change story is the response to the open question: *Looking back, what do you think was the most significant change that occurred for you as a result of coming here?* The young person is encouraged to explain why the change was significant to them. This promotes reflective dialogue between the young person and the youth worker.

2. Youth Workers Analysis and selection - the youth workers collectively analyse the young people's stories, using content analysis to group stories. The youth workers add their professional commentary to the stories they generated with young people and select one story from each group to forward to stage 3. Their reason for selection is added to each story.

3. Stakeholder Group selection and feedback -The Stakeholders Group receive the selected stories from the youth workers group. They discuss, review and select the one that they feel represents the most significant change for that cycle. The cycle is completed by the return of this story to the youth workers' group together with their collective reason for selecting particular story.

4. Meta-evaluation - At the end of each cycle the youth workers and the members of the Stakeholders Group review their experience of using the evaluation methodology with the purpose of developing skills and understanding to inform the next cycle.

The notion of 'generating' rather than 'collecting' stories is used to make the 'evaluator involvement' in the process transparent. Ethical issues were discussed during the training and the research group was facilitated to draw up a set of ethical guidelines as a means of raising awareness, highlighting the risks and developing strategies to minimize these.

'Youth work' has no universally agreed definition. It has been informed by distinct national traditions and practices, and consequently variation exists. Taking a global perspective, Belton (2014) tried to capture the worldwide common features of youth work by defining it as a practice "working with and alongside young people" to foster the values of "equity, human rights and good governance" and specifically to address "young people's welfare and rights in a responsive manner, by providing an interface between young people and decision-making process at all levels" (Belton, 2014, p. 3). In a broader sense, the term youth work refers to a polyvalent educational, social or cultural practice involving young people in different settings, for example in clubs, street-based settings, within social/welfare services, schools, children's homes and young offenders' institutions. The importance of stable, respectful and meaningful relationships between young people and youth workers is paramount as is the dialogical pedagogy. Youth work is framed as a holistic and empowering approach that supports young people's participation in their local community and the wider society.

The foundations of Transformative Evaluation are clearly congruent with the ethos and values of youth work and as a result it enables practitioners to experience 'doing' evaluation as part of the 'daily' work. TE moves beyond the 'does it work?' approach towards combining outcomes and process evaluation. It draws on the lived experience of participants and practitioners rather than superimposing an abstract, ideal model, which merely tests for standardisation and conformity (Shaw, 2011). TE produces co-constructed story of change in which the authors (young people and youth workers) describes a change and the way in which the project under evaluation contributed in enabling that change to come about. In other words, the story provides an account of the process as well as the outcome of interventions. This is significant as being able to explain and evidence a project's complex social interventions in a tangible and accessible form is key to ensuring the work is understood and valued. Stories can be rich and insightful, illuminating lived experience that is generally missed by other forms of knowledge generation.

Since its inception, Transformative Evaluation has been used in a number of youth work organisations in the UK, Europe and Australia. In 2016, the

methodology was used in an Erasmus-funded project to develop and communicate the impact of youth work in Finland, Estonia, France, Italy and England (see Ord et al., 2018). The research entitled 'Developing and Communicating the Impact of Youth Work in Europe' (DCIYWE) involved three youth projects from each country.

A research perspective on youth work oriented by a critical sociology of education (Apple, 2013) is possible if we recognize the complexity of youth work as a relational experience that occurs between young people, youth workers and the socio-institutional context. Conceived as a public sociology (Burawoy, 2005), the effort of critical sociology is to value and support the *agentic power* of youth workers and young people considered as *generative process* in which their reflective thought may succeed in identifying and containing the inequality mechanisms in their contexts (Donati & Archer, 2010). Transformative Evaluation is one evaluation approach that has a greater sensitivity to the complexity and the critical potential of the lived experience occurring in the relation between young people and the youth workers

2. Transformative Evaluation of Youth Work in Italy

The term 'youth work' in Italy is not still explicitly recognised within public or policy discourse. Non formal education ('Educazione non formale giovanile') or Socio-educational animation ('Animazione socioeducativa') are among the more common terms used to refer to youth work in the youth sector and European Union youth policies. During the last two decades, the European Union provided a range of support measures for the development of youth work skills and practices, starting with the Youth Programme (2000-2006) until the current Erasmus Plus in the youth sector. Despite a number of projects supported by these European Union programmes, there is still no specific national public policy or programme with the specific purpose to develop youth work professionals in Italy. This is problematic because as 'no law defining or regulating youth work [exists] and youth work is generally not perceived as a policy priority' (Dunne et al., 2014, p. 216). Even though a number of professions in the sphere of education are recognized by the State in Italy (such as professional educator, socio-cultural educator or community worker) the creation of a professionalised youth work training and certification system still seems a challenge. Experience in the field is often the main strategy for other educational or social professions to specialize in working with young people (Morciano, 2017; Morciano & Salvati, 2018).

Much of the youth work practices in the early Italian state-funded youth centres during the 1990s - such as the 'Centri di Aggregazione Giovanile

(CAG)[1] or the centres for adolescents and young people in the framework of social and health services (Law 328/2000)[2] – were predominantly focused on prevention and control of 'perceived' youth problems. The work focussed mainly on addressing issues of juvenile delinquency, unhealthy life styles, drug or alcohol abuse, youth unemployment and school drop outs. In the context of a legislative vacuum in national youth policy, increased powers were granted to the Regions in the field of youth policy. This stimulated new programmes from 2006 onwards. These had a different vision of young people. Young people were seen as active citizens able to express their own unique potential at a young age, in an attempt to overcome the dominant discourse based on compensating for perceived individual deficiencies that hamper the transition to adulthood.

New youth centres funded by the new regional youth policies aimed to diversify the offer of opportunities for the active use of the spaces, ranging from the ability to cultivate a hobby to the realization of projects aimed at business creation. These centres developed as incubators of new projects based on youth initiative by providing a range of both tangible and intangible resources. The Laboratori Urbani Giovanili in Puglia Region (Morciano, 2015a) and Visioni Urbane in Basilicata Region are examples of these new youth centres. This vision shares common features with the national definitions set out earlier, namely that youth work starts from where young people are. The young person's life experience is respected and forms the basis for shaping the agenda in negotiation with peers and youth workers. Young people and youth workers are active partners in a learning process. Youth work is a strengths-based approach and holds the belief that young people have strengths and resources. It is these unique strengths and capabilities that will determine their evolving story, not their limitations.

Three youth centres developed during this new season of regional and strengths-based youth policies in Italy were involved in a Transformative Evaluation experience in the Puglia region, as part of a Europe-wide programme funded by Erasmus plus[3] and a regional research project funded by the Region[4]. On details, the following three youth centres in the region participated in the study from September 2016 to September 2017:

> Organization A was an arts-based youth centre where cinema is adopted as an educational medium. The youth centre is located in a sub-

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[1] Funded by Law 285/1997 (*Provisions for the promotion of rights and opportunities for childhood and adolescence*).
[2] *Framework law for the realization of the integrated system of interventions and social services.*
[3] Erasmus Plus Key Action 2 funded Project - Code 2015-3-UK01-KA205-022861 -
[4] Research project "Non-formal education as a tool of youth employability through youth-led innovation" (2016–2018), funded by the Puglia Region (Italy), "Future in Research" program.

urb on the outskirts of the city and has a high rate of crime. The centre runs courses in film production and has a drop-in area. A range of professionals are associated with the centre including film experts, social educators and a psychologist.

Organization B had a community-based approach. Initially this focused on art and cultural projects (such as live music and dance shows), more recently their focus has been on enterprise involving product design and the use of 3D printers, as well as fashion and photography.

Organization C operated as an incubator of new youth-led and community-based projects, for example a nursery, a café, an association of photographers, a school of music. This organization provides a platform to develop and initiate self-directed projects from social volunteering to creative expression.

Three cycles of Transformative Evaluation were implemented in each of the three organizations and a total of 151 significant change stories were generated. The stories were generated by the youth workers in cooperation with the manager of each youth centre. They were presented to the group of stakeholders who selected the Most Significant Change story for each cycle. Stakeholders included local council members, officers of the youth services and members of associations working in partnership with the centre.

Every effort was taken to ensure that the voice of young people was central in the analysis of the stories. Firstly, a process of coding (also known as content analysis) was applied to bring out common themes within the stories. The research group were aware that this is a subjective process and that their own perspectives may have influenced this process. To minimize any bias, the authors endeavored to be reflexive in the identification of codes. Specifically, each story was read by at least two members of the group in order to generate substantial themes from different perspectives. Each member of the group sought to prioritize the specific experience and voice coming from the words of young people when reading the stories, rather than focusing on themes relating to changes that he or she expected to find.

During the reading of the stories, each member created a long list of key themes by adopting a language that was as close as possible to the experience of change as told by the young people. A specific effort to avoid codes derived from academic or professional theories related to youth work was made at this stage. A quotation from the stories was associated with each theme, for example, the theme "Increased ability to deal with change" was associated with the quote "*This was one of the first lesson that (the youth centre) gave me: all changes and all can change at any momen*t". A further example is the theme "*Had the chance to overcome my shyness and mistrust*"

was drawn from the following quote "*I've been able to break some of my limits mainly regarding my shyness and what made me a person close to others*".

The majority of stories came from young people over the age of 19 (132 stories on a total of 151). The largest group was young adults aged between 25 and 35 years old, which accounts for about half of the total (84 stories). Young men's stories (n=84) outnumbered the stories coming from young women (n=67).

One example of *Most Significant Change Story* is the following story of a young adult male:

> I'm 32-year-old. I grew up in the old part of Bari city, where I was the usual bad boy of the street (those who was used to throw eggs at people, to be clear). I started my adventure in the (youth centre) by chance. I was in a party with a friend who told me about this centre. I've never completed school. I wasn't keen to attend places of culture or other boring similar things. But I really liked cinema and films, something that I understood so clearly and strongly, even without knowing the biography of actors and directors. The (youth centre) has been a chance to get to know the world of cinema and the many people that work in this sector. But it was a chance also to understand myself better: I'm a different person, regenerated thanks to relations experienced here, a place where associative life is made not by a single person, but thanks to continuous exchange of ideas, feelings, fears, quite simply the life of the project. After the training course in (the youth centre), I started to work as a technician on the film set.

The Stakeholders Group choose this story because it was the most emblematic of a change experience, taking in consideration the disadvantaged context where the young person grew up and his determination to emancipate himself in no small part thanks to his participation to the training activities in the youth centre.

The following story is an example of how the youth centre became an opportunity for a young musician to come back and start to work in his home town:

> While I was in Rome, with a group of musicians, we just started to think about the idea to export our experience. In the meantime, we have been contacted by (name of youth worker). During seminars and concerts the idea of a music school became even more important! Thank to (the youth centre) I came back. In fact, I use to think that probably without the (name of the project in the youth centre) my life would have been really precarious abroad. (The youth centre) has been for me a real chance and what helped me to decide what I want to do and to be.

3. Change outcome for young people

The preliminary analysis of the stories produced 33 key themes related to change outcomes. All the themes were grouped into the following six final codes, starting from the code most frequently occurring in the sample:

- Improvement in job chances (n=57)
- Relating with others and valuing diversity (n=55)
- Sense of belonging to the community (n=48)
- Self-determination (n=48)
- Developing or discovering new skills (n=32)
- Participation in innovation and change (n=30)

Between paid cooperation and enterprise creation

Improvement of job chances occurred mainly in two ways: a period of paid collaboration in some projects of the youth centre and the creation of a new enterprise. Experiences of paid work were more frequent in the youth centre offering a training project about the art of cinema (Organization A). In this case, young people that completed the training project continued informally to cooperate with the centre until they had the opportunity of a paid work in some film production, for example as assistant photo editor, set technician, make-up artist, post-production expert. In some cases, young people worked as teachers on the same training course that they attended in the youth centre. Some stories talked about the creation of a new enterprise inside the youth centre, while other young people became entrepreneurs outside the centre after having cultivated their entrepreneurial skills at the centre.

The first case occurred particularly in Organization C, the youth centre operating as a collective projects incubator. A number of new group enterprises developed and operated in the spaces of this centre in different fields, for example photography, music learning, food service (specifically a restaurant created as a project for the inclusion of disabled people), music education for children, a library, music festivals, and a café.

Whereas in Organization A (the cinema school), the creation of an enterprise occurred after the participation in a training project in the youth centre. A young male, for example, told of how the training and cooperation experience in the youth centre had inspired the creation of a film production company specializing in socially committed film. In this story, the 'social cinema' is described as a form of cinema production that "builds positive social relationship and tells the stories of an urban suburb" (male, 30).

Valuing diversity in a non-judgmental space

For a large group of young people, the participation in the youth work activities included new opportunities to relate with people coming from different cultural or social backgrounds.

Feeling themselves accepted in a "non-judgemental space" seemed an essential condition to tear down the "wall between self and the other". An example of this is a young man recalling that when he was a boy he "used to react to every ordinary question by raising a wall between myself and the other" (male, 22). The ability to feel "free to talk" (female, 21) and for "not being just a silent spectator" (male, 20) seems important. Attending the youth centre, therefore, provided opportunities to put in to practice the skills of expression, communication and dialogue with other people, and to start to be more curious than scared about their "own diversity as well as the diversity of other people" (male, 35).

Belonging to a problematic but vital community

For some young people the youth centre itself became a small community to which they felt they belonged. The youth centre, therefore, became like a "second home", a "great family", a place where they could share passions and interests. Furthermore, being involved in the youth centre has been a chance to discover some positive resources in a difficult or complex local community: "I had the chance to meet good people, good situations, an atmosphere of buzz and novelties" (female, 32). Some young people discovered the vitality hidden under the sense of tragedy of a socially problematic suburb where the youth centre was located. They discovered "a world made of little things, of lively and surprisingly curious children, of women strong like rocks and bringing on their shoulder the weight of difficult families, but without leaving themselves to be overwhelmed by sadness". A youth centre located in a really problematic suburb captured the imagination of the young people that experienced the youth centre as a surprising exception ("nobody never really believed that something good was possible" (female, 24).

A "medium of the soul"

Youth work experience in the youth centres helped a number of young people to increase self-knowledge, until they started to feel themselves creator of the own social experience and capable to actively affect the own life course (Colombo, 2011). The training course on cinema, for example, gave the opportunity to use the art as a medium of self-exploration and self-understanding. Furthermore, art was experienced as a mean to express ideas, insights, emotions, feelings, desires and individual life styles. In the words of the one young person, art became "a medium of the soul" (female, 24). The self-determination outcome includes a number of aspects related with self-fulfilment and personal emancipation, including the capability to cope with changes, decision-making skills, motivation and perseverance. A 22-year-old young woman, for example, said she "had reached a deep self-awareness in term of my authentic desires, for the present and the future".

Discovering or revaluing skills

Learning experiences in the youth centre helped young people to discover or revalue personality traits, aptitudes or capabilities, especially when learning was intertwined with a real work situation. Young people, for example, talked about "having a feel for a task that I've never thought to be able to do before" (female, 22), discovering relational skills that will be useful to find a job (male, 24), realizing the need to be patient, to be able to plan and to coordinate a project. It is precisely the experience of "doing things" that led them to discover or rediscover "abilities that you felt or thought you have". In a sense, "you can see your ability when you put in practice them" (female, 32).

Developing change-making projects

"Feeling themselves as a part of a change" is one of the most frequent expressions in the generated stories, especially when the young people had personally participated in a project that he or she perceived as innovative. For example, a 29-years-old female told about a music education project for children 0-3 years old. This project involved "an age range normally excluded by the music schools" and it was a unique project in the area. The development of new projects that involved the local community contributed to highlighting and valuing some hidden knowledge that was previously limited to leisure time and everyday life, for example a group of housewives practicing embroidery for hobby started a production of innovative textile products together with a young fashion designer. Developing creativity and critical thinking was important for who attended a training course in the field of artistic handicraft; in the words of a young man that meant "developing my own language, my own vision…giving a poetic to every image you give a shape" (male, 26).

Furthermore, the stories provided an insight into young people's perspective in relation to how the artistic and cultural projects operated as stimulus for cultural change, for instance, the promotion of the values of cooperation in competitive contexts. In some stories, young people were aware of the different culture between the youth centre and the school. Participation in the youth centre's projects helped them to understand what it means 'helping each other, listening to who is by your side, [whereas] the school system pushes students to compete for the highest score', going on to argue that 'cooperation helps you to learn more than competition' (female, 22). Another story in which a young man talked of his experience of social prejudice towards his feminine traits provides an example of challenging homophobic prejudice. The open and non-judgmental culture of the youth centre nurtured in him the courage to express his feminine side which he now defines as his alter ego thanks to the artistic performances: 'People in the communi-

ty see me as a guy who, despite the difficult place he lives, has been able to express himself and get accepted by the neighborhood.' (male, 27).

4. What worked to generate changes?

The preliminary analysis of the stories also produced a number of themes related to processes that contributed to generating change outcomes. From the perspective of a theory-based evaluation (Funnel and Rogers 2011), the analysis of the stories allowed the identification of some of the mechanisms and causal links that produced change as perceived by the young people. The following six final codes relating to these mechanisms /casual links emerged from a list of 26 key-themes identified by the working group:

- Relational space open to the community (n=37)
- Holistic & experiential learning (n=28)
- Trust, participation, non-hierarchical relations (n=26)
- A space for the incubation of job-related projects (n=23)
- A space for the incubation of projects for change (n=20)
- Relation with non-formal educators (n=15)

The variety and frequency of social interactions and social events can be considered an essential generative mechanism. A number of stories tell of the specific atmosphere in the youth centre, a feeling that Smith (1998) termed *buzz.* Buzz is a sense of positive social energy as well as a feeling that new and interesting events may occur ("atmosphere and sense of occasion and of things happening", Smith, 1998, p. 52). In the words of young people, *buzz* meant "a place full of people, dense of emotions, fascinating, ready to offer a lot of experience" (male, 20), where "things that are impossible in other places, in the youth centre they happens" (female, 25). It is precisely the socio-relational fluidity and dynamism of the space in the youth centre that increase the probability to generate *chance-event*, where the term *chance* means *causal or unexpected* as well as something that can become a positive opportunity (Shanahan & Porfeli, 2007; Morciano, 2015).

If personal change is possible due to the relational experiences (with youth workers, peers, inhabitants etc.), the collected stories told also about some key factors that turn social relations in to a driver of change. These include *trust*, *gratuitousness* and *not-hierarchical* interaction. These are the principles that contribute to creating an *open* environment in terms of low access threshold (i.e. free-of-charge or low-cost services and non-targeted interventions), low standardisation of roles, and voluntary participation. A 25-years-old young woman, for example, spoke of the dynamic "from sharing to trust to activation" which helped her to cope with the fear of getting involved. This distinctive relational environment of the youth centres seems to nurture a specific kind of learning, namely a *holistic learning* inasmuch as

it is able to link different levels (emotional, cognitive, sense-making, reflection on values, practical experience) together (Cameron & Moss, 2011).

In the stories, this way of learning is described as:

- The opportunity to learn in real work situations ("the only way of learning photography and video was observing other people that were doing things. I was there and able to watch him", male, 24);
- The opportunity to experiment with something new ("start to test, verify if an idea can become an action", male, 31) and to have enough time to cultivate and develop a know-how ("they don't overfill the learning space, but they give you the time you need", male 31);
- Having the possibility to make mistakes and being encouraged to learn from them ("you can learn more from a failure", male 25);
- Being able to do something that stimulates curiosity e ("whoever comes in to the youth centre become a curious person and always finds something of interest to do", female, 24).

The conception, planning and implementation of a project can be considered intrinsically part of these specific learning experiences. On one hand, the start-up of a new project can be the result of a learning experience; on the other hand, the implementation of the project becomes a real work situation basically intertwined with a new learning process. Furthermore, the new projects contributed to enhance the variety, intensity and frequency of social interaction inside the youth centre and with the surrounding community.

5. Discussion of youth work impact and process

The most frequently occurring change outcome relates to improvement in job chances and the development of self-determination capabilities. A group of stories provides evidence about the involvement of young people in projects or processes of social and cultural change in the community. The development of a sense of belonging to the local community is likewise important in a number of stories. The more one feels a sense of belonging to a community, the less he or she desires to migrate elsewhere in order to find a job.

Overall, the outcomes are mostly associated with the transformation of the own *self* in terms of linking personal growth with the development of community. This is particularly relevant if we consider how young people are often labeled as narcissistic by the dominant educational agencies in Italy, while within this Transformative Evaluation project, a number of young people committed to community issues and feeling themselves as part of a positive change in their social contexts (Morciano & Scardigno, 2014; Morciano, 2018).

A group of young people indicated in their stories that they felt a social and cultural change process had taken place thanks to the youth centre. Some young people, for example, took the role of community educator by involving children, young people or adults in projects run by the youth centre. One young man planned and implemented an educational project for children about cinema (male, 24). In the same centre, a group of young male musicians (aged 24, 29 and 34) launched a community music school together.

However, work experiences supported by the youth centre are mainly temporary and sometimes limited to the local context. A stronger cooperation with career counseling service, therefore, would be useful in order to make these experiences a more effective driver of young people's career paths. This seems important especially if we consider the high level of shadow economy in the South of Italy and the high risk of falling into undeclared work.

Overall, the fundamental element of the youth work experience for the centres involved in the research seems to be the ability to generate spaces of social proximity (Bottalico & Scardigno, 2007) through the building of a collective identity and a sense of belonging to the community. Generating spaces of social proximity can also be a driver of open innovation processes promoted by youth work projects that often deal with a cultural distance between citizens and public institutions.

The stories help also to identify a general dynamic operating in all the youth centres, with some mechanisms and causal links that seemed able to generate positive change. Specifically, what can be called *Open Relational Space* mechanism relates to the variety and frequency of social interactions in the youth centre and can be considered one of the key mechanisms, together with cooperation with the surrounding community. This kind of relational environment can nurture learning processes particularly when embedded in real work situations as it can activate different levels of the young person's experience (intellectual, cognitive, emotional, practice). This mechanism can be referred to as the *Holistic Learning* mechanism (Cameron & Moss, 2011). Finally, the conception, planning and implementation of a project (from leisure time to cultural sphere, from volunteering to enterprise creation) are intrinsically part of this continuous learning process in the youth centre. This mechanism of *Project incubation* has a dual nature, on the one hand, a new project is a result of this learning process, on the other its implementation opens a new learning chance for those who join it.

6. What the Youth Workers Group learned from Transformative Evaluation

Feedback from the youth workers that were involved in the Transformative Evaluation project have been collected in a specific work discussion

meeting. Regarding the use of the results arising from the stories, the youth centres developed a stronger awareness of the importance of supporting the work careers of young people. Most of the stories focused on change that occurred in connection with work-related issues. This reflects the urgency of youth unemployment and the difficulties of youth transition from education to employment in Italy. According with Eurostat[5], in 2018 Italy is among those EU countries with the highest rate of young NEET (8,4%, age 15-29, after Bulgaria 8,6% and Malta 9,1%) and with the highest rate of young unemployed (10,2% among the 6 countries with a youth unemployment rate greater than 10%). Furthermore, Italy presents the lowest rate of young graduate 30-34 aged (27,8% together with Turkey and Romania) and a higher average age leaving the parental household (greater than 30-year-old).

Youth centres in Italy, however, are not expected to have a direct effect on youth employment. Indeed, they cannot provide services for the recruitment and placing of workers through the clearance of job vacancies and application. Furthermore, youth centres are not specialized in vocational training. This research project, however, provided evidence about how the youth work experience can help young people to go further in their professional paths. From this perspective, the reflection about the process of youth work helped the youth worker group to better understand how youth centres can be effective in this kind of support. The key mechanisms include the creation of environments that emphasize social relations, that are open to the interaction with the local community, that are based on non-hierarchical relations and strive for a balance between cooperation and the promotion of individuality. Situated or experiential learning is pivotal. Having the opportunity to situate learning within real work situations allows young people to make mistakes and to learn from them. They also develop understanding that trying to achieve results in the shortest time is not a requirement of success but rather a cause of stress. The special and temporal aspects of youth work are important, youth centres, seem able to give more time to learning and to developing skills than schools or other formal education institutions.

Transformative Evaluation is a flexible and adaptable methodology that is designed to be shaped by those who use it as they learn from its use. The Italian research group applied some adaptations to Transformative Evaluation (TE) method in order to take into account of some peculiarities of the youth centres. Firstly, the vision held by the youth centres of young people as 'agents of local development and innovation' shaped the story generation stage (Morciano, 2017; Morciano & Merico, 2017). The youth workers reject a deficit model of young people and thus any form of 'targeted' interventions. Instead the stories generated identified examples of youth involvement in

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[5] Source http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/youth/data/database

projects or processes of change in the local context, for example, stories from young people who felt themselves involved in the management of the youth centre. This can be considered as a *common good* (Helfrich & Bollier, 2015) based on new forms of cooperation between citizens and the public actor. As a *common good*, the youth centres endeavor to promote community participation, a collective sharing of responsibility and a participatory decision-making in regards to the rules for the use and management of the centre (Arena & Iainone, 2012).

An adaptation of TE methodology related to the group composition. Specifically, in one youth centre, instead of an internal youth worker, an external expert with a youth work background collected the stories. This required a stronger mediation activity on the part of the managers in order to facilitate the relation between the external youth worker and the young people. Nevertheless, the possibility to tell their own stories to a neutral external professional encouraged young people to talk also about problems and difficulties relating to the youth workers in the centre. The youth centre had experienced a recent change in the management group and the youth work staff. Some young people, therefore, were dealing with difficulties with this change.

Overall, the research group appreciated TE especially for the variety and richness of knowledge that it helped to generate about the individual and the social experience of young people in the youth centres. This occurred particularly during the analysis stage of the process. The depth of analysis (and learning) is evident in the number of outcome codes (33) and the number of process mechanisms codes (26). On one hand, coding was complex task for the group, on the other it was a chance to discover a surprising variety of outcomes generated by youth work as it was being practiced in their own youth centre. From a methodological perspective, however, during the coding process there were at least two risks. The first of these was a temptation to bypass the methodological complexity and make the choice of the final codes prematurely. The second was the influence of the subjective factors (expectations, values, emotions etc.) on the process. The methodological coordination provided by the social researcher with an expertise in youth work research, therefore, played an important role in order to minimize these potential biases.

The effectiveness of TE as a learning tool for the youth workers along with its adaptability to the peculiarity of the context was appreciated both by the youth centres' staff (managers and youth workers) and by staff of the Regional youth service. Each youth centre expressed interest in further reflection on the collected stories and planned to use them as a means to communicate the impact of their own work. Moreover, the need to equip the youth centres with a self-evaluation tool has been shared with the Regional

youth service. In this case, a specific interest has been expressed about the possible triangulation of TE, as a goal-free evaluation tool, with other forms of evaluation to identify specific change outcomes and processes which could have priority for individual youth centres.

7. Limitation and benefits of TE

It is important to acknowledge that the Transformative Evaluation method, as with any other evaluation method, has its limitations. The validity of the method can be questioned in regards to the process of sampling employed. TE uses a purposive sampling approach; a common approach used in qualitative studies that involves the recruitment and selection of participants specifically because they of their experience of the phenomenon being studied. Selecting young people based on prior knowledge that they have experienced a change as a result of being involved with the organization is purposefully 'bias', not to make the organization look good but in order to learn from those cases of good practice (Patton, 2002).

A further critique of may be raised on the basis of its positive bias. Transformative Evaluation is underpinned by appreciative enquiry and this is made transparent to all participants and in any arising reporting. TE does not seek to identify what is not working, but what is, in order that we develop understanding of the enabling processes. The 'appreciative gaze' counters the effects of performativity and the deficit-based discourse associated with accountability and managerialism. Given this stance it is important that TE is not seen as a 'standalone' approach to evaluation; organizations need to employ a range of methodologies to fully evaluate and account for their work.

Lastly, critics of participatory evaluation in general often raise questions about validity, reliability and generalizability, yet these are clearly located in positivism. Transformative Evaluation is an interpretative evaluation method that examines youth work in its natural settings in an attempt to make sense of the outcomes and processes in terms of the meanings people bring to it. The positivist criteria for quality as set out earlier are therefore inappropriate. The criteria for judging the trustworthiness of TE methodology relate to credibility, transferability and reliability. The stories generated provide an authentic and credible description of the experiences of young people and youth workers. The risk of evaluator influence and bias is made transparent and managed. The collective reflective analysis process, in which peers act as 'devil's advocates', provides a review opportunity. Transferability relates to the degree to which the evaluation findings are applicable or useful to theory, practice and future research. The usefulness of the TE methodology can be seen in its provision of a communication conduit between young people,

youth workers and external stakeholders. TE creates a culture of evaluation built on collaboration and trust between these groups, and engages people in a spirit of co-inquiry as a core part of practice improvement and organisational learning (Cooper, 2014a). Reliability does not mean that the same result would necessarily be found in other contexts but that, given the same data, other evaluators would find similar patterns. The cyclical nature of TE provides the opportunity to assess the reliability of the methodology.

The key benefit of the TE methodology is seen in its promotion of collective reflection amongst youth workers as they interrogate the impact of their work, discuss and debate their interventions and agree collective statements on value and merit. The deep and critical examination of the 'processes' they use to support young people's development surfaces and translates their tacit knowledge into a language accessible to those beyond the discipline (Cooper, 2014b). In doing so it gives voice. The appreciative nature of the methodology creates a feeling of pride in their profession, restores a sense of professionalism and power (McLaughlin, Black-Hawkins & McIntyre, 2004). The transformative aspect promotes social justice aims through the inclusion of marginalised groups, in this case young people and youth workers, in the evaluation process. TE re-frames evaluation as a democratic and participatory practice that is based on the essential features of transformative learning: critical reflection, relationships with other and engagement in dialogue (Taylor, 2007).

8. Conclusion

This article has drawn on the experiences of a group of Italian youth workers who used transformative evaluation to assess the impact of their work. They found that the methodology supported them to create evidence of this impact through the generation of 151 stories of change. The method also enabled them to gain a deeper understanding of some of the mechanisms that enable change (e.g. Open Relational Space, Holistic Learning & Project Incubation). Importantly, the methodology is seen to promote learning, in contrast to many other forms of evaluation that seem only concerned with outcomes.

However the impact of the 2008 global economic crisis on economic and social life has been immense. Large-scale social policy interventions have been sold as helping to mediate the crisis, however it has been argued that this age of austerity is based more on politics than economics (Farnsworth & Irving, 2014). Over the past decade policy has taken a deficit turn, increasingly focussing on 'the problem of youth' whilst cutting support for other forms of youth work interventions (Bradford & Cullin, 2014), undermining the very foundations of the welfare state. Youth services tasked to support

young people into 'adult' citizenship have been the focus of increased political and financial scrutiny during this time. Youth work has been re-shaped to focus on a framework of 'investment' and preventive interventions in young people's lives seriously challenging its ethos and pedagogy.

Neoliberalism favours free-market capitalism and prioritises economy, effectiveness and quality, and has impacted on the way in which youth work organisations are managed. During austere times the call for organisations to demonstrate 'value-for money' seems sensible but the problem lies in the ways in which 'value' is conceived and 'measured' (Cooper, 2012). Youth work organisations have struggled to articulate the value of youth work in a neo-liberal climate that demands particular forms of evidence, mostly quantitative data generated by quasi-experimental evaluation approaches. The outcomes of youth work, however, are not prescribed but emerge from the interactions between young people and youth workers, and indeed between young people themselves in facilitated spaces (Fusco et al., 2013). Therefore, evaluation methods that assume a universal starting point, prescribed intervention and outcomes in order to judge quality of practice and practice outcomes are inadequate. At a time when demonstrating effectiveness (and accountability) is the most pressing concern of every organisation, and the articulation and evidencing of outcomes is synonymous with survival, alternative approaches to evaluating complex social interventions are urgently required (Cooper, 2018). Resistance to accepting other forms of evidence such as that which arises from Transformative Evaluation can be understood in the context of the political nature of evaluation. Evaluation has become an integral part of the control system (Dahlberg et al., 2007). By discounting evidence created via methods that raise the voices of the marginalised (in this case young people and youth workers) the status quo remains unchallenged.

Acknowledgment

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