

Youth-work and young people's agency in a Mediterranean context: an evaluation research in the South of Italy

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Abstract: This study aimed at evaluating informal and non-formal learning in youth centres located in the South of Italy and funded by a regional policy called "Bollenti Spiriti". Particularly, the evaluation purpose was to provide empirical evidence about how non-formal learning affect young people's agency. The research involved all the young people attending all the non-formal education courses occurred in the youth centres between January and May 2011 (159 young people in 23 training courses of 10 youth centres). A single group design has been adopted and a self-administered paper questionnaire has been administered at the beginning of the training programmes, at the end and 6 months later. For the case studies included in this research, participation in non-formal and informal education seems associated with an agency improvement in half of the young participants. The research results also suggest that young people's agency is associated with an autonomy supportive learning.

Keywords: youth-work, agency, informal education, cultural capital, autonomy support

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Introduction

The Barcelona process has promoted in 1995 a space of cooperation among the European Commission (EC) and the Mediterranean countries also in the field of youth policy. Euro-Med Youth Program has been set up in the Barcelona Declaration under the priority to create “partnership in social, cultural and human affairs”². The Council of Europe (CoE) has promoted a closer cooperation in the youth field three years later by setting up a formal partnership (EU-CoE youth partnership)³. On the whole, this root of cooperation has three main directions: building a common framework about objectives and strategies at cross-national level; knowing the youth policies developed in different countries at national and local level; enhancing mutual learning from different youth-work practices. The quality of youth-work has become an important issue within this framework of Euro-Mediterranean cooperation (European Youth Centre Strasbourg, 2010; Göksel, 2010). In this regard, evaluation research could provide empirical evidence about the quality of youth-work practices in different contexts as well as about how to improve its impact on the youth development.

Evaluating youth-work is a challenging research purpose because of the sheer variety of methods, objectives and expectations that can be observed in its practice. Nevertheless, the need to evaluate the specific contribution of youth-work in the youth-development field has grown over the last two decades (Verschelden, *et al.*, 2009; Davies, 2005; Smith, 1999). According to Williamson (1995) ‘If anything goes it is hard to identify the defining features of youth-work’.

Informal and non-formal learning is one of the main activities in the youth-work practices. For this reason, youth work can be evaluated also from the perspectives of its distinctive learning and educational process. Specifically, informal learning can be defined as a holistic experience because it simultaneously engages an individual's intellect, emotions and values during practical activities (Beckett & Hager, 2002). Furthermore, informal learning is mainly freely-chosen (Falk, 2005). Similar to informal learning, non-formal learning occurs outside the formal educational system, but its objectives and activities are more structured. Learners participate in

² See the program web site www.euromedyouth.net

³ For further information about the youth policy partnership Council of Europe-European Commission see the official web site www.youth-partnership-eu.coe.int

the decision-making process of non-formal learning, but they 'seek help on *how* or means of the learning activity' (Mocher & Spear, 2002, p. 6). Therefore, young people have more opportunity to interact with adults while they attend a non-formal educational programme. In this regard, youth-adult interaction is a key issue in a growing number of research studies about how youth development programmes work (Smith, *et al.*, 2010). Specifically, these research studies also confirm the importance of autonomy supportive methods (Ryan & Deci, 2000) in a non-formal educational context (Sullivan & Larson, 2000). Moreover, it is important to evaluate the impact of youth-work on young people with different social and cultural backgrounds. In this respect, Coussée (2008, p. 8) highlights the risk that 'youth work that works is not accessible and accessible youth work does not work'.

Youth-work in the European Union and the Mediterranean

The EU definition of youth work includes all the youth development programs that occur outside the formal education systems. In fact, the EU Youth Policy defines *youth work* as "out-of-school education managed by professional or voluntary *youth workers* within youth organisations, town halls, youth centres, churches etc., which contributes to the development of young people" (European Commission, 2001). Likewise, EU assigns to youth work a wide range of objectives, like "unemployment, school failure, and social exclusion", as well as the provision of recreational services during the leisure.

On the basis of this general definition, the European Commission has also included youth work in the Youth Strategy for the period 2010-2012 (European Commission, 2009). A specific priority is given to the professional growth of youth workers, especially through the enhancement of professional skills and the exchange of innovative practices. Consistently, the current Youth in Action Program supports the organizations that work with young people in the European Union. In fact, this programme provides financial support to train youth workers, as well as to introduce innovative approaches and to build networks. Furthermore,

the programme provides funds for projects that are implemented by non-profit organizations⁴.

However, it could be necessary to better define when such youth projects are “youth work” projects. In fact, the EU definition of youth work seems to include all the youth development programmes that are implemented outside the formal education. Otherwise, youth work is a specific approach of youth development program that has been developed in a wide range of practices in many European countries. The European debates and studies about these practices tried to identify some key-features of youth-work. For instance, a wide cross-national analysis has been started in a workshop promoted by the Council of Europe in 2009 (“The history of youth-work in Europe and its relevance for youth policy today” Verschelden, *et al.*, 2009). Participants in this workshops have highlighted some defining features of youth-work like the symbiosis between recreational activities and learning opportunities, the young people's voluntary participation, the educational work focused both on individuals and groups, the growth of associational life, and the promotion of self-government experiences (Verschelden, *et al.*, 2009, p. 138-139; Davies, 2005, p. 22; Smith, 1999)

Moreover, youth-work methods and objectives vary according to the place where the youth-workers usually meet the young people. Therefore, *centre-based youth-work* provides continuous services in a specific place where space and equipment are available for different kinds of ‘adult-led’ and ‘youth-led’ activities. Other forms of youth-work are implemented in pre-existing contexts that can be informal (*detached youth-work* and *outreach youth-work*) or formal (*school-based youth-work*) (Smith, 1998; Merton, *et al.*, 2004).

The concept of youth-work in the European Union has many common points with the Euro-Mediterranean debate. In the toolkit “Mosaic”, for example, the EU-CoE youth partnership provides theoretical and practical tools for youth workers in the Euro-Med Youth Programme, as well as for any users of other European and Mediterranean co-operation programmes (Göksel, 2010).

⁴ For example, the programme supports non formal learning projects for groups of young people coming from different countries (action “Youth exchange”), voluntary experiences (action “European Voluntary Service”), informal learning activities proposed and implemented by young people (action “Youth initiatives”).

This guide has been written by a team of youth workers and trainers having experiences in youth-work practice in the Euro-Mediterranean area. Such a tool is mainly based on the European concept of youth work, by stressing features like voluntary participation, non-formal education, and the experience-based learning. However, specific key-themes are stressed in the Euro-Mediterranean concept, especially about human rights education, gender equality, cultural diversity, peace, and intercultural dialogue. At the same time, youth-work is particularly committed in encouraging young people's social action in the own social and political environments, especially basing on an intercultural learning perspective (Göksel, 2010). Furthermore, other studies stress the active process by which the cultural imperatives of global media are appropriated by young people in the Mediterranean countries (Grixti, 2006).

In fact, youth participation seems a key issue in the Euro Mediterranean debate on youth policy. A growing attention is assigned to extending youth participation in the policy-making process also in the Mediterranean countries besides a concept of political participation based on the electoral vote, (Kirby, 2007; European Commission & Council of Europe, 2005). Thus, young people are encouraged to participate in the implementation of public projects as active citizens together with the public actors.

However, it is important to consider the specificity of different contexts while dealing with the different cultures, political systems, social structures, and economic development degrees of the Mediterranean area. In fact, the risk to impose irrelevant concepts of youth-work is very high. For example, models of democratic participation that are already defined in West Europe could not be yet feasible in others Mediterranean countries, because of specific political or economic constraints. For this reasons, youth participation in the public policy could be impossible or illusory where some fundamental rights are not respected like the freedom of expression, association, speech or press. With such a lack of freedom, the growing awareness about social inequalities are generating social protests as the only possible form of participation. At the same time, the dramatic lack of job opportunities forces youth emigration as a form of renounce to participate.

Research objectives

This study aims at evaluating informal and non-formal learning programmes in youth centres located in the South of Italy and funded by the regional policy "Bollenti Spiriti". Launched in 2006 by the Apulia Region, this youth policy funded a regional network of 157 youth centres called Urban Laboratories (Labs). (Morciano, 2011; Morciano, 2012; Morciano & Scardigno, 2012; Scardigno & Manuti, 2011). Recreational and learning activities are available in these centres. Furthermore, there are self-managed activities and 'adult-led' services for leisure, vocational training, job orientation and enterprise creation. The approved Labs' programmes are mainly of an artistic focus (photography, multimedia, handicraft, theatre). Furthermore, Labs aim to offer services in different sectors, especially in tourism, publishing, events and show production.

The present study is included in a broader research project aiming at evaluating youth participation (Scardigno & Manuti, 2011). The regional programme that funded the Urban Labs has been chosen because it clearly puts youth participation at the centre of each stage of the implementation process. In fact, the policy maker asked to involve young people in the design as well as in the management of the Labs.

On the details, the regional programme for the Urban Labs gave the opportunity for an on going evaluation of the youth participation for each of the following evaluative dimensions: *decision-making power* concerning the participation in the planning of the centre; *empowerment* as it is linked to the participation in the management of the centre and to the power to affect local development processes; *education* with regard to the informal learning that occurs in the centre.

This paper is focused on the study about the third evaluative dimension. Particularly, the evaluation purpose of this study was to provide empirical evidence about how non-formal learning affect youth agency. The concept of agency was useful for evaluating one of the main expected results of the regional programme, that is the active involvement of young people. In fact, the regional policy maker encouraged the Labs to adopt resources-oriented approaches in order to enhance youth capabilities that already exist and give youths new chances to realize their potential. Instead of compensate individual deficit (e.g. lack of capabilities, personal responsibility, income), such approaches give priority to the resources

already owned by young people, like ideas, projects, potential and actual skills, networks of social support ect.

Thus, the concept of agency has been adopted just because it includes personal skills that play an important role in social participation and active citizenship, which are considered key-purposes in the Euro-Mediterranean debate about youth-work (Loncle & Muniglia, 2008). In more details, the concept of agency refers to the "ability to exert influence on one's life" (Shanahan & Mortimer, 2003), the capabilities to engage in choices and actions (Elder & Johnson, 2002, p. 61) and the proactive attitude for improving the own social environment (Schwarzer & Taubert, 2002).

Urban Labs were in different stages of the implementation process when the research project started. The participatory planning stage was complete and the refurbishment started for all 157 Labs. About one third of them was open (n. 57), another third had a management partnership (n. 48) and the remaining part was not yet completely refurbished (n. 52). Thus, the research project aimed at on-going evaluating the regional programme and it could compare the implementation process of Urban Labs in different stages. In this way, the evaluation research could give a feedback to the Urban Labs less advanced by focusing on the Urban Labs already open.

Research methods and evaluation questions

The research involved all the young people attending all the non-formal education courses occurred in the Urban Laboratories between January and May 2011. On details, a total of 159 young people started to attend 23 training courses in 10 youth centres during this period. The courses had a length of maximum 70 hours distributed in a maximum of 4 months. Each course had a specific training objectives and the most was about multimedia art (e.g., video and photo editing, digital animation), tourism (e.g., english language, cultural heritage management), ICT application in marketing and advertising (e.g., web marketing, graphic design), music (e.g. instrument and vocal study), theatre (e.g. diction, dubbing, acting) and handcraft (e.g. wood, ceramic). All the courses was held in a youth centre during afternoon or evening, and at least with two weekly meetings. Furthermore, young people could meet in the youth centres during the whole opening time, having the opportunity to attend other informal

learning activities like using internet points, libraries, spaces for self-managed meeting and facilities for practicing hobbies.

A multiple-single group design has been adopted (Hotn Wade & Heerboth, 1982) and a self-administered paper questionnaire has been administered at the beginning of the training programmes, at the end and 6 months later. A control group has not been adopted because of some ethical constraints. In fact, the evaluated learning programme did not have participant selection criteria. Consequently, it was not possible to involve young people in a control group without informing them about the opportunity to participate in the evaluated learning activities. However, the external validity of this research design is based on the possibility to observe the change of the variables for each subject of the group⁵, and not only on the comparison between averages after and before attending the programme. Furthermore, the study involved different educational settings, that are the 10 youth centres in which the training programmes have been implemented.

This paper is based on data gathered at the beginning and the conclusion of the courses (a third data collection is in progress). A self-administered questionnaire involved all the 159 participants and 114 of them responded to both the questionnaires. The respondents included equally man (54%) and female (46%), especially in the age range 25-35 (49%) and 20-25 (30%).

The study focused on specific evaluation questions. First, it aimed at evaluating if participation in the programme was associated with an improvement in personal agency. Specifically, empirical evidence has been gathered about two analytical dimensions: the young people's self-perception about the ability to affect their own life course (*capabilities beliefs*), and the self-perceived social support that young people feel to receive from their own social networks (*context beliefs*) (Ford, 1999).

On details, 'capabilities beliefs' has been referred to the individual proactivity. According to the theory of Proactive Coping of Schwarzer (Schwarzer & Taubert, 2002), a proactive individual is defined as resourceful and responsible, as he/she strives for improving his/her life instead of reacting to adversities. The Italian adaptation of the Proactive Coping Scale (Comunian, Greenglass & Schwarzer, 2003) has been adopted in order to measure the proactivity of young people that attended

⁵ Each respondent has been tracked through a personal code between the questionnaire that has been answered before, at the end and after six months.

the non-formal education courses in the Urban Laboratories. This scale includes list of 14 statements that deal with different possible reactions to daily events (e.g. "I try to pinpoint what I need to succeed"; "Despite numerous setbacks, I usually succeed in getting what I want"; "I turn obstacles into positive experiences"). Respondents have been invited to indicate to what extent each statement was true according with how they feel about the situation (from 1 "not at all" to 4 "completely"). The Proactive Coping Scale has been included in the questionnaire both at the beginning and at the end of the educational programmes.

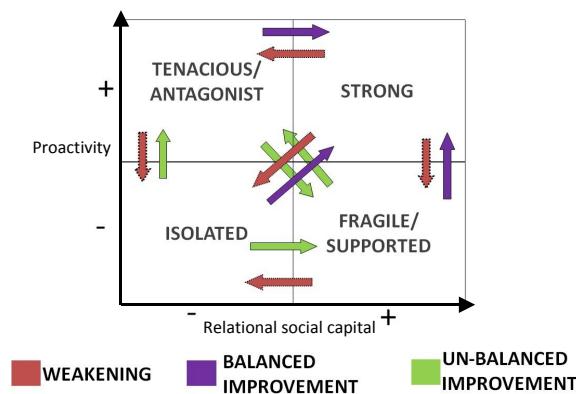
On the other hand, 'context beliefs' has been measured through indicators of "relational social capital" that is defined as trust in the own social networks (Donati & Tronca, 2008). A specific question invited the respondents to indicate to what extent they could count on a list of people or organisations when they need help in their personal career (e.g. parents, teachers, friends, schoolmates, employment services, local politicians etc.).

Specific personal agency profiles come up by crossing the two dimensions of proactivity and relational social capital above described. Furthermore, the study has observed also the change dynamics between these different personal agency patterns thanks to the longitudinal measures in different times of the programme implementation. On details, as shown in the chart 1, young people with a "Strong" agency profile are supposed to be more confident in their proactive skills and, at the same time, they can count on the own social networks. Otherwise, the lack of social support and proactivity beliefs define the "Isolated" agency profile. The theoretical model includes also the "Tenacious" and the "Fragile" intermediate profiles: the first one identifies proactive young people that count mainly on themselves, being able to strive for realizing their potential even in a low supportive social context; the second one identifies young people living in a protective social environment that, instead of encouraging them to believe in their capabilities, tends to generate dependence.

The chart 1 indicates also the change dynamics between the four personal agency patterns proposed by the theoretical model. On details, a "Weakening" dynamics occurred when one or both the agency dimensions decreased after the educational programme. For example, if young people in a "Tenacious" profile started to lose confidence in their capabilities, they moved toward an "Isolated" agency pattern. Instead, the "Balanced improvement" dynamics occurred when young people became more near to the "Strong" agency profile thanks to the educational programmes. This

dynamics could happen thanks to an increasing in proactivity and social support in young people that was in a “Fragile” agency pattern, an increasing in social support for young people that was in a “Tenacious” agency pattern, or an increasing in proactivity for young people that was in a “Fragile” agency pattern.

Chart 1. Personal Agency Profiles (Ford, 1999) and dynamics of agency change



A second evaluation question focused on the causal links that leads to an improvement of the individual agency. Specifically, the study verified if personal agency improvement was associated with two main factors: the autonomy supportive learning climate, and the perception of ‘chance-events’ (Shanahan & Porfeli, 2007) during the learning experience. The concept of autonomy support has been elaborated in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) for understanding the social-contextual factors that affect learning motivation. On details, autonomy support in a learning setting occurs when “a person in a position of authority (e.g. a teacher, a health care provider, and a manager) takes the other’s (e.g. a student’s, the patient’s, and a subordinate’s) perspective, acknowledges the other’s feeling and perception, provides the other with the information and choice, and minimizes the use of pressure and control’ (Williams & Deci, 1996, p. 767). In contrast, a control-oriented educational learning occurs when “an authority who is controlling pressures others to behave in particular ways, either through coercive or seductive techniques that generally include

implicit or explicit rewards or punishments' (Black & Deci, 2000, p. 742). The Learning Climate Scale has been adopted in the questionnaire that has been administered at the end of the educational programmes in order to measure the autonomy supportiveness of the adult educators (Black & Deci, 2000). A specific questions presented a list of 15 items related to how young participants perceived the adult educators during the learning experience (e.g. "I felt that my instructor provided me choices and options"; "My instructor listened to how I would like to do things"; "My instructor encouraged me to ask questions").

Specific questions have been also included in the questionnaire concerning the individual reflectivity on 'chance-events' (Shanahan & Porfeli, 2007) that young people perceived during the learning experience. A chance-event is defined as an event that encourage change (Schlossberg, *et al.*, 1995), and it is perceived as having influence on the own life course (Shanahan & Porfeli, 2007). Particularly the questionnaire asked to young people to what extent they experienced a list of events that potentially could support their development tasks (Havighurs, 1953). This events was referred to peer relationships (e.g. "I met people and maked new friends"), the linkage with the community (e.g. "I felt my self valued by the community"), the career support (e.g. "I met someone that was interested in my professional capabilities"), the identity exploration (e.g. "I better understood what I'd like to do in my life"), and the relationships with the family (e.g. "I improved the relationship with my parents") as well as with the school (e.g. "I increased my interest in studying at school").

A further evaluation questions was the following: did agency increased also for young people with a lower personal and family cultural capital? The concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1985; Besozzi, 2009) has been operationalised at a personal level by using the following variables: educational level (lyceum vs. technical-professional high school), previous similar learning experiences and participation in voluntary associations during free time. At a family level, cultural capital has been measured by the parents' educational level and type of work, together with some indicators of 'home possession' (e.g. having a computer at home) (OECD-PISA, 2009).

Results

Evaluation question n. 1: is participation in the programme associated with improvement in personal agency?

A significant change in individual agency has been observed in almost 70% of the cases⁶. On the whole, participants seem split in two groups: the one without any change (31%) or an agency weakening (18%), the other one with a significant agency improvement (51%). A larger rate of young participants had a “balanced improvement” that means being closer to the “Strong” agency profile after attending the course (32%). For some of them, both proactivity and relational social capital increased (e.g. shifting from “Isolated” profile to the “Strong” one). For others, an increase occurred in the variable with a low level of score (e.g. shifting from the “Tenacious/antagonist” pattern to the “Strong” one).

Furthermore, is empirically evident that the more higher is age and school level, the more higher is the rate of agency improvement (chart 2).

Evaluation question n. 2: is personal agency improvement positively associated with autonomy supportive learning climate and individual reflectivity on chance-event?

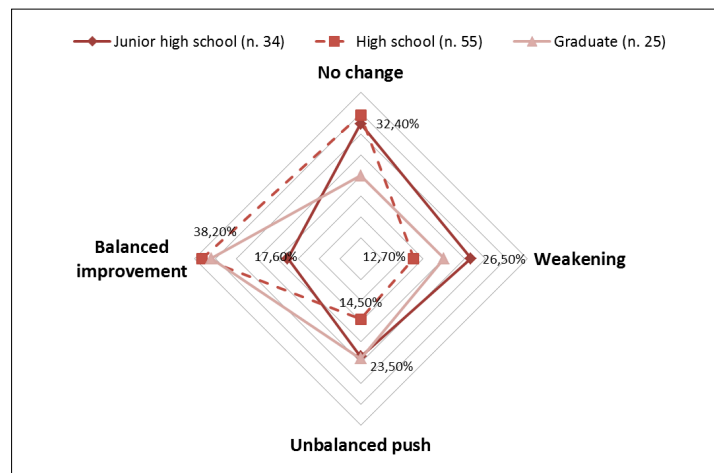
The independent variables included in this evaluation questions (perceived autonomy support and personal reflectivity about chance-event) have been crossed in order to generate four “learning style” profiles.

On details, “Dependence on adult-led tasks” and “Not reflective autonomy” includes young people having a weaker perception of the chances offered by non-formal and informal educational activities in the Labs: in the first case, the learning experience was mainly dependent on the adult educators, while in the second one young people experienced the educational activities with high autonomy but with low reflectivity about the possible impact on the own life course. Instead, an higher reflectivity on chance-event offered by the Labs is in the other two profiles: in one case,

⁶ Each individual score has been divided in four level at 25th, 50th and 75th percentiles in both the Proactivity and the Relational Social Capital index. These two variables measure respectively Capabilities Beliefs and Context Beliefs, that are the two dimensions of agency included in the theoretical model. On details, Relational Social Capital was split up in the following levels: 14-30 (low), 31-46 (medium low), 45-62 (medium high), 63-78 (high). Instead, the levels of Proactivity was 1-14 (low), 15-28 (medium low), 29-42 (medium high), 43-56 (high). A change in in this two index of agency has been considered significative if the score shifted in a lower or an higher level.

young people perceived the adult educator as able to support their autonomy and reflectivity (“Adult-supported autonomy and reflectivity”); in the other one, young people tend to reflect in a more autonomous way about the chance-events offered by the Labs (“Reflective autonomy”)

Chart 2 – Agency effect between the beginning and the end of the courses, and educational level

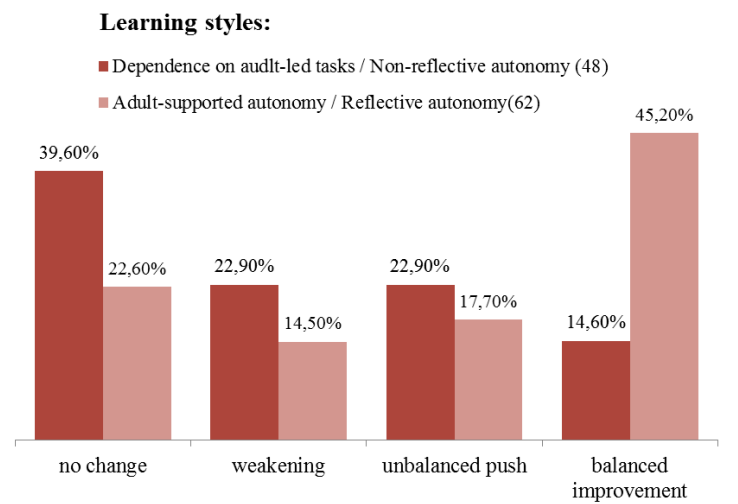


Reflectivity-oriented learning experiences occurred in half of the participants, especially in those one with a lower adult support (35%). Furthermore, more than one fourth of the participants had a more disengaged learning style (27%). The research results confirm a positive association between the reflective learning style and the agency improvement. It means that agency especially improved when the young participants perceived an autonomy supportive interaction with the adult educators and, at the same time, they more perceived the course as a source of chance events (chart 3). Conversely, the cases of agency weakening or those without any change was more frequent when young people were more dependent on the adult-led tasks or, at the opposite side, when they had an autonomy but not reflective learning experience (such a result does not change depending on age range and sex).

The provision of youth-led facilities has also been considered as indicator of autonomy supportive learning climate. These facilities could be directly used by young people, even without the support of adults and

outside the learning sessions, e.g. an internet point, a café, the library, other spaces for youth-led meeting or artistic performance etc. In this regard, research evidences suggest that agency improvement is also associated with these youth-led facilities provision. Furthermore, agency did not change in almost half of the Labs with a lower level of this kind of facilities.

Chart 3. Association between learning styles and agency effect

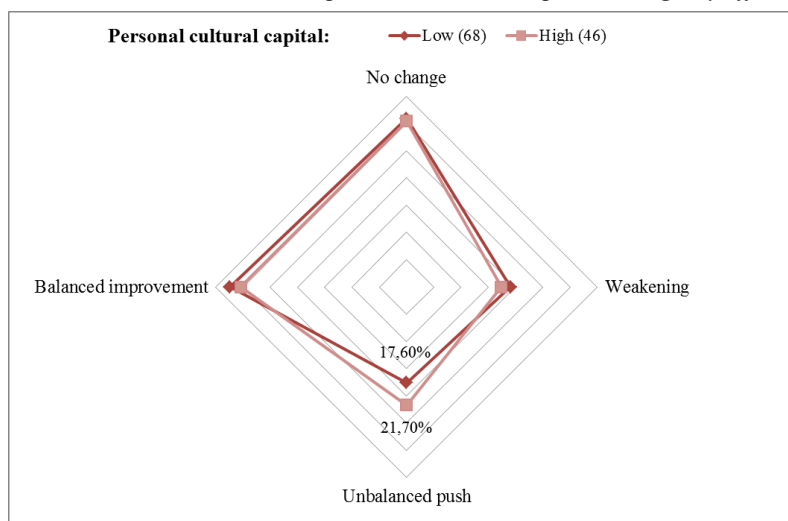


Evaluation question no. 3: did agency increase for young people with a lower personal and family cultural capital?

Finally, the research aimed at verifying if the hypothesis about the cultural reproduction of educational inequality (Esping-Andersen & Mestres, 2003; Ballarino & Checchi, 2006) was valid also in the informal education contexts included in this study. On the whole, research evidences suggest that informal learning settings can weak the effect of cultural capital on educational achievement, as well as others research argued (Besozzi 2009; Scardigno 2011). In fact, agency effect seems weakly related with the personal cultural level, as shown in charts no 4. On details, this chart shows how young participants are distributed among the different types of agency change (weakening, balanced and unbalanced push), including the case of no change. This distribution does not change

depending on having a low personal cultural capital (darker line in the chart) or an high one (lighter line in the chart), except for the case of “Unbalanced push”. However, this distribution changes depending on family cultural capital. In fact, in the chart 5 is evident that a larger rate of young people with a low family cultural capital (darker line in the chart) had an agency weakening (22%).

Chart 4. Association between personal cultural capital and agency effect



Furthermore, a stronger role of the cultural capital can be observed if the combinations between personal and family capital is considered. In this regard, analysis shows two extremes clusters (“weak” and “strong”) and other two intermediate ones (“emancipated” and “antagonist or distant”).

Any way, cultural capital level has not a direct and unambiguous effect. For instance, the chart 6 provides evidence of a high rate of young people with any agency effect just in the “strong” cluster. Instead, the higher rate of young participants with an agency balanced improvement is for the “emancipated” cluster, as well as for the “distant” one: the first include young people that are able to grow a personal cultural capital despite a low cultural provision in the own family; the latter include young people that have problems to access to the high family cultural family.

Chart 5. Association between family cultural capital and agency effect

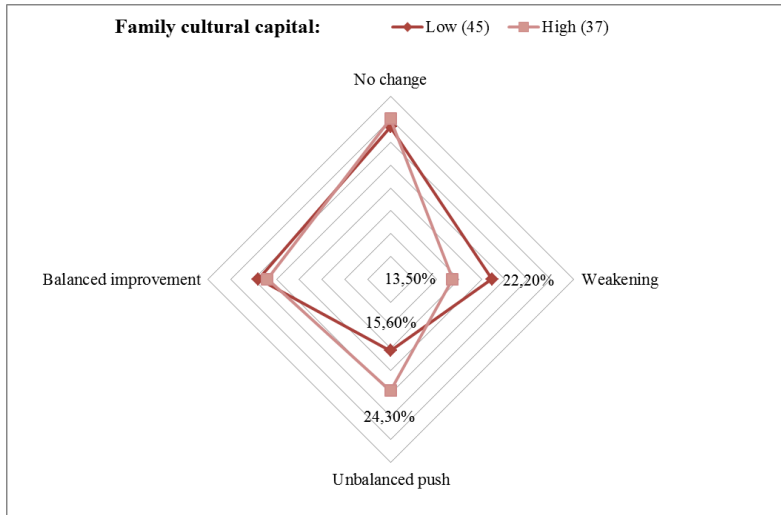


Chart 6 – Association between cultural capital profiles and agency effect

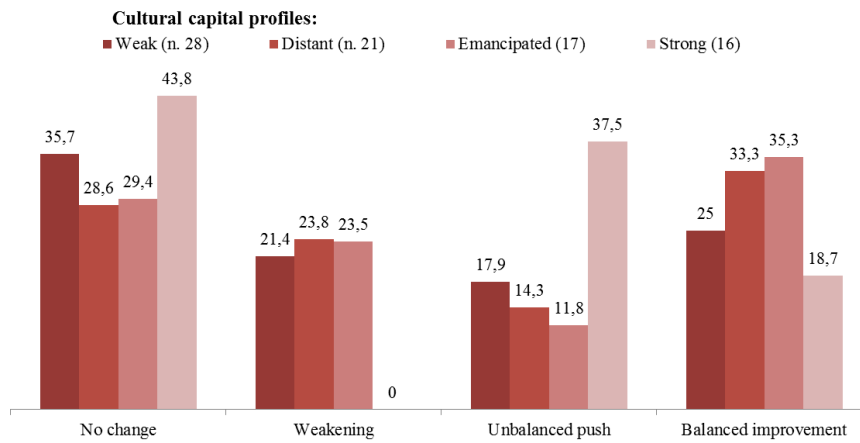


Chart 7. Association between learning styles and agency effect: clusters "Emancipated" and "Distant"

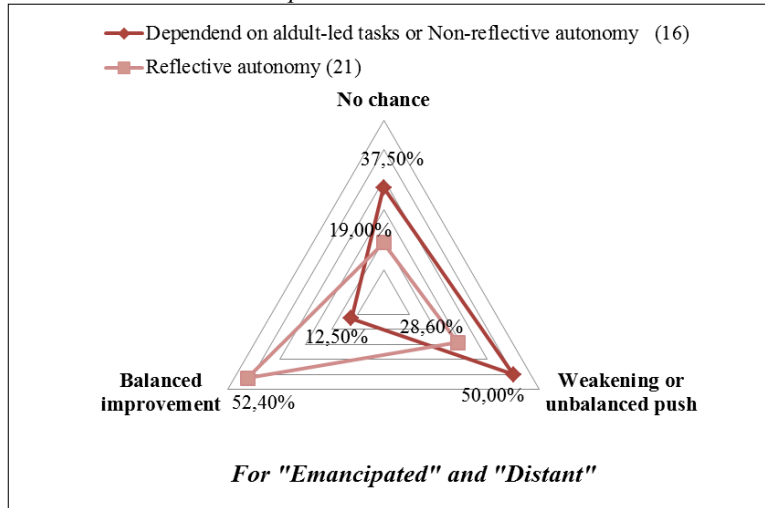
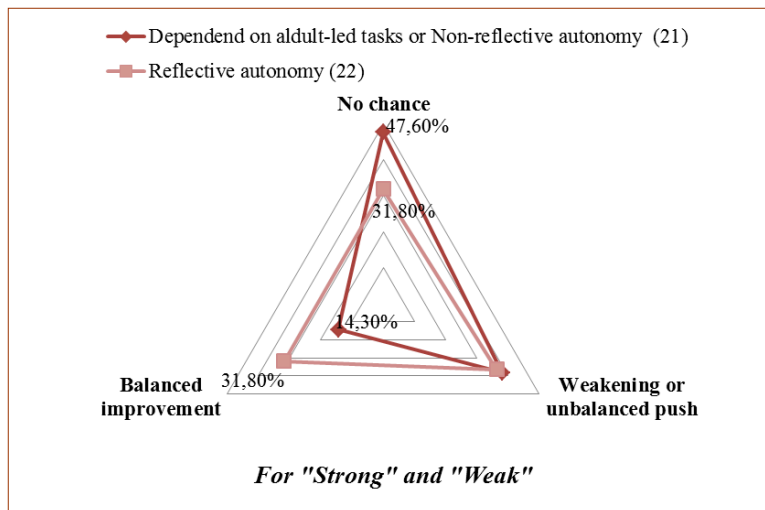


Chart 8. Association between learning styles and agency effect: clusters "Strong" and "Weak"



Finally, the research results confirm a stronger effect of the autonomy supportive learning experiences just on the “emancipated” and “distant” young people. In fact, autonomy supportive learning is associated with their agency improvement more than it happens for the other clusters. As shown in the chart 7 and 8, “Reflective autonomy” (lighter lines in the chart) influenced the agency “Balanced improvement” more in the group of “Emancipated” and “Distant” young people (chart 7) than in the “Strong” and “Weak” groups (chart 8). A similar mechanism has been observed for the “Weakening” or the “Unbalanced push” of agency. This agency dynamics are stronger when “Emancipated” and “Distant” young people had a less reflective learning experience (chart 7). Otherwise, this dynamics are the same for young people in the “Strong” and “Weak” groups, even when they experienced autonomy support and reflectivity about chance-events (chart 8).

This study tried to test an evaluation approach for evaluating non-formal and informal education as a component of youth-work practice. Specifically, the study aimed at evaluating the effect of the learning programme on youth agency. Such a purpose is relevant for youth-work in the Mediterranean, where youth participation and active citizenship are increasingly valued and encouraged by youth worker and youth organisations. However, other case studies in different Mediterranean countries could further confirm the results of this research, as well as the effectiveness of its theoretical framework and research instruments.

For the case studies included in this research, participation in non-formal and informal education seems associated with an agency improvement in half of the young participants. The research results also suggested that autonomy supportive learning was moderately associated with the agency improvement. Furthermore, the hypothesis about cultural reproduction of the educational inequalities seems weaker in the evaluated informal and non-formal settings. In fact, agency improvement is weakly associated with the personal and family cultural capital. On details, autonomy supportive education is a stronger driving factor for young people that have a weaker access to a high family cultural capital (“distant or in conflict” cluster), or for those ones that are more able to achieve cultural resources outside family (“emancipated” cluster).

However, the research results highlight how is difficult to improve agency for young people with a low personal cultural capital and, at the

same time, having more difficulties to look for cultural resources outside the family. For these cases, the research suggest that non-formal and informal education could better work if youth centres were able to involve young people for a longer time, and to promote a feeling of membership (Verschelden, *et al.*, 2009; Smith, 1999). For the same reason, it could be important improving the cooperation between non-formal and formal educational services (Scardigno, 2009). Otherwise, the opportunities offered by non-formal and informal education risk to have just a temporary effect (Pietropolli & Charmet, 2000). Such a risk is confirmed by the research results. In fact, agency improvement was less frequent for those younger participants that were still attending the formal educational system and were more used to formal educational methods.

Any way, the research results suggest to better considering personal and cultural capital as driving factor also in non-formal and informal educational settings. In this regard, inequality in education should be considered one of the main problems to face in the youth-work practices of the Mediterranean countries. Particularly, the concept of family cultural capital could help to further understand how different models of primary socialization affect youth participation in informal learning. According with a research on youth participation in Arabs countries, for example, family education do not encourage young people to be involved in form of participation that are different from the political vote, the religious education or the public school. At the same time, the lack of intergenerational communication between parents and children do not help the growth of a participation-oriented culture (Kirby, 2007). However, this research draws attention to the growing youth participation in associations and NGOs even where a national youth policy does not exist or is still weak. Furthermore, many participation networks are accessible on the web. In fact, young people increasingly use internet in the Mediterranean countries having the opportunity to build free relationships at local and global level. Such a trend suggests new future evaluation research about on-line participation and web-based non-formal or informal learning opportunities in the Euro-Mediterranean space.

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