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Training, Recognition and Professionalisation of Youth Workers in Italy: the Contribution of Erasmus+/Youth in Action

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Training, Recognition and Professionalisation of Youth Workers in Italy: the Contribution of Erasmus+/Youth in Action

Maurizio Merico*, Nadia Crescenzo** and Serena Quarta***

Abstract: The paper aims to observe the training, recognition and professionalisation of “youth work(ers)” in Italy, paying specific attention – within the framework of European youth policy – to the effects of the Erasmus+/Youth in Action Programme (E+/YiA). In this respect, the paper presents a selection of results from the Italian sub-sample of the international research programme “*Research-based Analysis of Erasmus+: Youth in Action*” (RAY). Through an analysis based on qualitative and quantitative methods, the outcomes of some of the Actions carried out under E+/YiA are discussed, focusing on their impact on socio-educational instructors’ biographies and training pathways, as well as on organisational development, recognition and professionalisation of youth work(ers) in Italy. The rise of a marked reflexivity encounters the challenges related to the process of recognition and professionalisation, particularly critical in Italy. Aspects and problems subsequently emerge, thus reshaping the ambitions of many Italian youth workers, who identify – as the research results show – in the European (and international) dimension the (only) framework (perceived as) capable of giving meaning and perspective to their experience.

Keywords: youth work, non-formal education, youth policy, European mobility

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1. Conceptual framework and research questions¹

The considerations and analysis presented in this paper are part of a wider debate on the role and relevance of non-formal education (NFE), with necessary references to the debate on European youth policy and the recognition of youth work (Lauritzen, 2006; Verschelden *et al.*, 2009; Devlin, 2010; Chisholm, Kovacheva, Merico, 2011; Belton, 2014; Morciano, Scardigno, Merico, 2015; SALTO, 2016).

“Youth work”² is a term that has become an integral part of the lexicon of the European Union and its Member States when referring to socio-educational activities of a multi-purpose and differentiated nature, involving young people, which are located between the formal educational system and the practices of informal socialisation and learning (Hurley & Treacy, 1993; Coussée, 2008; European Commission, 2009; Belton, 2014; Morciano, 2015; Morciano & Merico, 2017). In this respect, in its “*Strategy for Youth – Investing and Empowering*”, the European Commission defines the practices of 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 [... that] can help deal with unemployment, school failure, and social exclusion, as well as provide leisure time. It can also increase skills and support the transition from youth to adulthood» (European Commission, 2009: 11).

With it concluding, «Despite being “non-formal”, youth work needs to be professionalised further» (European Commission, 2009, p. 11). Starting from this point, the paper aims to explore the issues of *capacity building*, *competences development* and *project management* that involve youth work in the European dimension, through a perspective capable of critically analysing the interconnection between practices, processes and policies (SALTO, 2016; Bammer, Fennes & Karsten, 2017).

¹ This paper presents the results of ‘RAY Italia’, a research programme supported by the Italian National Agency for Youth (ANG) and carried out in the framework of the international research programme ‘Research-based Analysis of Erasmus+: Youth in Action’ (RAY). RAY (<http://www.researchyouth.eu/>) is a project developed by the RAY Network, which includes the National Agencies of Erasmus+: Youth in Action and their research partners in currently 31 countries. RAY is coordinated by the Institute of Educational Science of the University of Innsbruck and the “Generation and Educational Science Institute” (Austria).

² This is a term commonly-used when referring to the work with young people in the socio-educational field. Consequently, “youth workers” are those who in legal term are called “socio-educational instructors” (see the “Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union”, article 165(2) – retrieved from <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A12008E165>).

This is a debate that takes on specific profiles in Italy, where it should be noted that an organic path oriented towards the recognition of NFE and youth work, the training of the youth workers and “socio-educational instructors”, the definition of institutional plans and structures of reference, as well as the validation of learning and certification of the acquired skills has still not fully taken shape (Bazzanella, 2010; Merico, 2013; Morciano, Scardigno & Merico, 2015). In this sense, the reference to the European dimension becomes – in our opinion – essential for the definition and analysis of the NFE experiences and practices in the Italian national context. The majority of the initiatives that are carried out in it seem to be based on the models, methodologies and “training kits” that characterise the projects financed at a European level and to which the individual organisations and/or single actors have taken part in (Merico, Gualtieri & Tinaburri, 2017).

Despite their respective competences, the European Commission and the Council of Europe – above all through the *Youth Partnership* – have developed a path of significant investments in the field of NFE³, aimed at supporting young people’s biographies and trajectories, as well as with regard to what is here of greater interest, the recognition and training of youth work(ers) (Devlin, 2010; Chisholm, Kovacheva & Merico, 2011; Friesenhahn, 2013; Taru, Coussée & Williamson, 2014; Cairns *et al.*, 2018; Ord *et al.*, 2018).

Within this scenario, the international research programme “Research-based Analysis of Erasmus+:Youth in Action” (RAY) aims to analyse the impact and effectiveness of projects carried out under the Erasmus+/Youth in Action Programme (E+/YiA) on (individual and group) beneficiaries and participants (Fennes & Hagleitner, Helling, 2011; Fennes, Gadinger & Hagleitner, 2012; Fennes *et al.*, 2013; Bammer, Fennes & Karsten, 2017; Bammer, Karsten & Muller, 2017; Bärta, Fennes & Gadinger, 2018). In particular, the Actions of E+/YiA analysed during the RAY research programme are the following: *European Voluntary Service (EVS)* (KA105), an intercultural learning experience in a non-formal context; *Structured Dialogue (SD)* (KA347), concerning the dialogue between young people and political decision-makers to obtain results useful for youth policies; the *Transnational Youth Initiatives (TYI)*, which provide for two or more groups of young people from different countries the resources to carry out joint activities in a project that may concern various aspects of life; *Youth Exchanges (YE)* (KA105), which are meetings between groups of young people from two or more countries to deal with a common theme and exchange ideas. Finally, *Transnational Cooperation Activities (TCA)* (KA218) and *Youth Worker Mobility (YWM)* (KA105): the first aimed at supporting cooperation between organisations active in

³ This is a path started with the *Youth for Europe* Programme (established in 1989), continued with *Youth* (from 2001 to 2006) and *Youth in Action* (2007-2013), up to the measures included in *Erasmus+/Youth in Action* (2014- 2020).

the field of education and training; the second at promoting support structures for young people, supporting both the training of youth workers as well as youth organisations.

In the more general framework of the research activities carried out in the RAY research programme, this paper will focus on (though not exclusively) the results related to these two KAs, since they present several relevant opportunities for the training and professional development of the participants in E+/YiA and the (aspiring) Italian youth workers. The hope is to offer a contribution to the analysis of training paths, professionalisation and recognition of youth workers, of the practices and standard for the validation of learning, as well as to the examination of biographical and professional trajectories of those working in the youth field.

Even if within a national framework of youth policy characterised by an “uncertain statute” (Mesa, 2010; Martelli, 2014) as well as by scarce (if not residual) attention to NFE (Colombo, Giovannini & Landri, 2006; Morciano, 2018), the results of the RAY research programme highlight the significant contribution and impact of E+/YiA on the construction and definition of the biographies and pathways of those operating with young people in Italy. Thus, it seems of utmost relevance, as recommended on several occasions by the European institutions, the opportunity to carefully observe the structuring of NFE processes and practices, their repercussions on the lives of young people, as well as the training and professional pathways of youth workers.

The following paragraphs will first describe the methodology of the RAY research programme and then focus on the challenges and tensions that animate the training, recognition and professionalisation of those working in the NFE sector in Italy.

2. Research approach and methodology

The RAY research programme was founded in 2007 on the initiative of the Austrian National Agency for Youth, in particular by its consortium partners Interkulturelles Zentrum and the Institute of Educational Science of the University of Innsbruck, in order to develop joint transnational research activities related to the effects of the *Youth in Action* Programme.

Its main focus is on «the effects of projects on young people, youth workers and youth leaders as well as on their organisations and the communities where projects take place. Additionally, RAY studies how project actors are learning, and which contexts, settings, approaches, methodologies and methods contribute to their learning and competence development». In this respect, together with contributing «to quality assurance and development in the implementation of E+/YiA» – that is to «evidence-based and research-informed youth policy development in Europe» – RAY also seeks – and this is

a central issue in the reflexion developed in this paper – «to generate new knowledge about the processes and outcomes of non-formal learning and learning mobility in general and more specifically about non-formal learning in youth activities with an international dimension» (RAY Coordination, 2018: 1).

The RAY network today involves 31 European countries and the research programme is organised into three (sub)projects:

- RAY-MON – “*Research-based Analysis and Monitoring of Erasmus+: Youth in Action*” which aims to monitor the activities carried out within the E+/YiA projects and the effects of the Programme on the beneficiaries, project managers, youth leaders, their organisations and local contexts. For the period considered here, RAY-MON is based on two multilingual online surveys performed with CAWI: both PPs (*project participants*) and PLs (*project leaders*)⁴ involved in the projects funded under E+/YiA have been interviewed. Every beneficiary of the Programme was reached at a distance between 2 and 10 months from the end of the project in which they participated. The Italian sub-sample was selected among the PPs and PLs of projects funded in 2014 and 2015 within KA105 - YWM, KA218 - TCA and KA347 - SD. A total of 1912 questionnaires were administered, of which 318 addressed to PLs and 1594 addressed to PPs⁵;

- RAY-CAP – “*Research Project on Competence Development and Capacity Building in Erasmus+: Youth in Action*” explores the competence development of youth workers and youth leaders through their participation in training and support activities in the youth field. Studying in greater detail the results of RAY-MON using a qualitative approach, its main goals are to understand how learning outcomes from such activities are transferred into practice and the long-term systemic effects of training and support activities on the organisations involved in E+/YiA. The methodology of RAY-CAP is based on the administration of three in-depth interviews to a sample of

⁴ PPs and PLs represent the two categories of subjects interviewed in the context of “RAY-MON” and the last (sub)project mentioned in this paragraph, “RAY-LTE”. PPs are young people who participate in E+/YiA projects without organisational responsibilities: in general, they are subjects with at least a medium-high educational qualification and, in most cases, they are still on university training courses; PLs are subjects with organisational responsibilities, whose average age is higher than that of the PPs and with a generally high level of education; many are on work pathways and/or are doing a university or post-graduate course. Most of the PLs interviewed have already participated in other projects supported within E+/YiA (or previous European youth programmes), playing either a role “*mostly educational (socio-pedagogical)*”, “*mostly organisational*” or “*in equal measure*” educational and organisational functions.

⁵ Among the PPs 1183 were of “Italian origin”, 334 participated in projects funded by the Italian National Agency for youth (ANG) and 273 carried out their project in Italy; Among the PLs, 260 were of “Italian origin”, 70 participated in projects funded by the ANG and 69 carried out their project in Italy.

youth workers⁶ and youth leaders who participated in the training activities: each subject involved in the research was interviewed before the start of the activities, 2-3 months after the conclusion of the activities and after about a year from the end of the project. The sample was selected extracting the names of the subjects to be interviewed from those who participated in training activities funded within TCA (KA218) or YWM (KA105), which are – as mentioned above – actions chiefly aimed at supporting the training of youth workers. For Italy, 13 participants were selected: 7 from the participants in the training activities (KA218), 6 from those who participated in YWM projects;

- RAY-LTE - “Research Project on the Long-Term Effect of Erasmus+: Youth in Action on participation and active citizenship” which aims to investigate the (long-term) impact of E+/YiA projects on the development of practices, competences and the knowledge of the participants, as well as their attitudes and values regarding participation and active citizenship. The research was carried out through a mixed-method approach based on the use of quantitative and qualitative techniques: for this paper, the first two standardised surveys have been considered, performed with CAWI at the beginning and end of the training activities, and the first two in-depth interviews administered at the beginning and one year after the end of the training activity⁷. Regarding the Italian sub-sample, it was composed of PPs and PLs from mobility projects funded under KA105 “*Youth Workers Mobility*” and KA347 “*Structured Dialogue*”. In total, after the data cleaning, 257 questionnaires of participants in the Programme were considered in the analysis of the first survey: of these 97 are of Italian “origin”, 204 participated in projects funded by the Italian National Agency for Youth (ANG) and 206 carried out their project in Italy. In relation to the second survey, 147 questionnaires were considered: 63 of these were compiled by participants of Italian “origin”, 114 by subjects who participated in projects funded by the ANG and 114 carried out their project in Italy. The qualitative analysis was carried out through the implementation of in-depth interviews with 13 subjects for the first interview and 10 for the second interview.

ANG has been part of the RAY Network since 2015⁸, taking part in all the three (sub)projects. Since July 2016, the team of the University of Salerno, co-

⁶ In RAY-CAP, the sample included exclusively youth workers/youth leaders. The subjects interviewed have in general high educational background, mainly of university level with someone who also hold a post-graduate master’s degree or a PhD. They have collaborative relationships with the organisations in which they operate and show a consistent level of experience in the European and international context.

⁷ Two further surveys and a further round of in-depth interviews will take place up to three years after the end of the activities.

⁸ Accordingly, with this aspect, the results analysed in this paper refer to the period 2015-2017.

ordinated by Maurizio Merico and including, among others, Nadia Crescenzo and Serena Quarta, co-authors of this paper, has ensured scientific and methodological support throughout the research activities and taken the responsibility of the data analysis and writing of the Reports produced through the research programme⁹. The involvement of the Italian research team in all the three (sub)projects and the subsequent opportunity to contextually analyse the results of the different (sub)projects has allowed to focus on the interaction of the qualitative and quantitative data collected and, then, have a wider and more comprehensive understanding of the issues analysed through the research programme (Merico, Gualtieri & Tinaburri, 2017). In particular, it is worth recalling that the survey administered in RAY-MON and the in-depth interviews carried out for RAY-CAP have been constructed in order to support each other in understanding the knowledge, attitudes and skills acquired by the beneficiaries of E+/YiA. In the same direction, qualitative interviews of RAY-LTE have been developed in order to broaden the results of the questionnaires administered during the same (sub)project, thus allowing to better identify young people's interpretative processes on concepts such as citizenship, participation and democracy. Furthermore, it is important to point out that, within the large amount of data collected throughout the research programme, given its purposes and aims, in the context of this paper, the results primarily dealing with the issues of youth workers' educational and training pathways and personal and organisational recognition and professionalisation have been selected and, accordingly, will be only considered.

3. Youth workers' educational and training pathways

The three studies carried out under the RAY research programme, and the mutual support resulting from the analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data gathered, generally converge in highlighting how the beneficiaries consider the E+/YiA Programme to be a viable tool for enhancing and consolidating their knowledge, competences and skills, adding new value to their training pathways and giving consistency to what has been defined as the *learning continuum* (Chisholm, 2008).

⁹ In particular, the team of the University of Salerno has supervised the sampling of the Italian participants in E+/YiA to be interviewed or surveyed through the different (sub) projects of RAY; it has controlled and cleaned the datasets and analysed the results of the questionnaires administered to the Italian sub-sample; it ensured the transcription and analysis of the in-depth interviews conducted with Italian participants, as well as the production of the protocols provided by the RAY network for the international comparison; finally, it has produced Reports on the different (sub)projects in which the wider RAY programme is organised; it has taken part to the international meetings of the RAY Network and contributed to the national and international dissemination activities.

It should however be immediately underlined that from the analysis carried out, a profile of the young people who take part in E+/YiA emerges, characterised by the prevalence of subjects with high-medium human, cultural and social capital, and therefore by the lacking – particularly, though not only, in Italy – of young people with fewer opportunities¹⁰. At the same time, those who join E+/YiA show – even before the beginning of the projects – a high level of aspirations and social commitment.

Moving from this background, the activities carried out under the Programme generally provide the beneficiaries with more flexible attitudes, values and practices, openness to new situations and contexts, as well as a greater willingness to enter into dialogue with “others”. It should also be noted that the respondents to both the RAY-MON and the RAY-LTE questionnaires emphasise the significant role of the Programme in allowing them to increase and consolidate their cognitive¹¹, cooperative¹², technical, creative and relational skills, as well as those linked to the sphere of *agency*, communication and language¹³. Furthermore, participation in the projects offers the possibility to acquire transversal skills, more often linked to an individual dimension, thus contributing to increasing the reflexive and critical abilities of the young people who take part in it. As shown by the in-depth interviews carried out before the projects, these are elements that strongly define the motivations and expectations of those who are about to take part in the Programme:

I expect to know about different realities of countries I have never had the opportunity to come in contact with and then I expect to acquire competences on ... how to say ... the skills to design interventions in a shared way with realities which are, however, similar but also very different from ours, here. [...] I also come to know a bit more ... how to say ... about projects that affect young people and hence a bit how and what are the possibilities in other countries and different cultural contexts (RAY CAP – n. 4 - first interview with a participant to a project of YWM).

Furthermore, there is the perception of an incremental process, which does not end with the participation in a single project, but which, on the contrary, always needs to be stimulated further:

¹⁰ In this respect, it is worth noting that Italy shows one of the lowest level in Europe: only Bulgaria is lower, while the great majority of the projects supported by Ireland have seen the presence of people with fewer opportunities (Bammer, Fennes & Karsten, 2017).

¹¹ The RAY-LTE questionnaires show how the positive effects of the Programme on the development of cognitive skills grow proportionally with age and the level of education.

¹² This is an aspect that assumes a specific relevance for young women.

¹³ Here it is worth mentioning that, when comparing the answers given before the projects to the RAY-LTE questionnaires by the respondents of Italian origin and those of foreign origin, the latter state to have greater language skills.

I will never abandon the education of young people. The basic question is to understand how this desire, ambition, even moral example can be combined with the opportunities ... of course it depends on what can be done. Surely with organisations like mine and the *Informagiovani*¹⁴ you can do it, ... or planning. [...] So I will personally continue to propose and commit myself. [...] I will continue to apply for and be a candidate for activities both as a participant and as an educator in Erasmus+ and not. [...] at the local level, I will continue as a single participant or with the two organisations I collaborate with to activate non-formal, recruitment and inclusion pathways in both schools and outside (RAY CAP – n. 9 - first interview with a participant in a TCA activity).

This is linked to an aspect that emerged several times during the research, that is the explicit emphasis on reflexivity: the latter allows the subject to rework previous knowledge and to (re)construct (new) meanings, thus generating a knowledge of a higher order, with it being indispensable to face the chances and challenges inherent in a complex, fluid and risky society (Merico, 2011; Mongelli, 2016). The dimension of reflexivity, particularly evident during the in-depth interviews with youth workers and youth leaders carried out for RAY-CAP, becomes a powerful tool that is able to reorganise from within the educational and training pathways, as well as, more generally, the biographical and identity building. In other words, it stimulates the exploration and re-exploration of occasions and opportunities, thus transforming them into knowledge (Archer, 2009). Along with this process, as supported also by the results of the surveys carried out within the monitoring (sub)project (RAY-MON), E+/YiA becomes for the Italian beneficiaries – in particular for the eldest, and regardless of their gender – a chance to gain greater awareness of their own role, their own educational, training and professional perspectives, as well as to plan future pathways and the achievement of further competences.

This feeling sometimes translates into a positive feedback mechanism that passes from the single beneficiaries to their organisations, with concrete and rewarding results on the *modus operandi* of the latter. The organisations are thus invested with new purposes and methodologies, acquired through the cooperation with members of other (international) organisations, in an incremental process of network and social capital construction:

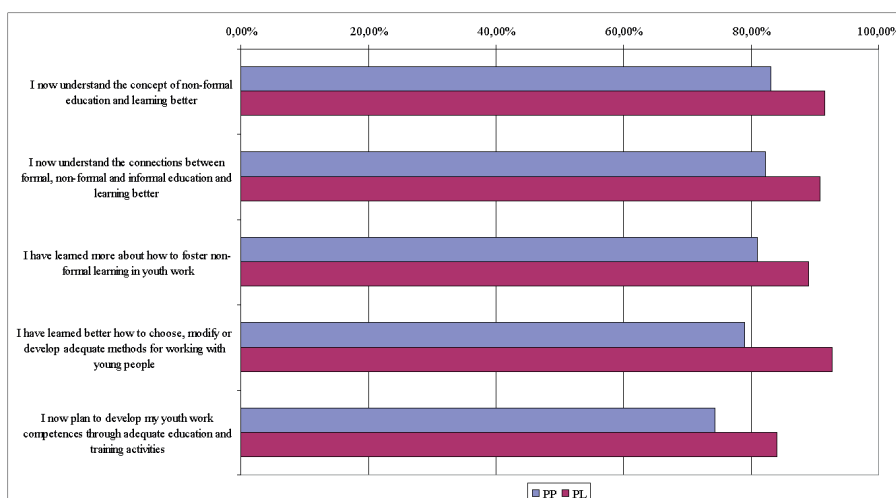
Thanks also to this activity [...] we are working on the creation of this project. [...] Completing this project is a way to show all the knowledge we have acquired and the desire we have to be able to participate and to transfer to other young people what we have learned (RAY CAP – n. 10 - second interview with a participant in a TCA activity).

¹⁴ “*Informagiovani*” is the common label for the Italian “Youth Information Centre”.

A greater awareness of their role and capabilities ... that made it possible to work in ... just ... more aware, in order to improve [...] the quality of work you do and the type of service you somehow offer (RAY CAP – n. 1 - second interview with a participant in a TCA activity).

The results of the questionnaire administered during RAY-MON also show, however, several occasions in which this feedback mechanism – from the beneficiaries to their organisations – becomes stuck or works only in part. This is particularly evident in relation to the “*recognition and validation processes of young people’s skills*” and – once again – in the capacity of organisations to increase the inclusion of “*younger people with less opportunities*”. Moving from this aspect, the in-depth interviews carried out during the RAY-CAP (sub)project allow to recognise that, when the organisation are more structured, the positive effects of the participation in E+/YiA tend to increase (mostly because the higher level of internal interexchange among the different actors and levels). On the contrary, when organisations have a weaker structure, the effects do not reach the same ability to affect the sharing of the achieved resources.

Graph. 1. “Please indicate the effects of your participation in this project on your work/involvement in the youth field” (sum of answers “Agree” and “Strongly agree”) (PP = 543; PL = 292)



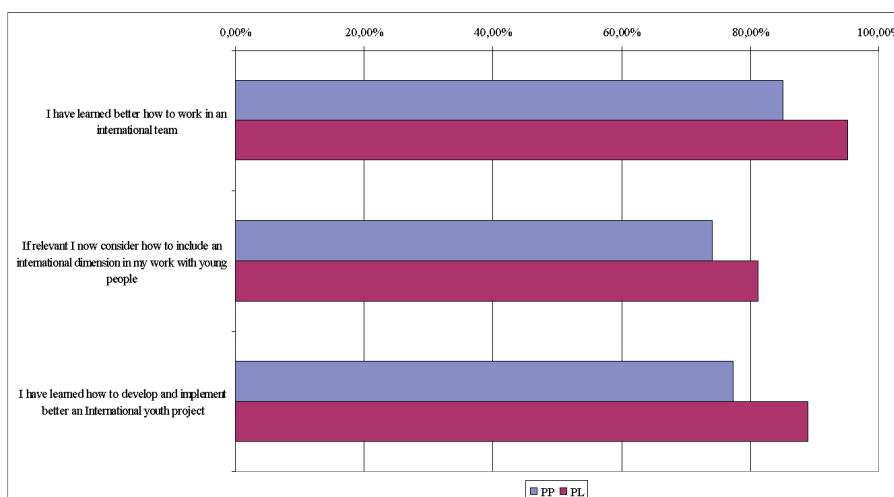
Source: RAY-MON

Participation in the activities of the Programme seems to provide, as highlighted by the data collected in RAY-MON, a decisive contribution to a greater understanding of the NFE process and the potential of youth work. This is coupled with the acquisition of personal and professional skills in the design and implementation of projects, as well as with networking and

internationalisation. All these aspects result in positive effects on the methodologies and practices used by those working in Italy within the youth field. The analysis of the RAY-MON data highlights, in this respect, how the PPs and, above all, PLs claim that they have acquired, by virtue of their participation in the projects, a better understanding of the “*non-formal education concept*” and the “*connections between formal, non-formal and informal education*”. Another important result is that of the PL’s greater awareness – with values that exceed 92%¹⁵ – in relation to “*methods [...] to work with young people*”. The beneficiaries, therefore, seem to “*discover*” the NFE by virtue of the Programme, but also state, with a trend that is more evident for PLs and which increases with age and is slightly more noticeable for females, that they are (now) planning to use the non-formal learning and learning opportunities acquired in their everyday practices.

This “*discovery*”, however, is not situated at the local or national levels. It rather immediately assumes an international locus, which places the local and national ones in the background. In relation to this element (see Graph 2), the results achieved by the Programme highlight the importance of aspects such as the ability “*to work in an international team*”, to “*include an international dimension in my work with young people*”, as well as “*to develop and implement better an International youth project*”.

Graph. 2. “Please indicate the effects of your participation in this project on your work/involvement in the youth field” (Sum of answers “Agree” and “Strongly agree”) (PP = 543; PL = 292)

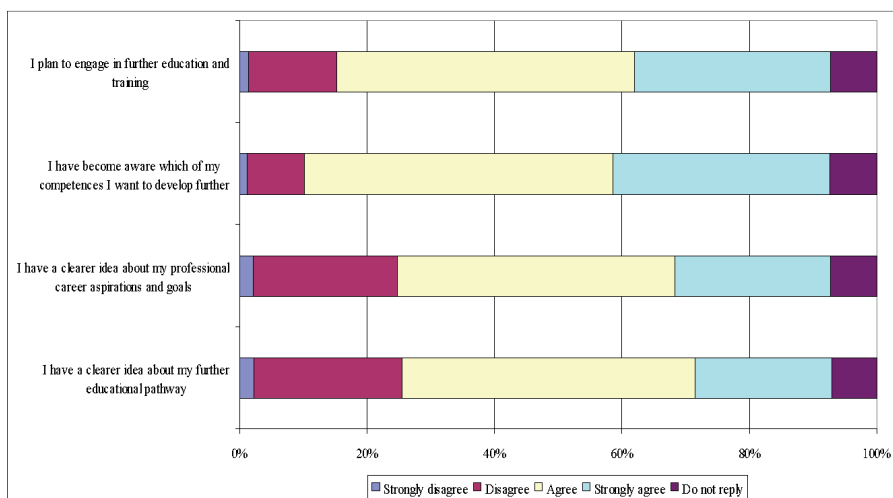


Source: RAY-MON

¹⁵ The data refers to the sum of the answers “*I agree*” and “*strongly agree*”.

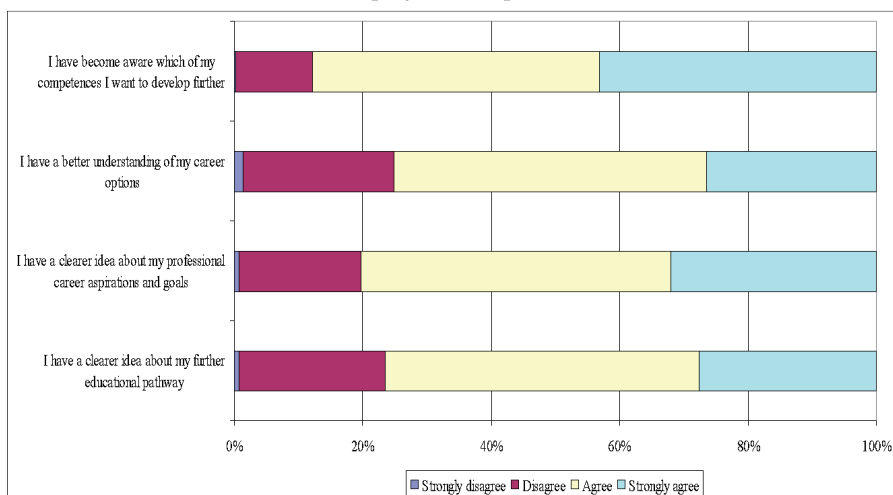
Regarding one of the central nodes analysed in this paragraph – the impact of the Programme on the future educational and professional paths of the beneficiaries – taking into account that the analysis highlights how there are no clear differences between males and females, the following two graphs illustrate the answers provided, in turn, by PPs and PLs.

Graph. 3. “Please indicate the impact of the participation in the project on your educational and professional path” (PP = 1954)



Source: RAY-MON

Graph. 4. “Please indicate the impact of the participation in the project on your educational and professional path” (PL = 295)



Source: RAY-MON

Regarding the PPs, 82.9% stated that their participation in the projects made them aware about “*which of my competencies I want to develop further*”, to which is added the indication of 67.4% who claimed to have “*a clearer idea about my further educational pathway*”: an aspect that is also supported by the younger PPs. As a consequence, almost 8 out of 10 PPs intend to “*to engage in further education and training*”. Not least, the data show how the participation in the Programme offers the PPs a “*clearer idea about my professional career aspirations and goals*”. To the PLs, the Programme offers “*a clearer idea about my professional career aspirations and goals*” (80.3%) and “*a better understanding of my career options*” (75.1%). In this case, it clearly emerges how the Programme is able to give the PLs a greater level of reflexivity, which, in turn, gives them a greater awareness of the areas where they still need to train, while also recognising their potentialities.

More in general, although unquestionably a general positive attitude of the beneficiaries toward E+/YiA seems to emerge, it is important to stress that the most important effect seems to be that the involvement in the Programme stimulates – both for males and females, and though with slightly different meanings between PPs and PLs, as between the different age groups – the awareness of having to further develop their competences and potentialities.

Another relevant aspect refers to the desire to use European projects to offer opportunities for growth and training to those who share the same organisational and life situations. In this respect, the results highlight a general profile of young respondents characterised by a strong sense of responsibility towards the local community¹⁶. This feeling is linked to a desire to open-up their own context of reference to the European and international dimension, with which the Programme allows to get in touch with. The Programme becomes, in this direction, a resource through which to enhance their own local context, assuming a specific characterisation in Southern Italy and the peripheral/marginal areas:

Surely, I would use all the tools I have acquired to go home and improve my region. Because, like saying, it is part of my identity that of my territory. [...] I know that the region where I was born has so much potential that I want to bring it to light ... [but] I need the tools and the experience to do so. So, these three years I've gone through the Erasmus+ project [...] ... I will use them for ... with this intent, in short.

¹⁶ Within this scenario, it is worth noting that, concerning the local community, as shown by the results of the questionnaires administered through RAY-MON and the in-depth interviews conducted in RAY-CAP, the Programme works very well in terms of activating networks and relationships, while having some difficulty in acting on the awareness of the needs of young people.

I ran away, but with the intention of going back. Let's say so (RAY LTE – n. 2 - second interview with a participant on a Training course).

... among all things, I would like to take the European experience that is something missing in the small centres. That is, they do not feel Europe. But I would like to take my experience to the service of the community, of small communities (RAY LTE – n. 8 - second interview with a participant to a YE).

In this case, the mobility – the physical displacement into “another” (international) context – together with the support of participatory methodologies and of NFE practices – specific to the context of youth work – facilitate the creation of meaningful learning contexts where the beneficiaries of E+/YiA projects succeed in coming out from their habits and, in favourable learning conditions, from their mental abilities, thereby activating what is called a *cognitive decentralisation*. Coming out from their own beliefs and convictions, outside from their *comfort zones*, they are provided with a fertile ground for intercultural learning, in which multiple levels and learning styles can be put in place, and where the emotional/affective part plays a significant role:

I would like to acquire new competences that could serve me during this journey. I think that they are a key element also because being abroad gives me the opportunity to know other points of view [...]. So, it could be really ..., indeed, it will definitely be something of growth and above all a way to acquire new knowledge to bring them back here and apply them during meetings (RAY CAP – n. 10 - first interview with a participant in a TCA activity).

I discovered a new world and I also said: “Do you know what's up? Why not try to go further?”. I tried to set myself another goal and I did it thanks to these experiences. Because the whole world that revolves around it is difficult to understand. But then you go inside, you are confronted with people of other nationalities and the desire comes... (RAY LTE – n. 6 - second interview with a participant on a training course).

... a kind of world I did not know at all. And so already this ... I was surprised. [...] Let's say that [...] at the beginning I found myself a bit disorientated by the thing. But then I adapted myself, and in fact all the things I did have served a lot [...] the fact of having to work in a group with people you do not know and then evaluate yourself [...]. So I did and compared myself with a world that was totally unknown to me. Let's say ... I've met a new world, I've met very nice people and then I have seen things from another perspective, because anyway ... [...] catapulting you into a different reality makes you change a

bit your point of view. Yes, because I come here by myself without knowing anyone and found myself in a group of people coming from different countries that I do not know about sharing things, then it's a bit ... really a different reality (RAY CAP – n. 3 - second interview with a participant to a project of YWM).

Finally, it can be argued that the training pathways to which Italian youth workers are participating in the E+/YiA framework offer the opportunity to acquire those useful and necessary competences to locate the interviewees pathways within the broader framework of NFE practices and of international youth work, while also comparing themselves, without any solid reference at a national level, with a stimulating international environment, with different educational and participatory methods. This, then, allows to improve the qualitative aspects of the projects and to strengthen the project management competences, especially through the construction of transnational networks to be activated when needed.

4. The difficult recognition and the problem of professionalisation

The policies, programmes and measures assumed by the EU and CoE over the course of the last twenty-five years have allowed to define a specific reference framework not only for the development of NFE processes and practices, but also for the validation of learning and recognition of the actors and organisations operating within the youth sector (Chisholm, 2011; Morciano, Scardigno & Merico, 2015; European Commission, 2015; Ord *et al.*, 2018).

In Italy, however, the absence of an isomorphism between the formal, non-formal and informal educational arenas generates problems in the recognition and professionalisation processes (Morciano & Scardigno, 2018). This phenomenon (can) determine(s) the debasement of the *Lifelong Learning* approach solicited by international organisations, with negative repercussions on the recognition of competences (Mongelli, 2006; Chisholm, 2011) and, more generally, on the location of the subjects within the organisational context and the labour market.

The data of the three studies carried out in the RAY framework show how, in the youth field, personal, organisational and professional pathways need, more so in Italy, a continuity of the relationship with the Programme and with the activities that take place in it. The following subsections will discuss these three areas in detail.

Personal pathways

It is now known that, in the national context, even in the presence of a long, rich and plural tradition of interventions traceable to youth work practices, it is difficult to recognise the scopes of intervention as well as the

professional figures that characterise the work of “socio-educational instructors” in the European and international contexts (Bazzanella, 2010; Morciano, 2015; Merico, Gualtieri & Tinaburri, 2017; Morciano & Scardigno, 2018).

In this scenario, taking part in E+/YiA places young Italian beneficiaries – in some respects, *shamelessly* – in front of the figure of the “youth worker”: this takes on particular importance for those who, despite having previous experience in educational projects with young people, do not (yet) have a custom relationship with the European and international contexts. For them, participation in E+/YiA offers a framework within which to (re)place their own educational and professional pathways, as well as to see – that is to *recognise* – themselves in another perspective. Thus, regarding the settling and professionalisation of the figure of the youth worker, taking part in the Programme almost outlines, from a subjective point of view, as clearly emerges from the interviews carried out within RAY-CAP, a “*back to the future*”: it allows the individual participants to (re)place, (re)define and, therefore, (re)cognise in a new way their contribution and the broader field within which this takes place:

I didn't imagine that you could organise such things. The kind of knowledge I have acquired can be absolutely re-proposed. Because I think of the reality where I am and it can easily be done. This is an evaluation in general ... then I think I will do it in my business in the future (RAY CAP – n. 3 - second interview with a participant in a project of YWM).

In other and more explicit terms, participation in the activities of E+/YiA allows the beneficiaries, operators and educators to feel, perceive and recognise themselves as “*youth workers*”, as well as part of a community of practices that takes on an international significance. This is an aspect innervated within a more general perspective – and that was already discussed in the previous paragraph – according to which the Programme becomes, for those involved in it, an occasion around which to gain greater awareness of their educational, training and professional perspectives, as well as to plan “*reflexively*” future pathways and the acquisition of additional skills. This often parallels with the claim of the “*non-recognition*” of their own contribution and work in the national context:

... but I see that [...] there is no real recognition of the work, say, that it is done and the efforts that are then required to do one's job in a certain way ... (RAY CAP – n. 1 - first interview with a participant in a TCA activity).

Nevertheless, the beneficiaries of the Programme demonstrate to have achieved three interlinked goals: one refers to the awareness of the relevance of subjectivity; one to the responsibility in the governance of their own growth process; the third deals with the need to reflexively construct

their own biographies within a scenario characterised by a continuous process of transformation. On the whole, this is also thanks to the acknowledgment of the obstacles due to the difficult recognition of their professional figure (Chisholm, 2008; Merico, 2013; Taru, Coussée & Williamson, 2014; European Commission, 2015; SALTO, 2016; Bammer, Fennes & Karsten, 2017).

Organisational pathways

Regarding the effect on the organisational models and pathways in assessing the impact of the experiences carried out in the international context, the interviewees attributed importance to the following aspects: first, the sharing of methodologies, intervention tools or specific activities to be developed with youth groups at a local level; second, the comparison of project ideas and best practices emerging from other contexts; third and not least, the opportunity to enter into a relationship with and to contribute to the development of youth work in the European context, through the construction of transnational networks.

Along this path, in the first instance, the participants interviewed for RAY-MON straightaway recognise a significant impact of the Programme in enhancing the competences and skills of their organisations in the “*provision of non-formal education*”: this is more evident for PLs (PL = 86.3%; PP = 77.5%) and in particular for those aged over 30.

An element that – as clearly highlighted during the in-depth interviews – seems, sometimes, to be in clear discontinuity with the national context:

The methodologies for me were completely new because in Italy... I don't know... we don't have this kind of ... because we did a workshop on non-formal education ... [...]. Here I've participated in many workshops on this topic but it was one thing we said to be unilateral: so there was someone who spoke at the front and we listened and asked questions. Here it was set differently: everyone said what they had to say, we were also seated differently ... it was not set ... Here's this really struck me: the method of how to convey this information, but for me it was completely new. I never participated [before ...]. For me it was the first time. I also asked for more information about this method of teaching and learning because I had never heard of it ... and I had never participated in projects where they used it. They explained to me a little about how it works and there anyway for these projects it is very used ... because personally puts you into play, it is much more engaging than sitting and listening to the teacher, say. It is completely different ... (RAY CAP – n. 10 - second interview with a participant in a TCA activity).

... very participatory [...] at first it was unsettling, then we realised ... But at first it was a bit unsettling: because the contents were being asked to us [...]. It was again the topic and evaluate the impact of training activities [...] having had previous experience of this evaluation ... but never

in such terms as specific [...]. On the one hand there was the novelty of the subject, on the other of the methodology used for training [...]. I was quite at ease [...] ... there was an initial moment but on the other hand, it has given me so much ... it's always like this, in the sense that in times of difficulty, I've drawn from them more opportunities. Also questioning your information methods, your didactic methods ... was useful (RAY CAP – n. 1 - second interview with a participant in a TCA activity).

It is also worth noting that another aspect on which E+/YiA seems to be able to determine extremely positive outcomes on the beneficiaries' organisations is that of *networks* and *partnerships*. The results of the questionnaire administered in RAY-MON highlight how the participants interviewed – with prevalence for the males – recognise in the Programme a context in which to increase their “*contacts/partnerships with other countries*” (PL = 86.3%; PP = 79.2%) as well as obtain greater networking abilities at a European level (PL = 84.4%). Less relevant, but still appreciable, is the benefit of being able to participate in “*more international projects*”, which is more noticeable among PLs (PP = 70.1%; PL = 78.1%) and those with an upper middle level of education (72.6% among the PPs and 93.3% among the PLs).

Another aspect considered is the *transfer of competences*. In this case, when answering the RAY-MON questionnaire, the respondents agreed with the assertion that the project has contributed to increasing “*the transfer of knowledge and the implementation of good practices to everyone in the organisation*” (PL= 82.2%; PP= 78%). However, it is important to refer to some specific experiences reported by the participants:

On returning [...] I told both the manager and two colleagues of this experience, also giving some input on how some things might be directly used here. Some of them would also like to start ... (RAY CAP – n. 9 - second interview with a participant in a TCA activity).

The experience has been passed on to a cooperative where I work [... there have been] two special meetings where the management teams of the cooperative were involved [...] where we showed [...] what we did, we explained what the training course was, who was there and who was not there and imagined together [which] could be the future of this initiative [...] where I work [...] that is very concrete examples reported within the cooperative to make it clear the importance of getting in touch with other experiences (RAY CAP – n. 6 - second interview with a participant in a project of YWM).

These elements take on greater importance when considering that joining the Programme often becomes an opportunity to build new moments of sharing and to give life to new projects, often implemented at a European level. An aspect that often arises during the in-depth interviews carried out in RAY-CAP:

... the thing that comes to mind is that thanks to that course a thought opened-up, a thought has spread even in the cooperative, a style of philosophy that a cooperative has brought as best practice. And so we have discussed ... often this comes up, a way of working that somehow was already part of my cooperative's DNA. But that they managed to structure it much better than we can do, in my opinion ... (RAY CAP – n. 6 - third interview with a participant in a project of YWM).

In other words, taking part in E+/YiA becomes itself capable of (re)motivating towards new forms of participation in international training and mobility projects: this despite the difficulties of recognition and professionalisation that, as will be discussed in the next paragraphs, characterise the professional pathways of the interviewed beneficiaries.

Professional pathways

If participation in the Programme makes it possible to redefine and reposition the role as well as restore value to organisations through international contacts and experimentation with new methodologies, the Italian context of educational and youth services and policies, on the contrary, finds it difficult to recognise the importance of NFE, as well as in offering opportunities for the recognition and classification of the figure of the youth worker.

The perception that the respondents have is clearly different from the European and international context with which, in the course of the activities supported by the Programme, they come into contact with. In their representation, the international context (and in the first instance, the European level) offers occasions and contexts that are more capable to face – even within the *youth field* – a professional and training framework of growing complexity and uncertainty (Benadusi & Molina, 2018), increasingly marked by sudden and unpredictable changes, which calls for flexibility and autonomy of decision by those, both individual and collective, who are involved in it:

I think [the Project] has changed so much in my planning but also in my ability to handle my work. And so this obviously comes back to my personal life. Because I've learned so many things: I've learned how to manage time, I've learned how to handle the issues, I've also learned to let many things run and thus allow for a truer exchange between people. [...] This is also being used for future projects that I am preparing for (RAY LTE – n. 8 - second interview with a participant in a Youth Exchange).

This is particularly evident when focusing on the perception of the *Youth-Pass* (the tool developed to favour the recognition and validation of non-formal learning in the European context – SALTO, 2011). The respondents generally recognise its positive contribution in terms of reflexivity and for the self-assessment of learning. Starting from this, almost contextually, it comes called into question the “expendability” of the tool within the organisational

context as well as in the national labour market, which is struggling to recognise its validity:

But in my opinion, it is useful [...] but in short: words on words ... on skills ... all these things here, the most beautiful in the world ... but the employer will never read it (RAY CAP – n. 2 - second interview with a participant in a TCA activity).

I have no idea what it's for ... and it's the third one I have. Can you tell me what? I only write it in my CV ... it also makes me smile to have a YouthPass at the age of 43 ... and I always write it. What is it for? [...] It's not a strictly curricular certification ... therefore, it's not useful for any type of job selection ... it supports your ability to stay, even your experience, to stay in enlarged European contexts (RAY CAP – n. 9 - second interview with a participant in a TCA activity).

In general, the strategies adopted by the respondents encounter a very significant obstacle in the national legislative vacuum on NFE and the valorisation of the skills of youth workers. In some cases, this ends up stifling the ambitions of young people in the youth field; other times, this condition contributes to the belief that only in other European countries – or better still, once again, in the context of the policies adopted by European institutions – is it possible to meet their professional expectations and develop the necessary competences to carry out training projects. Definitively, there is a clear sense that the Programme offers decisive tools and opportunities for the definition of training paths, identity and professionalism, that have a preventive maturation outside the national context. Thus, when faced with the question “*Have you done other training activities apart from this? Do you want to do any other training?*”, some of the participants interviewed ardently responded:

Eh, on everything there is ... I would go anywhere. I'm going to go [...] actually (RAY CAP – n. 9 - second interview with a participant in a TCA activity).

Narratives as the one just cited are emblematic of the fact that personal pathways, organisational developments, along with professional recognition in youth work, in Italy, seem to be firmly rooted in – and need – a continuity of a relationship with the E+/YiA Programme and with the activities that take place in it.

5. Youth workers in Italy: prospects and challenges

The findings of the RAY research programme highlight the strategic importance that E+/YiA assumes in relation to the training, recognition and professionalisation of (aspiring) youth workers in Italy.

The results demonstrate how the involvement of the young Italian beneficiaries of E+/YiA strengthens their training pathways, offers them the possibility to acquire transversal competences in learning contexts and contributes, more generally, to outlining new educational and professional paths, defined alongside future investments in the youth field. Furthermore, as revealed by the three (sub)projects carried out, these processes are experienced within an incremental dynamic of mutual reinforcing.

This does not imply only positive facets. As it has been shown, critical aspects from RAY also emerge. However, the research clearly shows that the latter do not arise in connection with specific or distinct aspects of the functioning of the single projects developed within the European Programme. They rather refer – and this needs to be clearly pointed out – to the barriers that (explicitly or implicitly) limit the access to E+/YiA: it then seems to be not yet able to reach those young people with fewer starting opportunities and resources, thus mainly contributing to the strengthening of those who are already equipped.

In accordance with the representations that appear from the answers given by those young Italians who took part in the Actions funded through E+/YiA, the general framework works, and does so consistently. In this direction, the picture that emerges from the analysis carried out in this paper could seem to be overly positive; and maybe, because the kind of goals that underlie the RAY research programme, this is likely to be the case. However, in our opinion, this is also linked to the fact that E+/YiA is a tool working on a matter which is becoming increasingly important in the European context, while it has not received equal attention and recognition in Italy yet.

Moving from this broad background, the cooperation and interactions that take place within the European framework are also an opportunity to acquire new knowledge and competences in relation to the conception of specific activities and/or larger projects to be developed in the home context. At the same time, they allow for the implementation of new organisational methodologies, acquired thanks to the construction of transnational networks. The results also show the emergence among the Programme beneficiaries of reflexive and critical competences, with them becoming able to self-recognise, often for the first time, in the figure of the youth worker, despite having had (in particular for subjects with previous experience of participation and mobility) long been dealing with that kind of professionalism.

Moreover, for those working in the field of youth policies and NFE, the involvement in the activities supported by E+/YiA helps in feeling members of an international community of practices and professionalism that gives meaning to their work and which also returns a greater awareness of their strengths and weaknesses. These potentialities, when effectively combined and embedded, create an *interlocking*, a sort of emotional-cognitive plot

(Benadusi & Molina, 2018), that reveals the pervasive nature of the training and educational processes that take shape in the European context. Thus, the image of an *attractive* mobility, creating virtuous circles that open from time to time to further mobility and training experiences, is confirmed. Mobility actions allow (aspiring) youth workers to face a challenging international environment, in which they can fortify their theoretical, methodological, organisational and management competences, even during informal moments.

This characterisation is also revealed by the results of other studies concerning youth participation in the youth European Programmes (Bontempi & Pocaterra, 2007; Chessa, 2010; Eurobarometer, 2015; Rizzo, 2016; Cairns *et al.*, 2018). The other side of the coin is, however, the fact that these circles end up becoming *vicious* when taking part in European mobility projects involves (mostly) the same young people, already sensitised and informed, that have already participated in other and/or previous projects and that, therefore, see in the European experience a safety valve that does not seem to take root in the national reality.

The main future challenge of E+/YiA therefore seems to be twofold: on the one hand, to preserve and, where possible, to increase the mutual exploitation of mobility and participation within the European and international dimension; while on the other, to increase the number of people involved in this process so as to create more comprehensive inclusion processes.

It is sure that, in connection with most of the dimensions considered above, the direct effects on communities and, in particular, on organisations are less marked than those on the individual. However, it seems plausible to say that – following a process of “*contamination of local realities*” – the effects on the latter end up in producing (indirect and) sensible effects on the first, both in terms of policies, activities and projects for young people. Several occasions are thus created, through which the local dimension comes into contact with the European and transnational ones and the beneficiaries can associate their own context to the European and international dimensions, with which the Programme allows them to come into contact. This axis, however, fails to involve (and almost bypasses) the national dimension, which is often excluded from the narratives of the young people interviewed. There seems to be – in brief – a sharp jump from the local to the European level. This is particularly evident in the characterization that the figure of the youth worker is assuming in the local organisational contexts, which is increasingly portrayed around a distinctly European model.

Undoubtedly, as it has been pointed out so far, Erasmus+/Youth in Action seems to offer young people who join it opportunities that are difficult to live in the national context, and that are perceived as able to (re)model their perspectives and practices. It also allows Italian youth workers to (re)define their training and professional trajectories, which are now located

and engaged within a strictly international horizon, as well as being able to (self)recognise their professional role and figure using this (for someone of them, new) term. However, it should be noted that – in order not to disperse the beneficial effects of the Programme, discussed in the previous pages – it is necessary to avoid the risk that this path will flatten exclusively within a model based on the international dimension. The research bears witness to the, often tacit, but by no means less pressing, urgency of constantly putting in critical relation the model proposed by the European programmes with the distinctive features of some consolidated experiences (Coussée, 2010; Morciano, 2018) and, therefore, with the national and local traditions (Jeffs & Ord, 2017).

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