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24. PARENT TRAINING EXPERIENCES IN ITALY

Transformative Learning Models in Comparison

ADULT EDUCATION AND PARENT TRAINING IN ITALY

With this contribution I would like to present the results of an action research project conducted in Palermo by the pedagogical team at the Department of Psychology and Education Sciences between 2010 and 2012. This work intended to test a new parent training scheme aimed at state schools. The following paragraph will first describe some turning points in the history of adult education in Italy which, in the last two decades, has also included supporting would-be parents, giving rise to a growing number of parent training initiatives. Then, the novelty of the project is detailed: a main role in it was played by workshop activities conducted in small teams using a narrative dialogue to foster reflection on one’s couple and parental life experiences.

A Virtually Unknown World

Since the second half of the 20th century Italy has seen an increase in initiatives and organizations aimed at promoting adult education in intentional, i.e., organically structured, ways (Demetrio, 1999). In the 1950s adult education was generally understood as primary literacy education. Nevertheless, educating adults was not considered a merely instrumental problem, but also a cultural matter. As well as teaching how to read and write, it was necessary to help in the desire to free the individual and the community from their depressed condition. In the 1960s educators had begun to frame adult education as the possibility of experiencing, later in life, a new, greater sense of responsibility about the choices of one’s youth. The aim was to promote the ability to take on new social, intellectual and moral tasks within local and national communities (Bellingreri, 2013).

Only a few decades later, in the 1970s and 1980s, adult education was considered equally as an aid to the development of a professional conscience and the enhancement of the art of “learning how to be” (Delors, 1996), aimed at fostering real freedom. In this sense, adult education has a twofold purpose: on the one hand, to encourage the responsibility of adults for their own education and participation in society’s productive and political development; on the other hand, to promote the growth of every person, so as to improve the quality of his/her life (Galli, 2000).

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In the past two decades Italian educators have also seen and practiced adult education as a form of professional support to people choosing to spend their life together (spouses and parents), so that adults can learn to competently deal with not only their working life but also their family life. Everything is achieved by two different educational pathways: (a) training young people for family life; and (b) training (married) adults for married life and parenting (Scabini & Rossi, 2007).

Out of these pathways, a growing number of Parent Training Teams has emerged. In Italy they are sometimes simply called “Parent Training” (Robiati, 1996) and in some cases “Paths for the Promotion and Enrichment of Couple-bonding and Parenting” (Iafrate & Rosnati, 2007). Although still little investigated, this is an increasingly important area, because the promoters of this brand of adult education are often public authorities and public education institutions.

It must be added that these initiatives introduce a new way of thinking about adult education. It, in fact, has the task of helping increase social responsibility, first of all by fostering the formation of professional and civic awareness; on the other hand, it can also encourage personal responsibility and boost competencies in the care of loved ones, which is just as important for an adult in order to become generative.

**An Action Research Project in Palermo**

The author of this article is a member of the Education and Social Pedagogy unit at the University of Palermo (Department of Psychology and Education). With support from the Catholic Association of Italian Primary Teachers (AICM), this department has promoted an educational pathway for teachers skilled to lead parent-training groups («Insegnanti animatori di educazione familiare») during the academic years 2010/2011 and 2011/2012. The research group has taken advantage of the collaboration with the Center for Pedagogical Studies on Marriage and Family Life directed by Prof. Luigi Pati, an institution of excellence within the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Brescia. The project directly involved forty primary school and kindergarten teachers (four-fifths of them parents), from all parts of Sicily. The purpose of the educational path was to enable the participants to acquire the skills needed in order to plan and lead parent training groups in state schools.

The volume La cura genitoriale. Un sussidio per le scuole dei genitori (Parental Care. How to Plan and Lead Parent Training Groups in Schools), published in late 2012, is a collection of the lectures and some of the workshop materials used during the two-year project (Bellingreri, 2012). In it the scope and purpose of the project are presented. This work was driven by the conviction (namely, the hypothesis to be tested) that learning processes are more effective if the subjects are involved in workshop activities, proposed by either themselves or the animators (the latter are in fact the actual researchers who were fully involved in the activities). Here individual participants were invited to tell the ways in which they usually confront couple and family life, i.e., mental habits or typical reactions before emerging critical events.