

Capacitating the participation of (new) generations in a pedagogical perspective

Capacitare la partecipazione delle (nuove) generazioni in una prospettiva pedagogica

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ABSTRACT

In Europe, one third of young people are considered at risk of poverty and social exclusion; these age groups are subject to low representation in political bodies. Phenomena such as these determine the increase of generational inequalities intersecting profound demands for active citizenship education, responsive to the principle of *inter-generational equity*. This principle implies equal access to opportunities for new generations, as well as an educational ideal that rewrites the role of adult society. Recognizing pedagogical project-making as an orientation value for thinking about, and implementing youth policies, this article reflects on the realistic and inclusive scope of the *inputs* offered by the European Union regarding youth participation. The implementation of participation requires recognizing sociocultural heterogeneity as a value, as well as educational projects and research actions with a participatory orientation which, by making use of co-responsibility among different actors, elect the *capacitation* of the rights of each young person as a potential promise of a participatory future.

In Europa un terzo dei giovani risulta a rischio di esclusione sociale e povertà, le stesse fasce d'età giovanili sono soggette ad una scarsa rappresentatività in seno agli organi politici. Fenomeni come questi determinano l'incremento delle disuguaglianze generazionali intersecando le istanze di una formazione alla cittadinanza attiva rispondenti al principio di *equità intergenerazionale*. Tale principio implica un'uguaglianza di accesso alle opportunità per le nuove generazioni, altresì un ideale educativo che riscriva il ruolo formativo della società adulta. Riconoscendo nella progettazione pedagogica una valenza orientativa per pensare e attuare le politiche giovanili, il contributo riflette sulla portata realistica e inclusiva degli *input* offerti dall'Unione Europea in seno alla partecipazione giovanile. Essa è letta come viatico per la fuoriuscita di tanti giovani dalla condizione di esclusione sociale, la cui realizzazione abbisogna del riconoscimento dell'eterogeneità socioculturale come valore nonché di progettualità formative e azioni di ricerca dall'indirizzo partecipativo che la *capacitazione* dei diritti di ciascun giovane come *promessa* ancora possibile di un futuro partecipativo.

Keywords: youth | intergenerational equity | participatory research-action | active citizenship

Parole chiave: giovani | equità intergenerazionale | ricerca-azione partecipata | cittadinanza attiva

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Introduction

In the Italian context, youth is undergoing a process of temporal expansion which, according to most recent *youth studies*, “extends maturity [...] up to 35 years of age, where we arbitrarily cut off young adulthood” (Rosci, 2022, p. 9). However, defining the boundaries between adulthood and youth has nowadays become complex, not only because of the delay that characterises today’s access to adult life but also because of the “youthification of adulthood” (Crawford, 2007). While such a generic reference to this phenomenon would require a multi-level unpacking, it is clear that we see here an adult “of the here and now” who adapts to living [...] in the illusion of an endless youth and who, by refusing to accept the changes produced by ageing, reveals the inauthenticity of his or her project” (Ladogana, 2019, p. 247). Indeed, *far* from considering the adult’s “unnatural” tendency of youthification as an attempt to understand young people, the latter, instead, risk being confused. The under-representation of youth, exemplified both by “demographic unproductivity” and by a “deeply old” average age” (Bonaventura, 2006, p. 25), as well as a “tired age” (Han, 2020) at the helm of organisations, risks leading to nuancing the issue of youth not just in terms of its borders, but at its core. What is sidelined is the reception of the voice of the young, whose acute awareness of iniquities is certainly no coincidence. As the results of a Global Survey conducted by *Ipsos Equalities Index* (2023) in 33 countries, show, young people are

typically more sensitive to inequality than older generations, although there are some notable exceptions to this general rule - less likely than older generations to believe that they live in a meritocracy - are increasingly likely to be drawn to ideas of “equity”, which develops the concept of equality further by arguing that equality of outcome is the right goal, rather than equality of opportunity (p. 4).

In order for the debate on youth not to be reduced to categoric crystallizations avoiding the realities of who, instead, experiences young people, regardless of whether they are marginalized or not, the challenge of a different perspective, *with* and *for* young people is in the hands of pedagogical professions. Young people cannot be denied the opportunity to deal with a “constructive” educational approach, one which, instead of “looking towards an empty and abstract theorizing”, finds “in an examination of possibilities [...] a prompt and an incentive for a reality *to build*, instead of being subjected to an already built reality, within the cult of what is *done*” (Bertin, 1971, p. 65).

1. Young people: recognizing generational inequalities

A little over a decade has passed, since the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions published its Policy Document on the third *EU Quality of Life in Europe Survey* (EQLS). Aimed at offering a multidimensional picture of the quality of life in Europe, it is based both on objective data about people’s lives, and on their impressions and subjective perceptions; it stated that about half of the EU’s youth aged over 18 lived in families with some form of material hardship. In other words, if 27% of interviewed young people could neither use up yearly holidays, nor invite friends to enjoy conviviality, the other 22% suffered from substantial material deprivation; this meant that they were unable to afford “to keep the home adequately warm, and [were] unable to afford a meal with meat, chicken or fish every second day”; to buy “new clothes rather than second-hand ones”; (p. 41). The survey, conducted in three distinct years (2003, 2007, and 2011), allowed for a comparison between the quality of life before and after the 2008 financial crisis and showed, for young people aged between 15 and 24, an increase in unemployment rates, from 15% to 21%. Today, in an age hurt by the pandemic crisis, youth unemployment has surpassed 40% in many EU countries, and the high number of young individuals who are neither in work nor in training, nor pursuing further education (NEETs) has reached its historic highest levels (16% of the whole EU population aged between 15 and 29). As shown in the *6th 2021 Report, Generational divide from the pandemic, to recovery and resilience [Il divario generazionale attraverso la pandemia, la ripresa e la resilienza]*, “all systemic crises affecting Italy have always had an unbalanced impact on younger age groups” (p. 13). In particular, Italy’s *Generational Divide Index* (GDI, 2021), the marker measuring the obstacles delaying achieving economic and social maturity for younger generations, shows unprece-

dened levels of intergenerational inequality. Considering the need to contextualise the data quoted above, it has to be noted that, if the former can be considered a consequence of the 2008 public debt crisis, which in Italy marked the first bounce back from the global financial shock, the latter bears the consequences of a global pandemic emergency which, in the case of young people, interfered with their processes of socialisation and their building of individual and collective identities. What emerges is that, in times of crisis, intergenerational imbalances consolidate, inevitably worsening generational inequalities (Rosina, 2020), as indicated in the premises, causing a *vulnerability*, incommensurate with regard to other age groups, in the young. The term vulnerability was chosen here in order to better focus on the conditions of the young, and because of the particular contexts in which this article intervenes. This “vulnerability”, in fact,

does not emerge from subjective biological aspects, but is connected to a social dimension that generates and amplifies it. It derives and depends on the context and relations that structure the young person’s existence and expose them to the risk of experiencing inequalities in terms of accessing, or enjoying, goods and resources. This is a vulnerability formed of different strata, degrees, and intensities (Crocetta, 2022, p. 76).

In this sense, it is about ensuring that a set of actions, able to detach from the logic of incapacitation, are put into practice. However, if it is true that young people “live” in the crisis, marked by the evolutions of globalization (Appadurai, 1996), neoliberalism (Baldacci, 2022), and the technologies of an *onlife* reality (Floridi, 2014), this does not mean that they are immune to a perception of the crisis as a pervasive condition of precariousness becoming a “distinct mark of life” (Renzitelli, Vaccarelli, Zizioli, 2023, p. 328). This is a risk that the generation born in the 1980s and 1990s in Europe and North America has run, coming to assimilate “the themes of uncertainty, instability scepticism before public intervention and the role of politics, generated by structural elements impacting individual life choices” (Rebughini, Colombo, Leonini, 2017, p. 12).

The current situation of the youth is imbued with an existential precarity that identifies in young people a tendency to “arm’ themselves with (sane) realism, and aim for materialistic goals, able to offer refuge and reassurance” (Lello, 2019, p. 19). If then, on the one hand, the reception of an imaginary future marked by uncertainty mines young people’s ability to generate aspiration, on the other hand, a lack of material and/or socio-cultural resources impacts not only their personal biographies but also their investment in the conditions of their communities, who are not amongst their priorities.

The demographic question contributes to subordinating the role of young people within the labour market and society in general; a trend towards ageing of the population in Europe, and population growth only in some EU countries, including Spain, Germany, and France. However, without downplaying the role that the impact of demographic changes has played on the situation for young people, according to ISTAT

In the last decades, demographic dynamics, delayed milestones in individuals’ lifecycles, widespread precarity and fragmentation in professional careers, and reduced levels of social mobility have contributed to compromising the possibilities, for high numbers of young people, of reaching for opportunities, and discouraged their participation at various levels (p. 25).

In this context, the narrative representing young people in the collective national imagination matters significantly. The *6th Report 2021*, by analysing measures in Italy’s *National Recovery and Resilience Plan* (NRRP), and by comparing it to equivalent plans in other EU countries, denotes “limited awareness [...] of the need to tackle the situation of young people not as a problem, but, instead, as an opportunity to seize with detailed medium-term and long-term strategy” (p. 15).

Being mindful of words used to “categorize” young people means taking a first step towards not weakening them even more so that they do not succumb to obscurantism that kills hope. In this sense, Europe, as an entity of unity in its multiplicity becomes an emblem and the source from which a “different” interpretation of young people can be derived. As a “mosaic” of heterogeneity, it requests us to “focus not so much on the essence of one category or the other [...], but on the intersection of various categories” (Zoletto, 2020, p. 91) in which they can represent themselves, instead. Indeed, young Europeans are more and more connected (Mitchell, 2012). Connections, relations, and exchange experiences constitute a key

resource for solidarity and future development in the EU (EC, 2018a). The program evaluation of *Erasmus+* reveals a need for continuous participation so as to contribute to “a more cohesive Union” (p. 81) and, as a consequence, promotes positive social and civic behaviour, and a “stronger feeling of being an EU citizen (+19%)” (EC, 2018a, p. 23) compared to non-participants.

As to the *Next Generation EU* plan, the focus on young people is evident from the title (Malavasi, 2022), and shows how young people can lead to a concrete, democratic European rebirth in light of unity. This is generated not just for demographic reasons which counter the low birth rates in some countries of the Union but is also an acknowledgement of a European perspective which is still possible, and which moves from young people’s *social visibility*.

2. Representation, Research, and Governance to *capacitate participation*

The European Union EU Strategy acknowledges, given the *specific role* of young people in society, their active participation as a driver to eradicate all forms of discrimination (EC, 2018). At the same time, it acknowledges the importance of promoting their personal development within an active participation framework (Santerini, 2010), inspired by “European values” (EC, 2018a, p. 7) and European identity. In light of this plan, and considering the emphasis it places on participation, a word which, as evidenced from keyword searches, is frequently repeated in the text, this article reflects on *inputs* offered by the EU and which push towards *capacitating participation*. Without claiming to be exhaustive, this article will examine such capacitation of participation from several key points.

The European Council recognises, primarily, that “young people have a specific role in society and face specific challenges” (EC, 2018b p. 1) and converges in identifying five “guiding principles” for political cooperation on the subject of youth, encouraging their application “in all policies and activities concerning young people”. These principles include participation, understood as *young people’s right* “to participate in the development, implementation, and follow-up of policies affecting them” (p. 3). The same guarantee of a *right of participation* is difficult to imagine without the active participation of those who directly experience potential forms of iniquity. In this respect, participation can be considered *capacitation* in continuity with Sen’s concept of *capability*, which refers to “an ability which society gives (or denies) to the person” (Sen, 2000, p. 19). The link to education is made explicit, to the point that, as Sen writes, participation requires “knowledge and basic educational skills” (Sen, 1999, p. 32). The issue has its roots in the determination of the rights of minors, as recognised by the 1989 UN Convention; nonetheless, this does not mean that a right that is given is “necessarily a right that is enjoyed” (Bobbio, Bondioli, 2024 p. 14).

Representation. As a consequence, just like “children struggle to get their voice across, and it is rare for adults to hear it” (*Ibidem*, p. 9), young people struggle to find equal representation in decision-making processes that concern them at every level of society (EC, 2018b, p. 16). A representation may result in a crisis whenever a child, about to become a youth, has not managed to “shape, in themselves, a self-representation and a narrative of their life within a framework of coexistence, or of a collective life” (Lizzola, 2000, p. 22). The question of representation, therefore, necessitates the close attention that a pedagogical planning perspective can give, the more so given the complexity of representation, one (more) crisis amongst the “critical emergencies in Western democracies today. Instead, we take its meaning and practice for granted, and risk, therefore, understanding it only in procedural terms. A formal representation that survives itself” risks suffocating participation. This determines, also, the way institutions engage with young people, making them “neutralised service users, subjected to later introverted adults, isolated within their functional relationships” while not acknowledging them as *questioners* (Lizzola, 2000, p. 73). What is at risk is the logic of acknowledgment and inclusion of young people, which, therefore, reverberates on the abilities to participate, necessary for a complex society (Santerini, 2010, p. 69). In order to create the conditions of participation as *development as freedom* (Sen, 1999), it is urgent to plan spaces that are *diversified* and respectful of the identities and backgrounds of young people.

Research. It is certainly not a coincidence that, in order to favour an understanding of diverse groups of young people, “especially those with fewer opportunities” (2018, p. 3), the Council of the EU emphasises the need for “continuous research”, in which “the collection of disaggregated data on young people”

has particular relevance for youth-related policies. The latter, in fact, “should be evidence-based and anchored in the real needs and situations of young people” (p. 5).

Active participation of the youth receives, therefore, significant *inputs* from the EU at the dawn of the new millennium, in particular through Resolution 78 (1999), titled *Europe 2000 – youth participation: the role of young people as citizens*. This theme is central to the debate on social, cultural, and educational policies, thanks to the *Revised European Charter on the Participation of Young People in Local and Regional Life* (2003). “We see an endless widespread of projects, [...] which, however, do not always include preliminary evaluations of the needs of service users and/or of the context” (Tolomelli, 2011, p. 3). Recently, the European Council has returned to the question of *active participation* of young people, incorporating it with the need for data: this led to the “Youth Wiki” project, promoted by the European Commission as part of the Working Programme Erasmus+ 2019. “Youth Wiki” is a digital platform providing an overview of youth-focused policies promoted by member states and offers a common base to compare strategies and interventions in the sector, while promoting benchmarking analyses in European countries.

Far from a misrecognition of the value of ‘data’, considering as an example the value of youth observatories as emblematic ways of aligning youth policy with youth communities at local, regional and national levels, the emphasis placed on everything that adult society does not ‘know’ about the world of youth requires a research perspective of a participatory nature, so that the centrality of the experience and qualitative knowledge of young people, who live the challenges of our time, is not shifted in favour of the claim of objective information.

Indeed, it would risk suppressing in principle both the intrinsic value of the diversity of youth experiences and an educational-phenomenological correspondence to the experiences of young people. Participatory Action Research (RAP) profiles itself as an emblematic common denominator of research approaches for the activation of participatory practices at the service of a community within an organisation or territory (Reason 1994; Reason, Bradbury 2006). In contexts of high educational complexity, policies in favour of generational equity hold a transformative potential if *co-participated* by a harmonious confluence between the experiences of young people and the scientific knowledge of researchers. The qualification of the confluence as ‘harmonic’ stands on the practice of listening that works where the researcher ‘works on himself’ (Mortari, 2010, p. 142) to assume a ‘(self)critical-reflexive posture’ (Zoletto, 2023, p. 141).

In the frame of participatory action-research *with* and *for* young people, preventing the risk that data, although indispensable, become a functional product at the service of a development model driven by the demand for consumer goods becomes both an educational and a political issue: ‘Participatory awareness is a fundamental prerequisite of democratic life; it can therefore be said that participatory research has political implications since practising it significantly contributes to developing a participatory awareness’ (Mortari, 2010, p. 139).

Governance. Contexts, namely the relational structure underlying young people’s experiences, take on a relevance that is not only functional but also emotional and symbolic; to a certain extent, they become ‘co-participating’ subjects (Ciaffi, Mela, 2011) and for this reason, do not lend themselves to simple formalisations. Moreover, in the face of contexts marked by a strong mixture of population and mobile living conditions, typical of large cities, neighbourhoods, neighbourhood units, and the spaces of young people’s everyday life bring out a local symbolic universe indicative of young people as a relational extension of themselves. This is where the role of the local authority comes into play with regard to the activation of a true *multi-level governance* that, moving from the bottom up, aims to make the *European Union’s youth strategy 2019-2027* a reality. In order for partnership schemes not to be fragmentary and insufficient, and thus not to exclude or relegate young people to a subordinate position, the role of the local authorities is decisive when it moves away from the logic of mere service provision to respond to the need for territorial coordination in the perspective of a pedagogical project capable of capacitating participation. This means proposing to work

from an educational point of view (hence in a value dimension, with a high symbolic coefficient, based on immaterial elements, oriented towards changes in perceptions and representations), [therefore] it is necessary to conceive and give oneself forms of relationship between organisation, service and project proposals that are very flexible, willing to maintain a high degree of permeability and a marked aptitude for the perception of change (Guerini, 2000, p. 126).

Within this context, speaking of *participation governance* in relation to realising youth-focused policies means involving local authorities as intermediaries; these contribute to shaping political life and put themselves in dialogue with young people themselves, public institutions, and other local contexts taking care, in various ways, of their growth, their rights and their needs.

The city of Reggio Emilia provides an emblematic model of action; within a project-based approach, its *Progetto Chance* [Chance Project], which links youth-focused policies and social policies, established a *community-based educational service targeting young people*, and a *permanent monitoring unit for teenagers*. Based on a participation-focus logic, the project involves the City council, the Department for Education and Social Sciences of the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia (Unimore), the district's education authority, the District Council, and the local health trust. The project moves from meeting very young, and young, people within their social environment, to building or rebuilding relations of trust through presence and visibility in neighbourhoods of a specialised team intercepting and taking care of young people's vulnerabilities.

Representation, Research, and Governance will really be generative, the more they will value the unexpressed potential of young people, transforming the participation of younger generations into "visions of the future" (Malavasi, 2022, p. 105).

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