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Systemic actions for inclusive processes in the implementation of CRPD: involving social professionals as agents of change

Azioni sistemiche per processi inclusivi nell'attuazione del CRPD: coinvolgere i professionisti sociali come agenti di cambiamento

Articoli

ABSTRACT

This article explores several aspects of the processes involved in the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) as part of the work that the research group Studies Centre for Rights and Living Independently has been carrying out in the last 10 years. The training on the job process involving several social work organizations (such as social cooperatives, municipalities, organizations of people with disabilities) has been implemented from 2011 to 2020, focusing on the Enabling co-design approach as a tool for the implementation of CRPD. This paper reflects on the professionals' involvement in the experiences led by the social services (public services and cooperatives) of 34 Municipalities in 4 Regions (Piedmont, Tuscany, Lombardy and Aosta Valley). These experiences show that only when CRPD is at the very core of the work, triggering in practice the paradigm change it envisaged, does it bring about an increasingly articulated reflection on the transformation of services from places of care to places of citizenship, in which social and educational workers can play a core role as agents of change.

Keywords: disability, rights-based model, network, social services, public policy

* Background and Conclusions are written by Cecilia Marchisio, Towards a rights-based model on the field by Natascia Curto.

Background

The CRPD framework

The framework in which the work described in this paper was developed is the Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). This fundamental document establishes a new disability rights paradigm that empowers disabled people's organizations and creates a new operational model for disability scholars and professionals (Harpur, 2012). Since the CRPD was approved by the UN in 2006, hundreds of articles have been published bringing the disability discourse closer to the human rights field, which until then had often been relegated to the biopsycho-medical field (Retief Letšosa, 2018). Since the very beginning, the available international literature on CRPD has been characterized by a consistent focus on effective implementation (Lang, 2009). From this point of view, it is not surprising, thus, to observe how one of the most discussed topics was ratification, which can be considered an important first step towards implementation: out of 193 UN Member States, which took part in its drafting, as of today 151 have ratified the CRPD, meaning that they have marked the passage from the Convention being a charter of intent to becoming a binding regulatory framework (Stein Lord, 2018).

As far as Italy is concerned, this happened in 2009, through law no. 18/09; ratifying the UN Convention meant committing to adapting the existing legislation and support systems to what the document states (Griffo, 2019). Hence, if on the one hand the CRPD implementation is substantially led by the legal framework established by the document, on the other hand scholars give mostly unambiguous indications, pointing out that further steps are needed to achieve its full application (Chaney, 2020). The implementation of the CRPD, therefore, calls into question complex social, organizational, and psycho-pedagogical processes that have to be addressed carefully (Grue, 2019).

According to this broader process, in the context of social and educational services, the CRPD calls on professionals to give up a system of ideas in which PwD are seen as persons to care for and protect (known as: assistance-based model), even at the cost of limiting their rights and freedoms. The welfare professional community is asked to acquire and develop a system of ideas and actions that start from the assumption that people with disabilities are citizens with equal rights compared to others, without exception (Barbieri, 2019): the rights-based model.

To work in that direction, extensive experiments aimed at exploring this change have begun to develop locally at both national and European level (Curto Marchisio, 2020). Among those experiences, the Studies Centre for Rights and Living Independently of the University of Turin has been designing and implementing technical support aimed at enabling the social and educational services to face the profound change defined by the new paradigm, moving from an assistance-based perspective to a rights-based operating model. The research group has been experimenting the CRPD implementation on the field, in a constant and tight partnership with professionals from social services and social cooperatives, in order to build a new way of working that is both viable in their daily experience and consistent with CRPD principles (Curto Marchisio, 2020, cit).
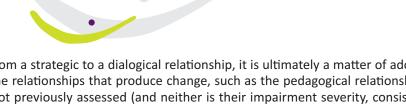
Enabling Co-planning

In this context, the research team has been developing an innovative approach aimed at providing support for the life project for PwD and their families based on equality of rights, opportunity, and full access to citizenship, called Enabling co-planning (Marchisio, 2019).

Enabling co-planning is a pedagogical empowerment approach based on Dialogical Practices, a therapeutic model which has already shown important potential both in terms of effectiveness and scope of application (Seikkula, 2013).

The experience of Dialogical Practices is essentially based on engaging in transformative dialogue that takes place within the social network. Enabling co-planning borrows from this approach the Bakhtinian (Bachtin, 1929) suggestion of polyphony, in order to define the deeply constructivist character of the dialogue on which each individual's life project is built (Seikkula, 2003). In addition, Enabling co-planning is based on Anticipatory Dialogue, one of the possible operational variations of the dialogical approach, which emerged from the field of early intervention (Arnkil, 2018). If, on the one hand, Dialogic Practices have proved to be an important tool for Enabling co-planning, on the other hand it would be wrong to say that the approach uses either Open Dialogue or Anticipatory Dialogue: there are, in fact, some significant differences, as detailed in Marchisio 2019 cit.

Above all, what Enabling Co-planning needs to be effective is to be developed in a deinstitutionalization framework (Mezzina, 2014). Hence, the approach takes up the suggestion related to the polyphony of voices, but it integrates it with the theme of the restitution of subjectivity as key to the path of deinstitutionalization that underlies Pier Aldo Rovatti's analysis of Franco Basaglia's ideas (Rovatti, 2013).

When the professionals move from a strategic to a dialogical relationship, it is ultimately a matter of adopting a different view on the nature of the relationships that produce change, such as the pedagogical relationship. In Enabling co-planning, the PwD is not previously assessed (and neither is their impairment severity, consistently with the CRPD). Nevertheless, their life is gradually described and redescribed by a set of voices, images, and situations that interact with each other, among which their own voice is becoming increasingly more and more prominent and aware. This set of voices also defines the path of support to living independently: the pedagogical life project. This project aims at accompanying individuals by providing them with the necessary support and by building social networks, so that the wishes – as well as the rights – of the person and their loved ones are respected.

Towards a rights-based model on the field

This paper reflects on the most recent experiences of training on the job led by the social services (both public services and cooperatives) of 34 Municipalities in 4 Regions (Piedmont, Tuscany, Lombardy and Aosta Valley) and focused on the support to the social worker while adopting the Enabling co-design approach as a tool for the implementation of the CRPD.

Each territory promoted the search for new ways of working that allow to support the project of life in full respect of rights through the sharing of working methods based on reflexivity and capacity with local professionals and organizations (Marchisio, 2019 cit). Above all, enabling co-planning has kept the practices of accompaniment (of real people, who at that time were followed by the service) and reflection on the models of citizenship underlying that accompaniment constantly intertwined.

The possibility for social workers and professional educators to experience this change of perspective first-hand has proved particularly fertile ground for the change of perspective. In this scenario, they employed professional methods and strategies directly, in order to support people and help them achieve full and self-determined citizenship in the real world, thanks to the personalized support that gradually the services themselves have started to offer. Those who participated in building a life plan based on access to full citizenship and respect for self-determination could observe the path that took shape right before their own eyes: independently (as prescribed by CRPD) from the conditions of the PwD involved, it was possible to support these individuals to live, choose, work, have relations on the basis of equality with other citizens. This work involved a process of systematic reconnection with the organizational levels and with the very mandate of the social and educational services. This reconnection presents some core aspects that we will discuss in the following chapters.

A different distribution of power

The main consequence of this way of understanding psychosocial discourse and planning is a different distribution of power between the professionals and the PwD (Mezzina, 2017). By seeking to implement within the services what the UN Convention prescribed, therefore, one of the first elements that characterized the application of enabling co-planning was the search for a mode of encounter between operator and individual that was not based on the usual mechanisms of assessment of need and that would allow, precisely for this reason, to open up new spaces of operational scope and reflection characterized by more symmetrical and dialogical interactions. It seemed crucial to discuss the possibility of a meeting in which the diagnosis, the label that identified the discomfort, were not considered as the only possible gateway to understanding the existence of the other.

From the very first moment, this approach appeared to stand in deep contrast with what is usually required of the professionals in social and educational services, starting from the point in which the operator has to "fix" the condition of the other by imposing a term, or a definition. This step became a primary condition of professional action; however, the means of support resulting from it were able to provide only individual and fragmented responses (Saraceno, 2019).

Through the modality of enabling co-planning, the *label* is no longer what determines the intervention: as a consequence, its usefulness in the encounter is lost. This does not mean, in response to a very frequent criticism, that working in a rights-based model means thinking that diagnoses, situations of substance addiction, or the experience of mental suffering do not exist. Renouncing the label does not mean denying its existence but subtracting its power, founding its own professional action in the awareness that none of these elements can, or should, be treated as what determines the course of a life, the available support, the existential opportunities that person should be given.

At first, professionals were afraid of such a profound change in the daily routine

> I remember that the thing that amazed me, after the interview (with PwD and family), is that I had a whole series of thoughts: who knows what they will ask me, who knows what they will want to do, who knows if we will succeed... Actually, I was just afraid of not giving the right answer to a task (social worker[1])

Hence, professionals have experienced a new way of meeting PwD and their families, in which what was described was the individual's existence from their very own point of view and from that of their family and their informal network, in their own words, through their categories and their value system. It is a polyphonic construction, but it is primarily about taking a stand; those who have worked in this direction have reported as a primary effect that of rapprochement

> Actually, this person was asking me simple things: I want to go out with my friends, I want new friends because the ones I have are not good, I want to go to the bar to get a coffee, I want to work, I want to live alone because with my family I'm fine but I'm 30 years old ... (social worker)

All those desires and wishes are not assessed but they become the foundation upon which to build a future. From the very first moment, the operator can start an authentic process of empowerment when they meets the other, without worrying about proposing timely answers that are individual, circumscribed, and "appropriate to the diagnosis"

> We social workers ... I always say this among colleagues we laugh a bit about it... we should be studied as carriers of a particular pathology that is the anxiety of the social worker. This concern, this fear of having to respond to a mandate, respond to deadlines, respond to requests... always respond and respond. This obsession with answers implies that many times in haste, in fear of not answering, you give quick and standardized answers (social worker)

Approaching the other person's life without the need to define labels and predetermine answers passes through a stage that has transversally been identified as the element of major change: creating an inner void. A key element that the involved professionals identified, in fact, is the inner space that they have been called to create: clear of classifications, evaluations, assessment, predefined proposals and therefore able to allow the other to bring their self in its entirety to the meeting.

When a rights-centered operating mode is implemented, in fact, the operator is no longer the one who evaluates the individual problem and defines a response but becomes

> A figure who approaches people and their families on tiptoes, accompanying them in a life of awareness towards adult life lived in the fullness of rights (social educator)

What clearly emerges from the words of the operators is that through practice, trying to work with different modalities, one comes to the same conclusions proposed by scientific literature, which advocates the necessity to overcome the standardized models of services (Zuttion, 2019).

From diagnosis to meaning

In this sense, creating an inner void, approaching each other without the intent (or the task) to evaluate or classify, is in its own right an operational tool, as it allows to recognize that the life of the other

> is a story... a story full of experiences, people, experiences and signs that over time these experiences have left... (social educator)

In this way, the services no longer see the biographical and social network dimension in anecdotal terms or as an opportunity to search for information, a field in which to go hunting for new labels ("the father was an alcoholic", "the mother was depressed"). Peppe dell'Acqua points out that when we are asked who we are, we answer with a story (Rovatti, 2013, cit.), a statement that everyone can relate to their own experience, but that ends up being ex-

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1   The voices of social workers and professional educators have been collected (and registered) in the form of monthly meetings and periodical exchanges planned as part of the monitoring process of each municipality

cluded from the services' procedures for getting to know individuals. When asked to work in a different way, it is precisely the biographical dimension that operators succeed in welcoming when they make sufficient space within themselves. This biographical dimension is primarily a dimension of meaning

> listening means listening without judgment, because it is people and families who tell their story. We get to know each other beyond diagnoses, we leave room for families to tell with their words what they want and what they value (social educator)

It is crucial to notice that in Enabling co-planning this narration assumes a primarily operative meaning. Listening to personal history is not, in fact, in itself a novelty within socio-educational practices. However, this listening usually takes place within a framework in which the professional performs an act of competent and active listening, but it will not be that story, that desire or that dream to define the path and the intervention; the meanings and the priorities that the individual expresses are not usually the elements on which the social service will base their decision. The operators listen to the story and then proceed with the assessment, the evaluation and the definition of the appropriate intervention according to the labels they have identified. It is important to underline that this does not happen because of the person's bad will but for all the elements – organizational and related to conceptual models – inherent to the individual medical model. It is as if the operator were saying "I may find your story interesting, but to help you, I need to know *what's wrong*". On the contrary, in the rights-based mode of work put in place by the services in recent years, the story and the vision of the other take on the role of guiding the whole process

> what changes compared to a classic life project is the point of view, because the point of view is that of the people we meet and of their families (educator)

In the perspective of rights

The change of perspective, in this sense, seems radical. Starting from the new practices, operators modify what they think is their mandate: from the standard idea of having to provide answers that lead to the daily, moral, and behavioral functioning of the PwD, they go on to think that

> the task of us professionals is to be able to transform their dreams and priority into actions and short-term objectives, and then allow them to see what happens day by day. It is a small step to get closer and closer to what they want (social educator)

Only by changing the operator's perceived mandate, in fact, can we open an authentic space of emancipation for the other in our daily work. In this space one must abandon the rigidity that educational design brings with it when based on an assessment-intervention-compliance model: the educational life project becomes

> a project to scribble, to pick up in your hands, to read again, to delete, to add, to modify (social educator)

In this perspective, the project that changes, a scenario that changes, is no longer a source of frustration but, on the contrary, it is precisely the production of a modifiable scenario for the existence of the other that becomes the heart of the work of socio-educational support. The tolerance of uncertainty, proposed among the key elements of the Dialogic Practices, allows us first of all to widen the field of description; Enabling co-planning expands it potentially to infinity by removing the constraint to terminate the description before starting the action. This restriction is in fact a legacy of the medical model, which responds to the classical diagnosis-intervention-compliance scheme but is ill-suited to the purpose of accompanying an individual throughout their existence. In the rights-based model instead

> Being a social worker in the framework of rights, therefore, means supporting families and PwD to imagine the future as they wish; it means trying to build together all the steps needed to translate their dream into concrete goals; it means giving up offering solutions and making room for others, always remembering the right and freedom to design and redesign the future as they imagine it (social educator)

These experiences show that through the CRPD it is possible to bring a deinstitutionalized perspective into social services, which does not mean finding a different space in which to live – no larger Institute but the small apartments – but it is outlined as the opening up of the possibility to accompany the individual in all the spaces that are part of the real world on equal basis with other citizens.

In this sense, the perspective of the UN Convention seems fundamental. As long as, in fact, the operator's primary objective is to bring the individual closer to an expected behaviour, then they have no room to allow self-determination as a right: it follows that professionals stress that the real meaning of change is change towards working on the context rather than on the person.

> In terms of rights, however, it is not PwD who have to change, who have to learn things to stay in the world and be able to live their life like everyone else, but rather it is the context around them which must change (social educator)

The work from the point of view of rights is therefore centred on the context and on the networks: this completely new focus on what usually happens in socio-educational services is generative compared to a new conception oriented to community work

> In rights-centered services, indeed, the task of the educator is to work with and for the person, so that change takes place around them (social educator)

The Convention, in this sense, leaves no room or margin for unconscious and automatic actions, thus triggering a cascade reaction: once the operators experience the intricate and deep connections between their daily actions and the social mandate they are the bearers of, they simply cannot go back to micro thinking, to taking for granted, to "it's always been done this way" as an answer to the questions that are raised by daily contact with people. This changes the role that operators play – and perceive to play– within their organizations and within society.

Conclusions

The UN Convention has allowed those who work in social services to understand that the categories of thought through which they know and describe phenomena, and the professional discourse they are used to are linked to a specific theoretical model that changes in space and time. There is a paradigm, a system of assumptions, knowledge and beliefs, which determines in a powerful way what one should do in services. Operators speak, act and make decisions daily about people's lives based on their narrations, the priorities that are defined in their paths, the models of explanation of their behaviours. One of the elements that the Convention has brought to the attention of practitioners is precisely this: the relationship between paradigm and educational work is much closer than we used to think. The profession of educator and social worker, in the ways and contexts in which it is articulated today, seems in fact to find in the daily practical dimension a prevalent, if not totalizing, aspect. This carries with it the risk of a substantial invisibilization of the connections with the paradigm within which one acts daily. Many services may culturally consider "theoretical" reflections as interesting, but they are systematically defined as poorly related to the practice. As a consequence of this disconnection, in professional culture there is a widespread and systematically reinforced detachment between doing and reflecting (intended as organized, collective, systematic reflection),which are perceived as belonging to two separate spheres: the "non-random, non-voluntary possibility to reflect, to exchange experiences between colleagues, to welcome innovations and rework them" (Canevaro, 2006, p.13).

In this way, the disconnection between paradigms at all levels – together with the relative reflection on them – and the operating models, represented as two different worlds, is nourished. This context of "pragmatic hyperrealism", as Benedetto Saraceno defines it, "only authorizes the discourse around the visible reality of the present" (2019, cit. p. 41), denying the fact that each action – especially in a context full of power implications such as the educational one – brings with it a wealth of definitions, positions and meanings that, being tacit, ends up acting implicitly and unconsciously through the daily actions of social workers and educators.

Bringing the Convention into the services at an operational level acted precisely at the level of contact between models and practice, thus forcing the opposite movement: in this light, we need to raise our head to understand the paradigm shift, and we also need to rethink daily practices. Once the professionals assume this new perspective, defining new scenarios for accompaniment is one of the first operational thrusts, one of the first changes that the rights-based paradigm brings forward.

What would be needed is not a simple training course on a new methodology but a systematic process involving networks and communities: within the paradigm of the UN Convention, the objective of our work as professional operators is indeed no longer the evaluation, planning and structuring of interventions appropriate to a certain type of situation or diagnosis, but the creation and multiplication of exchanges in a negotiation network, which includes the material, emotional, symbolic, identity and cultural dimensions.

Furthermore, the systematic implementation of the rights-based model of inclusion challenges the assumption that processes have to be centered on the objectives of autonomy, which are in turn based on the idea that social inclusion stems from the person's "improvement of the damaged skills" (Saraceno, 2017, cit. p. 164) and therefore on the progressive acquisitions that are allowed, in the end, to those who manage to live on the basis of equality with others. However, this framework is incompatible with the UN Convention since, as we have seen, the Convention affirms that disability cannot be used as a motivation for the limitation of rights; if we are faced with the limitation of a right, not managing is not a sufficient justification.

As a result, we need models that, in order to function properly, do not base their practices in the distinction between those who manage and those who do not. The goal is no longer to ensure that "the weak cease to be weak in order to be able to share the stage with the strong" but, as Benedetto Saraceno states, to change the rules of the game, to build a scene, networks, communities to which everyone can belong, and where each citizen is allowed continuous, situated and rooted exchanges of "skills, interests and rights" (Saraceno, 2017, cit. p. 164), regardless of their own characteristics.

When the UN Convention, is put at the centre of the work, triggering in practice the paradigm changes for which it was born, it has the potential to bring frward an increasingly articulated reflection on the relationship between the different ways of accompanying an individual throughout their path of life and full citizenship for all people with disabilities. What is at stake is the transformation of services from "places of care" to carriers of citizenship.

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