Community social work in Child Protection: Texére project in Milan

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Abstract

The protection of children and young people is not the responsibility of some institutions alone, but it is a responsibility of the community as a whole. It is therefore essential to promote, or strengthen where it is already present, the collaboration between parents, educators, teachers, psychologists, social workers and citizens to build a network and better support children in their growth.

This is the goal of the Texére project, funded by a local banking foundation from 2017 to 2020, which sees 11 municipalities in the province of Milano engaged in defining new operating ways and methods to stimulate the community to listen to the needs of children, young people and their families.

A network of people linked to Social Services, Tertiary Sector Organizations, Schools, Child Neuropsychiatry, voluntary organizations and the local community has accepted the challenge to review their commitment to families in difficulty. Social services are engaged in implementing a new perspective of Community care with the ambition of no longer being just providers of services, but co-creators and co-builders of new forms of help.

At the core of this initiative there is a desire for change that needs to be sustained and stimulated not only in the people who turn to services, but also and above all in the practitioners and aid professionals. This paper will highlight the key elements of community social work in the field of child protection according to the Relational Social Work method by presenting the Texére project and its inspiring principles, its goals and its many actions. Besides, it will provide some reflections on the changes necessary at system and service organization level to allow practitioners to act at a community work level.

Keywords

Community social work, child protection, participation, relational social work

Introduction

The goals of social work are set at different levels. Usually, social workers work to pursue chance goals: that is, goals that aim at the well-being or improvement of a life problem that concerns an individual or their family. This type of work often leads to social workers working from their office, seeing the people involved in the specific cases they are following from time to time. At times, social workers visit their area even when they work in this context: they go to schools to talk to children's teachers, they visit homes or conducts interviews in informal places frequented by the families they are working with. However, most of the working time is spent in the office.

Moreover, there are two other levels of purpose in social work: these are the goals that concern projects of collective value. By this expression, we mean the kind of work that social workers do to improve the situation not just of an individual or a family but of many people united by similar needs or interests. This type of work can be grouped into two distinct categories: group work and community work (Folgheraiter, 2004; Raineri, 2017).

We talk about group work when the purpose concerns a group of people who pursue the same goal and know each other personally, form relationships and carry out various activities together.

Social community work, on the other hand, means «the process of assisting ordinary people to improve their communities by undertaking collective action» (Twelvetrees, 1991).

When we talk about community in social work, we can refer to two different definitions (Mayo, 2002).

– Community as shared locality — the set of social ties based on belonging to a specific geographical area. Consider, for example, the whole of all the people who live in a particular neighbourhood or the same condominium.
– Community as shared interests — the set of social ties based on the sharing of a specific type of needs or interests, of the same origins or based on the fact of going through the same phase of the life cycle. For example, a community can be considered as the set of mothers of newborn babies or parents of boys who use drugs or all the children of migrants from North Africa.

This paper specifically focuses on community work for child protection, as this has been the challenge faced by 11 Municipalities in the area of the province of Milan, in Northern Italy. Many experiences of community projects implemented for child care are described in international literature (see for example, Daro & Dodge, 2009). Child protection has historically focused on interventions aimed at individual families, but some research (Wilkenfield *et al.*) shows how the territory, neighborhoods and communities can play a decisive role in the growth and physical and mental development of children.

Unfortunately, in Italy, very few social services work at this level of purpose. Social workers use most of their time working in a casework context, and they do it from their own office (Cabiati, 2015). The causes of this are traceable for the most part in the tradition

and history of social services in Italy and also in the legislation that assigns responsibility for the protection of children to municipal social services if the parents and relatives are negligent or unable. Furthermore, working with the community from a participatory perspective requires specific training and flexibility in schedules, movement and available budgets that practitioners often do not have in public services.

However, how does a community project start? There are several different ways in which community work can be started. Professionals who work in the services are often those who take the initiative of starting projects with a collective content. While working on cases, they may notice that many people and families are united by similar needs and therefore the desire can arise to work on projects that pursue goals involving all of them. Alternatively, those who work in the services may have access to data that highlight the onset of particular phenomena or that underline specific social changes in their area. This reading could inspire to develop projects that allow to cope with the new needs or re-balance the community following the rise of these new needs.

Other times, instead, it is the community itself, organized in different ways, to knock on the door of services to request professionals' help in implementing actions that can respond to the needs they feel and see.

In recent years, in Italy the attention of many banking foundations, public bodies and non-profit organizations has been focusing on new ways to support actions aimed at coping with needs that increasingly unite people at local level.

However, there is no single way to operate at community work level. The approaches adopted may be different and sometimes even far apart from each other. This article aims to explore a community level project implemented following the guidelines of the Relational Social Work method (RSW).

According to this method, professionals not only should pursue collective aims in their work — as indicated by the Italian code of ethics for social workers — but should do so *together with* the community.

This means that practitioners, managers and policymakers should not plan, draft and implement actions aimed at the well-being of the community out of their status and their professional knowledge, but, instead, they should meet with the members of the community to carry out the whole process together (Ranieri, 2005; Panciroli, 2017). In this way, technical and experiential knowledge meet to create a path of mutual learning and complement (Folgheraiter, 2004).

To achieve this goal, professionals should visit their local area, meet the members of the community to identify together what is important to them. The first step is to identify the needs, desires and aspirations that move and motivate people to act.

In this type of planning professionals can't presume to involve the whole community. They should aim, instead, at involving those who are truly concerned, those who «*care*» for that specific need of the community and engage with them — sometimes they will be many, other times just a few — and start evaluating with them what can be done. A

shared planning process starts from this first step, in which practitioners, volunteers, people directly affected by a specific problem or need work together to draft and implement a project whose purpose may affect the entire community (community social work).

The Texére project

The Texére project was born from this concept. A lengthy planning process, which lasted about a year, and involved local practitioners interested in improving their way of interacting with families and minors. The goal was to create an opportunity to start to operate at the community work level, working in the local area and especially with fragile families and minors.

Public social services, non-profit organizations, schools, universities, training and vocational training institutions have begun to define together a project that could lead them to learn a new operational way; to carve out a space to work in a perspective of prevention and promotion and not only in remedial one (Folgheraiter, 2007; Folgheraiter & Ranieri, 2012) and, not least, to improve and intensify their collaboration.

Therefore, from its very first stages, this project focused on participation (Warren, 2007), based on the idea that all interested parties involved in child protection can contribute to the topic with their valuable view (Ranieri, 2005; Panciroli, 2017). The goal of the project, the actions in which it was later developed, the tools adopted, were decided by a large, extended panel that involved anyone willing to accept this challenge. Families and children did not participate in it, but in outlining the project, it was discussed how to give them some space to express their views and participate in individual activities once the project started. Indeed, one of the approaches that most contributed to the change was precisely the effort made to see families, traditionally considered the 'recipient' of interventions, in a 'new light'; that is trying to discover in them even the smallest bits of resources, of ability to put oneself in discussion or, in any case, the willingness to try to improve their attitude towards their children and children in general. For this reason, the leading role of families has become an essential part of the project, as well as creating a space for children to allow them to express themselves and listening to their 'voices'.

The local area

The area in which the project developed is very peculiar, a community of about 120,000 citizens who, although resident in one of the most developed and wealthiest areas of Italy, the metropolitan area of Milano, live in conditions of economic or social fragility for historical and social demographic composition. An area featuring sharp contradictions — with towns where most residents live in public housing (Rozzano, project leader with 42,000 inhabitants,

of which about half are housing project tenants), other towns, such as Basiglio, with the highest per capita income in Italy, or with the highest ageing index in the metropolitan area, and other ones with a population that doubled in a short time due to the arrival of new families. However, they share a characteristic, a feature that only public services of high competence and sensitivity could identify with lucidity: a large number of minors are in charge of specialized services (in the leading town alone over 300, around 8% of the target population) with a case history characterized mostly by various forms of neglect. While abuses and actual maltreatment are very rare, a widespread lack or scarcity of 'care' affects all social classes, including the 'wealthiest' municipalities; it is a sort of 'widespread lack' of attention, of listening, of focus on children that produces disabilities, detected and certified in schools, even in the absence of the so-called 'real pathologies' but rather as environmental ones.

Rediscovering a common language for care, therefore, is one of the objectives of a project called 'Texére' [To Weave] precisely to evoke the potential of weaving bonds and relationships; those ones that have been broken or loosened between many adults and their children, but also between families, and between families and institutions (schools or services). Texére is meant to represent the threads that unites children with their parents and relatives, and those that link the stories of residents in neighbourhoods; Texére as the bricks of a domino in which each piece is essential to create contiguity and produce the final design that characterizes the community.

And it is right in the history of this area, which has produced hardships and fragility, that 'care' resources are found: in towns, whose inhabitants have increased tenfold in less than a decade due to domestic immigration, where a strong solidarity and a strong associationism have developed, and in citizens very dependent on the institutions who, however, have a strong connection to their origins and good neighbourly relations, indispensable to rewrite their own story after a drastic uprooting. All these factors have created an environment conducive to the creation of a sense of community, which in turn can support children and young people's well-being, even when economic or cultural difficulties make children's needs and their need for care invisible to many of their families.

It is, however, a great challenge, despite the promoters' intuition and determination, due to the many difficulties, above all organizational ones. The project, in fact, has to be managed in an institutional setting designed by a bureaucratic system (a zoning of municipalities that in Italy, based on the Law No. 328 of 2000, constitutes socio-sanitary districts) formed by single institutions, and whose number of inhabitants (from 3,300 inhabitants to over 42,000) determines different complex environments, with often an inadequate number of practitioners, different administrative purposes and numerous external subjects with whom activate participatory procedures.

For this reason, the project has tried to combine multiple aspects, ranging from technical and professional contents to organizational ones, from relationship modalities between services and the recipients of the interventions to the involvement of the local community, from single stories to a 'restyling' of the system.

The actions of the Texére project

The project has developed into eight different actions divided, in turn, into as many sub-actions.

The actions developed within the Texére project can be grouped into three primary aims.

The first consists in accompanying and supporting the practitioners, both through training and the reorganization of the services, for the acquisition of a new working method. The practitioners of public services and non-profit organizations have engaged in facilitating processes of social work in the community and, through a process of joint reflection and reciprocal debate, together with researchers and teachers, are defining principles, operational indications to finalize and systematize a new *modus operandi* for all the professionals of the services involved.

The second aim pursued by the Texére project is the improvement of the collaboration between the school system and social services. To pursue this goal, we worked on two significant fronts. On the one hand, we started to collaborate with the parents of some of the schools belonging to the 9 Comprehensive Institutes in the area. Supporting and following the parents' committees that were already active, it was possible to organize joint training sessions on educational competencies and encourage parents to support each other.

On the other hand, 406 teachers and practitioners of social services and psychopedagogical help desks in schools took part in an action-research to improve their daily collaboration. New working models have been introduced with families such as, for example, the Family Group Conference, the child advocate, the Video Feedback, the Future Dialogues. Actions have also been carried out to encourage working together: laboratories for the definition of good practices, the construction of shared tools, joint training to acquire a common language and opportunities for exchange and discussion on difficult experiences and mutual expectations.

A third aim of the project concerned the involvement and activation of the families living in the area. To respond to this need, sharing places — 4 *Case per Fare Insieme* [4 Houses for Working Together] — and active participation paths were established. These places, renovated and adapted to the needs of children, parents and young people, offer an opportunity to meet, exchange experiences and share parental responsibilities. At the *Case per Fare Insieme* relationship has a central place and, therefore, they are spaces that did not exist before in any of the local environments, buildings or apartments not intended as day or residential educational centres. Despite the presence of professional figures such as educators and social workers, they took shape following the project inspiring ideas and the desires of those who attend them and keep them alive. Thus, they have become places where practitioners and volunteers meet and get to know families and children, fragile or not, in different, more free and spontaneous contexts. Thanks to these meetings, held in a climate of equal collaboration, various activities were created to respond to collective needs through the direct commitment of families and citizens alongside the practitioners.

All Texére project actions are monitored and documented both through quantitative and qualitative detection tools. The practitioners are accompanied by an external project evaluation agency and by the Catholic University of Milan in making a six-monthly monitoring to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the project, to change the direction in the following months and to capitalize on the knowledge experienced professional so that it can become the asset of all the services involved.

Which system–level expedients were implemented to encourage community work?

Changes are always challenging. Therefore, to simultaneously support both the practitioners (of public and private social services) and the citizens (bearers of needs and resources) in finding new ways of collaboration and co-planning interventions, it was necessary on the one hand to design a very articulated system governance, on the other hand to avoid neglecting any aspect to give continuity and consolidate the processes started.

The governance of the system was designed and has partially evolved as the work progressed, with a horizontal and concentric model, like a galaxy, created to share decision-making processes between public and private subjects and favour an osmotic movement between the centre and the 'periphery' of the system. Institutions and social cooperatives that manage services are the engines and facilitators of the participation of single families, but also of other institutional subjects (the school, the health system reorganized following the territory configuration and even the court) and the associations, formal and not; but at the same time they receive from them impulses, new stimuli, further challenges that allow the system to refocus and contextualize continually.

This model requires an internal organization of the participating institutions that are adequately involved in its continuous maintenance and possible development. For this purpose, a certain flexibility is essential (public and private practitioners available to leave their institutional facilities — their offices — and to adopt working hours that can meet not only families' schedule when their members work, but also the ones of volunteers and associations' members who do not always carry out their activities 'during office hours'). At the same time, continuous and shared training is needed for all the members of the network activated by the project.

Besides, the process needs stability and continuity over time: for what concerns stability it requires an institutionalization of the forms of governance — which preserves the system even from administrative changes — while for continuity the project already identifies forms of fundraising and people-raising that must be continually followed and implemented, made structural, measurable and measured.

During the process, the Institutions that, in collaboration with the tertiary local sector, have been carrying out the project, must continually maintain a balance between guiding

and supporting active citizens and delegating, in moderation and at the proper time, to individual or associated citizens single interventions, new activities, self-organization processes that at the same time release them from too much dependence on public intervention.

It is a bit like being good parents. In short, it is like a new language to be learned by the citizens and the institutions alike.

Conclusion

This facilitation of participatory processes primarily made possible to encourage the activation of those who felt the need to change themselves and face their personal and family difficulties.

The network members who favoured this process are experiencing a new way of working with each other and *with* families, not just *for* them. Beyond the many actions that have been created and the many citizens involved, the main change that has been started by Texére is a different way in which practitioners look at the community as a whole, perceiving its protagonists as allies and bearers of innovative ideas and not just of needs and problems. In particular, the social workers' effort to literally «get out of the office» is sending a clear signal to politicians and managers about how a different way of supporting families is possible. Today, at different levels, professionals are striving to forge collaborative relationships with citizens not only to know their ever-changing needs, but also and above all to find in them valuable allies to raise awareness in the community about caring for children and create a solidarity network around families.

This project can demonstrate that the protection of the child can be pursued not only through case work level, ie working with individual parents through support and individualized educational intervention, but also through community work, where this is understood according to the RSW method. That is, the practitioner must not perceive herself/himself as the expert who must educate the community to take care of their children, but as facilitator able to support and bring out the resources and knowledge that the community already has in itself to take care of its members, starting with the youngest.

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