

Working with school to promote community development: The «Let's start together» initiative

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Abstract

Multi-ethnic neighbourhoods are widespread in Italy, especially in suburban areas, and are often characterised by economic and educational poverty. In this context, schools perform a significant role. Educational institutions help children experience first-hand socialisation by helping them learn the rules of society and develop social relationships. To carry out this important task, «educational co-responsibility» with families is an unchallengeable condition. This collaboration, especially within a multicultural context, can sometimes be difficult to achieve because of different cultural backgrounds of the families; this is why it should be promoted through innovative projects and actions. This is one of the objectives pursued by «relAzioni», a non-profit organisation (NPO) that has been operating in a city in the north of Italy since 2012. The NPO runs a big project in a neighbourhood isolated from the rest of the city, where the immigrant foreign population, physically separated from the Italian population, currently lives.

This situation also has repercussions at the school level, starting from the presence of immigrant children who have been registered mainly near the neighbourhood.

This study focuses on the methodology of the community social work applied to improving multi-ethnic cohabitation and strengthening relationships and social ties within the school.

The action will focus, in particular, on some activities carried out with families with children aged between 3 and 10 years.

The participatory methods and strategies implemented will highlight the importance of collaboration between schools, parents, and community members.

Keywords

Community social work, participation, relational social work, multiculturalism, inclusion.

Introduction

Community work, according to the *Relational Social Work* method (Donati, 2010; Folgheraiter, 2011, 2012, 2017), can be defined as «the methodology that copes with collective aims and involves and facilitates the autonomous action of subjects belonging to the same community who feel a determined concern and are willing to activate for a change» (Pancioli, 2017, pp. 40).

As can be understood from this definition, within the community work, social workers are dealing with a series of problems that do not concern a specific family or person (needs to be addressed in the casework), but they must intervene on collective issues involving the whole community, such as discrimination, poverty, and disability (Raineri, 2011; Calcaterra, 2017; Thomas & Pierson, 1995).

Twelvetrees defines it as «the process of assisting ordinary people to improve their own communities by undertaking collective action» (Twelvetrees, 2002, p. 1). In fact, it should be highlighted that through «collective action», an action designed and implemented by the people of the community, by leading to the wellness and improvement of a community or at least of a category of people. Therefore, social workers are responsible for helping and supporting people because they are activated in view of their own wellness (Raineri, 2005, 2011).

Within this methodological framework, we can better understand the work of the NPO «relAzioni», the promoter of the project «The world in a neighbourhood», started in 2012 with a practice of placement student of social work.

The aim of the NPO is to strengthen community relations, support the integration of the population, promote inclusion and contrast, and prevent poverty.

In particular, the organisation deals with immigrant women/mothers who, for both cultural and social aspects, are more at risk of discrimination and social isolation than men. The focus is mainly on the female population, but the general aim is to begin from women in order to involve the community by rebuilding social bonds.

Both immigrant and Italian citizens are members of the organisation, with different expertise and professional skills. These members spend their time taking care of the community and the reception of migrants. In addition, there is a vast volunteer network made up of many immigrants, Italian women, and teachers.

With the project «The world in a neighbourhood», several community initiatives have been implemented involving and mobilising women in the neighbourhood. In particular, they have promoted: workshops for children between 0 and 3 years of age and women, local events to reduce territorial fragmentation and develop a «sense of community», and activities with schools.

The NPO works to enhance the resources within the community to find solutions for the needs of the area, because it believes that besides the problems, the community also holds the solutions to face them. Furthermore, it means promoting and

strengthening the bond that communities have within themselves, activating the territory to become responsible (Bulmer, 1992). Citizen participation in the development of initiatives has always been a precise methodological intention for planning and implementing interventions.

Social actions for this reason have been promoted through open and participatory planning according to the method of *Relational Social Work* (Donati, 2010; Folgheraiter, 2011, 2012, 2017), with the aim of promoting empowerment (Folgheraiter, 2012) for emancipation, solidarity, and socio-cultural integration.

The territorial context: The «Satellite» neighbourhood

The experience is focused within the neighbourhood called «Satellite», built between 1962 and 1964. As per the local builders and administrators' blueprint, it was supposed to become an innovative and residential neighbourhood. The building project immediately seemed too far sighted and expensive. The apartments (for various reasons) depreciated and were purchased first by Italian migrants and subsequently by migrants from other nationalities.

The Satellite is made up of 55 buildings. There are 1,972 apartments, and an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 people of about 100 different nationalities live there. This ethnic heterogeneity in addition to the difficulties generates positive repercussions because it avoids abuse of power by one ethnic group over another.

This very high-density neighbourhood can be considered as a «city within the city», equipped with services, shops, schools, parks, etc. There is a physical and social gap among the population; currently, Italian citizens live mainly outside the Satellite, while the immigrant population lives inside. This social organisation causes exclusion and isolation of the immigrant population.

The situation is worsened by delinquency, illegality, and huge debts. Furthermore, the degradation of buildings would require an important urban regeneration intervention, which is now impossible because of the economic precariousness of the owners and the lack of state support as it is an entirely private housing neighbourhood. This causes an emergency housing situation.

One of the typical characteristics of the Satellite neighbourhood is the high social mobility of the population (Alietti & Agustoni, 2015). Citizens consider it a place of transit or passage and not a place for planning the future.

Therefore, if on the one hand, negative social phenomena are observed, on the other hand, the presence of a resilient, strong community rich in resources and social and human capital is highlighted.

The «Let's Start Together» initiative promoted in the school

The topic of school has always been addressed within neighbourhood workshops because many women, coming from other countries, were used to different education systems from that of the Italian one. During its work in the neighbourhood, the NPO realised that the lack of knowledge and trust in the Italian school system is one of the main reasons that lead people of different nationalities to leave Italy. Lack of trust and participation arises chiefly from the lack of knowledge and, therefore, from the devaluation of the Italian educational model. Spreading awareness about schools can contribute in increasing the trust and well-being of the whole community.

To address this issue, a group work was created in 2015 with mothers and teachers with the aim of better understanding the Italian school context and bridging the lack of communication between schools and families. In this way, interventions began in schools in the Satellite neighbourhood.

The initiative promoted a synergy between schools and families in spreading the culture of «working and educating together». The aim was to promote parents' involvement in their children's education — through mediation, negotiation, and sharing between parents and teachers — in order to facilitate a greater understanding of the elementary rules of Italian educational institutions in migrant parents and raise awareness among teachers and school principals about the needs of culturally diverse people.

The school involved in the project is a microsystem that reproduces the same dynamics of the territory in a small way (in this case of the Satellite neighbourhood). Therefore, it is an important observation centre that caters to the problems of the community.

In detail, the complexes adjacent to the Satellite neighbourhood are mainly frequented by immigrant families; this is an indicator of the physical and social fracture of the territory.

Activities of the project

Interventions in the school promoted by the NPO can be divided into three areas according to the actions and school complexes involved.

The first, also temporally first, developed within the kindergarten school (in Italy attended by children between 3 and 5 years of age)

The concern highlighted was the presence of mutual conflicts and misunderstandings caused by lack of communication and different socio-cultural habits between parents and teachers.

On the one hand, teachers reported that immigrant parents did not participate in school activities and events (blaming them for not showing interest in their children's education), on the other hand, the parents did not know that they could participate; they did not know their rights and duties towards the school.

For example, in Bangladesh, private talk with teachers is not considered a resource but a negative event. As for many parents from India and Bangladesh, it is difficult for them to understand what the Italian kindergarten is like, a place where learning takes place through playing because in their countries, once the children start school (at three years of age) are immediately supposed to learn to read and write. These are just some of the issues that, if not known, can raise barriers of misunderstanding and prejudice between families and scholastic institutions.

To address this situation, thematic meetings were organised to raise awareness and mediate to spread awareness about the rights and duties of parents in regard to their children's education. Some of the main topics debated in the meetings were the role of the class representative, the function of the conversations between parents and teachers, academic inclusion and the day at school of the child, the use of technology in education, and conflict management between peers and siblings.

The meetings saw the presence of Arabic, Urdu, and Bengali cultural mediators (this role was undertaken by some women of the NPO together with school mediators). Furthermore, the school psychologist was involved to deepen the topics.

Each meeting had the same setup: in a circular setting, through a brainstorming session, the participants were asked to share their experiences on the topic; then, its positive and negative aspects were highlighted by the facilitators; and in the end, the psychologist, addressing the themes that arose concluded with a brief summary. On average, around 30 parents were involved in each meeting.

The second area of intervention was developed with 6-year-old children and their parents in a school with a high concentration of migrant children. Therefore, great attention and innovative practices were required to promote integration and social inclusion.

The problem reported by parents was the presence of many ethnic groups that caused serious relational and communicative obstacles between parents themselves, who could not feel like a part of the «class group»; therefore, they did not speak outside the premises of the school, raising even higher «walls» in the community.

The establishment of a «parent-class group» was identified (by the working group) as an important factor for good schooling for children; if the parents established cordial relationships among themselves — for instance, by helping one another and having the children meet beyond school hours — it could prove beneficial for both the children and the neighbourhood.

Hence, afternoon meetings were organised to facilitate mutual understanding and friendly relationships between parents from different cultures. During the meetings, while playful activities were planned for the children, the parents together with a facilitator had the opportunity to meet and get to know each other for the first time.

In the third phase of the project, several initiatives were organised, such as a tutorial video on reception at school (this action arose from the lack of material translated into different languages and the presence of many illiterate immigrant parents); and

afternoon workshops for children with linguistic, relational, or family difficulties, and for newly arrived children in Italy.

These workshops aimed to promote a welcoming atmosphere where children could experience a positive relationship with adults and peers (in a situation of equality and absence of judgement present instead in the school context). In this way, children gained confidence in themselves and befriended others, which can prevent bullying. Italian language was enhanced through games and recreational activities. Teachers and volunteers also helped children understand their homework and were taught easy learning methods.

Reflections on experience: the importance of «working together»

The benefits reported by the participants were numerous. In particular, through the thematic meeting, it was possible to observe a reduction in conflict at all levels (between parents, class representatives, and teachers). Furthermore, the significant and continuous participation in the meetings by Italian parents, immigrants, and teachers created a climate of mutual hospitality reducing social discrimination.

Teachers and school collaborators were made aware of the needs of culturally different people, and they realised that different educational and school models exist and have started to be more oriented towards families. At the same time, parents felt actively involved in their children's school life (e.g. organising events). The teachers reported that they had increased the hours of private talk due to a high number of requests, and there had also been an increase in the participation of parents in class meetings.

Moreover, parents said they had met each other for the first time (they declared that there were no aggregative moments proposed by the school), and they had started building relationships and greeting outside school. Class representatives were able to collect all the phone numbers to create a WhatsApp group. After one year, the parents met again. They highlighted further benefits of the initiative: the initiative had strengthened the relationship between parents and their children, fostered the emergence of new social ties, and children started to meet each other outside school; at the end of the year, the parents organised a get together.

In practice, the initial reflections took into consideration two main questions: 1) What can WE do to face hard situations? and 2) What kind of «community» do we want to work with?

The key factor leading to the success of the initiative has to be identified in the presence, within the group responsible for the project, of parents (Italians and immigrants), teachers, and school collaborators. This heterogeneity of roles has generated a valuable exchange of knowledge and ideas that made it possible to carry out innovative interventions for the community (Calcaterra, 2019). The outcome achieved was a greater dialogue between families and the institution.

Conclusion

School is a very important institution of our society. It is the place of «civil and cultural growth of a person» (Ministero dell'Istruzione, *Nota Prot. n. 3602/P0 del 31 luglio 2008*). For this reason, education is an active collaboration between schools and families. This is maintained in the «educational co-responsibility pact», a fundamental document signed at the beginning of the year (that contains the rights and duties of parents, teachers, and students).

In multi-ethnic contexts, such as in the municipality involved in the project, this path is more complicated. A document is not enough; it is important to find new common educational and communication strategies (between schools and families) and implement good practices and initiatives that encourage collaboration.

The intercultural dimension is a treasure to be enhanced; however, it requires far sightedness and continuous innovations. The educational institution alone struggles to promote social relationships between families (especially in a neighbourhood with the characteristics of the Satellite, a multicultural place and inhabited mainly by first-generation immigrants). Apart from the social aspect, schools do not arrange orientation sessions for parents of different nationalities who, coming from countries with different education systems, struggle to understand the functioning of the Italian schools. There are also no training sessions for teachers, who often find themselves unprepared to work in multi-ethnic contexts. In multi-ethnic reality, therefore, the contribution of the Community Social Work launched according to the relationship principles (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2017) is precious. Through it, social workers can guide people motivated to «work together» as a reflect, and plan, to implement, and act collectively for the good of all, transforming the territories into an «educating community». Furthermore, we can work to build new social relationships based on comparison, dialogue, and mutual respect.

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