

Fostering Civic Participation Through Youth Town Councils in Europe

Luigina Mortari[†]
University of Verona

Abstract One objective of environmental education is that of educating the young to play an active role as members of civil society. A way of promoting this kind of learning is that of engaging the young in participatory activities in which they can contribute to the conception and planning of a better quality of urban life.

This paper presents an educative experience based on the assumption that in order for the young to be empowered to become responsible citizens, it is important to grant them the role of "young citizens", who actively contribute to the construction of a new way of thinking about the quality of urban life and where they are engaged in the production of ideas to be realised in the urban environment.

The educational research is framed in the phenomenological-hermeneutic theory of inquiry. The data have been collected from the analysis of the ideas expressed by the participants both in individual written reflections and in conversations in the classroom.

In generating a new ecological culture, people must devote the necessary time to pondering the knots of the ecological crisis carefully. This means people need to reflect very deeply on the assumptions which underlie ways of behaviour (Robottom & Hart, 1993, p. 45), to question anti-ecological worldviews and to cultivate ecological forms of conceiving our way of inhabiting the Earth. What is very important is that this dedication to thinking in an ecological way supports an active participation in political life. A cultural upheaval leading to a new ecological world needs citizens committed to improving the quality of life. Thus, education towards responsible participation in political life is an essential component of environmental education.

One objective of environmental education is that of educating young people to play an active role as members of civil society. Improving educative experiences in order to foster widespread civic competence is a responsibility not only of schools, but also of a civil society. A way of promoting this kind of learning is that of engaging the young in participatory activities in which they can contribute to the conception and planning of a better quality of urban life.

This paper presents an educative experience based on the assumption that in order for the young to be empowered to become responsible citizens, it is important to grant them the role of "young citizens", who actively contribute to the construction of a new

[†]*Address for correspondence:* A/Prof Luigina Mortari, Department of Education, University of Verona, via San Francesco 22, 37129 Verona, Italy. E-mail: luigina.mortari@univr.it

way of thinking about the quality of urban life and where they are engaged in the production of ideas to be realised in the urban environment.

Pedagogical Premise

If we conceive of politics as participation in the running of public affairs with the aim of constructing a world where every person can have a good quality of life, then politics is an essential component, or at least it should be, of the life of every citizen. Consequently, our formative institutions must educate the young towards participating responsibly in civic life. Educating towards political participation means cultivating a passion for the critical analysis of the present reality, and on the basis of this understanding inventing better worlds, because imagining utopias is necessary in order to orient action towards the construction of a new world (Freire, 1998).

The theoretical premise which underpins the educative experience that is the object of this research is that political commitment is made real not only through action, but also through speech and debate (Arendt, 1958). It is through speech that we invent worlds, it is with debate that we decide in what environment we want to live and what actions must be taken in order to construct this world.

In order for speech and debate to be educative it is necessary that linguistic actions (for example discussions in groups) have relevant political questions as their object. From an Aristotelian point of view the fundamental political question is "What is a good human life?". If we contextualise this question in our educative project, which has its focus in the life of the town, then reflecting about well-being in the town is essential in order to identify and assess the conditions which can improve the life of citizens (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993).

On this pedagogical premise a complex educative experience was organised in a small town in north-east Italy, developing both inside and outside school. I devised this educative process and implemented it with two educators-researchers. Initially this experience of urban ecological education was organised only outside school, however, later it also involved some schools in the town creating a close relationship and reciprocal dialogue outside and inside school. This is defined as an "integrated system of education" in Italian pedagogy.

This paper presents the first three years of this on-going experience. Its purpose is to explain how this educative experience was structured and how that structure has been altered in order to boost its educative capacities; and to present the findings of the educational research which has been carried out on this experience. As will be discussed, these findings emerged from the analysis of the "things-of-thought" produced by the students during the educative process.

Starting from the assumption that our experience is bound to language, analysing what the young say and symbolic activities in which they engage in a learning environment is a relevant research task. Since elaborating an interpretive sense of the products of thinking requires a phenomenological sensitivity and a hermeneutic ability, the educational research is framed in the phenomenological-hermeneutic theory of inquiry. This approach allows us to answer questions of meaning, such as precisely what meanings are constructed by the young involved in reflecting about life in the town. The data were collected from an analysis of the ideas expressed by the participants both in individual written reflections and in conversations in the classroom. All conversational situations were monitored through audiotaping which has given us enough data to develop a description of the experience. The data have been elaborated on the basis of a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994).

The Educative Experience Outside School

In recent years some European towns have organised the "Town Council of Boys and Girls" (TCBG). These youth town councils have been promoted by the local government, with the aim of involving the young in co-operating in the planning of a better way of living in an urban context that takes into account both the needs and the desires of children and young adults.

A "Town Council of Boys and Girls" was organised in 1998 in a small town in north-east Italy. This Youth Town Council is an assembly of around 30 children aged between 9 to 13 and meets in the same chamber as the adult Town Council. The Youth Town Council has the task of analysing the town's quality of life starting from a child's point of view and then proposing actions for the improvement of the quality of the urban life of children. Indeed the life of the town, its town-planning and traffic-planning, is conceived from an adult point of view, which often has scant consideration for the needs of children such as the need to move freely and without danger in the streets, the need to have green areas in which to play in contact with natural elements, the need for a place where children can meet and freely organise games activities. The "TCBG" has been organised with the aim of giving voice to the children's point of view and from which to rethink the organisation of urban life.

The members of "TCBG" are elected through democratic consultations in the town's schools and are organised every two years. When it is election time the local government informs the schools and sends the teachers a document with the directions for the procedure to be implemented. The procedure foresees that any boy or girl aged between 9 and 13 can stand for the "TCBG" as a candidate for his/her class and the candidate must enrol in the list of the candidates. The list is made public and then the elections take place. Every child can vote and the voting is secret. When the elections are finished the teachers make up a list of the elected candidates and send it to the local government which convenes and, in a public ceremony, designates them members of the "TCBG".

Even if the local government is the promoter of this formative activity, it cannot run the local youth assembly both because it doesn't offer any guarantee of pedagogical expertise and because there is the risk of causing ideological conditioning. In order for the participation in the "TCBG" to be really formative it is necessary for it to be supported by rigorous pedagogical work. With this aim the "TCBG" was entrusted to a pedagogical team composed of an academic researcher (myself) and two educators. This team is responsible for the planning, implementation and evaluation of the educative program.

Starting from the premise that what is important in preparing citizens capable of working for the environment (Fien, 1993) is promoting in the young the passion for thinking in a critical and creative way, the pedagogical team structured the assembly of young participants as a "laboratory of thinking" (think tank). In this learning environment the young are involved in reflecting about the life of their town and then in working out proposals for improving the quality of life. The major question which has to be addressed is that of promoting critical reflection on living conditions in their town and creative thinking which works out new ideas about urban life. Children are encouraged to learn to think for themselves and to express their own ideas courageously and with a constructive attitude.

Thinking Activity

The thinking activity developed around the following questions: (a) "What does a 'good quality of life' consist of?"; (b) "How would you like your town to be?"; and (c) "What proposals would you formulate in order to improve the quality of life in your town?".

Each question develops a specific cognitive dimension: the first asks the young to analyse an issue of high existential value which activates philosophical thinking; the second asks them to develop the capacity to imagine a better future; and the third asks them to exercise productive thinking which leads to transformative actions.

Each of these questions has precise pedagogical reasons: firstly, asking the participants to think of what a good quality of life consists of means involving the young in reflecting on what is important in order to authenticate human existence. If we really want to educate citizens who, rather than passively accepting the prevailing style of life, are capable of planning their existence by themselves in a creative fashion then, in the school context, existential questions must become the subjects of debate. Secondly, in order to become citizens capable of actively participating in the life of the town it is necessary to learn to think in terms of the future, to learn to imagine better futures. Conceiving of an "ideal life in the town" has educative value. Finally, after having thought of what signifies a good quality of life in general and then having hypothesised the life of an ideal town, it is necessary to involve the students in identifying those transformative actions which allow citizens to improve the quality of the life in their town. Too often school confines itself to training students in a way of thinking which adapts itself to the present reality, rather than educating them to think in a creative way, that is, to invent new ways of conceiving the "world-of-life".

Working for Change

Just as the adult town council is organised into "working committees" so too is the youth town council, with four committees planned. This organisation also allows participants to work in small groups under the supervision of an educator.

Each committee meets as many times as it is necessary in order to tackle the questions indicated above. Each verbal interaction in the work committee is audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. The work of transcription is important not only for gathering the data needed for the educational research, but also for ethical and political reasons since the transcriptions of the interactions are given to the local government so as to render the educative activity transparent.

After the discussion work has been concluded, the whole youth council is convened and here each committee communicates the outcome of its work. This is a delicate phase since the components of the youth assembly must examine the proposals aimed at improving the quality of urban life which have been formulated by each committee and through a democratic debate must identify the more meaningful proposals which are then submitted for consideration to the adult town council.

With this aim in mind, the students must also decide how to present their proposals to the adult council. Generally the young choose to prepare posters where their ideas are expressed both through words and through drawings, while in the second year of this experience some students preferred to make a computer presentation. When the proposals are ready the youth council organises a public meeting with the adult council and the mayor and in this context they present the proposals that they wish to see implemented. The adult town council then has the task of choosing what proposals to bring to fruition.

A Critical Evaluation of the TCBG

This organisation model for the TCBG's activity was repeated for the first two years, nevertheless from the critical evaluation made at the close of the second year the necessity of radically rethinking the structure of the formative experience emerged. The youth council, as it was structured, turned out to be an organism separate from the life of the town: indeed its members, after having been elected, acted independently from the schools they represented. In this condition of separateness from the everyday life of schools the involvement with the youth council risks being only a superficial activity of participation and not a true formative experience.

In order to fill this gap and make the activity of the youth council the expression of the wider community of young people who attend the schools, I organised a "Laboratory of Civic Thinking" with some schools in the town who worked closely with the youth council. In order for the youth council to be an expression of a truly democratic way of participation, it was necessary to implement a continuous dialogue between the council and the classes in the web of schools. To this end, the relationship between the council and the classes has been structured in this way:

- (i) The classes who decide to participate in the "Laboratory of Civic Thinking" reflect on the same questions discussed by the committees of the youth council. Since in each class there is a representative of the youth council, he/she has the task of gathering the ideas formulated by his/her classmates and then he/she must communicate all of these to the youth council.
- (ii) Each class not only discusses the issues but also formulates its proposals which the class representative reports in the youth assembly. In this way the council members examine the proposals and then, on the basis of this examination, formulate their own proposals. In order to make this choice very democratic each representative then returns with the council's proposals to his/her class, which discusses them and suggests further ideas which will be discussed in a successive meeting of the youth council. This process allows for continuous communication between councillors and their constituents.

When the project of the "Laboratory of Civic Thinking" was presented to the schools nine classes decided to participate and a total of 165 students were involved.

Structure of the "Laboratory of Civic Thinking"

In order to organise the "Laboratory of Civic Thinking" in a way which was pedagogically meaningful, I started from the premise that "educating to think" means enhancing both intrasubjective reflection, that is, silent thinking to oneself, and intersubjective reflection, that is, thinking which is socially shared with others (Mortari, 2002). Consequently, each question was tackled both at the individual level and through a discussion which involved the whole class.

In the first phase each student was asked to reflect on an issue (intrasubjective reflection), then he/she had to write his/her reflections on a sheet of paper that was later collected by the researcher. In the second phase the whole class was involved in discussing the same question (intersubjective reflection) in order to clarify and deepen the issue. In this second phase the task of the educator-researcher was much more delicate: he/she had to encourage students to reflect on the questions without conditioning their ways of thinking. For this purpose he/she had to adopt a Socratic style of leading the discussion, which consists of raising doubts, problematising beliefs taken for granted, questioning points of view in depth, all without expressing his/her beliefs and theories.

Each phase of the experience was analytically monitored: that is, the individual reflections were gathered and transcribed, while the discussions in class were taped and then transcribed verbatim to construct texts for analysis. Data from the researcher's was also examined.

Findings

The analysis of the data was made using a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) which involved the following steps:

- (a) without any preconceived theory, preliminary groupings of the ideas were constructed;
- (b) similar groupings were merged into categories;
- (c) each category was labelled; and
- (d) the more frequent categories were identified in order to reveal the essence of the thoughts of the research participants.

In order to ensure respect of the epistemic principle of "being faithful to phenomenon" which characterises the phenomenological approach, the analysis was developed without preconceived questions. We generated questions by returning again and again to the data.

In the space of this article there is no room to present all the findings which emerged from the analysis. However, what is interesting from an ecological perspective are the concepts of a "good quality of the life in the town" that were expressed by these students.

From the analysis of the individual texts about twenty indicators for a good quality of life emerged. Among these the results were that eleven indicators gathered a meaningful number of preferences: more greenery (17%); less pollution (12%); less traffic (11%); cleaner towns (10%); more places for socialising (8%); more cycle paths (7%); more sports facilities (5%); more public transport (3%); more cultural events for young people (2%); and more pedestrian areas (2%).

In order to understand the students' points of view better, each idea written on the individual sheets was examined during the discussion in the class. Then, after having reflected on the thoughts that emerged, the students were asked to identify the "important" indicators of good quality of life in the town. The top three components of a good quality of life were more greenery, less pollution and cleaner towns.

More Greenery

The majority of students explained this choice scientifically: "trees give oxygen". Only a few students noted the aesthetic and recreational value of green areas. This view supports the argument that in Italian schools an "education to nature" which develops an awareness of its intrinsic value is lacking. Indeed, these students showed that they don't appreciate "wilderness", since when they were asked if they prefer woods or gardens, the preference was for gardens, with this choice explained by arguing that gardens are safer environments. In contrast to the wealth of experience provided by a natural environment, the security given by a highly anthropomorphised place is preferred. This lack of appreciation for wilderness, shown by Italian children, should be problematised in order to provoke a conceptual change that develops the capacity to appreciate natural settings. We can hypothesise that in order to promote a positive conception of wilderness it is necessary for schools to promote more frequent interaction experiences with nature (which in our technocratic way of life are ever rarer), rather than keeping students sitting in the classroom many hours a day far from the surrounding lifeworld. According to the phenomenological framework, which takes

the primacy of perception seriously (Merleau-Ponty, 1962), a change of perspective is promoted only through an embodied experience of the sensate world. In pedagogy a renewed attentiveness to bodily experience can enable people to recognise and affirm the value of natural environments (Abram, 1996, p. 85). Research about environmental practice (Palmer, 1995; Chawla, 1998) confirms the hypothesis that children's outdoor experience is the most important factor in developing a personal concern for nature.

Less Pollution

From the analysis of the data it emerges that the students were very worried about urban pollution and think that it is caused mainly by car traffic. When they were asked to identify some solutions, in order of importance they suggested the following: using electric cars, blocking traffic on Sundays and holidays, increasing public transport and at the same time decreasing the cost of public transport.

Another solution often suggested is that of eliminating industries. When the students offer simplistic solutions failing to take their social impact into account, the researcher's task is that of inviting them to a more complex analysis of the issue by raising questions such as: "What consequences could this decision have for employment? How many people would lose their job and consequently how many families would find themselves living in difficult circumstances? Are there alternative solutions? How can we analyse them?"

Cleaner Towns

With the indicator "cleaner towns" the students express their desire for a town "where the pavements are free from rubbish", where the "parks are cleaner" and "the walls are not dirty". To the question "how could we keep the town cleaner?" the most widespread response was to increase the number of wastepaper baskets, and the application of stricter sanctions for litter-louts.

From the point of view of urban politics two other elements that emerged from the data analysis must be considered: the wish for the town to offer "places for socialising" and "cycle paths". With the term "places for socialising" the students mentioned indoor areas where they can meet freely to play and talk, "to be with one's friends". This desire is particularly felt by girls, who want places where they can "talk together about problems concerning our own age group".

The request for cycle paths is a sign of the desire for a town which is more attentive to the needs of the young; our towns seem constructed for cars and for adults. Instead the chance to move about freely in the environment is essential for healthy development both of the body and of the mind.

Discussion

The task of the researcher who investigates not "on" people but "with and for" people (Reason, 1988, p. 1) is that of making the research experience meaningful from the participants' point of view. In this specific context that means organising the thinking activity so that it enhances participants' capacity to think both in a critical and in a creative way. For this purpose the researcher must be capable of identifying the preconceptions taken for granted in the flow of the class discussion, that is, of recognising those expressions which are said unreflectively and when he/she has identified them, the researcher must be ready to problematise them.

An idea which was frequently expressed during the discussions was the conviction that education had minimal effect. Indeed, when we were discussing ecological problems caused by incorrect individual behaviour the students tended to propose the introduction of more severe laws as a solution while little confidence was placed on

the education of people. When invited to explain the reasons for this lack of confidence in education the students gave this rationale: education is possible only in the early years of life, that is, from birth to primary school age, then acquired behaviour cannot be changed. On the basis of this reasoning the secondary school is left only the task of instruction, that is, of facilitating the acquisition of the conceptual and procedural structures of the disciplines in the curriculum; while education, which consists in promoting the capacity to give an ethical and aesthetical form to one's existence by oneself and in an original way, is conceived of as impossible to implement.

Having noted the presence of this preconception, a relevant pedagogical question is raised. If the school system wants to be really educative, it must above all become aware of the way in which the young think, that is, it must ascertain the opinions they have of important issues and then encourage them to investigate the implications of their beliefs in depth. Such teaching-as-research which takes the students' views seriously is crucial in environmental education (Payne, 1998, p. 19). The next step consists in showing them that other worldviews also exist and these have different existential and political implications.

Believing that it is no longer possible to educate beyond a certain age means reducing one's confidence in the transformative capacities of educational institutions, with the risk of enhancing the kind of pessimism which is the first step towards a passive, detached attitude. Hopelessness immobilises us and it pushes us to succumb to fatalism (Freire, 1998: 8). Instead, if we want to transform our culture we must cultivate hope and confidence in the possibility of changing reality in the young. For this reason environmental education is "a kind of education in hope" (Freire, 1998, p. 9).

For the Future

Each educative experience needs to be continuously re-elaborated with the aim of optimising its formative value. In this case there are two critical points on which work is needed in the future. Firstly, after having constructed a close collaborative relationship between the youth council and the classes of the "Laboratory of Civic Thinking" it is now necessary to implement an exchange between the classes themselves, so as to construct a web of schools. In this way we will cultivate *a tissue of relationships of thinking* which are the basis for democratic life in any urban environment. Secondly, besides reflecting on the questions already posed it would be interesting to participate in thinking activities which have some practical tasks as their object. For example, it would be pedagogically meaningful to involve the students, both in the youth council and in the laboratory, in the commitment to plan a green area or a square so that social life and recreational activities would be facilitated. When the project is completed, it could then be presented to the local government who could bring this area about, taking the suggestions given by the young citizens into consideration.

Keywords: civic responsibility; a good quality of life; participation; laboratory of thinking; web of schools.

References

- Abram, D. (1996). *Merleau-Ponty and the voice of the earth*. In D. Macauley (Ed.), *Minding nature* (pp. 82–101). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Arendt, H. (1958). *The human condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Chawla, L. (1998). Significant life experiences revisited: A review of research on sources of environmental sensitivity. *Environmental Education Research*, 4(4), 369–382.
- Fien, J. (1993). *Education for the environment*. Geelong: Deakin University Press.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of hope*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company.

- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception* (A. Lingis, Trans.). Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press.
- Mortari L. (2002). *Aver cura della vita della mente*. Milano: RCS-La Nuova Italia.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Nussbaum, M., & Sen, A. (Eds.). (1993). *The quality of life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Palmer, J. (1995). Environmental thinking in the early years: Understanding and misunderstanding of concepts related to waste management. *Environmental Education Research*, 1(1), pp. 35–45.
- Payne, P. (1998). Children's conceptions of nature. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*, 14, 19–26.
- Reason, P. (Ed.). (1998). *Human inquiry in action*. London: Sage.
- Robottom, I., & Hart, P. (1993). *Research in environmental education*. Geelong: Deakin University.