



**Proceedings of the 2nd International
Conference**

of the Journal Scuola Democratica

REINVENTING EDUCATION

VOLUME II

**Learning with New Technologies,
Equality and Inclusion**

**ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA
DEMOCRATICA"**

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ASSOCIAZIONE “PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA”
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Rethinking Youth After Pandemics? Reintroducing Agency and Generations 1121

THINKING THROUGH ADOLESCENT SUBJECTIVITY AND AGENCY AND THEIR ROLE IN SUPPORTING MENTAL HEALTH: A CONTRIBUTION TO THE NEW UK'S MENTAL HEALTH ACT	1125
<i>Danilo Di Emidio</i>	1125
A STUDY ABOUT GENERATIVITY IN INTERGENERATIONAL CARE IN PANDEMIC TIME	1137
<i>Maria Vinciguerra</i>	1137

International Students Mobility pre, during, and post COVID-1146

INTERNATIONAL VIRTUAL MOBILITY: IS IT AN OPTION FOR PROMOTING THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION?	1149
<i>Cristina López-Duarte, Jane Frances Maley and Marta María Vidal-Suárez</i>	1149
YOUNG PEOPLE, IDENTITY AND EXPERIENCE IN EUROPE	1161
<i>Alessandra Polidori</i>	1161
INTERNATIONAL STUDENT RECRUITMENT AND IN-BOUND MOBILITY IN THE POST-PANDEMIC WORLD ORDER	1171
<i>Raghvendra Singh and Dylan Rust</i>	1171

Educational Experiences of Youth NEET at Urban and Rural Areas During COVID-19 Pandemic and Future of New Education World 1182

IN TEAMS... ONLY CONNECTED: RE-READING AND RE-SIGNIFYING THE CIVIL SERVICE EXPERIENCE IN THE TIME OF COVID-19	1185
<i>Marianna Capo</i>	1185
SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITION IN ITALY AND ROMANIA: THE ROLE OF EDUCATION SYSTEM	1197
<i>Gabriela Neagu and Antonella Rocca</i>	1197

Re-Inventing the Integration Between Formal, Non-Formal and Informal Education (After Pandemic Time)? 1209

THE EVALUATION OF EDUCATIONAL CREDENTIALS FOR YOUNG REFUGEES INCLUSION: AN EXPLORATIVE RESEARCH	1213
<i>Marianna Colosimo and Anna Fausta Scardigno</i>	1213
WE ARE STILL HERE! SCHOOL-VET ALTERNANCE BETWEEN ENGAGEMENT AND DROPOUT RISK. EVIDENCE FROM EUROPEAN PRACTICES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC	1223
<i>Maddalena Bartolini and Valentina Lamonica</i>	1223
TOWARD UNDERSTANDING POTENTIALS, LIMITS AND CHALLENGES OF COOPERATION BETWEEN YOUTH WORK AND SCHOOLS DURING THE PANDEMIC	1233
<i>Daniele Morciano and Fausta Scardigno</i>	1233
FORMAL, NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL EDUCATION: INTEGRATION IS POSSIBLE	1247
<i>Nunzia Vezzola</i>	1247

Beyond Formal Education? Young People and Alternative Non-Formal and Informal Learning Times and Places 1258

INFORMAL LEARNING IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY. THE TESSERA CULTURA PROJECT	1261
<i>Giambattista Bufalino, Gabriella D'Aprile and Cristina Lo Presti</i>	1261
INTERNATIONAL YOUTH WORK: ASSETS AND CHALLENGES	1271
<i>Horta Herranz, Andreas Karsten, Ashley Pitschmann, Cara Lee Roth, Sümeyra Akarçesme and Tanja Strecker</i>	1271

SERIOUS GAMES AND NON-FORMAL LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM: THE EXPERIENCE OF <i>SICURI SI DIVENTA</i>	1287
<i>Pina Lalli and Claudia Capelli</i>	1287
IT'S EVEN MORE COMPLICATED! THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA PRACTICES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ADOLESCENTS' IDENTITY	1301
<i>Elena Pacetti, Alessandro Soriani and Paolo Bonafede</i>	1301

Learning Digital Creativity in Formal and Informal Environments Challenges and Opportunities for Education

1312

SURVIVING THE PH.D.: THE USE OF MEMETIC CREATIVITY IN INFORMAL NETWORKS	1315
<i>Roberta Bracciale and Junio Aglioti Colombini</i>	1315
PANDEMIC AND SELF-REPRESENTATION. BOYS AND GIRLS DESCRIBE THEIR REALITY THROUGH DIGITAL IMAGES	1328
<i>Maria Adelaide Gallina, Tania Parisi and Valentina Rosso</i>	1328
EMPOWERING DIGITAL CREATIVITY DEVELOPING CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE THROUGH A UNIVERSITY BLOG, SOCIAL MEDIA AND PODCASTS	1337
<i>Pina Lalli and Michela Zingone</i>	1337
<i>FUTURI (IM)PERFETTI. SOCIAL FORESIGHT AND DIGITAL CREATIVITY AS PRACTICES TO EXTEND THE ABILITY TO ASPIRE</i>	1349
<i>Claudio Marciano, Domenico Morreale and Alberto Robiati</i>	1349
FOCUS ON THE FUTURE. AN ORIENTATION PROJECT OF THE UNIVERSITY OF L'AQUILA	1361
<i>Geraldina Roberti and Antonella Nuzzaci</i>	1361

In Teams... Only Connected: Re-Reading and Re-Signifying the Civil Service Experience in the Time of COVID-19

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ABSTRACT: *This contribution focuses on the educational experience of volunteers of the Civil Service, involved in a project titled Advocacy and inclusion of disabled university students, from Centro di Ateneo Sinapsi operational sections. The training planned some autobiographical-narrative tasks designed to self-assessment of skills and sources acquired by students in different learning contexts, formal and informal. Main goals were to allow the participants to lead in a role of reconstruction, documentation and enhancement of their educational, professional and life experiences, and due to the pandemic, to restore the experience of the civil service. The journey has been structured in three meetings: the first two for the execution of interviews in a group in order to reorganize the experience of the civil service based on the increment of transversal competences, while the last one focused on a challenging experience that turned out to be different than it was expected. The current pandemic situation forced a radical change in the management of both meetings and civil service work, Microsoft Teams has been used for the provision of training activities. The assessment questionnaire showed up that, despite the social distance, young people have appreciated this positive experience, perceiving it as a successful opportunity to highlight personal values and ideals, and awareness that can lead them to future goals.*

KEYWORDS: *experience, storytelling, training, skills, reconnaissance.*

Introduction

The contribution presents a training experience aimed at highlighting the revision of the Civil Service experience carried out by young volunteers in *Centro di Ateneo Sinapsi's* operational sections. The SPO training included, at the end of the Civil Service year, an autobiographical storytelling project that has been particularly useful and fruitful for volunteers, not only to create a space-time area pedagogically functional for self-recognition of significant learning (gained in different life context, formal, non-formal, informal), emotions and self-image, difficult dimensions to achieve (Spencer, Spencer, 1993), but also for the re-significance of the Civil Service experience in the COVID-19 pandemic period. The Civil Service project *Advocacy and inclusion of disabled*

university students was born in 2004 with a partnership between *Centro di Ateneo Sinapsi* (Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II) and *Associazione Mediterranea per lo Sviluppo e la promozione del Servizio civile* (AMESCI).

Since its beginning, the project turned out to be fundamental to improve disabled students' university-lives through the implementation of activities directed to promote their integration and participation. The planned activities have been the following ones: assistance to university courses, examinations, meetings with professors reception of teachers; preparation of accessible teaching materials and all those activities and services that allow the student to actively participate in university life. The entering and exiting volunteers of the project *Advocacy and inclusion of disabled university students* take part in the formation planned by the interactive laboratory for the promotion of employability (SPO), a didactics that provides narrative-autobiographical activities designed to self-evaluation of skills and resources acquired by young volunteers in different learning environments. In the majority of cases, volunteers decide to take part in a formative experience added to the higher and/or university studies, with the goal of gaining and empowering useful skills for their job placement, one year of volunteering that engages young people 5 hours a day and plans a payment of € 400. The COVID-19 health-emergency period has forced, in every workplace, a significant change in working conditions, the activities shifted from being carried out in presence to being carried out remotely. The participants, allocated in different operational sections (SPO, SSF, Antidiscrimination and Disability) of Centro di Ateneo could not attend university to do their activities in the usual presence and collegial way, and so all of the activities planned by the operational sections of the Sinapsi have been remodeled to let them carry out the work remotely.

1. Target

27 remaining volunteers of Centro di Ateneo Sinapsi have taken part in the outgoing training and have been placed in different services: disability, educational success, employability, and antidiscrimination. The group is formed by graduated students aged 25. The graduate volunteers take part in several degree courses: psychology, engineering, communication sciences, journalism, philosophy, and modern philology.

2. Goals

The goals of the outgoing training are to allow young volunteers to:

- benefit of a reconstruction and valorization of their formative, professional and life experience;

- re-cross life experiences to find out what they have learnt from them (Domincé,1990);
- reach identification, recognition and self-assessment of their skills and resources;
- re-imagine the Civil Service experience in the pandemic period.

These results are achieved by an activity carried out partly in presence and partly autonomously.

The SPO training¹, taking account of the occupational system evolution and of the European Union directives about young policies (OECD, 2011; EU, 2011, 2019), supports development and growth towards autonomy of young people who take part in the Universal Civil Service' experience, making them totally aware of their resources and talents, so that this self-awareness can orient and guide their professional objectives. Furthermore, SPO formation promotes their participation in democratic life, supporting its social and civic commitment, and ensures that all young people have the basic resources to take part in the society they live in (EU, 2018).

Also considering these pronouncements, in conjunction with the volunteering year' end, a further training module (Tab. 1) has been predicted in the usual context of outgoing training to promote employability². This module has led volunteers to reflect on the Civil service experience, and ensured that the conclusion has been lived with greater awareness.

<i>Meetings</i>	<i>Timing / setting</i>	<i>Input – Step of group interview</i>	<i>Output</i>
First meeting	Individual- Group 3 hours	On the metaphor line: Civil Service experience as; Civil Service during COVID-19 period: keywords; 'Digital portrait' introduction	Image/metaphor Written reflections

¹ The SPO formation is articulated in a laboratory path of 6 meetings: the first two are finalized, through the compilation of two questionnaires, to the identification and restitution to the participants of the employability profile (questionnaire Avo) and the identification of a soft skills map (Questionnaire Bdc); the third meeting is oriented to provide both operational guidance to achieve, through the implementation of narrative devices created ad hoc, a Digital portrait, both directions and advice to write an excellent CV (CV Europass, infographic, etc.); the fourth meeting offers an in-depth study of life choices; the fifth offers suggestions to overcome the individual and group interview; finally, the last meeting is aimed at sharing digital portraits.

² SPO outgoing training for volunteers aims to the realization of a 'digital portrait' as product-process oriented, in this specific case, to increase personal self-awareness, self-recognition of soft skills, personal and professional values in the perspective of 'life design'.

Second meeting	Group 2 hours	Digital portrait sharing	Digital portrait
Third meeting	Individual- Group 2 hours	Budget of training experience	Written reflections (starting from two incipits) shared in the group. Final Questionnaire administration.

TAB.1. Schedule of meetings of ongoing training, leaving the Civil Service path

3. Methodology

The formative meetings with 27 volunteers, in the disability, anti-discrimination, employability and educational success sections, have been conducted using Microsoft Teams Platform and providing a virtual learning environment, in order to benefit of all possibilities of clipboard and information exchange that are possible in this way. In the first meeting a focus group was realized, aimed to encourage the re-elaboration of the Civil Service experience in terms of knowledge and soft skills acquired, a meeting oriented to give a voice to the volunteering experience complexity, carried out in a different way than what was predicted. Young people have been invited to share freely their experience, by associating a metaphor or an image³ to the Civil Service experience in the pandemic period, to write the reason behind that choice and then to share it with in the group; starting from this first narrative activity there were frequent words to describe the experience, as: social inclusion, Civil Service as an experience to reinvent themselves, welfare, relationships. A work on these topics followed to build a shared reflection⁴.

³ Among the metaphors chosen by the young volunteers there is the image of the road sign indicating a turning point, of the compass, of a tree with a lush foliage because the Civil Service was experienced as an opportunity of personal re-design, re-orientation and discovery; again the metaphor of the circle that refers to experience as part of the most general biographical path, understood and re-read as a process constantly in progress, never completed permanently but constantly sought and built; or an image of a circle of persons or a figure indicating objects connected by different links, evidence that the Civil Service has represented for volunteers an experience of connection, indeed of inter-connection, related to the implementation of the different activities to be carried out within the various operational sections of Centro di Ateneo, but also related to the relationship with people: with the OLP (local project operator), with the contacts of the individual sections, with colleagues, with students - users of Centro di Ateneo.

⁴ Here are the results of the shared reflection on some recurring concepts and themes, used to describe the Civil Service experience: young volunteers claim to have felt included from the beginning because, thanks to the training path,

Why use metaphors? Because they open the way to the possibility: sometimes they are the best instrument to observe reality, to live it, and even more to understand it, to perceive it in another way. Metaphors and images allow us to say in a way that cannot be found in other ways: they are cognitive and emotional strategies that relate to reality, actions and behaviors, useful to rework meanings and to build other actions and possibilities. Furthermore, in this first meeting young volunteers have been introduced, as it was said before, by different incipit to facilitate the creation of a narrative auto-profile, to a 'digital portrait'⁵ preparation. Incipit try to facilitate, for young volunteers, the production of a narrative text, as well as «a realistic self-evaluation and the transition from the implicit to the explicit knowledge» (Bresciani, 2015) is also able to integrate the Civil Service experience in the global biographical path, highlighting purchases and discoveries in terms of personal skills and resources. The autobiographical narration is proposed with the awareness of supporting young volunteers in the opportunity to interpret choices,

to monitor paths in order to undertake fearlessly unexplored paths [...] The narration reveals behaviors and communicative processes, influenced by emotions and experiences of the subject. It sets in motion those self-reflective abilities that allow us to capitalize on errors, to strengthen the consciousness of our own limits and potentials."(De Carlo, 2012, 3-4).

In the second meeting, that took place after 15 days to let volunteers write their 'digital portraits', 'digital portraits' were shared. In the end, the third and last meeting was aimed to get a budget of the outgoing training experience and of volunteering in general starting from two incipit: What

knowledge of the context in which they would have work accompanied them. During the Civil Service year, despite the limitations of the historical period in which they found themselves, they participated intensely in the activities proposed by the different sections. Sociality has been much penalized. The lack of daily sharing moments has not allowed, very often, to go beyond the performance of the task, despite they had the will to cultivate and expand the friendship.

⁵ To guide young volunteers to the production of a narrative text, there are several incipit that invite them to make a reconnaissance and reworking of the main experiences carried out in different contexts (formal, non-formal, informal) to summarize these experiences, identifying and self-assessing personal skills and resources. As an example, we report some of the opening words proposed: 1) From the history of my name ... my name is because... ; 2) Reached training goals (Diploma, degree, etc.); 3) My dream project (personal or professional) to fulfill; 4) Why did I choose volunteering? ; 5) What do I bring, in terms of skills, from this experience? ; 6) My hobbies and interests; 7) Gratitude for ... the meeting /the meetings that changed my life/ (people, but also movies, books, etc...); 8) Along the way I learned that ... ; 9) I represent myself with an image, a metaphor that summarizes my philosophy of life... For further information, please refer to Capo, 202.

do you leave behind this experience? What are you bringing with you from it? The intent is to further a reflection on something considered not meaningful to abandon and on something considered important and valuable that you decide to bring with you. After that, written reflections were shared in the group. Group meetings have certainly helped to strengthen the knowledge among volunteers of operational sections, who have never had the opportunity to work together.

4. Results

4.1 Processing of data issued in the second session

At the end of the laboratory meetings, the 27 volunteers received a questionnaire divided into 4 sections: the first one, information-biographical part, aimed at collecting personal data (age, gender, graduation level, higher education, etc.); the second aimed to give an assessment of the path (expectations, contents, logistics, skills implemented, etc.) and divided into 6 items in graduated scales (from 1 to 4) and 5 items with closed answer yes/no; the third part with 7 open-ended questions for the evaluation of the device oriented to the Digital portrait realization; lastly, a fourth part about the valuation of the Civil Service experience that had two questions, one open-ended and the other with multiple choice.

From the point of view of analyzing this information, for each open question, the answers were first categorized (Mortari, 2007) and, secondly, for each of them, the frequency distribution was calculated, while in relation to the closed answers, the frequency has been calculated directly:

- 25 volunteers on 27 answered the question «Did the workshop meet your expectations?» giving the value 4 (the highest) and only 2 volunteers on 27 gave 3 as value;
- 27 volunteers on 27 answered the question «Have the activities generated ideas to create a story related to personal and professional projects?» giving the value 4;
- 25 volunteers on 27 answered the question about the exercise aimed to the learning group activation giving 4 as a value, while 2 volunteers on 27 gave the value 3;
- all the volunteers answered the question about the exploration of the dimension of skills through a reflection on personal formative experiences and story writing giving the value 4;
- even about the activities oriented to creating and sharing the digital video CV all volunteers gave 4 as value;
- 20 volunteers on 27 answered the question about the satisfaction derived from the learning environment giving the value 3, while 7 volunteers on 27 giving 4;

- about the competences acquired through the training experience, all volunteers claim to have implemented self-awareness, creative, relational and digital skills.

4.2 Elaboration of the data emerged in the section for the evaluation of the device oriented to the realization of the digital portrait

About the first open-ended question: «What did you think and feel in recalling, making sense of your professional and personal experiences?» all volunteers converge to such conclusion: the opportunity to engage in this kind of narration let to reorder made possible reordering personal experiences, taking time to reflect on what was done earlier and on the personal goals to pursue. In the second question: «Creating a story that tells of your skills, your attitudes, your personal representations, your values... How approaching autobiographical writing felt like? Was it simple or challenging?», premised that the incipit to write the narrative text allowed all young people to focus on their training, or rather, to identify the learning matured over time in different educational contexts, it hasn't been easy for everyone to write about their lives, especially attempting to take into account the most significant aspects; in fact, many of the experiences feed and enrich each other, making difficult for people choosing what to tell; about the third question: «In which way do you imagine that the skills you think you acquired through the experience of volunteering can support and guide you in the definition and/or implementation of future professional projects?» all volunteers claim that the volunteering experience gave them the opportunity to deepen the topics covered by the Section where the service has been carried out, to cooperate, to achieve common goals and particularly to implement the time management skill; about the fourth question «Through the creation of the 'digital portrait', were you able to identify the training experiences that, in addition to encouraging a skills implementation, have guided and will guide you in the prefiguration of personal and professional goals to achieve?» 21 volunteers on 27 say yes, reporting more awareness of their skills, useful in the choice of future goals; about the fifth question: «If you have succeeded identifying your training experiences, I invite you to talk in depth about them and explain why you consider them meaningful» 23 out of 27 volunteers support the importance of university experience, perceived from a professional point of view as an experience that has allowed them to build excellent theoretical foundations, the satisfaction of feeling 'in the right place' and of building their present and future; about the sixth question: «During the digital portrait sharing moment, what did you think and how did you feel about sharing it with your colleagues and getting to know theirs at the same time?» all volunteers say it was a very intense and meaningful moment, because they had the possibility to show personal parts that others hardly know, they felt enthusiasm and, at the same time, trust in the group they were part of. Similarly, observing the 'digital portrait' of others has allowed them to better know their colleagues, their experiences and their skills.

About the seventh question: «Do you think that the facilitator has managed to orient you in the proposal of different narrative activities and incipit, to the production of a self-story as authentic as possible?» volunteers say yes, that the facilitator has proposed useful incipit, but also left the freedom to truly express themselves, the proposed incipit was fundamental to the realization of the 'digital portrait', but at the same time young people believe that the urge to creativity and authenticity has strongly motivated and encouraged them in the realization of a job that fully represented them; lastly, about the first question of the fourth section: «In light of Civil Service experience, what are the main values of your existence today?» All volunteers claim that it is based on the value of being able to help others and, through this action, on the possibility of personal maturation.

To answer the second question: «again, in light of the volunteering experience, think about the meaning of the word 'work' for you today» (Indicate from the following list the 3 words that you most associate to work: Quality - Effort - Freedom - Responsibility - Competence - Development - Pride - Social integration - Innovation - Stress - Security - Social relations - Remuneration - Performance, and it is also possible to indicate other words than those proposed): 23 volunteers on 27 chose the following words: responsibility, competence, social integration, while 4 volunteers on 27 indicate: quality, development, social relations.

The last question that invites to motivate the choice of words: the group that chose responsibility, competence, social integration, motivated the choice considering that the work involves the responsibility of what is done and therefore is a commitment, for this reason it is essential to develop both technical-specific and soft skills to best fulfill this responsibility. In addition, work is an important opportunity for social integration and inclusive participation in society. While the group that chose the words quality, development, social relations, considers that working involves feeling the responsibility of what you do, individually or in a group, trying as much as possible to take care of every aspect. Finally, it has been found that the activities carried out from home with virtual meetings, and sharing ideas both with managers and with colleagues, favored relations in a time of 'distancing' and necessary isolation.

Conclusion

The participants, moved by an ideal of solidarity and social utility, shared the purpose of the laboratory, deeming it useful for the purpose of their employment; the evaluation questionnaire of the path showed that, in spite of the social distance, they considered this experience very positively, perceived it as a fruitful opportunity to acquire and highlight skills, values and personal ideals; awareness that has, finally, oriented them on the choice of goals to be set for the future. The possibility of

writing a self-narration, starting from different life experiences, offered young volunteers the possibility to stop and better know themselves, also to better manage decisional processes, life choices and, particularly, to individuate professional and/or training projects. The experience and results highlight how the lifelong learning dimension, which is learning processes, has to do with the lifewide dimension, and so with the recognition of complementarily and valorization of formal, non-formal and informal dimensions of young people's educational and training experiences.

The production of an autobiographical story, in this perspective, facilitated the recognition of personal stories (Striano et al., 2018), that is, the placement of the self within a broader narrative and, therefore, the interrelation between the various life experiences and contexts. The training course, through the opportunity to rebuild personal life experiences, promotes the memory of all the activities carried out over the years by a person, giving access to the understanding of the pressures and motivations of one's own existential path on the sides of school orientation, social and professional activities, and helping to identify other skills from school and professional ones. Starting from the analysis of participants' narrative fragments (Mortari, 2007); there is evidence that the training has been for them an opportunity to re-invent and direct themselves; an experience that allows the 'self' to become more expert and competent through the Civil Service. The formative experience seems to have favored the discovery of new biographical clues, personal skills, values, and ideals. From this point of view, identifying the most important personal and working values, allows to discover personal areas of professional interest and to invest commitment towards specific goals for the future (Bernaud et al., 2020), as it can be seen from the stories of Miriam, Pasqualina and Maria.

I am glad that this experience of Civil Service, also re-read in light of the Spo formation, has offered me the opportunity to be part of a community and to be able to bring my contribution to the different activities"[...] this year offered me the opportunity to learn a lot about what it means to be employable and promote myself in the job market. Working in groups with other volunteers has allowed me to refine cooperation and problem-solving skills, the confidence I received increased my ability to work independently, to act responsibly, and to establish empathic connections with the recipients of the services. (Miriam, graduated in Psychology)

For Pasqualina (graduated in Modern Philology and specialized in Linguistics) the training, despite the difficulties of the pandemic emergency, has helped to strengthen the motivation, the prefiguration and identification of professional objectives:

Which image, metaphor to associate with the Civil Service? I chose the image of the road sign that indicates a turning point, because the Civil Service experience has involved a continuous self-reinventing, a continuous rediscover also implying the risk of getting lost [...] The road sign is a guide, and it is a good rule to know how to observe and trust the code it carries. [...] In this path I decided to follow the signs along my way, I agreed to question and trust, to enrich myself and at the same time to keep faith in my motivations.

Even in the case of Maria (graduated in Philosophy) it would seem that the training activities and the ability of redefining the experience of the Civil Service have offered her the possibility of identifying the strands of her biographical path, to re-elaborate the sense of previous and different learning experiences, directing the meaning of these experiences around a motivational core, as well as to integrate the experience of the Civil Service within the scope of her biographical path:

When the Civil Service announcement was published, I thought it was time to have the experience that has always attracted me, but that I constantly postponed [...] If I had to choose a word to summarize this year it would be 'growth': I understood that you grow, you improve and you build together with others. The Civil Service at the Sinapsi, and, therefore, the activities, the formation in which I participated, helped to indicate a direction of meaning: a new path to follow, a different perspective. I don't know if I've found my place in the world today, but I know where I'm going with this....

In some way telling about ourselves «becomes a real creative activity of the ego, a symbolic instrument that guides subjects who, in writing and rereading, find the red thread of their existential journeys and learn to extricate in a world that is not always easy, but which belongs to them and which returns to be a horizon of meaning» (De Carlo, 2012, 3). An experience that, in the light of the training activities carried out within the interactive laboratory for the promotion of employability, has been re-interpreted by young volunteers as an experience facilitating the activation and implementation of soft skills and of the construction of a life project, connecting «the personal biography with the family, the neighborhood, the local scenarios and the global cultural and social context» (Monteagudo, 2006, 203). Therefore, the Civil Service through the implementation of an autonomous and responsible action is presented as a pivotal experience for the acquisition of new skills, the exploration of new self-images, to successfully deal with complex situations in order to involve personal autonomy (Rey, 1996). The competent and effective action, in fact, cannot disregard the mastery of knowledge and skills, but the possession alone is not enough to move to the resolution of problematic, complex situations: it is the mobilization, aware and intentional of the knowledge and skills possessed, that characterizes the competence and its development (Baldacci, 2010). These conclusions are, moreover, also shared by numerous European

documents (European Union, 2019), which strongly affirm that a solid base of skills and an adequate orientation, can help young people to successfully carry out transitions towards the job market and, within it, to undertake rewarding careers. The possibility of recalling, reconstructing and re-signifying experiences, from this point of view, is a device that allows the transparency and capitalization of learning and soft skills, that guide and support the professional motivations of young volunteers:

During this Civil Service year, I developed team working skills, time and stress management, fundamental in the workplace, experiencing for the first time a context very similar to the professional one [...] I had the opportunity to develop and/or improve my soft-skills [...] that have allowed me to clarify what I want to do in the future (Maria Cristina, graduated in Communication Sciences).

Tales that reveal the efficacy of narrative practices as a device of learning, self-orientation, individual and professional growth (Castiglioni, 2008; Cunti, 2014; Demetrio, 2008, 2012; Domincé 2002; Josso, 1991), and the main purpose is to allow individuals to rebuild and re-signify life experiences by designing, or re-designing more consciously and responsibly, their personal and professional lives, knowing how to ask the right questions to themselves and to the context they are part of. In this perspective, «the narrative, thanks to its hermeneutical and constructive function, represents an irreplaceable tool to build professional identity and a privileged tool to observe, understand, reorganize and reinvent themselves according to internal and external changes and circumstances» (Cunti, 2014, 121).

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