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Autobiographical Methods For Broader Lifelong And Lifewide Learning For All: A Research Based On Original Format

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Abstract

Nowadays we are living in hyper-connected and increasingly knowledge-based societies, where their citizens need ever higher skills and knowledge “equipments”. Several recent international surveys agree that it is crucial and strategic what people know, what people know to know and how they can effectively and profitably use what they know to work, live and improve their life chances, not only about earnings and employment but also about health and social active relationships, as i.e. reported in PIAAC by OECD (2013). In this framework, we’re pursuing a qualitative research based on a original format who allow to collect autobiographical writings as well as key-words and key-experiences people lived. Autobiographical writings, indeed, collected through an original format titled “Parole di una vita. Parole per…” and elaborated by the research team allow to remember, focus on and give senses and meanings to all people lifelong and lifewide experienced, to better understand what they lived and did, what are their skills, education attainments and literacy, and even their lack, what have influenced their choices so to better understand past to better plan their future. We will report some interesting results from the survey, whose data have been analyzed through grounded theory principles, which will show autobiographical format is useful in education and self-education, especially in a perspective of lifelong and lifewide learning.

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1. Introduction

Ever more, in these first decades of 21st century, there is a widespread need of high-level knowledge and of highlevel skills in all advanced countries. Technologies, furthermore, have become essential in, and they are even

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affecting, almost all aspects of our lives: from work-professional environments to transport, communication, formal, informal or friendly relationships, active participation in civil and social life and so on. Lots most recent international surveys agree in recognizing, therefore, that it is crucial and strategic for well-being and development of countries not only wider, more in-depth and up to date knowledge acquired by their population, but also what people know to know and how they can effectively and profitably use what they know to work, live and improve their life chances, and not only of economic nature such as about earnings and employment but also about health, a longer life expectancy and active relationships in all aspects of civil life for a wider social inclusion. So, education in a perspective of lifelong and life wide learning is essential to be improved ever more, both in formal educational environments and structures and in non-formal and informal ones, as well as education opportunities, which are to be offered to both more increasingly early age and to adults and elderly too. Particular attention, therefore, e.g. according to the most recent EU educational policies, has to be focused by countries on education and training programmes of adult age population and even older, also in consideration that the average life expectancy is lengthening exponential increasingly: Eurostat report 2013, indeed, points out that elderly over 65 throughout Europe are nearly 18% on average than the entire population of over 503.7 million people and in Italy elderly over 65 are even more, reaching 20.3%, and general trend is increasing. Elderly, so, could be both a resource (of knowledge and experiences, etc.) and a significant portion of population at risk too, not least at risk of loss of health, of physical and mental weakness, of social exclusion. Educational policies and specific plans aimed at increasing all the potential of the elderly in a perspective of lifelong and life wide learning is to be considered, therefore, strategic.

2. Contexts analysis

In the international scenario, countries are still having to address the serious problems arising as a result of the continuing deep economic and financial crisis, which started some years ago in globalized and capitalistic economic systems and which is now also increasingly becoming a “social” crisis, which threatens to undermine the cohesion and coexistence among individuals, families, economic ranges, age groups, not to mention about solidarity, active participation and inclusion. Furthermore, technologies which rule most aspects of our lives require specific deep and up to date knowledge and skills to use them (because they have become essential in our daily as well as professional life) and to be able to maximize the full potential of them. Digital divide concerning access to Information and Communication Technologies could become urgent to efficiently address. International Organizations, like UNESCO, agree that literacy is the starting point, it has to be considered the basis of lifelong learning because education is a human right. «It empowers individuals, families and communities and improves their quality of life. Because of its “multiplier effect”, literacy helps eradicate poverty, reduce child mortality, curb population growth, achieve gender equality and ensure sustainable development, peace and democracy. In today’s rapidly-changing, knowledge based societies where social and political participation takes place both physically and virtually, acquisition of basic literacy skills and the advancement and application of such skills throughout life is crucial» (UNESCO, 2014). Other crucial issue is the access of adults to education, in a context of lifelong and life wide learning, which differs significantly within among countries and within countries too, both in offers and in financing, funding and participation. Some countries, therefore, consider adult education as literacy achievement; other countries instead relate it to technical and vocation education and training. Though such a lack of clear and comparable data about participation of adults in lifelong education programmes, which make difficult to assess the impact of them (UNESCO, 2013, 9), it is crucial to promote a widespread of lifelong and life wide education for all, at any age. OECD has recently published the inaugural edition OECD Skills Outlook which explains the report about results of the Survey of Adult Skills, implemented in 24 countries including Italy, a product of the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). «The survey provides a rich source of data on adults’ proficiency in literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments – the key information-processing skills that are invaluable in 21st-century economies – and in various “generic” skills, such as cooperation, communication, and organizing one’s time» (OECD, 2013, 3). The survey of Adults Skills investigated about how adults acquire and increase (on average, highest performances are reached at 30 years old) – and maintain and/or loss (average performances decrease in relation to the aging of people) throughout lifetime too – their skills and the benefits related to they are using them – such as in better improving the living conditions, in generating prosperity and in developing social inclusion – at home, workplace and in the community, including labour market participation, income, health, and social and political engagement. «For example, the median hourly wage of
workers scoring at Level 4 or 5 in literacy – those who can make complex inferences and evaluate subtle truth claims or arguments in written texts – is more than 60% higher than for workers scoring at Level 1 or below – those who can, at best, read relatively short texts to locate a single piece of information that is identical to the information given in the question or directive or to understand basic vocabulary. Those with low literacy skills are also more than twice as likely to be unemployed. [...] Poor proficiency in information-processing skills limits adults’ access to many basic services, to better-paying and more-rewarding jobs, and to the possibility of participating in further education and training, which is crucial for developing and maintaining skills over the working life and beyond» (OECD, 2013, 26-27). Skills, furthermore, are needed and strategic not only for satisfactory earnings and kind of jobs, but for better health care, solidarity, cohesion and cooperation, trust (increasingly essential for development of advanced-economy countries) social active and civil participation in society and community. Collected data, nevertheless, show that a high percentage of adults score is at lower levels of proficiency in literacy (from 4.9 % to 27.7 % at the lowest levels) and numeracy (from 8.1 % to 31.7 % at the lowest levels) scales. Furthermore, there is a significant lack of basic skills required to daily use Information and Communication Technologies: higher proportions of 16-65 years old people at lowest levels are reached by Italy, Korea, Poland, the Slovak Republic and Spain (nearly 23 % or more), while the minimum is attained by the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden (less than 7 %).«In England/Northern Ireland (UK), Germany, Italy, Poland and the United States, social background has a major impact on literacy skills. In these countries more so than in others, the children of parents with low levels of education have significantly lower proficiency than those whose parents have higher levels of education, even after taking other factors into account. […] Foreign-language immigrants who have low levels of education are particularly at risk. When low educational attainment is combined with poor proficiency in the language of the host country, integration into the labour market and society becomes even more difficult» (OECD, 2013, 30). About different age cohorts, data point out that proficiency levels are positively related to younger age and decrease with the aging of people, but this gap between generations differs greatly among countries.

«This may reflect differences in the quality of education, but it may also reflect the opportunities available to pursue further training or to engage in practices that help to maintain and develop proficiency over a lifetime. Participation rates in adult education exceed 60% in Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, while in Italy they remain well below half that rate» (OECD, 2013, 34). And participation in adult education in a context of lifelong and life wide learning is a key matter because not-updated knowledge and “unused skills can become obsolete or atrophy”. All those first data above reported point out that high-quality education both in initial (crucial as well) and in lifelong and life wide programmes (formal, but also non formal and informal educational opportunities) available for all (the most people as possible) are strategic aims to pursue by all advanced countries for increase development and well-being. In EU countries, the contribution of education and training to economic competitiveness is an important priority for the EU policies and actions for the present decade, as it is contained in strategy Education and Training 2020 (ET2020), an operational and support framework for European cooperation in education and training which aims to actual and high quality lifelong and life wide learning for all and for effective knowledge-based societies, to promote equity, social cohesion and active participation to civil, social and cultural life, and to increase transversal knowledge and skills for strengthening creativity, innovation, and the potential for entrepreneurial skills.

3. The research project

Having taken into account the scenario and framework above described, the research project is focused on the design and testing of an original, flexible, and heuristic format to collect autobiographical writings useful for remembering experiences lived, giving them ever deeper meanings, orienting and self-orienting, education and self-education in the perspective of lifelong and life wide learning. It started two years ago within a broader qualitative research project and it is still in progress. Subjects of the survey we’re going to report some results about are mainly adult people from eighteen years old and older, elderly too. A considerable part of the sample, however, are students at university level. Scientific research based on autobiographical writing is part of qualitative research and includes among its first pioneers the sociologists Thomas and Znaniecki, members of the Chicago School, of whom we remind the famous survey of Polish peasant immigrants in the United States pursued around the twenties of XX century. Pedagogical sciences few decades later recognized the utility and the potential of such a research tool.«so
that it became one of the most used methods, especially in adult education (Demetrio, Alberici, just to name two representative examples) and of lifelong education. Autobiographical writing makes it possible to analyse in depth and detail the various and specific experiences of its protagonist, as well as all the people and the social and cultural environment, that have been “significant boundary” in order to get them re-emerge memory through the memories, think about it, and give them new or unexpected meanings as well, in order to make them, in this way, real-life experiences, which help to rebuild their path and to continue to live profitably in the present but also to design in a coherent and consistent way, their future too» (Aleandri, Giaconi, 2012, 99). Autobiographical writing gives the opportunity of making balances and self-balances about experiences of subjects lives, about knowledge, skills and competences attained, about past and present personal and context/environment/community/society considerable events useful to understand increasingly wider meanings and to positively and profitable plan their own future. Autobiographical writing, furthermore, offers itself as a source for reflective learning. Autobiographical writing, through its deep reflections required, allow to generate new knowledge too. The analysis of collected data is based on a mixed quantitative and qualitative methodology, which traces its roots from the grounded theory elaborated by Glaser and Strauss (2009). After reflections, testing and remodelling new framework and tool have been elaborated and re-planned resulting in a more streamlined and flexible approach. The original format designed to collect autobiographical writings is titled “Parole di una vita. Parole per…” (Words of a lifetime. Words for…) and it has been planned within a broader research project names “Scritture di una vita. Scritture per...” (Writings of a lifetime. Writings for...”). The format has been structured into five tabs with strategic and key cognitive, emotional and affective stimuli, in order to try to promote and increase as much as possible the storage and retrieval of memories, which sometimes we think we have forgotten forever but when we are able to remember them we have the opportunity to make progress in knowledge and in meanings of experienced and past events, which will be a support and a guidance for further development, education and training during all lifetime.

The tabs are based on different periods of life:
1) birth-childhood
2) adolescence,
3) first work experiences,
4) today,
5) As I see myself when I’ll be… years old.

   In each table, the participants can indicate the correct age or the age group to which they refer writing remembered events and they can explain many episodes and experiences that they have noteworthy lived in their lifetime: from the most significant people (parents, teachers, friends, etc.) to the most significant objects, books, songs, films of that period or that particular experience, travels, educational experience and / or training, or even dreams, desires, fears, and much more. Each table reserves then a space dedicated to free additional notes or whatever more. Moreover, such a model of format is considerable efficient, because its prerogative to be smart, concise, do not require too much time to be attended, although it is needed a careful choice of words and meaningful terms and dense content. The autobiographical format has been administered to a sample of more than 100 adult subject, aged from 18 to elderly. Almost 90 % of them are female and more than 90 % has attained at least an upper secondary level. To fulfil the format it requires, on average, at least 2,30 hours. However, each completed format has been considered as a case-study. Each format has been read several times, to understand the main sense and understandings, then it has been subject to a first “open coding”, then the research team has proceeded to identify elements referred to units of meaning, to develop short captions with the foresight to remain as close as possible to the original text and finally to attribute conceptual labels of reference. A following stage consists in identifying categories, macro-categories and their properties, ever increasingly abstract, up to define central (core) categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, 146) and others, to be further discussed among researchers in order to elaborate the final reports.

References