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ScienceDirect

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 197 (2015) 4 – 9

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**Procedia**  
Social and Behavioral Sciences

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7th World Conference on Educational Sciences, (WCES-2015), 05-07 February 2015, Novotel  
Athens Convention Center, Athens, Greece

## Autobiography as educational scientific tool in penitentiary

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### Abstract

In recent times, educators, social workers and researchers are making increasing use of life histories method as significant evidence of life because the autobiography is the most important self-training method. In the context of prison, writing about themselves means to build personal identity of educators. Therefore, the research team analysed adult writing, investigating both the emotionality and the relationships between educator and prisoners. From a methodological point of view, the research focuses on an original autobiographical format and a semi-structured interview, composed by sixteen pre-determined questions. Before the interview, a five frameworks format was delivered in order to make flashbacks into the past experiences, with a view to identify events, facts, people etc., within a structured grid used as pattern. Data analyses were based on quantitative and qualitative methods, they were carried out following reviewed and adapted processes laying their rows on grounded theory. Through the various life stories and personal experiences narrated by educators we could discover that the main motivations of this profession lie primarily in the willingness to disseminate the knowledge. Willingness, determination and formative relationship between educators and prisoners are valuable tools to accompany educators in this difficult task. Relationships between educators and prisoners to achieve educational goals, are essentially based on dialogue and autobiographical skills was proved to be very useful. Telling personal stories means taking a moment for themselves, to recharge and give free rein to the emotions and to be shared with others.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Education and Research Center.

*Keywords:* autobiographical writings, sustainability, penitentiary, lifelong and life wide learning.

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## 1. Introduction

Education and re-education of prisoners is one of the most important as well as difficult aims a civic and advanced Country has to achieve.

In Italy, politics and administrators have also to try to face and solve the problem of prison overcrowding. According to the recently published report by Council of Europe (2014), indeed, prison people were 66,271 (23,773 of detainees in Italian jails were foreigners, amounting 36 percent of the entire prison population), while only 45,568 were the regulatory places available (data referred to 2012 year). Italy, thus, placed at second ranking of highest-level of prison crowding in Europe, just below only Serbia. Italy ranked second also in highest suicide rates, first was France.

On January 8<sup>th</sup> 2013, the European Court of Human Rights, moreover, recognised Italy responsible for violation of European Convention on Human Rights, article 3 (“No one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”), judging about the “case of Torreggiani and others v. Italy”.

Consequently, Italy adopted some measures in order to decrease prison crowding. According to most recent data by Italian Justice Ministry, referred to February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2015, the detainees were down to 53.982 in total (17.463 strangers) and the regulatory capacity was of 49.895 places.

As stated in article 27 of Italian Constitution, “penalties may not consist of inhuman treatment and they shall be designed to rehabilitate the convicted person”, and through subsequent laws (Legge 354/1975, D.P.R. 431/76, Legge 663/1986, D.P.R. 248/1989, D.P.R. 230/2000 and Legge 10/2014), it has been enshrined the individualization of treatment. Each intervention, therefore, has to be developed and programmed taking into consideration the personality of the prisoner, after scientific observation by expert team (educator included). Thus, we can recognize a trend linking the concepts of re-education with the recovery and re-socialization of the convicted.

Another crucial international issue involving international educational policies concerns lifelong and lifewide education for all, and, especially in economic (financial and also social) crisis like the present one, an education that will be sustainable and that will contribute to increase social inclusion, to support everyone to continue his/her growth process and life project, even in difficult contexts.

European policies, indeed, in recent years have shown an increasing level of sensitivity and awareness towards development policies based on education, and in particular on education for sustainability.

EU 2020 strategy aims, among other goals, to achieve growth that is:

- smart, through the development of knowledge and innovation;
- sustainable, based on a greener, more resource efficient and more competitive economy;
- inclusive, aimed at strengthening employment, and social and territorial cohesion.

Some ways to undertake are achievable by:

- attending to knowledge of sustainable development,
- values supporting sustainable development,
- thinking and decision-making skills that strengthen sustainable development,
- integrating knowledge, skills and values to promote informed citizenship (UNESCO 2012).

In the last decade (DESD), placing the issue of quality education at the center of the debate on sustainable development has led great results. Education has become the keyword for promoting sustainable development that has lasting fruit. The UNESCO report in 2012 about Education for Sustainable Development shows that:

- It is based on the principles and values that underlies sustainable development;
- Deals with the well-being of all three realms of sustainability – environment, society and economy;
- Promotes lifelong learning;
- It is locally relevant and culturally appropriate;
- It is based on local needs, perceptions and conditions, but acknowledges that fulfilling local needs often has international effects and consequences;
- Engages formal, non-formal and informal education;
- Accommodates the evolving nature of the concept of sustainability;
- Addresses content, taking into account context, global issues and local priorities;
- Builds civil capacity for community-based decision-making, social tolerance, environmental stewardship, adaptable workforce and quality of life;

- It is interdisciplinary: no one discipline can claim ESD as its own, but all disciplines can contribute to ESD;
- Uses a variety of pedagogical techniques that promote participatory learning and higher-order thinking skills.” (UNESCO 2012, 11).

It is urgent to devise and promote new ways of thinking, indicators and methodologies, especially to know that we care about who benefits and who had been excluded from the development, and how it has an impact on the conditions of human life and the social environment in which it is produced. In this perspective, we recognize very useful to promote lifelong learning for all, especially in difficult contexts, as it is in jail.

## 2. The research project

In our risk, global/glocal, (as Robertson firstly argued, 1995) dispersion and fast-changing society, it may be very useful to promote and widespread a "sustainable" method to retrieve the dimensions of meaning, identity and history: it is through writing about himself/herself. Through writing autobiography at any age and in any context, indeed, we may strengthen a process of self-knowledge, self-awareness, self-education. Autobiography offers to develop an analysis through which the subject may wish to share their experiences enriched with new senses and meanings, also through the slowing of time that writing has the privilege to grant. Autobiographical writings are analysed following a redesigned more flexible and adapted method deriving from the Grounded Theory by Glaser and Strauss (2009) and according to Merrill and West (2012) revised theory.

This article suggests some reflections and proposals by analyzing the results obtained through the administration of an original format for adult education, effective, efficient and sustainable in the perspective of lifelong and lifewide learning and education.

Some of the most aims of the research project through the autobiographical writings format are:

- to increase self-identity awareness,
- to facilitate social rehabilitation, participation and inclusion and
- to enhance the search for meaning of life experiences.

The autobiographical writings format was planned to support and help the adults (especially the adults, but not only them) in autobiographical writing. It follows a time sequence, through five cards, from the past (birth/early childhood – adolescence, first working experiences) to the present moment and then solicits to imagine and plan about the future. It urges the memories of significant events of own life through series of stimuli and suggestions that are structured yet flexible and adaptable to the context of research and the survey sample.

The autobiographical writing, as it is now widely supported by the pedagogical literature on the subject, supports reflection on own identity, increases self-cognition and metacognition.

“The first one is functional to better know each other and then to work better together, the second one increases self-awareness (how we reason, how we think, what are our habits and what are the ways in which we make decisions, etc.)” (Demetrio, 1996).

Often, nowadays, people live in isolation, the social relations are stereotypical, cold and empty, and it is even more in jail.

Instead, through lifelong and lifewide learning perspective enhanced by autobiographical writing format, they have the opportunity to continue their process of growth and life project.

This helps young, as well as adult or old people, to track, understand their roots, their collective substrate, their family, social, historical, cultural environment, etc.

Our project fits in fact into a theoretical framework represented by a systemic perspective, which refers to the concept of educating community, with particular focus on difficult contexts, included prison.

Focusing on education, self-education and socio-cultural development, through autobiographical writing, we can recognize a supplementary meaning about self-awareness process in terms of value in itself.

Autobiographical value in education can be added to the concept of utility and immediate usability of the “educational products of the interventions”, often needed especially when facing with adults.

Therefore, greater recognition should be attributed to the high educational value of self -cognitive experience allowed and enhanced through autobiographical writing format.

Furthermore, the proposed method had been proved in several administrations to be effective in terms of

achieving the expected results, and efficient, sustainable with minimum investment of resources.

Among the objectives of the research, we examined whether and how the autobiographical writing, declined in pedagogical sense, is able to provide a useful contribution to the implementation of self-awareness, in a lifelong learning and education way, especially in a time of economic and financial crisis, as we are experiencing today.

### 3. Some data analysis

For the data analysis of the qualitative experimental part of the investigation it had been used a flexible method, adapted and redesigned, derived from Grounded Theory by Glaser and Strauss.

For the quantitative part, we used common methods of statistical analysis in human sciences.

An original format of autobiographical writing was been administered to a pilot sample of educators in jail.

Among the numerous surveys carried out over the past two years, we chose to show and report the data obtained with the latest ones, with caution it is not to be considered a representative sample.

The experimental phase (through collecting data) of the investigation was carried out in two months.

The participants had several meetings available for the compilation of the autobiographical writing format. They occurred once a week and participants had about 2 hours of time in each.

There were 22 people participating: 16 women and 6 men. The age range was from 37 up to 64 years old. The most common degree was tertiary degree: 70 % were graduated, 20 % achieved the upper secondary degree, 10 % did not specify (see *Figure 1* below).

	M	W	
sex	6	16	
age*	37-64	37-64	
qualification	Not specified	Upper secondary degree	graduates
	10 %	20 %	70 %

Figure 1. The sample

They were solicited through a series of stimuli in the autobiographical format that allow them wide flexibility and autonomy.

Through five temporal cards, the stimuli in the format were a guide for writing. They, indeed, help participants to

remember emotions, the most significant events, desires, people, places, etc. of the past and help to bring out the present and future planning.

The formats were read and analysed by the research team following the steps below:

- identification of the most significant parts of the text
- construction of short captions,
- finally, construction of conceptual labels.

Analysing obtained data, we can argue that telling about ourselves, which is formed in an inner life autobiographical, in different places of education, is an important stage of personal maturity process.

Some applicants most important categories are about: significant people, experiences at school, significant belongings, love relationships and employment. Concerning significant people, we can point out the autobiographical writers said they are not only parental figures such as sons or daughters and parents, but also teachers or other educational figures. About school, it was hatched as a very significant place, so we could retrace many memories of the school, the teachers, the first day of school, state examinations and school trips.

Many of the participants remembered books as significant belongings.

About the sphere of affectivity, they usually referred them to love relationships; distinctions are generally between genders: women remember the first meeting and courtship by those who will often have become their husband; men describe, in adolescence, the increasing of a general interest in girls and women. Concerning employment, they generally stated that educational working in difficult contexts such as the jail it is very difficult, complex, but very involving too.

Finally, among the free comments that the interviewers provided at the end of the autobiographical writing experience, we wanted to point out that several of them have reported observations that indicate a certain degree of self-reflection and about their own experiences of life. These observations are related to the categories of remembering, of memory, of self-knowledge and to the talking about themselves through autobiographical writing.

Over 95 % expressed appreciation about the format. In fact, they said the format was interesting and stimulating in order to get a deeper self-awareness, to give sense to past experiences, to evaluate own lifelong learning process and to plan for future.

#### **4. Reflections and perspectives**

Early evidences showed an increase in awareness, meta-cognitive reflections and in the meanings of their own experiences. They suggest, furthermore, to those who had experienced it, that they can still design, learn, plan and grow.

This is particularly important: there is a need to strengthen the capacity of people to bring on the change (UNESCO, 2012).

The Education for Sustainable Development, even through the autobiographical format, can help in this regard, as an engine for innovative pedagogy.

In light of the above presented results we can agree that the solicitation of memories and experiences, through autobiographical writing, has a value for both personal and social terms through the promotion of a sense of generativity, thus has a double meaning of sustainability.

In our view, the proposed method is also very useful for educational policies because it suggests the use of such sustainable instrument, for the promotion of sustainable educational policies that:

- are able to enhance all areas of experience
- let know how to assign value to life experiences and experience gained in all areas of learning (formal, non-formal and informal) of education policies
- allow going beyond the mere spendability conceived only in utilitarian terms.

We argue that it is crucial to take into consideration prominently lifelong and lifewide development of people and the creation of a good society, social inclusion and active and cooperative participation.

What emerges from the survey results, therefore suggests an acknowledgment about the concept of sustainable education to improve the quality of life of all those involved in the community, promoting a participatory learning and higher order thinking through an agile and effective tool.

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