

Extracto do Projecto de Investigação

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A practice of commitment

The project Associação Cultural Moinho da Juventude

As stated again more detailed in the "pen portraits", the objective of this project is the training of "intercultural mediators". It targets young people – aged between 17 and 28 years old - who live in a ghetto-like community of migrants from the former Portuguese colony Cape Verde, and who have finished at least 9 years of education. The vocational training for an "intercultural mediator" is meant to enable young adults to mediate professionally between this community of which they are part themselves and the wider Portuguese society, but also, inside the community, between teachers and students, parents and children, etc.

The specific nature of the project provided it with the opportunity to balance more than any other project we visited the development of biographical, social and instrumental competencies. The participants have the opportunity to apply immediately their learning in a concretely located practice: *the community in which they live and to which they belong*. This context strongly facilitates their identification with the project, and relates their experiences directly to who they are; in the words of one of them: *"We learn things that are connected with us"*.

The engagement of the young adults certainly is eased by the project being situated in and aiming at the benefit of the community that they belong to. But this in itself probably would not suffice to give the

participants the feeling that they "*learn much more in this school than in others*". Decisive are the organisation and the atmosphere of the practice they meet. The professionals view the encounter and the dialogue with their trainees as a process of building a *learning community* that essentially contributes to the empowerment of the wider community in which it is located. This view is expressed and transferred to the young adults in the practices that are deployed in the project.

As a result, in the project heavy emphasis is placed on creating a safe, secure and supportive atmosphere, and on the building of relationships of *mutual trust* between professionals and participants. In the words of one of the youngsters: "*I use to say that Moinho da Juventude is like a family and that is very important*".

The feeling of "belonging" that is expressed in a pronouncement like this, is promoted both by the mutual interactions of the participants, and by the ways in which these are challenged by the professionals. The sharing of common objectives, assignments, and "rituals" obviously generates the excitement of collaborating in and sharing the responsibility for a "joint venture". The Portuguese researchers observed that the participants clearly felt supported and enriched by their companions, with whom they learn and work for the same cause. The feeling of shared responsibility for a common enterprise is systematically reinforced by the professionals, who involve the participants in decisions concerning the content and the progress of the project. In this way, the young adults learnt to negotiate their views, actions and preferences in the perspective of both personal and social objectives, and were motivated to turn the project into "their own case". This implied that on the one hand they felt encouraged to speak up for themselves, and to present openly their questions, doubts and worries. On the other hand, they felt no embarrassment in doing so, because of the sense of equality and "partnership" they experienced from the side of the professionals. Representative for the way the young adults experienced the project was the statement of one of them:

"The teachers let us speak, we don't feel intimidated to ask something, doubts just come out. Besides, we both are part of and contribute to the training sessions".

The setting and culture of Moinho da Juventude easily spark the imagination and biographical competencies of the young adults. They perceive the project as "*a niche*", that gives room to explore who they are, and what they can be, in the perspective of bridging where they come from with a meaningful career-identity. Coming to explore the reality of several options and scripts for their future, the perspective of becoming an intercultural mediator implies a meaningful and promising alternative to their original dreams

(football player, bus driver, designer, musician) of how to escape the cycle of poverty and social exclusion.

Remarkably enough, this “playing” with imaginations of themselves in a wider future, works in two ways to provide them with new perspectives and a growing self-confidence. On the one hand, they picture themselves more in terms of a social asset than in dreaming of individual “stardom”. Like the Portuguese researchers observed: *“They are keen to imagine themselves going to support others coming from the same background as they themselves do”*. On the other hand, it helps them as well to gain a deeper and wider understanding of the thoughts and acts of others, and to abstain from hasty judgments and conclusions:

“Sometimes I felt anger when I heard about something and I used to react by saying: 'hire a bunch of boys and beat them', but now, we have to think things over, we have to understand the reasons why people act like they do....I believe I am learning very much”.

By the nature of the project, it also aligns them in an “organic” way to the world of labour. The training of instrumental skills and the learning of the practical knowledge they need for their future vocation take place in the real-life setting of the community they live in, and therefore easily make sense to them. It provides them both with experiences as to how things work for real in life “out there”, and makes them feel participants in the “community” of socially acknowledged workers. Contrary to other projects that were practice-oriented and founded on “learning-by-doing” as well, Moinho da Juventude aligns young adults to the *real* world of labour. For example, in the Belgium project *“The Hagelandse Werkwinkel”* young women went through a one-year training for the sales and distribution branch. They, however, met problems in keeping up their motivation to the mark, because they felt their assignments to be artificial, and not connected to the real world of sales and distribution. The young women eventually came to call the training “occupational therapy”, therefore, and doubted its significance. In this way, and different from the Portuguese case, they did not feel equipped sufficiently to face the world of labour that awaited them after the training.

Summarizing, one may conclude that Moinho da Juventude unites the best of the projects we described in the two cases before. Like the StrOHmerin project it promotes alignment by engagement, and like

the YMCA project it provides participants with sufficient opportunities to develop their imagination and biographic competencies. Moreover, it succeeds in balancing these different kinds of competencies fairly well. As a result, this project genuinely strengthens young adults in their becoming an agent of their own lives, *committed* to the development of their qualities in connecting personal growth to the benefit of the (labour) communities they are part of.

However, even if this project should be judged as pretty successful, and might serve as an example for the developing of agency among young adults, it is also exemplary in showing the limits of what even good educational projects can achieve in view of *structural restraints and pressures*. Moinho da Juventude shows these limitations in two respects.

The first one concerns the *social background and position* of youngsters who are involved in programmes for social activation and participation. As indicated in the chapter on identities, most of them have relatively little social and cultural capital at their disposal, and therefore start at a relatively low level in relation to their sense of being an actor. In the project of Moinho da Juventude this showed in the insecurity and diffidence of the participants in entering the actual world of labour, despite the fact that they were intensively prepared, and were provided with a well-balanced set of competencies. The Portuguese researchers explained this fear by referring to "*a certain immaturity on their part, and a perception of the world characterised by a victim perspective, resulting from their past experiences*".

The young adults in this project were used to look at themselves as "victims" of the system, and were accustomed to "survival strategies" in coping with issues of how to find oneself a place to live. Now they were prepared for a position in the labour market where they should act as "winners", i.e. as actors who have the self-confidence and knowledge to make things happen in accordance with the ideas and the interests that they represent, both to themselves and to others. However, taking into account the structural and deep seated feelings of being a "loser" that are rooted in their past, it is virtually impossible to close the gap between this self-image and the qualities of genuine actor ship within the limited time and resources of one training. In the words of one of the professionals: "*eight months might not be enough to prepare them for such a complex professional activity in view of their past*".

We are inclined to add: no educational project by itself can solve this challenge, even if the available time was multiplied, as long as the world outside does not provide other incentives that help strengthen the feeling of actor ship among these youngsters.

The second structural limitation is the *limited number of actually available jobs* after finishing training for meaningful participation on

the labour market, i.e. the limited number of jobs for intercultural mediators. Although the first group who finished the training did find employment in various schools, extension and continuity of this vocation could not be guaranteed. Since the trainees are very willing and eager to find a job as mediator, they run the risk of being seriously frustrated when this expectation cannot be met. This risk is the more realistic as their alignment to the world of labour is confined to just this one specific future perspective of becoming a mediator, whose vocation is not only acknowledged within his own community but also by the world outside.

The tragedy of the risk these young adults run is the political and economic nature of it. Having overcome their own unrealistic dreams of meaningful work that is not attainable to them, they now are faced with the shortcomings of a society that fails in creating meaningful work. Young adults who show the creativity and endurance to seek a qualification for work that without doubt should add to the quality of a social life that grows ever more complex and multi-cultural, have to discover that in the age of globalised capitalism society is not very inclined to promoting labour opportunities that cannot be transformed into calculable profits and products. The frustration and resignation that are evoked by this state of affairs, is another problem that only can be attacked if educational projects are integrated in much more comprehensive, multifarious policies for social activation and participation.

Conclusion

In this chapter we explored to what extent the researched projects actually contribute to the learning of competencies that empower young people to participate as competent actors in the (labour) communities they are trained for. Taking Wingers' concept of "communities of practice" as a frame of reference, we selected three case studies, illuminating the inclination of educational practices to emphasize particular competencies at the disadvantage of others. The English YMCA project exemplified this in its foregrounding of biographical competencies, the German project StrOHmerin in its focus on social and instrumental competencies.

Such differences in preference are partly understandable and explainable in the perspective of the *target groups* that are addressed, and their presumed needs. The YMCA aims at young people who live at the margin of society and who are in urgent need of guidance to gain some control over their personal life. The German project targets a relatively stable group of young women, who are more in need of specific qualifications, as they are ready to enter the labour market.

Yet, as the Portuguese case of Moinho da Juventude shows, the apparent needs and deficiencies of specific target groups should not necessarily give rise to a restricted perception of agency. Also young people who live in marginal conditions and who suffer from social exclusion and personal problems are both entitled and able to develop comprehensive competencies, that enable them to commit themselves seriously to (labour) communities that make sense to them. And, the other way round, young adults who are qualifying for acknowledged vocations are in need of biographical competencies as well, to help them imagining the different options and meanings work might have in their lives.

Therefore, the balancing of biographical, social and instrumental competencies should be integral to projects that aim at the empowerment of young unemployed. Providing an unbalanced programme may easily lead to frustrations, both for participants and professionals. A lack of attention to instrumental competencies gives rise to feelings of uselessness and boredom. Not fully addressing social competencies prevents commitment on the part of the learners and hampers their developing feelings of responsibility. Neglect of biographical competencies hinders them to see the meaning of their activities in the perspective of plans and hopes for their (future) life.

Balancing competencies implies that participants are encouraged to explore the meaning of the knowledge, skills and practices they learn with respect to their personal life course – on the short and on the long term, i.e. to look at both present dreams and future options (imagination). Furthermore, their commitment should be evoked by situating learning in a joint practice of common goals and shared responsibilities, and embedded in a safe and supportive atmosphere (engagement). Finally, they should be provided with the relevant know-how, skills, and hands-on experiences to give them an adequate sense of taking part in the wider world of real life labour (alignment).

In our view, the reason why so many of the projects succeed insufficiently in such a balancing, despite the best intentions, is not so much caused by the specific target groups they work with. The main reason is the lack of a clear concept of empowerment and agency in relation to a meaningful participation in communities of practice. Educational projects easily turn into "*pseudo-communities of practice*", representing a reality of their own, that is disconnected from (labour) communities in the world "out there", even if they intend to prepare young adults for participating in such communities. The more programmes for training, schooling and guidance are transformed into individualized "packages" of skills and knowledge that are to be mastered, the more they are stripped of experiences of

sharing responsibilities and commitments in common practices that imply acknowledgment and meaning in relation to the "real world", the less they will be able to address young adults as (potential) competent actors in the full sense of the word. Projects will "produce" competent actor ship for (labour) communities of practice only, if they succeed in providing the participants with an environment that catches their personal imagination, promotes their social engagement, and aligns their functional abilities to wider practices of labour and social participation. To meet this end, projects will have to balance between biographical, social and instrumental incentives to promote identification on the one hand, and stimuli to negotiate the options and meanings of personal desires, social interactions and productive performances on the other.