

Building Youth Civic Engagement through Media Education and Educational Commons



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Abstract The Italian case study, presented in this chapter, develops the concept of educational commons building on the field of media education and the notions of “participatory culture” and digital commons. The motivation for this study arose from the need to reconsider education as a shared resource and to examine the importance of experimenting with, monitoring, and evaluating (digital) co-creation practices that may engage and empower young people within their communities. Hence, our research questions were: (a) How do young people collectively experience and build the educational commons? (b) How do participants (youth and adults) in educational commons experience peer governance, and how do they handle and resolve conflicts? (c) How does the co-creation of a photo blog as a shared space of action help young people discover and develop a “civic intentionality” in the (digital) public sphere? (d) What are the effects of applying a commons’ logic to address inequalities and achieve social inclusion of young people from vulnerable social groups? The analysis of the textual data collected through interviews and focus groups, logbooks, fieldnotes, observation grids, and audiovisual documentation, we have been able to (a) reconstruct the micro-context in which the case study activities took place, (b) comprehensively describe the relational dynamics, the processes, and the products using unobtrusive methods, and (c) assess the impact of the activities concerning the objective of developing “civic intentionality” and reducing educational inequalities through an educational-commons and media-education approach.

Keywords Educational commons · Media education · Youth club · Photo blog · Participatory culture

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G. Cappello et al. (eds.), *Educational Commons*, UNIPA Springer Series,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-51837-9_4

1 Introduction¹

The Italian case studies develop the concept of educational commons building on the field of media education and the notions of “participatory culture” and digital commons, adopting an action-research approach. The choice of this conceptual and methodological framework is motivated by the fact that these notions allow us to imagine and experiment with educational activities based on sharing, dialogue, and co-creation.

This was in line with the general goal of the Smooth project to rethink education as a common good and reflect on the importance of experiencing, monitoring, evaluating and narrating the co-creative practices that underlie the active participation and (in our case) civic engagement of young people.

Our case studies involved the same target group (young people aged 12 and 16) and were implemented in non-formal educational contexts with some similarities and specific characteristics. Both contexts are youth clubs that aim to promote initiatives using a bottom-up approach. One case study took place at the Centro Tau (<http://mediatau.it/centrotau/>), located in the La Zisa neighbourhood, one of the most at-risk areas of the metropolitan city of Palermo, characterised by high rates of job insecurity and unemployment, early school leaving, child labour, and delinquency. The other case study took place in Agrigento, in a youth club run by MondoAltro Foundation (<https://www.caritasagrigento.it/fondazione-mondoaltro/>), a Catholic organisation addressing the needs of disadvantaged people in the local community through innovative social and educational initiatives. Its areas of intervention include migration, international cooperation, and support for poverty.

This chapter presents findings from the case study carried out in Agrigento to verify whether and how educational commons may generate transformative processes inspired by an expanded notion of social action and politics (a micro-politics, so to speak) that includes and at the same time transcends the formal political system and its institutions.

2 Media Education for Youth Civic Engagement

Since the 1980s, media education has gradually abandoned the traditional protectionist approach to take a more “interlocutory” vision that, starting from the need to have a greater understanding of the complexity of youth cultures, aims not so much to protect them as to encourage them to have a more critical relationship with the media and their media practices. In this sense, media education

begins with students’ existing experience and knowledge, but it also challenges them to move beyond it. It works with their personal and emotional investments in media, but it also encourages them to reflect upon and analyse them. It provides opportunities for creativity and

¹ Gianna Cappello wrote paragraphs 2 and 5. Marianna Siino wrote paragraphs 3 and 4. Paragraphs 1 and 6 were written jointly.

self-expression, but it also emphasises the need for critical evaluation. It provides students with new information, unfamiliar theories, and critical tools for analysis, but it seeks to engage them in debate rather than merely trying to command their assent. ([13], p. 75)

Building on fields such as Cultural Studies and audience ethnography, media education has developed three interconnected modes of action: an *interpretive mode* that employs textual and paratextual analysis strategies to look at texts but also at the ritualising and socialising aspects of media consumption; a *social science mode* that looks at the broader context where media operate as social institutions in relationship with social, cultural, economic, and political institutions; and a *creative mode* that integrates textual and contextual analysis with a (self)-expressive dimension that enhances youth agency and subjective experience through their own media productions [14].

Although the thesis of media education as an approach to developing critical thinking has been widely explored in media education research,² much less so has been the reflection on how critical thinking should translate into civic engagement in everyday life [1, 28, 29]. Boyte [10] speaks in this regard of a “civic gap” between being aware of a problem (through acquiring critical analysis skills) and then being able, or willing to, take action to address it in everyday life. Due to this gap, media education faces new challenges today to foster a “civic intentionality where interventions are designed to bring people together in support of solving social problems, reinventing spaces for meaningful engagement, creating positive dialogue in communities”. ([28], p. 8).

Therefore, media education aims to not only develop the capacity “to access, analyse, evaluate, and create” [18] but also to foster the ability “to take social action by working individually and collaboratively to share knowledge and solve problems in the family, workplace and community, and by participating as a member of a community” ([24], p. viii). Mihailidis [29] argues that critical analysis and creative production (the traditional media education modes of action) should be complemented by some form of *action* in the public sphere, including the digital one. This brings us to the notion of educational commons as an alternative model of social and political action and to the Italian case studies of the Smooth project.

Our starting question was how to operationalise, from an empirical point of view, the concepts of critical analysis and creative production and how they can engage youth in social action. Any (media) educational intervention, in fact, must involve not only strategic planning to achieve particular learning objectives but also a declination of the competencies to be developed to assess empirically their acquisition at the end of the intervention [15]. For such assessment, we have used two models that are widely adopted in media education research, adding a third one, developed by Mihailidis and Thevenin [30], particularly useful for detecting the notion of youth civic engagement as the ability to act in a public context.

In the first model, three groups of skills are identified. At a personal level, the skills to be developed relate to the capacity to use technological devices to access

² Some representative references are: Buckingham [11, 13], Hobbs [24], Hobbs and Mihailidis [25], Bennett et al. [6].

the Internet, store information, share content, etc. (*technical skills*). Other skills concern the capacity to understand and evaluate media messages (*cognitive skills*): who created them, for what purpose, what they explicitly or implicitly represent, what values and beliefs they display, what linguistic conventions and codes are used, what audiences they aim at, and how audiences may differently interpret them, what commercial implications they entail. Finally, *communication and participatory skills* enable youth to establish relationships with others and participate in collaborative activities.

Buckingham [12] model makes instead a distinction between a *cognitive-conceptual level* (what one needs to know about the media as a social institution, a symbolic/cultural resource and an economic-industrial apparatus) and an *operational level* (that is, what one needs to know to do “things” with or about the media). The first level includes knowing how media language produces meaning, how ideology and stereotypes concur to (mis)represent reality, how media industries make profit, how audiences are targeted and how they consume/use media as prosumers. The second level includes more practical skills related to *reading* (for example, to deconstruct media texts by applying textual analysis skills) and *writing* (to create media content and share it responsibly, making it appropriate to purpose, context, and audience).

Building on these models, the innovative effort of Mihailidis’ and Thevenin’s [30] model is to focus on these skills can be placed within the framework of civic engagement. The “engaged citizen” for Mihailidis and Thevenin (see Fig. 1) must be able not only to critically access the web, analyse and create different forms of media content but also generate, from these skills, some kind of action and/or dialogue with the local community. In other words, to bridge the “civic gap” and (re)construct the civic intentionality of media education, the typical skills of critical analysis and creative production must be placed within the more general framework of the civic/public sphere.

Mihailidis’ and Thevenin’s model is based on the four key competencies developed through media education. The first two, *participatory competency* and *collaborative competency*, focus on Henry Jenkin’s notion of “participatory culture” [30] and are intended to operate at a broader socio-relational level, while the third one, the *expressive competency*, operates at the micro level of personal “conscientisation” [21]. “By focusing on the creation, dissemination, and reception of individual expression, young citizens can reflect on the content of their voice, and also on the power they have to be part of a larger civic dialogue” ([30], p. 1618). Finally, by acquiring *critical competencies*, they learn to take a critical distance from media content, reflecting on their ideological and commercial implications. Of course, attaining these competencies depends to a good extent on the conditions created by the social actors operating in local contexts (schools, families, NGOs, cultural institutions, local authorities, and policymakers, etc.). However, as much as one cannot define a priori what it means to be an engaged citizen and how one gets there, in an increasingly mediated world, the competencies indicated by Mihailidis and Thevenin appear indispensable to help “empower civic voices for the future of sustainable, tolerant, and participatory democracy in the digital age” ([30], p. 1619).

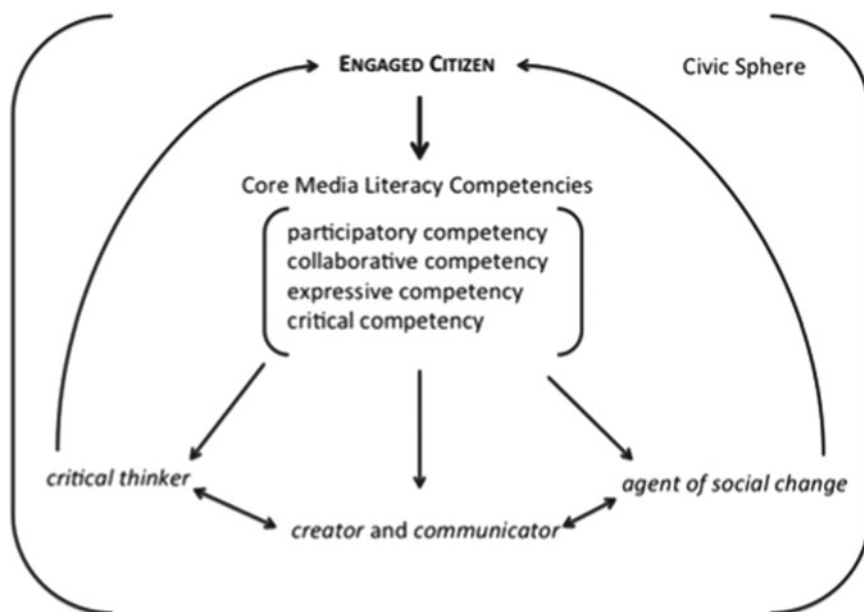


Fig. 1 A model for the core competencies of the “engaged citizen” ([30]: 1617)

3 From the Digital Commons to “Participatory Culture”

The other fundamental notion inspiring the Italian case studies of educational commons is that of digital commons. This notion is in part similar to that of the traditional commons. Like “natural” commons (urban gardens, forests, or pastures), digital commons are non-excludable goods (i.e., their use/consumption cannot be prevented, except at high cost). Still, unlike traditional commons, they are also non-rival, i.e., there is no risk that excessive use or consumption will harm others. Potentially, everyone can access and enjoy the good, and even if more people do, this does not result in a diminution or decay of the good itself. Moreover, digital commons have a global scale that traditional commons, tied to a circumscribed natural or urban resource, do not.

The free software movement is the most important precedent for the digital commons. Launched in the early 1980s by activist and programmer Richard Stallman, the movement contrasted the nascent proprietary software industry, Microsoft and Apple foremost, with the then-established practice of working with open-source software and its four “freedoms”.³ Over the years, the many projects related to FLOSS

³ “The freedom to run the program as you wish, for any purpose (freedom 0). The freedom to study how the program works and change it so it does your computing as you wish (freedom 1). Access to the source code is a precondition for this. The freedom to redistribute copies so you can help others (freedom 2). The freedom to distribute copies of your modified versions to others (freedom 3). By doing this you can give the whole community a chance to benefit from your changes. Access to

(Free, Libre and Open Source Software) have demonstrated the concrete possibility that digital resources can be co-managed as commons in the sense studied by Ostrom [31]. With the beginning of the twenty-first century, the traditional focus on the “natural” commons was joined by an interest in commons related to culture, information, and knowledge [2–5, 8, 9, 22], an interest also reinforced as a result of a second wave of enclosures represented more or less overt forms of privatisation, surveillance, and commodification of cultural and scientific production. The advent of Web 2.0 has exponentially amplified the potential of the digital commons by empowering anyone to produce content and fostering new forms of de-institutionalised creativity. Open-source communities, citizen journalism blogs, online fandom and video gaming groups have multiplied, developing some sort of decentralised, self-managed communities of “collective intelligence” (Lévy 1994) where individual freedom is coupled with co-managed, open, horizontal decision-making mechanisms and processes. An interesting key to understanding this more culturalist notion of the digital commons is Jenkins’s [26] concept of “participatory culture”, i.e., a culture

with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices. In a participatory culture, members also believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, members care about others’ opinions of what they have created). (p. xi)

Four characteristics of “participatory culture” make it assimilable to the digital commons [7]. The first characteristic is the *sense of belonging*, played out, however, not so much on the level of communication (and thus content) but on that of social practices whereby “communication is not simply a mediating factor but becomes an environment of interaction, a place [...] where experiences can be inscribed” ([7], p. 11). A second characteristic is *expression*, that is, the fact that users, especially youth and fans, can produce and share content. The third characteristic is *collaborative problem-solving*, i.e., working in groups to perform tasks, develop projects, and generate shared knowledge. Finally, the fourth characteristic is *flow sharing*, i.e., the “widespread capacity to share and participate in the media flow sharing” through practices such as podcasting, file sharing, and RSS feeds ([7], p. 14).

Despite the enthusiasm with which it has been received, the idea that “participatory culture” is, an expression of creativity and empowerment has been criticised as a form of cyber-populism [19]. Some scholars [17] have emphasised the need to distinguish between mere access to the Internet, a more complex interactive activity in which users exchange content (self-produced or not), and actual participation in which users are involved in projects of collaborative content production (the classic example is Wikipedia). For the latter case to occur, where we can actually talk about models of collaboration and self-governance that recall the basic principles of the commons, namely co-creation, co-management, and social sharing, certain basic conditions must be in place [23]:

the source code is a precondition for this”. <https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-sw.en.html#four-freedoms>, last accessed October 2023.

- *intentionality*: do participants share the goals and stages of the project, or are they mere executors?
- *mode control*: are participants empowered to question the rules of participation, or are they forced to accept them passively, fearing exclusion from the group?
- *ownership*: who owns the products originated by this collaboration?
- *accessibility*: who can participate, how and for how long? Who decides the criteria for accessibility?
- *equality*: do all participants have equal power in decisions, or are there hierarchies and differentiations of roles and functions? If there are, are they the result of a collective decision? Can they be challenged? And how?

Jenkins himself [26] notes that the affirmation of participatory culture cannot be taken for granted. A “political and pedagogical intervention” is needed to address three critical issues that could jeopardise it, especially with regard to younger people: (1) the participation gap, i.e., unequal access to Internet opportunities; (2) the transparency problem, i.e., recognising how media influence (albeit non-deterministically) our perceptions of reality; and (3) the ethical challenge, i.e., making sure that young people “are socialised into the emerging ethical standards that should shape their practices as media makers and participants in online communities” (p. xiii). Jenkins also mentions more structural problems related to the fact that social media evolution of the Internet, while enhancing the possibilities of commoning, also implies new processes of enclosure and an increasing commodification and exploitation of prosumers’ creativity due to the rise of the oligopoly of GAFAM (Google/Alphabet, Apple, Facebook/Meta, Amazon, Microsoft) and their Chinese rivals, the BATX (Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, Xiaomi) [20, 33–35].

In sum, while the beginning of this century has seen the explosion of the most diverse forms of digital commons, it has also witnessed the consolidation of a process of oligopolistic enclosing by large high-tech corporations. In other words, the Internet, especially in its most recent social media version, is part of the problem but also part of the solution. On the Internet, we can find many concrete examples of social action that could serve as a model for experimenting with alternative systems of co-governance, production of knowledge and culture, and economic development. These examples—intertwined with the offline action of the most diverse social movements—could reverse, or at least circumscribe, the negative effects, especially in terms of inequality and social inclusion, that are being generated by a growing and pervasive process of privatisation and commodification of ever more extensive and more diverse spheres of the social system, including the Internet.

4 Experimenting Educational Commons in Agrigento: The Action-Research Plan

One of two Italian case studies took place in Agrigento, at the youth club run by the Mondoaltro Foundation (<https://www.caritasagrigento.it/fondazione-mondoaltro/>). The Mondoaltro Foundation is a Catholic organisation (linked to Caritas) whose mission is to respond to the needs of disadvantaged people in the local community through innovative social and educational initiatives. Participatory methods and inclusion are the two cornerstones of the Foundation's action, particularly interculturality. Over the years, it has become a key institution supporting individuals with "fragile" living conditions (poverty, cultural and language differences, job placement or housing difficulties, etc.). The Foundation organises a series of distinct activities according to the age group of beneficiaries. For young people, the prevailing activities are those related to school support. However, an attempt is made to have them stay at the club and participate in various workshops (art, music, photography, etc.) and broader educational activities to promote better inclusion in the local community. The relationship between the youth club and the Agrigento community is very complex, filtered at many levels by existing prejudices that contribute, according to the educators working in the club, to construct a distorted representation. Club attendees, for example, are mixed, but the Agrigento community perceives it as the "migrant youth club". This distorted perception contributes to erecting imaginary barriers and creates a kind of "bubble" little community well apart from the larger community.

Our case study involved ten young people, five boys and five girls, aged 12 to 14, all second-generation migrants.⁴ Senegal, Morocco and Romania are the countries of origin of their parents. These young people, primarily because of their hybrid identity status, are vulnerable subjects and more exposed to the risk of social exclusion. Therefore, the youth club was particularly suitable for testing commoning practices and verifying their inclusive potential. Fieldwork was articulated into a three-phase action-research plan:

- (1) a *training* period for the educators working in the club (February–April 2022) to describe the action-research approach and provide media education competencies (with a focus on digital photography and blogging) and how they can be aligned with the goals of the Smooth project in terms of co-creation, co-governance, and peer-to-peer education;
- (2) a *first round* of activities (April–September 2022) during which educators, in turn, trained the children in the critical, creative, and responsible use of photography and online sharing. During the first round, a photo blog was created where the content co-produced by the children was shared until the end of the second round (<https://smoothitaly.wordpress.com/>, last accessed October 2023);
- (3) a *second round* (January–July 2023), during which the youth co-created content for the photo blog, increasingly strengthening ties within the club and the local

⁴ For a definition and an empirical study on second-generation youth in Italy, see [27].

community. The second round in Agrigento was an extension of the first, further developing the shared learning processes. Our goal was to involve parents, formal institutions, and the local community as a whole in the process of “reading and writing” about issues affecting the local community. Meetings were organised to promote discussion primarily with parents (e.g., a multi-ethnic lunch where the youth cooked for the whole Smooth community with the help of some parents) and with the local community on issues chosen by the youth themselves (e.g., youth did some interviews to adults outside the club on the redevelopment of a city area). A longer-term impact of the case study will be detectable in the extent to which it succeeded in reaching a larger community and, more importantly, in triggering social change, both in the vision of the subjects involved and in the relationships that they activate or not, in the bonds they generate or not, and in the interpretation of “community” as it becomes a “narration” in their own words.

To detect and monitor change, the action-research phases were accompanied by a series of data collection and evaluation activities carried out at the very beginning of the first round, during the first and second rounds, and after the second round. From the perspective of action research, all processes were constantly monitored by actively involving the same actors (educators, researchers, and children) with complementary roles. The information thus obtained was further enriched by the material drawn from the constant informal exchanges (online meetings, chats, emails) between researchers and educators. Fieldwork involved using typical ethnographic research tools: participant observation, focus groups, and in-depth interviews. The empirical basis of our analysis consisted of textual data collected through the interviews and focus groups, logbooks with field notes, observation grids, and textual and audiovisual productions resulting from cooperation among the children (photographs, videos, drawings, etc.).

The educators became “fellow travellers” and facilitators during the case study. They helped young people become commoners, that is, creative and self-directed individuals who feed off the shared educational good, the culture and knowledge transmitted by the community, but who also undertake their own innovative explorations, renewing what they inherited and creating new forms of culture and knowledge. It all took place within a community in which each creative subject engaged with other creative subjects, thus participating in the collective reinvention and expansion of culture, values, and knowledge in society as a whole. The adult—the educator—renounces asymmetry and interacts with youth equally. Young people are equally able subjects, bearers of unique and singular potentialities and creative energies. They can become free citizens, belonging to a community but, at the same time, autonomous actors within it [32]. Since the first round, young people in Agrigento have felt increasingly free to propose, create, imagine their own pathways, express their needs and share desires.

Undoubtedly, the bottom-up approach typical of the youth club was a strength in developing our case study. The educators involved in the training were already familiar with participatory methods as they use them daily in their relationship with the children. However, during the activities, they learned how to finalise their use

better and also value the broader framework within which they can be applied: a community of commoners who share a common good, education itself.

Another area of particular interest concerning the dynamics within the community was conflict resolution, which is a vital principle for community resilience and sustainability [32]. A specific conflict resolution model was proposed during the training, namely that of active listening, which is related to a broader approach of listening pedagogy, developed principally by the Reggio Emilia “school”, combined fruitfully with the theoretical approaches on the (educational) commons.

Another central area was peer governance and peer education. Commons do not emerge naturally or spontaneously but are the product of the sharing process. Peer governance, through which people co-decide and co-manage within the community, is the basis of all commoning practices. In this context, peers have the same rights and duties and are considered equally capable of contributing to a cooperative project and deciding how it will evolve. A final area of interest was children’s rights and well-being, understood as a permanent expansion of their capacities, autonomy and self-determination in the present.

In sum, the action-research process developed during our case study aimed at detecting empirically the three dimensions of the commons concept as identified in the theoretical framework of the Smooth project (see Introduction): the shared good/resource, the commoning practices, and community members. Each dimension was declined into less abstract sub-dimensions and research questions, functional to empirically detect useful information to assess the impact of the intervention and to provide guidelines for a possible redesign of the case study.

The collected data during the fieldwork allowed us to:

- reconstruct the micro-context in which the activities took place,
- describe in depth and with non-invasive methods social dynamics,
- analyse the processes and the products,
- assess the impact of the implemented activities to develop a “civic intentionality” to reduce the “civic gap” and educational inequalities by comparing the results of the two different rounds of implementation of the case study.

The following paragraph will summarise the main findings.

5 Commoners, Commoning Practices and the Community

Concerning the first dimension, we observed that the young people participated in the activities with interest but were not constant either within the same meeting or in general during the meetings of the first round: “It is difficult to maintain attention, but in the end they complete the tasks!” notes in her logbook the researcher present during the activities in Agrigento, emphasising this as an achievement both for the age group, characterised by a certain fickleness of spirit, and for the inherently “vulnerable” condition shared by the second-generation youth attending the club. They showed interest in anything new and preferred group work. They also showed a

good expressive capacity: they always explicitly expressed their approval or displeasure with the activities they were doing, sometimes even walking away. They were also creative and progressively increased their awareness of what they were doing, focusing more on the assigned theme/task and the purpose of the activity.

Intersectionality was a theme strongly addressed in Agrigento for the coexistence of different ethnic groups, natives and young people with migrant backgrounds. The condition of the dual identity of second-generation children, as well as the coexistence of several cultures, was strongly considered in the second round's activities.

Particularly during the activity dedicated to the representation of themselves and the Other as related to the concept of multiple identities, young people showed they had understood the importance of deconstructing the equation nationality = identity and started representing themselves as belonging to more than one reality. A particular focus was devoted to the difference between representation and reality and to the need never to justify prejudice and discriminatory behaviour (in particular, the girls recounted being the target of remarks that affected them as women and as people of migrant origin).

Below is an example of a post young people produced on this theme (Fig. 2). The post establishes a parallelism between two religious festivals: the Grand Magal festival in Touba, organised every year in Ravanusella square, where many people of Senegalese origin live, to mark the anniversary of the death of the prophet Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, who initiated Mouridism, and the Agrigento festival of a native saint, Calogero, celebrated in August. The comparison between the two festivals is intended to highlight what makes two festivals belonging to two different cultures similar.

The co-created post consists of two photos shot and selected by the young people during the celebration of the two festivals in Agrigento. The caption describes the two figures and focuses on what makes the two festivals comparable: both of these men (the prophet Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba and saint Calogero) did good things for the community. The post concludes with a reflection on what is considered a "problem": "we cannot understand why many people who love San Calogero [who had black skin] do not feel the same respect for people with black skin who live in Agrigento".

The children also showed good analytical, critical and reflective skills, taking into account different points of view and establishing a connection between images and text that was useful in conveying their message. In both cases, the pupils worked in sub-groups with different tasks. No particular conflicts arose, just a few disagreements on the photos to be included in the posts, which were quickly resolved. Finally, they started understanding the potential of actively engaging to achieve a common goal, denouncing something that does not work in their daily life context and raising awareness on certain issues. They began to develop an awareness that their small action can have value and that they, too, can contribute to changing the society in which they live.

Throughout the meetings, they learned to observe the reality around them in a new way, with an attention to details they had not noticed before, like when they saw a sudden burst of nature between houses, or the cracks of an abandoned building, or the pothole in the sidewalk and reported them in one of their posts. (see Fig. 3).

San Calò e il Grand Magal

Agrigento, Usi e costumi

San Calogero

San Calogero è il santo più amato di Agrigento. Ogni estate la città lo celebra portando a sua statua in processione, con la partecipazione di tante persone.



Grand Magal

Il Magal Touba è una delle feste più importanti della comunità Senegalese. Ogni anno si celebra la commemorazione della partenza in esilio dello sceicco Ahmadou Bamba. La festa viene celebrata nella città di Touba, in Senegal, ma anche ad Agrigento.



San Calogero e Ahmadou Bamba hanno vissuto la loro vita aiutando chi ne aveva bisogno, con il pane e con il conforto delle parole. San Calogero aveva la pelle nera, come lo sceicco Ahmadou Bamba. Per questo motivo non riusciamo a capire perché molte persone che amano San Calogero non provino lo stesso rispetto per le persone con la pelle nera che vivono ad Agrigento.

Fig. 2 A post from the photo blog (<https://smoothitaly.wordpress.com/2023/06/29/san-calo-e-il-grand-magal/>, last accessed October 2023)

La natura e la città

Agrigento, intorno a noi

Oggi abbiamo fatto un giro in città osservando con attenzione la natura. Ci siamo resi conto che così com'è, non ci piace!



Forse sarebbe meglio senza! Abbiamo visto alberi e piante che sono stati prima piantati e sistemati in varie piazze e strade per poi essere abbandonati. Abbiamo osservato anche la forza della natura che, con le proprie forze, cerca di prendere spazio in luoghi dove non gli è stato concesso. Ci piacerebbe avere più giardinetti curati, ci piacerebbe anche poterci prendere cura del verde che ci circonda, ma abbiamo paura di essere multati. Speriamo allora che scrivere qui i nostri pensieri possa contribuire a rendere la nostra città più bella e più vivibile per le piante!

Fig. 3 A post from the photo blog (<https://smoothitaly.wordpress.com/2023/06/29/la-natura-e-la-citta/>, last accessed October 2023)

The post (Fig. 3) reports three photos of glimpses of the urban context of Agrigento, in which nature becomes the protagonist of the photo composition. The short caption first describes what they do not like (the neglected condition) and the beauty that can be found (the disruptive power of nature). Then, it expresses the desire to have more cured urban green spaces and actively contribute to their maintenance. It ends with a proposal for action that shows how young people are somehow aware that small initiatives can have a more significant impact: “We hope that writing our thoughts here can help make our city more beautiful and liveable for plants”.

For commoning practices, we observed that young people, being part of a community where the educators typically employed participatory methods, were already used to working in groups and sharing everything they use within the club. Interestingly, in Agrigento, sub-groups mainly were formed by gender, an element we decided to focus on during the second round.

Another interesting finding is that at the end of the first round, young people showed they had acquired the capacity to shift from competition to valuing individual contributions: diversity was ultimately recognised as a learning opportunity. Leadership was another crucial point. The young people had two leaders: a boy (M., aged 13) and a girl (S., aged 13). These two figures underwent an interesting evolution: both gradually understood that they had a role that could take on positive or negative connotations. They began to distinguish that one can impose one's authority by becoming a disruptive element but can also catalyse the energy to empower the group by suggesting common directions. One case, in particular, aroused our interest. During one of the meetings, one of the boys (M., aged 13) was inattentive and was asked by the educator to pay more attention or leave, as no one was obliged to stay until the end of the meeting. The boy stayed but eventually left feeling "offended" by the educator's behaviour. The dynamics worth attention are the ones that came immediately afterwards: for the following meetings, half of the boys no longer went to the meetings as they had been "forbidden" to do so by the "offended" boy. The whole group was affected by this sudden temporary disruption. Fortunately, and with great effort, the educator managed to reconnect the boys little by little until even the leader, called "pack leader" by the other boys in the group, started attending meetings again.

For participatory methods, we found that young people usually identified the topics together, experiencing the possibility of finding points of convergence between elements of different cultures and creating forms of constructive dialogue while maintaining the freedom to express themselves freely within the group. However, they were not fully aware that what they co-produced belonged to everyone! More simply, they did things together and shared tools and experiences but lacked the awareness that a shared action can have a shared purpose and give rise to a co-created experience with some impact on reality. This awareness emerged during the last meetings, and we enhanced it further during the second round. Young people were aware that they could contribute to group activities actively, but the value of their engagement in the local community was still out of their reach. Their sphere of action was still relegated to the small context of their individual daily lives. We also worked on this front in the second round. In this sense, the photo-blog experience aimed to represent a common public space that goes beyond the boundaries of the club and the local community. Collaboration between young people and educators in Agrigento was excellent, except in rare cases where conflicts were always resolved thanks to the mediation of one educator. The group recognises the usefulness of confronting each other in the presence of the educator, an indicator of the level of trust they place in that figure. Some young people also showed good mediation skills and actively contributed to conflict resolution when solicited by the educator.

Regarding the third dimension, that of community, young people showed a good predisposition to confront and respect others (even those different from them in terms of ethnicity, origin, age, etc.). However, although they recognise the club as a community they feel they belong to, outside the club, different "memberships" are clearly marked! The activities implemented during the case study have strengthened ties within the club's community, timidly triggering a more open vision towards the

other and the outside world, making young people start to realise the possible impact of their actions. The photo-blog precisely represents a space where actions in a micro context (the club) can have some visibility and a spill-over into a macro context, a space that hopefully the Smooth community we co-created during our case study will take care of and further develop.

6 Conclusion

Since the training at the beginning of the first round, a co-creative process involving researchers, educators, and young people was initiated. We adapted the initial training plan to the specific contexts of the youth club in Agrigento. Together with the educators, we designed an implementation plan that was then adapted to the characteristics, needs and desires of the young people involved. Relationships were constantly based on the active listening of all members of the community. And those who could not do so at the beginning of the case study gradually learned to do so.

Constant monitoring of the activities was fundamental for reshaping them according to individual and collective pathways. Thanks to this, we identified some dysfunctional elements that emerged during the first round and addressed them during the second. One of these elements was the typical “emotional instability” at this age. As we know, adolescence represents the time when young people go through a real emotional storm, searching for their psychic and relational identity for prospects for their future. They gradually discover themselves and the world around them, slowly and laboriously constructing their personal worldviews. In this elusive and labile terrain, it is complicated to structure new positions, introduce new values and raise awareness for social issues that, at this stage, are often perceived as “distant and adult-centric”.

Another area for improvement was the unpredictability of children’s attendance at the activities. Unlike formal education, activities in non-formal educational contexts do not require compulsory attendance. Children’s attention and interest can never be taken for granted, and so is attendance. Therefore, it was a rather ambitious and arduous task to form a group and keep its composition constant until the end of the activities. We somehow managed to do so with the valuable support of the educator. Clearly, unstable attendance was a dysfunctional element for activities that aim at progressive skill acquisition and involve active participation, not merely physical presence. The last, but no less critical, dysfunctional element to consider was the sudden (and temporary) breakdown of the group due to the fragility that characterises the relationships with and among adolescents. The Agrigento Smooth community demonstrated that conflicts can be resolved, but there is no set time. The episode of the conflict between the youth leader and the educator highlighted some potentially disruptive elements that we addressed during the second round: the difference between a leader and a “pack leader”, the dangers of imitative dynamics, the importance of ensuring that the pursuit of a collective goal takes priority over self-interest, and the need to reiterate the importance of dialogue and confrontation

as an alternative to conflict (or “escape” in that specific episode). All these elements were considered during the data analysis between the two rounds. Interestingly, some of the solutions came from the young people themselves, together with the proposal of the new activities to be implemented during the second round.

Our case study can be seen as an example of a grassroots practice that, arising from below, makes community members protagonists of their living together and co-creators a shared “common space” (the club, the local community, the online environment of the photo-blog). These commoners collaborated in the same context by activating commoning practices that strengthened the sense of belonging to that community and their civic engagement. In line with the Smooth project goals, we wanted to identify and experiment with an educational model that can be adopted and re-adapted to those contexts where traditional approaches struggle to counteract efficiently the issues of social inclusion and educational inequalities. Our ultimate aim was to trigger a process of change based on adopting an educational paradigm that moves along the cognitive dimension but envisages its outcomes in the development of a participatory dimension.

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