

Growing conscious and responsible citizens

Elisabetta Kolar – Ufficio di Servizio Sociale Minorenni Trieste
Stefano Scorzato – “La Quercia” cooperativa sociale – Trieste

Background

In the last period of time the interventions towards young offenders are located in a cultural and social situation that emphasizes individualism, personal success and that often ignores the social dimension of human life. In this situation vulnerable people (also underage people) are getting up to social exclusion process which often bring them to illegal acts. When practitioners meet these young offenders, they can observe a ‘crisis of law’, that means a reduced agreement to laws and an accord to criminal behaviour (that included a consensus towards mafia organizations). A particular consequence of this situation is a young offenders’ difficulty to understand the meaning of the rules and to recognize the consequences of their own offence on the victims. This is the background of a legal educational project, “Growing conscious and responsible citizens”, developed by “La Quercia” (Trieste) and “Aracon” (Udine), affiliated to “*LIBERA Associazioni Nomi e Numeri contro le mafie*” (an organization that joins a lot of NGO to fight against mafia) and the Juvenile Justice Social Service (Trieste) and financed by Regione Autonoma Friuli Venezia Giulia. The project aims to give young offenders an opportunity to reflect about their acts and the meaning of the rules, to enhance their sense of responsibility and to take part of practices of active citizenship, promoted by “*LIBERA Associazioni Nomi e Numeri contro le mafie*”.

The development of the project

Started in 2009 in Trieste, the project has been enlarged thanks to the young offenders, practitioners and juvenile court’s interest in it. Now it involves young offenders who live in Friuli-Venezia Giulia, another NGO (“Aracon”, Udine) and a group of peer education in Udine. This link is very important in a perspective of social inclusion: in fact in this way young offenders can develop relationships and work with peers in a legal context.

During this period of time 35 young offenders (above all probationers) are involved in the project (about 15 young offenders a year). The kind of offence is not a criterion to select young offenders to involve in the program even if drug spreaders, violent people and young people who lives in families who are involved in mafia organizations has been preferred.

Many of young offenders (22) ended the educational program successfully and some of them go on the program after the end of probation. A few of them (8) didn’t agree to the project or interrupted the educational program (5).

The structure of the project

The project has a circular structure that can be summed by three key words:

- **Meeting:** there are three different phases:
 - o before starting educational program social worker meets educationist and tell him something about the young offender’s personal history and something about the offence (above all if it has something to do with mafia organizations). In the same time the social worker meets the young offender and purpose him to take part of educational program. This program is not included in the duties of the probation, rather it may be considered an addiction to them. In this way the young offender is free to agree (or not) without any consequence.
 - o the meeting among young offenders and practitioners (social worker and educationist who accompanied every adolescent during the educational program);
 - o through meetings young offender and educationist are built on trust and young offender can begin reflecting about his own offence and the emotions connected with it.

- **Knowledge:** newspapers, books, video, ecc are used by the educationist to debate about the meaning of the law. The meetings involve the educationist and a young offender or a little group of young offenders. The debate about everyday life matters allows young offenders (who often stop studying and don't have a lot of opportunity of learning) to become more conscious of what is happening in the society where they live, to understand the meaning of the rules and to reflect about their own behaviour.
- **Work:** in this phase young offenders are involved in practices of active citizenship. They can take part of (and cooperate to organize) local and national conferences organized by "Libera", they cooperate in educational programs in the schools of the region Friuli Venezia Giulia, they are involved in peer education experiences and in the community intervention in the confiscated mafia properties. In this situation they can also meet the relatives' mafia victims and listen to their witness: this is an important emotional and cognitive experience which usually changes the young offenders' mind about the outlawed behaviour. Before and after these experiences the educationist and young offenders discuss about them in individual or little group meetings. Indeed the educationist accompanies young people during all the experiences and monitoring them.

Another important step is the 'witness': young offenders are involved in local meetings, in peer education groups, in educational program in the schools and they can witness their own experience. In this way it is possible to mark the young offenders' change from a 'passive' to an active role in the project. Through their witness young offenders meet peers and involved them in the project, realizing the circular process of the project itself.

The 'restitution' to the family is also another important step. The parents, who are involved in the educational program, usually are far from what is happening to their son and they find difficult to recognize his skills. When the parents watch their son's videos or pictures and listen to their experiences are quite surprise: in this moment they can change their mind about their son and recognize his positive agency.

Evaluation

All individual programs are monitoring and evaluating by the young offender, the educationist and the social worker who care of him. According to a constructivism approach (N. Parton, P. O'Byrne, 2000; C. Bezzi, 2011), the practitioners point out the dialogue which allows to recognize the meaning of the experiences, to evidence change of young offender's mind or behaviour (when and why), to underline how young offender faces difficulties successfully. Indeed monitoring the individual program allows to adapt it to young offenders' needs and to recognize the best practices to promote a change of young offender's behaviour.

In the same time the whole project is monitored by an educationist ("La Quercia) and a social worker (USSM). In this way it is possible to evidence practices and process which offer the young offenders the most important opportunities of change. The annual evaluation of the project is developed by the educationist and all social workers involved in the project.

Outcome

All young offenders involved in this project recognize the important emotional and relational impact of this experience. This happens even if the young offender interrupts the program or when a new offence obliges to interrupt it. Taking part of local and national meetings and the community interventions in the confiscated mafia properties give young offenders the opportunities to meet and debate with peers and adults, to appreciate the affiliation to a group in a legal context, to recognize their own skills and to practice active citizenship. During the program the young offenders usually change their mind about their own offence: they become more conscious about the meaning of their offence and of the consequences on the victim. Indeed their consensus towards legal behaviour increases and they appreciate (and defend) the probation as an opportunity to improve their conditions of life.

The possibility to involve other young people at risk of delinquency in the project is another important outcome which is connected to the young offenders' witness in the conferences and in the informal relationships.

As regard the crime prevention there are three significant aspects: many young offenders ended their probation successfully; they don't commit any offence during the educational program (and it is also true for young offenders who committed a lot of offences before starting the program); they involve in the project other young people at risk of delinquency.