The Emotional side of Evaluation in the Professional Development of Educators

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Abstract. In these last four years, my Research Groups and I have been awarded Funding Research Projects, focused on the issue of Evaluation in different contexts. We started our research, but we encountered many problems due to the emotional side (see individual and group dynamics) of the behaviour of the participants. When doing research, you cannot stop at the surface and at a formal level. Many things occur that have not been foreseen by the Research Project Framework which, on the contrary, turn out to be very important. We are talking about what is known as 'serendipity', i.e. the fact that, while you are searching for something, you find something else unexpected, but still very important. The hidden and emotional aspects of doing research are revealed to be as important as the official and stated ones. Often, only the stated objectives of the research are fulfilled, leaving out everything that occurs emotionally in the research experience, because it seems to be material of little significance. It actually often relates to fragmented data, to new-born processes which therefore cannot be fully categorized. However, they are very important in order to acquire an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon studied.

Keywords: evaluation, educators, emotions, group dynamics, psychoanalysis, education, research

1. Introduction

In the last four years, my Research Groups and I have been awarded Research Projects, focused on the issue of Evaluation in different contexts. We started our research, but we encountered many problems due to the emotional side (see individual and group dynamics) of the behaviour of the participants. I coordinated a Research Project, funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, carried out together with 5 other Italian universities (Milan-Bari-Verona-Trento-Pavia), on the Cultures and Practices of Evaluation in the Educational Services for Adolescents. Having learned a lot from the first project, we submitted a new Project for European Funding, which we won. I am still coordinating a Grundwig Project, in the LLL Programme, financed by the European Union for two years, on the Evaluation of Adult Education Staff. I will concentrate here on the first Project, but the issue of the role of emotions in Research also concerns the difficulties we encountered with the second Project.

2. Body Part

2.1. The context

The first Project aimed at building two case studies, exploring the cultures and the practices of Evaluation in two types of Educational Services: one is more innovative (mixing educational work and stimulating the young person's interests for future jobs) and the other is more traditional, i.e. a Community for minors. The goals were to critically analyze the regulations governing the evaluation of Educational Services, to explore the concrete evaluation practices in the daily educational work in the Community and to compare what was collected in two different phases of the Research (review of the literature and research in the field), trying to analyze the differences or the points of contact (Käpplinger, Robak, 2014). We did

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Empirical Research using a Qualitative Research Approach and Qualitative Methodology (Hollway, Jefferson, 2013; Mortari, 2007), employing the ethnographic, educational, psychoanalytical, participatory and narrative methods (Formenti, West, Horsdal, 2014). The instruments we used in the Research, in order to gather data, were: Observation, Non-directive Interviews, Focus Group, Reflective and creative practices and projective tools. We used hermeneutic, interpretative and psychoanalytical methods to analyze the data gathered (Clarke, Hoggett, 2009). However, I am not going to present official research issues, but a theme which could seem lateral but is in fact central. I want to ask the question of the pre-conditions necessary in order to have contexts where it is possible to do research. In fact, we have experienced that certain contexts are open to researchers, allowing them to collect data, only after having undertaken preliminary work, in order to create confidence and support in the way of thinking.

2.2. Serendipitarian research results

What I am presenting here is something that has turned out to be self-imposed in the concrete experience of practical work in the field; something that we were not looking for but which we found. For this reason we call it ''serendipity''. In particular, the Team of the Community for minors we worked with – which is one of the two Socio-educational Services we studied, the more traditional one - was in such a state of conflict, mutual anger and anxiety that we could not even make observations, interviews, focus groups in order to carry on our Evaluation Research. When we first arrived, we found a very particular situation. During the first interview, the Coordinator told us that in the past he had been in prison for a long time, because he had been a terrorist on the extreme left-wing politically. Even now, he still declares that he does not want to ask for Rehabilitation, because he does not regret what he did. After a few years in prison, he was helped by an important religious association and he was given the Coordination of a socio-educational Service for adolescents, for his rehabilitation and to give him another chance. He is very charismatic and very authoritarian with the educators and with the young people. He has built a very closed community, rejecting the outside world which is imagined as hostile. He has imposed very particular rules, for example : all the educators and the interns must do housework, clean the bathroom, make the beds. He thinks that the role of Educator must be that of a sort of ''housewife'', because this role must send the message to the deprived youngsters that they once again have a family and somebody taking care of them as though the educators were their parents. However, in this way the youngsters are never given responsibilities, whilst it is thought – in the scientific psychological debate - very important for adolescents to start to become very active in their own autonomy. Not all the members of the Team agree with the Coordinator, but it is really difficult for them to freely express their opinion. Moreover, in Italy smoking is not allowed indoors, but he, his educators and also the adolescents smoke all the time. During the first meeting with him and the educators, it was very difficult to do interviews, observations and a focus group because he continuously shouted and scolded the educators. He was very angry with the whole world, and criticized continually. When, as researchers, we asked some reflective questions, he looked at us as though we were aliens. He started shouting as usual, and suddenly got up and went out to smoke at the door. He created a great deal of fear all around him, amongst the educators, researchers, adolescents and casual passers-by, with considerable acting out. The educators were very uncomfortable but, in some way, attracted by him. Naturally, this was also because he had the power to dismiss them. For much of the time, we could observe how the atmosphere he created around him was infectious: you could sense the fear, discomfort and anxiety. All the group dynamics were blocked (Perini, 2013).

2.3. The role of emotions and group dynamics in the research

It was necessary to do preliminary psychological and educational work, in order to create the safe conditions required to think (Riva, 2004; Perini, 2013; Ulivieri Stiozzi, 2013). The key issues concern the relationship between the preconditions of the research and the possibility to carry it out, ranging between training and research, between the strict data collected and the complexity of human experience and education, between the presentation of data and the ethics of research. The team of the Community was a group of educators who were very anxious, scared, frustrated, with persecutory fantasies from outside, particularly with respect to the institutions on which they depended (local authority, Co-operative, the Juvenile Court) and with many internal conflicts. Therefore, they claimed, by word of mouth, to be willing

and interested in taking part in the Research but, when it came to having to make observations, interviews or focus groups, we went through situations of defensive silence or very strong outbursts of aggression. The alternative we faced was to collect insignificant data, to give up the research or to refrain from looking - at certain times of the research - at content data and take charge of the educational and psychological growth of the group. As the research continued, we realized that we needed to make do twice the work in order to continue the research, which was alternating moments of data collection, through ethnographic observations, non-directive interviews, focus groups on evaluation, with moments of taking charge of the group and psychological training of the group to learn how to think together as a group. So we started using the model of Group Relations (as proposed by the Tavistock Institute of London), of Bion's group theory of basic assumptions (Bion, 1961; Brunner, Nutkevitch, Sher, 2006), linking together the psychoanalytical and systemic view, in order to be able to listen to their tumultuous emotions, to help the group to tolerate them without going to pieces, to help the group to think of itself as a group, to find ways of communication and dialogue among members, and to go through and to give value to the conflict as a form of knowledge of each other's position. When, after about one year of work, the group began to work – i.e. when the field was 'cleaned' - it was finally possible to collect data on the thematic contents of the research. We actually considered this support as an important part of the research, using, as a method of data analysis, the description of the psychological process of the group and the identification of the anxieties of the group according to psychoanalytical categories. What we observed and experienced produced some important issues which are generative, born from the practice and that are used to generate new views and new perspectives on the areas of research we considered. First of all, it is necessary to pay close attention to the starting conditions of the contexts in which the research is to be done. Are these contexts able to tolerate the entry of researchers? Are they in conditions to be observed as they are at that time or do they nevertheless require the introduction of some sort of change in the system, to be able to hold up to the exploratory eye of the researcher? There are closed contexts, frightened by the encounter with the new, because it breaks balances which are already consolidated, even though unhealthy and marked by conflict, as in our case.

2.4. Vignette

Toward the end of the research, we asked the group to make a drawing about how the educators and coordinator thought of the "Team at work". The Coordinator drew an open window and a beetle looking outside it. He wrote the following in the drawing: "The window is finally open! (even the beetle realized this)". He said, commenting: "For me, what this drawing means is opening a window on this Community…With you [Research group] we have started out on a good path… the beetle has many meanings: there is the educator-beetle, there is the adolescent-beetle, …for example, I am an educator-beetle who, sometimes, need to become part of the Community and I am always afraid that somebody, sooner or later, will crush me… and the adolescents as well, unable to avoid certain influences are, in some ways, beetles." After many years closed in on the members of the Community, thinking of the outside world as an enemy, he could think of the possibility of opening the window outwards, because the beetle was less frightened of being killed and he associates this feeling with the work done together with the research team. The head of the research emphasized the maieutic and therapeutic role that this research could have on the team, considering it a possibility to "open windows" on the community and to question themselves; for a long time, however, many educators maintained that, although it was necessary to question themselves, for the time being it was still early to "open up" to people from the outside. This aspect was interpreted by the Researchers as a serious problem with respect to the type of professionalism of the educators and in general the socio-educational team (Broek, Buiskool, 2013). The Service effectively seemed to be run and considered as something private and personal, not subject to a serious confrontation with the requests of great understanding on its functioning by the institution and society (Buiskool, Broek, 2014).

2.5. The emotional side of evaluation research

As we have seen, the role of the emotions and group dynamics in the organizational task is very important, because it affects the whole way the Heads and the members keep on doing their primary task (Perini, 2013; Armstrong, 2005). This is so true that, if you do not take this assumption into consideration, you may pay attention only to the officially declared organizational task – in this case the re-education and

rehabilitation of deprived and at risk youngsters, forgetting to look deeply inside the unconscious impulses and dynamics, that give another perspective to the formal primary task. In this socio-educational Service, they apparently want to rehabilitate minors but, on a different level, the team members were more interested in imposing their personal and pedagogical models, ideas, beliefs and managing the group dynamics of the team than genuinely listening to the needs of the minor final users (Huffington, Halton, 2004). Our Research had the goal of exploring what the cultures and practices of Evaluation habitually used in the Service were, with a qualitative approach, asking the educators and the Coordinator – thought of as privileged witnesses – to explain to us their ways and tools of Evaluation, their criteria and their objects. However, for a long time it was not possible to create a setting (Jacques, 2002) where we could sit with them, all around a table, and focus on the specific rational issue of the Research: the Evaluation.

At the first meeting, there were the group of researchers and all the members of the team and the Coordinator of the socio-educational service. They received us on the premises of the Community, giving us two hours of their weekly team meeting, usually dedicated to monitoring the cases and the trend of work in the Community. The leader of the meeting implements all the actions necessary to establish - concretely and symbolically – the work group and all the activities per covered by the Research, starting from presenting the aims, the objectives, the methodologies and the instruments used. The calendar was established and a formative and psychological agreement was made, necessary to be able to begin such delicate work. The climate in the community, throughout the first year of work, was always very turbulent, with great effort required to concentrate on the activities and tasks, as well as listening patiently to the different people speaking. After having established the formative and research agreement, the leader introduced the first activity, connecting with the aim of establishing a map of the different meanings at stake when, in the team and in its different members, evaluation is discussed. The discussion, after an initial moment of blockage, started and proceeded oscillating between highlighting the difference between the concepts of verification and evaluation, between the perception of continuously evaluating oneself in daily work and that of not feeling being positively evaluated from outside, despite the presence of the system of Certification of Quality adopted by their Cooperative. This system considers above all the practical procedures and the aspects closely connected with the physical structure of the building. The leader of the research group emphasized some levels of evaluation: that of the System of Quality Certification mentioned by the Coordinator, but not by the operators (this gap in issues in interesting, as it is related to the different roles and responsibilities); that of the daily events which have their specificity; that of the entrance record for each minor who arrives in the Community; that of the reports by the Social Services, that of the emotions that the different events occurring every day arouse. In addition, there are the statements about how the teamwork is a place for the evaluation of the youngster, as takes place in the meeting with the social services and with the juvenile magistrate, which makes the community an object of evaluation. The time of discharge of the youngster from the Service was considered another time of evaluation, as was the action of evaluating the request for what is called "administrative continuation" (i.e. the possibility of continuing to remain in the Community) for a subject after becoming an adult, both by the educators and by the juvenile magistrates. The educator, moreover, evaluates the most suitable educational behaviour to adopt with the youngster all the time. There was discussion on the fact that the change of educational models in the community is closely linked to the evaluation which is given of them, as well as the structuring of some important educational instruments, such as the daily diary. which reports all the main events that have happened during the day: various changes are linked to the history of the community which has "reconsidered" itself in time. Two macro-categories emerged: "we who evaluate others", and "the others who evaluate us". The issue of the different areas linked to evaluation was underlined: the management of responsibility of the roles and powers and how their distribution is managed, the pedagogical model and the education style (for example the action of "pulling the youngster out of bed" and how each educator interprets it personally); the continuity with a family model and relating to the heritage of the family of origin. The problem was also discussed of how to evaluate the effect of the action of each educator with respect to the experience of the youngster and with respect to the experience of the educators themselves. This was deemed a central theme in the institutions, as was that relative to the management of the Community-family of origin relationship. As can be noted, multiple subjects, levels and areas of evaluation emerged haphazardly. giving the sensation that a box had been

opened and a whole world of thoughts and emotions that had been closed in it was coming out all of a sudden (Vansina, 2013).

More than one meeting was devoted to the subject of the evaluation of the minors' stay in the community as often, during the meetings of the research group, conflicts in the team were seen which had to be crossed, first in order to be able to start the actual practices of research in the field. The Coordinator pointed out how the research could be a great opportunity for reflection but that "it is not possible because they are occupied by these stupid problems, because they are in difficult dynamics that cannot exist alongside something else." The leader asked how the research could be continued whenever, very frequently, the group of educators disagreed violently. The group often asked the researcher to continue as though such group emotions had not emerged so significantly. The emotions conveyed made the researchers straddle two paths that were equally possible to take, but alternative: on the one hand the reference to the need to suspend the action of research to carry out actions of consulting and supervision and on the other the need to remain anchored to the planned practices of research (and in this case not to intervene in the critical event that had occurred shortly before). The theme of evaluation is connected with the theme of trust (Bezzi, 2014), and this was embodied by the trust that the team had in the Research group. The fundamental conditions must be created so that the members of the groups can speak to one another and so that they can communicate with a minimum of serenity, otherwise it is impossible to start the empirical research in the field. The adult educators, moreover, often reproduced the same dynamics as the youngsters they looked after in the Community. A complex situation of blackmail was often created, where the Coordinator provoked, alluding to the possibility of breaking up the group and opening selection to take on other employees, as "the truth is that the group is made up of people tired of working together." In fact, each time the researchers returned to the Community they had to renegotiate the contract with the group, because it was fragile and the group effectively did not want to be driven to thinking and taking their problems into hand. The educational role of the conflict and of the different perception that an external person – such as the group of researchers had on entering the community, unlike those inside it, precisely because the members of the team had known one another for years, was discussed. The Leader-researcher recalled the necessity to accept the point of view of the others on oneself: "I'm not the only one to exist, the others exist as well and what can I do to integrate my point of view with that of the others? The problem is to succeed in doing work that has a meaning for the educators, for the youngsters and for everyone. You have to start thinking that this is not a part that you can overlook, it is the basis of everything." The leader thus reconstructed each time the meaning of the path that had been followed to date and introduced what she intended to do in the subsequent meetings, in the intention of building up piece by piece, moment by moment, the basic conditions so that the Team could begin to think and reflect on the event and to self-evaluate themselves. At the subsequent meetings, there was discussion on the educational path of a minor in difficulty and his evaluation. This was a way to reflect on the educational practices and on the pedagogical models that the Service used and on the ways of evaluation for this area (Riva, 2004; Freire, 2005). The request made to the educators to bring the documentation on the evaluation of the minors had the purpose of making a comparison between the official documents and the formal procedures and the level of evaluation implemented in the daily practices. The Leader stated: "Working on the gaps, on the congruities and on the incongruities helps being more aware."

The meta-cognitive task the group was asked to do was to create a framework, a "mental skin" of the group, which allowed passing from the production of multiple individual visions to a focus on common themes, to be studied in depth to use them in shared strategies of action (Ulivieri Stiozzi, 2013). The group of researchers had planned, for each meeting, two leaders and two figures of observers-recorders, who contributed, through the reciprocal exchange of visions, to creating a broader place of thought where the emotional movements of the Leaders and the repercussions that these had on the work group could be discussed and developed. This device was useful to avoid more easily the actions that the groups carry out to annihilate the state of turbulence that an external view provokes in the institution. Producing new thoughts is effectively always a complex operation for groups that are already deeply rooted in the institutions, often arriving at unconsciously boycotting the attempt by the researcher-leader to propose new perspectives, in the attempt to eliminate the potential suffering and discomfort for new thoughts, perceived as dangerous (Ulivieri Stiozzi, 2013; Giroux, 2005). As can be noted, the Leader carried out long and laborious work to

maintain the work group. However, if we do the work on the premises, the data are inevitably influenced, regarding the initial structure (Morin, 2008). So the question is: do we have to give up, to describe only the surface or to foresee a kind of support in order to collect more significant data?

3. Conclusions

The conclusion of this study is that, when doing research, you cannot stop at the surface and at a formal level. Many things occur that were not foreseen by the Research Project but which turn out to be very important. We are talking about what is known as 'serendipity', i.e. the fact that, while you are searching for one thing, you find something else unexpected, but still very important. The hidden aspects of doing research are revealed to be as important as the official and stated ones. Often, only the stated objectives of the research are fulfilled, leaving out everything that occurs during the research experience because it seems to be material of little significance. In fact, it often relates to fragmented data, to new-born processes which, therefore, cannot be fully categorized (Bion, 1961 and 1962; Armstrong, 2005; Bainbridge, West, 2012). In addition, since practice is an action that develops during the experience, which is changing and always work in progress, it involves the tumultuous development of many levels at the same time. There are many things that can be seen only by 'looking into the folds'. Reality- in this case the contexts of the research - cannot be bent as our theoretical models would like them to be. Bateson argued that the map is not the territory. The results can be used to help researchers build non-linear, rationalistic research designs, but inspired by the complexity and the practice of the theory of recursivity. It could be of use to theorists to expand the field of concern and uncertainty about the theoretical models in understanding reality, engaging themselves to face the issues raised by the practice. It can also be useful to all scholars and practitioners in education, because it clearly shows how necessary it is to start from the theory to interrogate the practice and vice versa, and to start from practice to feed back and induce shifts in theory, in a fertile circuit to be kept alive all the time. It shows that research, training and education should go hand in hand, helping each other achieve the goals of the research proposal.

4. Acknowledgements

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