



Heroic Education: An Educational Project that Helps NEET People Orient Themselves to the Future, Work, and Training with the Skills They Need to Be Successful in Life

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Abstract

Heroic education is an educational model that helps young people orient themselves towards the future, work, and training. It provides them with the skills they need to be successful in life. The program offers a variety of courses and activities that help participants learn about themselves and their world. It is a great way for young people to get started on their path to success. The program is designed to help participants learn about their strengths and weaknesses. It also helps them learn about their options for the future. Heroic education is based on the principle that every young person has the potential to be a hero in their community. The program is offered in partnership with local businesses and organizations. It is open to young people aged 14 to 21 with the help of the social services of the Municipality of Palermo.

Keywords

Heroic education, NEET, community development, educational orientation, soft skills

1. Introduction: the youth, between fake myths and new heroes

“The youth,” if we omit its aesthetic and age-based registry definitions, results as a limited concept, and often scientifically inappropriate for the labeling of the bio-psycho-social status of a young boy or girl. In the publication “Youth, a New Stadium for Education” (edited by Pati, 2000), Pati writes that “Until today, it [the youth] hasn’t delighted from much attention in the pedagogical discourse, save for some due exceptions” (edited by Pati, 2000, p. 8). “The youth” relates more to a social construction or to a related condition to the social-economic context of reference (De Luigi, 2007) than it does to a useful descriptive interpretation. The intermediate time between adolescence and maturity is one of enthusiasm and energy, qualities that can be lost in adulthood. But is the young person aware of their own youth and their strengths? Youth is an insufficient term to describe all the specifics of growth that a young person will undergo. For this reason, Italian sociologists, psychologists and pedagogists at the “*National Convention for Studies of Youth: a New Stadium for Education in Brescia 1999*” felt the need to better define the meaning of this controversial qualitative and quantitative moment, when “the youth” is so affected by projections from adults and by the exploratory limits that society forces on them (Dolto, 1998).

In adulthood, youth is remembered with nostalgia. Youth still holds all the characteristics that an adult loses through life changes, growth and aging. In the human journey of body and mind, people try to acquire the physical and mental maturity that they crave in youth in order to feel actualized.

One of the most well-established beliefs about youth is that it is as full of limits as it is of potential. To be young also

means to be burdened with certain social prejudices: immaturity, untrustworthiness, incapability, a need to prove oneself before being included in the adult world (*ibid.*). Insisting on these limitations, youth becomes, in some settings, a quality that one should *not* be fully proud of, almost something to hide.

“Youth” is a time period that is much too vast to be well-defined with a single term; the word doesn’t accurately represent all the stages that make up the evolution of a young person. But if this condition inspired poets and philosophers, the same cannot be said for the developmental psychologists who had to identify in stages the subject regarded as young, replacing the word “youth” with new and more well-structured terminologies. There are not enough meaningful terms to explain what happens to every kid, preteen, teen and young adult. As an evolutionary category, “youth” is not enough and does not help answer to some essential scientific questions. Yet as an inspiration, according to many thinkers, youth seems to be a gift, an opportunity, a dream, a celebration. The youth thus lives in continuous contradiction: to want, but not to know or be able to have; to be willing to work, but not be permitted to; to be inclined to talk, but be deemed not ready or competent enough. It is as if “the youth” is meant to stay relegated within imposed limits, lest they create imbalances, especially between adults. What’s more, Daniel J. Siegel says, “If adults try to block the flow of adolescence, it is likely that communication, so important to relationships, will be tainted with tension and disrespect. Disconnection, secrecy, isolation, and many other negative and hurtful social responses can emerge.” (Siegel, 2014). Maybe it is in fact that kind of “generational greed” (Stoppa, 2021), created by adults, that ensures the youth repeatedly prove to be inappropriate, because it cannot comply with the social codes and expectations of adults.

Youth and adults don’t seem to have a lot to tell each other, and this causes a missed opportunity for encounters between generations. Francesco Stoppa describes these possible encounters as “mysterious” and potentially “embarrassing” because of the differences of stories and experiences that characterize the two worlds. According to the Lacanian analyst, this outlook contributes to maintaining a certain unclear, safe distance (*ibid.*). Young people end up painstakingly separated from the world of the adults, as happens when at a family celebration there is a table for the kids and a table for the adults. In trying to promote exchanges between equals, a physical gap is created, in addition to the intellectual and generational ones, between “youth” and adults. But are those lost dialogues with the adult world not missing opportunities to re-evaluate the youth, to understand how and how much they might coexist with adults? Often youth and adolescents are granted passion, creativity, fantasy, humor, playfulness, shyness, impudence, surprise, happiness, curiosity, courage, but not the ability to adapt (Lancini, 2010). Yet it is constantly suggested, even imposed, that they find occasions to grow, learn, and take responsibility. But how can subjects regarded as young, without any appropriate inter-generational bridges, look towards their future with less fear?

If we limit youth to the kids’ table, and to the activities and games deemed suitable for their age and environment, what opportunities are we denying them to satisfy their needs from the recipes of the adults’ table? Stoppa, in the “*The Age of Desire. Adolescence and Aging in the Society of Eternal Youth*”, points out “that even in the realities in which generations are side by side, the older one does not seem to have any interest in transmitting stories, knowledge, or style of working” (Stoppa, 2021, p. 330). Despite the comforting distances that then became real radical stereotyping positions, science has proved the opposite of what is claimed about young people:

- firstly, there is no hormonal imbalance factoring into a psychic imbalance in teens. It is the incomplete development of the brain which has more relevant influence: acknowledging this psycho-evolutionary component can help in understanding some apparently inexplicable behaviours (Siegel, 2014);
- secondly, there should not be any expectation that this phase be overcome after the first mistakes, or that failure should be avoided as much as possible: adolescence should not be considered a time of empty submersion. Rather, it should be considered an opportune moment for learning to assert oneself, an era where there is room to transform passions and potentials into aspirations and virtues (*ibid.*);
- thirdly, we need to recognize that a regulatory process toward adulthood cannot be promoted by juvenile isolation aimed at survival: rather it must be the result of a co-construction that includes adults. It should be viewed as a condition of interdependence and mutual exchange, in which adults are able to learn from teens things that they have forgot- ten or do not recognize, and where teens might learn from the experience of adults, from lessons they learned through mistakes they made (*ibid.*).

Siegel (2014) explains that often separating the two worlds seems easier than moving them closer. Yet in avoiding the challenge of facing their own aging, parents and other adults progressively remove themselves from the life of the young person, causing him/her to rely only on the bond with his/her equals. But a group of equals, without a corres-

ponding target group of adults, creates a poor environment for growth, based on limited exchange and peer comparisons. Therefore, an attitude of mutual estrangement risks widening the generational gap and increasing each groups' secrecy, (Illich, 1972) causing more and more differences and conflicts between youth and adults. This mistake of distancing has an impact on every social environment, above all the ones that force the two worlds to coexist: home, school, city.

Seeking an answer to this "motivational damage" (edited by Rossi-Doria & Tamborini, 2016), the authors of this paper thought to further explore, through theory and practice, Philip Zimbardo's insights into reconsidering the position of the hero as a motivational incentive towards social action and the construction of one's own identity.

For a very long time, the heroic component, inherent in each of us, has remained dormant because of new and sometimes flawed reference models. In fact, with the widespread and exponentially growing use of social media, finding new functional models, in the infinite inventory of Google, Instagram, and Facebook has become increasingly difficult and complicated. Generations Z and Alpha have lost the classical and modern models of the hero and superhero as a result of a generalized abandonment of parental responsibility (McCrindle, 2021). Parents delegated some irreplaceable parenting tasks, consciously and unconsciously, to the smartphone and tablet, to Netflix, and in general to mass communication. Young people with Internet are in fact used to searching for answers, models and opportunities through Google rather than through conversations with the family (Gheno & Mastroianni, 2018).

Franco, Efthimiou and Zimbardo (2016) recognize in adolescents, that kind of youth often neglected by the adult world, a fertile ground where it is possible to plant a heroic passion that will become, according to the authors' vision, synonymous with active citizenship and social promotion, geared toward the protection of disadvantaged or at-risk youth. "The youth" is viewed as a vulnerable category, though not among the most fragile, considering other various existing developmental atypicalities, but one that nonetheless needs attention, and offers abundant opportunity for growth.

2. NEET: young people without heroism

According to mythologist theory (Brasey & Debailleul, 1998; Campbell, 2008; Vogler, 1992), in every person are inherent, as three different subconsciouses, the three archetypal figures of the fairy tale. Each needs to work respectively on their own: the me-hero, the me-fairy and the me-king. These three elements live inside ourselves and silently operate in decision-making processes to face the daily challenges to which we are exposed. One of the most recurring definitions of the archetypal character of the hero is that they are lonely, strong, and unique because they come from a wild land. The hero frees the people by killing the monster, bringing back order, and eliminating all bestialities, the primitive forces of the earth (Wu Ming 4, trad. it, 2010). The hero operates a 'civilizing' experience, able to identify with the entire community. It gives a model, a reference; the hero serves as an example for facing problems with solutions that use their own personal qualities. In our unconscious, the king is the observer, who aspires to order; when the king listens and deals with the problems, it tends to become the hero. The fairy, as an inner character, is the one that sees beyond the limits of reason. The most valuable virtue of the classical hero is that it is able to bear and fulfill others' needs, but then acts alone. It is therefore important to convert the solipsistic soul of the hero of the epic novel to the community-oriented soul of the postmodern hero, that understands itself to be stronger with allies, to translate a potentially self-centered and narcissistic attitude into an altruism devoid of distortions and pride. Not just one, but many heroes can re-establish harmony and balance together. This new vision of many heroes is urged by the writer Michela Murgia in the book *We are the Storm: Stories without Heroes that Changed the World* (2019). The book proposes, starting from sixteen true stories, new examples that might be considered heroes. Murgia critiques the features of the hero prototypes proposed so far from epic literature (classical hero) and mass culture (modern superhero): "nine times out of ten the hero is a man, he always gets the enemy, the solution model is war and the glory of the winner is obtained through the annihilation of the defeated" (Murgia, 2019, p. 6). Despite the rewrite operation of applying new symbols and signs to the modern superhero, the characteristics mentioned above remain the same. The figure of the hero in the collective imagination is still unchanged: one lonely being against the world. The prefix "super" added to the word hero is none other than the result of are-working of the ancient term by the production processes of the cultural industry, used to represent the new subjectivities of the modern society, though the stories of the superhero are in fact still all too similar to the ones we already know and that have influenced our ways of living in and representing society. The superhero is none other than an industrial superhuman, with the right to feel himself above the traditional hero, and the human itself (Brancato, 2006).

For every archetype of the collective unconscious derived from mythology and cinematography, it is necessary to introduce the arrival of new protagonists that can save the people and the world from this catastrophic vision of the individual and of reality. The community-based, non-violent hero is the new character to be introduced to today's youth, as a means of responding to the complexities of their evolutionary stage and of society as a whole, and opposing the wan-

dering disenchantment of the post-modern and the minimalism of the human with no qualities. Philip Zimbardo, through his project Heroic Imagination Project (official website: www.HeroicImagination.org), has engaged schools around the world to prepare future adults to act with heroic integrity and responsibility. A research project on the so-called ‘psychology of the good’ aims to identify the factors that, in a diametrically opposite perspective to the ‘psychology of the evil’, promote empathy, understanding and dialogues of mutual respect. The main assumptions of Zimbardo’s project are that ordinary people are able to take extraordinary action and that heroism starts from the imagination (Siddiolo, 2018). Within a local perspective, it is necessary to expand this educational action and promote the acquisition of heroism as a competence for young NEET. Using the theoretical assumptions of the American psychologist, new and innovative planning works are possible by interspersing purposes, goals, methodologies, activities to specific contexts and targets.

In Sicily, the success of the vast programming of “hero movies” from the American industry in recent years sits in stark contrast to the widespread secularization of the figure of the hero in real life. There is a lack of heroic figures of reference, an absence which results in the cancellation of positive models to aspire to and that inspire us. The data of the Regional Year Book 2018, published by the research institution Eurostat, notes that the current NEET (young people who don’t study, work or search for a job) between eighteen and twenty-four years old in Sicily, make up 39.6% of the population, a European record. This trend rises negatively if we consider the information related to 2016, which shows that the NEET between fifteen and twenty-nine years old were already rising in Italy in comparison to all other European countries. The group is full of potential energy in need of redirection; but how? What educational maps, coordinates and tools might be used? *The Atlas of Childhood At Risk*” by Save The Children Italia published in 2016 had as a subtitle “Children and Superheroes”, a publication resulting from research that had considered and studied more than three hundred and fifty maps and statistical graphs to comprehend which data could be more effective, more realistic, and in the interests of all children in Italy, visible and invisible. This work highlights the educational poverty in which Italian boys and girls live. Educational poverty not only in the economic aspect, but also in the formative, cultural, tutorial, opportunity and of physical and mental community centers. “*The Atlas of Childhood at Risk*” starts with an interesting premise; “the superheroes are among us” (Save The Children Italia, 2016). From this quote emerged the idea of a local educational project aimed at the potential NEET in the “social peripheries” (Save The Children Italia, 2018) of Palermo, and the need to draw the right maps starting from the children’s interests and fears, and the heroes that live their city. These local heroes, men and women, were capable of converting their passion into a profession, maintaining a positive attitude, and an ability to consistently generate self-motivation, which allows them to support themselves through their current job. These heroes are known and recognized within the civic community for their professionalism, excellence and innovation. People that can be non-violent, community examples for isolated young people who have lost, or never had, useful landmarks to inspire their minds and hearts towards a prospect of growing to become stronger together.

This pedagogical vision has been conjugated to the intention of making the entire city a workshop, where it is possible to explore jobs, cultural places and performances that involve and fascinate the young people who participated in the project. A new map, which allows children to learn where to start again, to know how to move, where to go, who to know, to accomplish heroic actions useful for themselves and others.

3. On the hunt for heroes, an intergenerational research model

The project “Mapping Palermo’s heroes: People and Places with Superpowers” was conceived as an educational and cultural model, useful for outlining a new heroic profile for the young people involved, interacting with them and offering them new models and positive reference places. This model was co-created, lived and documented with the young people who took part to the project, who had the opportunity to draw their own map, to choose hero-professionals to meet, to ask them their questions, to receive their advice, and learn, through the experiences of these heroes, a new way to be active citizens and professionals. The project involved the past (where are they from), the present (where are they now) and the future (where they want to go) of the young people who participated thanks to the Servizio di Educativa Territoriale del Comune di Palermo which began on the 9th of February 2019. The recipients were boys and girls from fifteen to eighteen years old, from situations of economic, social and/or family hardship, recommended by reference social workers in the eight districts of Palermo. With them, we wandered down the path to become heroes, to save themselves from social predestination in a protected time and space designed to inspire, charm, and motivate the young working group.

The project was divided into three consequential phases based on the archetypal metaphor of the “Hero’s Journey,” described by the mythologist Joseph Campbell (2008) in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. The first phase was diagnostics; “The Departure”. This phase focused on the path to build together with the boys, girls, their families and their

reference social workers. Starting this journey together was fundamental for learning the participants' life stories, in order to draft individualized educational projects as well as for group bonding to prepare to undertake the formative journey together. The second phase was operational-experiential, called "The Initiation". This piece involved, based on the interests of the young participants, meeting hero-professionals from Palermo in which they saw superpowers (courage, professionalism, innovation, heroism). The heroes engaged the young participants in training meetings within the city of Palermo, exposing their fields to the participants, and outlining possible future professional profiles to them. In the last phase, "The Return", social workers led the participants for the last time towards new autonomy.

Professional heroes, qualified in specific work areas, were determined together by the educators and the participants, based on an introductory questionnaire on the interests, curiosities and training needs of the young people. Sectors of general interest were identified: tourism, hospitality, sport, theater, medicine, animation etc. Each sector was explored by the participants during the first phase of the project, thanks to direct meetings with the professionals. Group activities, presentations, educational and didactic workshops were designed to involve all participants with active methodologies. We also worked on knowledge transfer, on the recognition of well-being and malaise of the young people compared to their current paths, and on giving them suitable tools to respond to stressful situations of misunderstanding or collusion with teachers-operators, especially geared towards recognizing and enthusiastically accepting the educational relationship and gifts of the program. Furthermore, at the level of local context, the team and the cooperative scrupulously mobilized to establish spaces in Palermo that might have cultural, motivational and symbolical value to the participants, in order to develop an understanding of the city context in its structural and infrastructural aspects. In the third and final phase, "The Return", we tried to raise awareness in the young heroes about the oncoming deadline of the project and the gradual removal of the mentor figures, discussing with the entire ecology of each individual young person, family, social workers, school and peers, to mitigate the emotional impact of the end of the project. After ten months with the minors, "Mapping Palermo's heroes: People and Places with Superpowers" turned out to be a project for finding a guide, Ariadne's linen thread, a way to fight the Minotaur, for rediscovering a path to freedom; for growing and surpassing the adolescents' "line of shadow." The same principles of the "rite of passage" applied: the project provided a time for trying to think of being both young and adult simultaneously, preserving the youthful energy of the kid inside our subconscious. The main purpose of this project was to allow the participants to acquire an inner awareness to fuel them to become heroes of freedom of thought: honest, brave, convinced that freedom is what makes them free (Campbell, 2008). Education is always intentionality and a life project for the achievement of an ideal, ethical and moral form of freedom (Cambi et al., 2013). "Mapping Palermo's heroes: People and Places with Superpowers" was founded in the general and specific needs of youth, the first three stages of Campbell's Hero's Journey were combined with the stages of educational intervention; detailed below are the various episodes of the project.

3.1. The educational model of the hero's journey

Phase 1. "The Departure":

- the appeal (taking charge of the minor);
- the refusal of the appeal (mediating the family objection);
- supernatural help (recognizing the service and drawing unexpected benefits from it);
- the crossing of the first threshold (facing limits and difficulties to overcome the fear of failure);
- the belly of the whale (following the first missteps, reflection on actions taken to start again with greater awareness and will).

Phase 2. "The Initiation":

- the way of testing (actively participating in educational and didactic laboratories);
- the meeting with the goddess (after overcoming the first obstacles, the young person can enjoy a relationship of trust with the mentor / operator);
- the woman as a temptress (overcoming the collusion between mentor and young hero, establishing a healthy educational relationship with the female figures involved in the project);
- reconciliation with the father (nurturing a more balanced and realistic concept of the hero as a nonviolent and rescuer figure).

Phase 3. "The Return":

- the refusal to return (once the program has ended and the project deadlines have elapsed, the participant does not immediately accept returning to the ordinary world without the help of mentors and his travel companions);
- the magical escape (escape from real life to escape the danger of a new loneliness);
- outside help (resumption of the educational relationship converted into a relationship of trust by mentors);

- the crossing of the threshold of return (dialogue between mentor and young hero on returning to everyday life with awareness and maturity);
- the resurrection/lords of the two worlds (awareness by the young hero of his achievements and the survival of the relationship with mentors);
- the freedom to live (now the young hero is ready to leave the extraordinary world of the project to return to the ordinary world with new knowledge and experiences acquired that will eventually benefit the community).

Each episode retraces the three acts of the Hero's Journey, listed by Joseph Campbell (2008), to reinforce the idea of this project as a 'workgroup' (cfr. Lavanco, Novara, 2012) aimed at creating and becoming non-violent community heroes, bringing out together a special competence that we have called "heroism." These phases could have been moved, added or omitted without the project losing efficacy. The key takeaway is the set of values inherent in the Hero's Journey (Vogler, 1992). The operator-mentors allowed themselves total freedom in adapting the mythical model to the goals set by the project, making interpretative changes which were useful in giving defined meaning to the entire project framework, which was internalized by the recipients and by all the participants involved, as a real journey of self-discovery, through the experiences of others: the heroes of Palermo, who did not know they were heroes, until they saw that they could be fundamental in satisfying the teaching and encouraging the desires of the young participants, have also become heroes.

4. Conclusions

"Never underestimate the power of a young person," wrote Louise Macdonald on twitter, CEO of the Scottish Youth Association Young Scot, as a caption to a photo of activist Greta Thunberg dated August 2018; a year and a month before the largest-ever strike against climate change, estimated at four million participants worldwide. "An empowered subject has a strong sense of self, is able to conduct a critical analysis of social and political systems, puts in place action strategies to achieve clear objectives, is able to work collectively and to work for collective purposes" (Kieffer 1984 cit. in Lavanco, Novara, 2012), "is the protagonist of the change and not just the simple recipient of the intervention. A change which, moreover, does not forget the history of the subject, but on the contrary, understands it to open up new horizons that were previously unthinkable" (Lavanco, Novara, 2012, p. 59). According to this description, there is no doubt that Greta embodied, at the height of her youth not only the figure of an empowered subject, but also that of the hero capable of mobilizing the whole world towards the achievement of a common goal. This non-violent action represents, beyond any peculiar background, that substantial force that characterizes the high value of heroism, a competence that is not solipsistic nor individualistic, but necessarily communal, capable of eliciting, in entire groups, the potential of others to cooperate and collaborate in view of goals that are too complex to be achieved alone. It will therefore be crucial to encourage projects similar to the Heroic Imagination Project and Heroes' Map within and without schools, developing self-efficacy and self-esteem closer to the lived reality of the youth involved, rather than in virtual worlds where many children risk getting lost if not properly accompanied (Castiglione et al., 2018).

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