The Reggio Childhood Studies PhD as a learning community

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Abstract

Exploring visions and methods to pursue high level education means to study how each person is allowed to develop new intellectual, aesthetic, and operational perspective, as well as grasp new insights for growth and enrichment of one's understanding of the world. The authors present the pilot phase of an analysis of the first industrial doctorate in Reggio Chilhood Studies, organized by the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia in collaboration with the Reggio Children Foundation: its socio-constructivist matrix is highlighted. In fact, constructing a community of learners allows cross-fertilization among diverse disciplinary knowledge and many cultures. The study hereby presented explores the variables of such learning community, through the analysis of in-depth interviews of the PhD fellows. Results show factors and variables that can affect and challenge the existence of the community. Recommendations are made to continue exploring the doctoral community, bringing in the picture all the stakeholders involved.

Keywords: Industrial PhD; learning community; multidisciplinary; socio-constructivism.

1. Introduction

The municipality of Reggio Emilia has long been internationally recognized as an excellence, for its innovative pedagogical approach. The Reggio Emilia approach has been characterized by the organization and management of the city's nurseries and preschools since 1963, when it began to organize educational services, promoting the opening of the first kindergartens for children aged 3 to 6. Loris Malaguzzi (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2010) is the reference pedagogue who inspired a new way of perceiving the kid, his capacities, and the collective responsibility that stems from them.

One of the fundamental pillars of Reggio Emilia's pedagogy is the research component. Anyone who wishes to participate in the educational process must regard research as an ontological condition to which one must continually listen to be a part of a continuous route of knowledge building. In this perspective, learning is viewed as a continuous, individual, and collective process, whose stimuli and reflection on them are research topics in and of themselves and apply to any sort of research. Carla Rinaldi (2009) defines the child as the first researcher because: he is innately capable of listening to the various stimuli coming from reality and capable of selecting them to build his knowledge based on his skills, thus becoming a creator subject rather than a passive recipient.

1.1. The specifics of the doctoral program in Reggio Childohhod Studies

The doctoral program in Reggio Childhood Studies was launched in 2019 and now it is on its fourth cycle. It is organized in collaboration between the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia and the Reggio Children Foundation. As such, the doctoral program has been envisioned as a learning community in support of specific research projects. Processes and procedures that encourage participation, relationships among participants, skill borrowing between fields of knowledge, and cross-cultural contaminations provide as many stimuli as possible to interrogate reality and train for a continuous vital exchange with it.

The pursued research projects span from inclusion to biomaterials, semiotics to translation, the study of prison environments to contemporary parenting models, the history of music to the fight against the mafias: the underlying belief is that contact between seemingly disparate fields increases the chances of innovative break-through studies and creative cross-fertilization.

Training methods range from seminars, lessons, conferences, and laboratory experiences, all based on innovative methodologies of peer-to-peer education, tutoring, mentoring, and flipped classrooms. During the years of the COVID-19 pandemic, multimedia was enhanced, moving formal and informal meetings online, through dedicated platforms and ICT tools.

The theoretical and methodological paradigm underlying this organization is one of complexity (Morin, 2008), in which the various components, each with its cognitive style

and training, as well as the levels of organization of the doctorate itself, are to be understood as related variables that participate in the construction of learning. Unpredictability or errors are also included in this system, making them peculiar and vital components for the research itself.

The theoretical frame of reference of the PhD upholds the concept of education as the creation of intellectual, aesthetic, and social learning opportunities in which everyone is free to learn autonomously as well as through the learning modality of others, in a horizon of meaning that is never definitively given once and for all but must be regained each time.

Reggio Approach inspiring theories are addressed during the mandatory-readings seminars: such meetings offer the opportunity to also experiment with different forms of teaching/learning. Becoming co-constructive and intrinsically relational, the PhD allows students to experience in practice what has been studied on a theoretical level, to monitor if and how the program has produced transformations.

1.2. The research questions

The present study aims to identify the specifics of a learning community within highly educated people, what themes emerge from a socio-constructivist approach when people talk about a community of learners. Specifically, it aims to investigate all those variables that have a positive impact on the emergence, functioning and sustainability of a learning community; and those variables that can hinder or negatively affect the existence of a learning community.

2. Methods and materials

2.1. Research design

The study comprises two phases: in the first pilot stage, the research aims to explore what the most significant features of a learning community are in the the experience of the student learners of the Reggio Childhood Studies PhD program. In this pilot phase, only a few learners are extensively interviewed to investigate their perception of which protective factors and which risks to the existence of the learning community they experienced in their years of doctorate.

The second phase is both qualitative and quantitative. At this second stage, not only all the PhD fellows are involved (a total population of 28 students) but also the faculty and the managing staff (directors, program manager and technical coordinator). The present article focuses on the results of the pilot study.

2.2. Sample and Tools

In this pilot study, the research team interviewed 2 student fellows per each cohort of the PhD program, excluding the current year that is only in its first months of activities. Therefore 6 students were interviewed, each couple corresponding to one different cohort of the program, that we named the "pioneers", the "pandemics" and the "re-start".

The criteria used to recruit the interviewees in this first phase were: gender, as males represent only the 18% of the total population of 28 students; and country of origin, as international students represent 29 % of the total number of fellows in the first three years of existence of the PhD.

The semi-structured interview had 5 areas of investigation. The first was the academic and working background of the interviewees together with their expectations. The second was to explore the construct of a learning community: what specifics, what limitations, what innovations etcetera in a constructionist approach (Gergen, 1994). The third area was that of the protective factors of the learning community, in the experience of the interviewee: they were asked to give specific examples of what elements of their doctoral life had a positive effect on the building and maintaining of the learning community. The fourth area of the interview was on the risk factors: that is what specific elements of their experience played a negative or challenging role in the making and surviving of the doctoral learning community. Finally, the last area was on the ideal prerequisites that they would consider when building a learning community: what were the unquestionable conditions that an educator should be aware of when fostering a learning community.

The more than three levels of headings, which will be numbered with Arabic numerals starting at 1. The interviews were transcribed and translated, when needed. The authors extracted all the themes that were mentioned in each interview; they then built a table with the lists of themes/variables and pasted the parts of each interview that fitted under the titles of such themes (see paragraph 3).

3. Results

The results are reported following the distinction in the five categories that the interviews explored: background, construct, pillars, challenges, ideal prerequisites

Table 1. Thematic variables emerged from the analysis of the interviews (only one of examples are shown, for brevity).

AREAS	VARIABLES AND EXTRACTED EXAMPLES
BACKGROUND	**Plurality and heterogeneity** *"Most of us come from regular university structure, where you have for example to do certain things at a given time, you have like a clearly defined structure ".* **The extended Community** *"It can be extended to all the professors and all the people you meet while doing the project".*
CONSTRUCT of a LEARNING COMMUNITY	**Physical presence** *"The physical presence much requested by the teaching staff has favored the construction of this community".* **Multidisciplinary** *"A learning community should share ways of comparing possibly between different backgrounds to have different points of view".* **Team work** *"It's a group of people who have a purpose, who have common goals."* **Leadership** *"Nobody forced us, on the one hand it is good and on the other hand it is bad".*
PILLARS	**The Reggio Emilia Approach** *"We tried to understand the concept of Reggio childhood from different perspectives".* **Informal networking** *"Over time, closeness has become friendship".*
CHALLENGES	**The pandemic** *"Covid has hindered and blocked the informal relationship that was fundamental humus at the beginning".* **Working online** *"The fact that our group was formed online was somehow flawed by it".* **Spaces and times** *"The question of spaces:there are not yet the conditions to offer a research laboratory but only an office".* *"A learning community exists when there are people who meet on an ongoing basis, with a fixed frequency, to create that type of exchange community".* **Legislation** *"Our doctorate follows the national legislation according to which research is individual".* **Competition/Individualism** *"If a group is made up of many individuals, the competitive logic prevails. Co-planning/co-leading can make a group supportive and non-competitive".* **Language** *"There's the issue of language. An issue especially for international students because sometimes you want to bond and come closer to the community; but because of the language it was not always possible".*
IDEAL PREREQUISITES	**Shared co-design** *"Involving PhD students in activities and in co-planning together with colleagues from the Foundation".* **Listening**

> *"Listening as a form of openness, of recognition of the other, of his diversity, of his individuality, as a form of curiosity".*
> **Freedom of expression**
> *"The facilitator must not be the one who organizes the meetings but the one who favors the creation of this spirit of trust".*
> **Solidarity**
> *"This start, so all together, unanimously, has certainly helped us a lot".*

4. Discussion

4.1. The backgrounds

Phd fellows range in age and have a diverse professional backgrounds, including art history, biology, history, pedagogy, philosophy, languages, music, and psychology. The PhD students come from a variety of national and international geographical contexts.

The teaching staff and teachers involved at different levels in the training have heterogeneous backgrounds and curricula and come from universities all over the world, making a significant contribution not only to the contents transmitted but also because they embody the culture and teaching traditions of other universities.

All fellows saw such diversity as an asset of the emerging learning community. Plurality of backgrounds and expectations grounded a sense of diversity as the true richness of the human capital of the learning community, being considered both an ehancing factor of collaboration, but also a challenge in the flow of the process: because working in group is a real job (Clark & Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986).

4.2. The co-construction of a learning community

To create a culture of continuous learning and critical review of one's practices and beliefs, the doctoral program is envisioned as a learning community in which the processes of sharing, collaborative and non-competitive creation of knowledge and skills, and sharing each person's cultural heritage were constantly encouraged (Gardner, 1987).

Because of such a vision, the PHD program is organized as a residential community, with significant opportunities for formal, non-formal, and informal exchange, from the sharing of spaces and times to the actual study and research part, to enhance all the skills acquired, including soft skills.

The interviews show a general overlap between the theoretical idea of a learning community and the experience of it in the doctoral program. Concepts like teamwork, leadership, multidisciplinary are presented through the understanding of how the interviewee experienced student life in the program. The construct is the result of a process of sense-making of the experience itself.

4.3. The pillars that support and enhance

By experiencing the evolutionary processes of groups, students gradually assume roles of shared responsibility. In fact, the path provides both a path of reading, analysis, and comparison of the literature that constitutes the framework of the Reggio Emilia educational approach, as well as a parallel path, of a methodological nature, which allows for active participation in work and reflection groups, which are sub-units of the larger community and its same building blocks. The primary objective of this dual register methodology (cognitive-speculative and experiential-relational) is to facilitate an individual's affective, cognitive, emotional, personal, and interpersonal development, which is the foundation for the acquisition of the relational and professional skills required of PhD candidates in the RCS.

Each working group organizes itself autonomously at first, but with time, the groups begin to collaborate and increase the intensity of their synergy and mirroring activities. A team that works on the process level outperforms a task-oriented team. These small working groups regard the student as an active resource for the gained knowledge. Different personalities, sensitivities, and attitudes come into play to bring a common project to life in a situation where the group processes underpinning task delivery are examined. The outcome of the task groups and their methodological choices are debated and evaluated by the students present at the end of the classroom presentation: the classroom as a whole is measured with certain hypotheses on the type of work that brought that particular task group to that particular exhibition result, to find links between the dynamics of the small group and the dynamics of the class group.

4.4. The challenges at stake

With the pandemic, the PhD community and workshop model had to be reconsidered, with the shift to a virtual setting. The loss of bodies, of the physicality of the group, was undeniably a disadvantage that caused 'distance' and 'randomness'. On the other hand, online settings enabled more frequent interactions, the creation of intimate spaces in which participants' homes opened to the community, less formal and more equitable education in which technology 'levels out' certain inherent asymmetries (Weinberg & Rolnick, 2020). The group sessions that cannot be held in the physical classroom triggered a reflection on the distance-proximity polarities (working online breaks down transnational barriers of lockdown), formal-informal (the private and the public are sometimes contaminated with effort, others with amazement), learner-teacher (the sense of the role of co-construction of the setting, of the training methodology, of the constellation of objects of reflection that constitute the content of the community becomes more intuitive.

The analysis of the interviews also showed other existing challenges, that can threat the sustainability of the community of learners. The same diversity of the group, which was previously referred to as a richness of the community, can trigger individualism and rivalries:

two dynamics that move the members away from the community, enabling self-centered modalities of learning and narcissistic drives.

Another theme is the conflict with existing resources: both a legislation that awards traditional academic research and the lack of sufficient spaces, that can welcome at any time all the cohorts of students and faculty, are mentioned as risks to the survival of the learning community.

4.5. The prerequisites of an ideal learning community

Every method of investigation, qualitative or quantitative, is allowed in the view that all contributions, if justified, have equal dignity and can contribute to the creation of shared knowledge. In such a diverse learning environment, everyone maintains a well-defined yet complimentary function to the others to achieve the established objectives, which in this case concern both specific scientific work and reflective metacognition on the personal style of learning and uncovering. Sharing and listening are seen as mandatory in the vision of a shared design of the learning process and its contents.

5. Conclusions and future implications

The goal of the Reggio Childhood Studies PhD is to train researchers through research, to invest in the creation of personal, original, and new lines of research, attempting to bring together quite varied domains of knowledge, skills, approaches, and concerns. It is crucial for the scientific community to be able to communicate with people from different perspectives and languages, which the PhD translates into a set of methodological and operational practices. In the complete research design, we intend to analyze all learning experiences, of all stakeholders involved, to evaluate and self-evaluate the quality (intended as the attribution of meaning) of the social and intellectual interactions established among peers and among generations, within contents, and through methodologies. The research can significantly highlight how such relational and dialogical experiences can become material to enhance metacognitive and critical skills, as well as to strengthen forms of individual and cooperative learning, through research-action projects (Bruner, 1996).

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