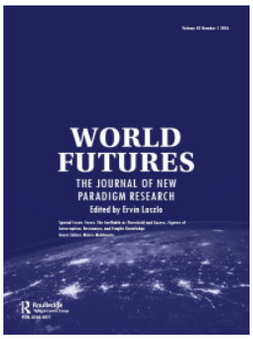

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Unveiling the Youth Worlds and Future: Methodological Experiences of Applied Anthropology in Youth Educational Contexts

Michele Filippo Fontefrancesco[a] and Elena Fusar Poli[b]

[a]Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, Italy; [b]University of Gastronomic Sciences, P.za Vittorio Emanuele, Bra (CN)

ABSTRACT

This article explores three applied anthropology interventions conducted in Italy, aiming to understand and value youth experiences in non-formal educational settings. Using a participatory methodological approach, the projects examine young people's relationships with public space, food culture as an identity element, and psychological challenges in the post-pandemic context. The interventions ("Bang! Immagini da Valenza!", "Il Cibo a 4 Occhi," and "Pazzesk@") focus on fostering youth identity co-construction and facilitating intergenerational dialogue. The findings demonstrate how an interdisciplinary, multimodal approach can provide a safe expressive space for youth, strengthening their role as active agents within communities. Finally, the article discusses the potential of applied anthropology to address educational and social issues and suggests ways to expand these practices into new territorial and institutional contexts to support the growth and social participation of future generations.

KEYWORDS

Youthscape; non-formal education; applied anthropology; social participation; teenagehood

1. Future and Youth Worlds

The future is not merely a spatio-temporal coordinate. For a community, it is first and foremost a cultural category through which individuals seek to define their own courses of action (Bryant & Knight, 2019). The future may be understood as the narrative objectification of imagined events that have yet to occur—events shaped by individual and collective interpretations of past and present realities as perceived by them (Berntsen & Bohn, 2010). As such, the future constitutes an interpretive exercise rooted in the present, requiring the capacity to grasp both one's own orientation and that of others. It demands attentiveness to elements of the surrounding reality that may be hidden, unacknowledged, or not directly experienced, yet are still capable of influencing the trajectories of individual and collective life. The future, then, is anticipation; understanding the future entails the careful observation of what is emerging—often in implicit or unspoken forms (Cowart, 2023). This theoretical framing underpins

CONTACT Michele Filippo Fontefrancesco michele.fontefrancesco@unicatt.it m.fontefrancesco@unisg.it Department of Sociology Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, L.go Gemelli 1, Milan 20123, Italy

the present contribution, which aims to offer methodological and practical tools for revealing social worlds—such as those of youth—that are often only partially understood by older generations (Makarova & Herzog, 2011).

"How can we act if we do not know in what world they live?": this phrase expresses a common sentiment among many local administrators and educational workers who are daily called upon to find solutions to promote and improve the condition of youth, particularly those transitioning from adolescence into adulthood. The phrase reveals a gap, an almost unbridgeable distance between new generations and those who live and work within local institutions: differences in age, culture, condition, and social role weigh heavily on this situation, highlighting divergences and almost suggesting the inevitability of intersubjective and intergenerational misunderstanding, and thus the ineffectiveness of policies and interventions. However, the sense of distance and incommunicability is often perceived by young people themselves, who express their otherness from the ways of living and thinking represented by older generations. In light of this difficult dialogue, this contribution seeks to offer tools to respond to questions about how it is possible both to allow the hidden world of young people to emerge and communicate, and to develop tools and pathways useful for understanding and empowering the new generations (Nussbaum, 2011).

Anthropological debate has taught us that the concept of "world" transcends physical space and embraces the set of experiences, meanings, practices, and relationships that constitute the living environment and daily reality of an individual or social group (Schutz, 1967). A world represents the network of meanings through which one navigates and relates to what and who surrounds them (Geertz, 1973). Inevitably, social reality is populated by different worlds, often in collision, each characterized by its own perspective (Viveiros de Castro, 2014). In this "pluriverse" (Escobar, 2018), in which multiple ways of inhabiting and interpreting reality coexist, not all of these different perspectives and ontologies find representation in the public and media spheres, which are characterized by an informational short-circuit that tends to represent only specific viewpoints in a loop driven by the pursuit of audience and consensus (Boyer, 2005).

Looking at the Italian national reality, the worlds of younger generations are among those struggling to gain greater visibility (Spagna, 2016). Placed at the peripheries of public opinion (Forgacs, 2014), they develop their vitality by expressing their own cultural and relational forms, often difficult to interpret for older generations who occupy positions of leadership and social guidance (Cerchia, 2013). Whereas in the postwar period this otherness was expressed through recurrent moments of social protest (Colarizi, 2019), in recent years this opposition has weakened, evolving into a sort of parallel living between generations. For younger cohorts, this manifests as a sense of waiting through which their generational identity is forged (Tanulku & Pekelsma, 2024). This parallel living, however, coincides with intergenerational misunderstandings and an apparently structural difficulty in developing policies and interventions capable of intercepting and responding to the emerging needs of young people. Hence the usefulness, if not the necessity, of bringing out adolescent worlds; that plural reality also defined as youthscape (Maira & Soep, 2005). This marks the particular ground on which anthropology can move and develop its contribution.

Since its modern origins, cultural anthropology has undertaken the task of capturing and conveying the "native's" point of view; of being able to narrate not only the material

reality characterizing a community—potentially distant from that of the observer—but also its world: the network of meanings and relationships that structure its life. In this perspective, the anthropological lens, starting from the studies of Margaret Mead (1975), has explored youth conditions and the ways young people live and perceive society. With this approach, from distant horizons to closer realities, the characteristics of different youthscapes have been narrated. Thus, over nearly a century of studies, the discipline has developed theoretical and methodological frameworks that today represent a fundamental resource for studying youth conditions, particularly in the field of applied research.

Applied anthropology represents a specific approach to anthropological research that engages with reality with the precise aim of transforming the existing order (Nahm & Hughes Rinker, 2015). In other words, disciplinary theoretical and methodological frameworks are seen as resources through which to analyze a given situation, deepen knowledge of it, and subsequently act for its transformation. Although the application of this approach is subject to vibrant discussion within the anthropological community (e.g., Palmisano, 2014; Podjed et al., 2016; Severi, 2019), over the years the discipline has engaged in numerous fields, including educational contexts, both within schools—unearthing the seemingly orderly reality of institutional surfaces (Dei, 2018)—and in non-schooling settings (Tassan, 2020). The latter have proved particularly promising and, at the same time, challenging. Indeed, if on one hand non-schooling education experiences represent a fluid field of interaction, not bound by the ordering dynamics and logics that rigidify roles and actions along predefined channels (Guy et al., 1994), they also constitute an indistinct galaxy in which it is difficult to carry out comparisons and modeling (Crescenzo, 2023), due to the multiplicity of interventions affecting realities of different degrees, dimensions, and social complexities, addressing diverse elements of adolescent experience in structurally disparate geographical contexts (Signorelli, 1997). This article, to some extent, aims to challenge this difficulty by offering the reader experiences and tools useful for bringing out the hidden worlds of young people. To this end, it will specifically focus on three projects ("Bang, immagini da Valenza!", Valenza, 2005; "Il cibo a 4 occhi", Vercelli, 2014; "Pazzesk@", Milan, 2023–24), carried out since 2005, to show different approaches through which it is possible to understand and communicate the youthscape, laying the foundations for youth empowerment processes and informing future local policies. In doing so, this article contributes to the field of futures studies by engaging with the idea of the *future* as a culturally embedded, socially constructed horizon of meaning (Poli, 2010; Slaughter, 2004). Reverberating with a growing interest in *futures literacy* (Miller, 2015) and the role of education in cultivating the capacity to engage with uncertainty, plurality, and transformation, we explore how young people in non-formal educational contexts imagine, negotiate, and contest their possibilities through narrative, spatial, and affective practices.

The article opens by outlining the characteristics of the adopted methodologies, then illustrating the three case studies. The experiences gained from the projects are then discussed, offering a starting point for future interventions.

2. The Methodological Approach

The article reflects on three case studies of socio-educational intervention projects developed over a span of two decades by the authors in northwestern Italy. Each

project was conducted using specific methods, detailed in the following paragraph. All involved groups of adolescents aged between 15 and 20 years, pursuing a dual objective of gaining knowledge about and improving the contemporary youth condition. Furthermore, the projects were developed based on an applied anthropological approach, investigating and acting upon young people's relationship with public space, with particular attention to issues such as urban marginalization, migration, and psychological distress.

The projects were carried out based on a shared participatory approach aimed at the co-construction of results within a dynamic and collaborative relationship between researchers and young participants (Palmisano, 2021). This approach was inspired by the principles of peer education (Croce, Lavanco, & Vassura, 2011; Turner & Shepherd, 1999), with the aim of valuing the participants' individual experiences, their identities, and competencies within a context of horizontal socialization. Within this framework, central importance was given to self-narration, developed through self-narrative and self-representation pathways carried out within focus groups and in-depth interviews. These activities emphasized the life story, understood on one hand as an ethnographic window useful for exploring youth worlds and the forms of relationality that define them (Bertaux & Kohli, 1984), and on the other hand as a tool for creating empathic bonds through sharing with peers (Hollan & Throop, 2011).

Moreover, their design and implementation were based on teamwork, combining the expertise of anthropologists with that of other educational and care professionals (pedagogists and educators in the first project; secondary school teachers in the second; psychologists and psychotherapists in the third). In this sense, a holistic and transdisciplinary approach was developed, necessary to gain a better understanding of the specificities of the youthscape experienced by the young participants.

3. The Interventions

3.1. Bang! Immagini da Valenza!

Valenza is a city located in Piedmont, in the province of Alessandria. It is a municipality with a population of approximately 20,000 inhabitants. Since the 1970s (Gaggio, 2007), the city has been characterized as a manufacturing center, internationally renowned for its jewelry production, which still today represents the main foundation of the local economy (Fontefrancesco, 2020). Over the past 25 years, the city has had a population with an average age slightly higher than the regional average (+2%), but has repeatedly exhibited dynamics of perceived youth marginalization (Fontefrancesco, 2013). In particular, in 2002, a survey conducted by the Istituto di Ricerca Sociale of Milan, commissioned by the Municipality of Valenza, revealed a widespread perception among adolescents that the city was unable to fully meet their needs for socialization, leisure, and future prospects, in light of their scarce presence in and use of public spaces (Istituto di Ricerca, 2002). The survey marked the starting point for a series of interventions aimed at the youth sector to promote its protagonism within society. It is within this historical context that the project developed.

The project "Bang! Immagini da Valenza" (Bang! Images from Valenza, in English) was carried out in this context, in 2005, as part of a broader peer education program

promoted by the city's Social Services Consortium during the 2004–2005 school year (Fontefrancesco, 2006, p. 37). This program was intended to respond to the institution's specific goal, in concert with the municipal administration, of fostering a process of youth activation and empowerment, enabling adolescents to identify their own needs and develop the skills necessary to initiate bottom-up actions to meet them. Specifically, "Bang!" aimed to encourage young people to reflect on their lived experiences, identifying meaningful places and the meanings attributed to them, with the objective of communicating their perspective on the city through photography.

"Bang!", like the broader peer education program, targeted students from the city's high schools, with particular participation from students of the "Carlo Noè" Technical-Commercial Institute. The activities, which took place throughout the calendar year 2005, involved eight students aged between 15 and 16 years, of Italian and Eastern European origin, coordinated by a team composed of a pedagogist, an educator, and an anthropologist who had designed the intervention (Figure 1).

The activity primarily unfolded over the course of three months, spanning the summer period. It included an initial phase, consisting of four weekly meetings (May–June), aimed at reflecting on the forms of city use and participation in public space, followed by the identification of the places most significant to the participants and the reasons for their relevance. The outcome of this work led to the compilation of a list of locations to be visited and possibly photographed during the next phase of the intervention. This list described a galaxy of spaces oscillating between being places and non-places (Augé, 1992) (shops, squares, playgrounds, gyms, municipal buildings, etc.), through which the lives of young people flowed without finding stable points to anchor relationships. Notably, the school was absent from this list: although it occupied a large part of their daily routines, it was perceived almost as an anti-place (Piasere, 2004), a shadowy zone that absorbed part of their day without impacting their lives.

This was followed by fieldwork (June and July), during which the young participants visited the locations identified in the first phase, capturing photographs through frames capable of representing and immortalizing the youth perspective, along with the specific emotions and experiences associated with each place. In total, 180 photographs were collected, which were then reviewed and selected jointly by the participants and the team members, with the aim of identifying around thirty images that, in the youths'

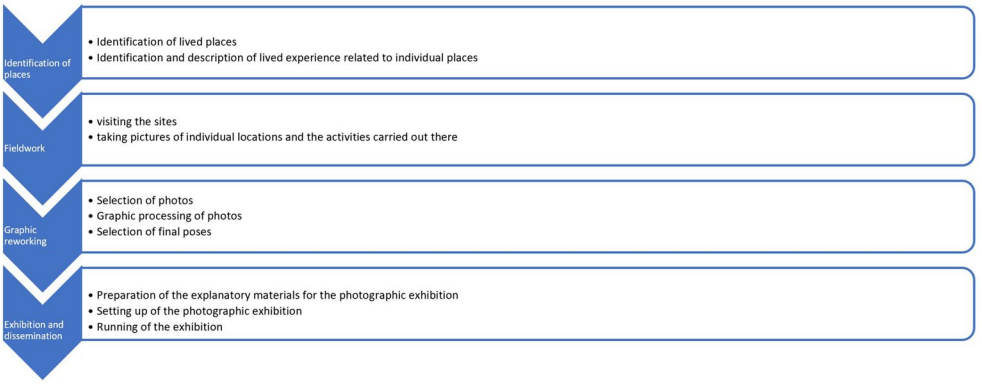


Figure 1. The phases of the 'Bang!' project.

view, conveyed the essence of the city, its places, and their lived experiences. In this sense, the selected photographs were expected to reflect a world marked both by a sense of hope for the future and by feelings of abandonment and detachment associated with the marginality and interstitiality experienced by the participants.

In September, 28 photographs were selected, portraying places of gathering (Photo 1), of play (Photo 2), of neighborhood life (Photo 3) or transit (Photo 4). For each photograph, points of interest—the puncta (Barthes, 1993, pp. 43–47)—were identified to focus the viewer's attention. To enhance their expressiveness and more clearly guide observation, the images were graphically reworked, playing with the contrast between the black-and-white background ("the everyday grayness," as defined by the participants) and the color highlighting the points of interest. The selection of photographs that follows conveys the specificities of these poses.

The photographs, once reworked, shared, and approved by the participants, were printed and exhibited between December 2005 and January 2006 in Valenza, at the Palazzo di Cultura in Piazza XXXI Martiri, which houses the municipal library and is one of the places frequented by young people.

The exhibition was visited by city residents, educational professionals, and local administrators, eliciting a wide range of reactions: from praise for the artistic choices

Photo 1. Columbine Bastion. Bang! project, 2005.

Photo 2. Coinor. Bang! project, 2005.

Photo 3. The Coop in Via Pellizzari. Project Bang!, 2005.

Photo 4. Camurati Street. Bang! Project, 2005.

to sharp comments about the sense of "desolation" that emerged from the photographs; from appreciation for the attempt to showcase a perspective different from that usually celebrated or narrated in the public sphere, to criticism from an adult audience who considered the chosen locations unrepresentative of the city.

For the participants, the project was a valued experience that enriched their educational trajectory, but above all, it contributed to the city's public debate during a phase of planning and implementing new policies aimed at increasing the engagement of the youth population (aged 15–25) in the programming of cultural activities. These efforts materialized in initiatives such as the establishment of a Youth Council (Zunino, 2005).

3.2. Il Cibo a 4 Occhi

The project "Il Cibo a 4 Occhi" ("Food Through Four Eyes") was developed in Vercelli between September and December 2014, and was promoted by the Diocese of Vercelli, the University of Gastronomic Sciences, and the University of Eastern Piedmont. It formed part of a broader set of activities carried out within the European project *Open Discovery Space*, aimed at studying and developing positive educational approaches to enhance the cultural diversity present in the local territory (Fontefrancesco, 2019, p. 28).

In a territory characterized by migration rates comparable to national averages, with established migrant communities from the Maghreb—particularly Morocco—and Eastern

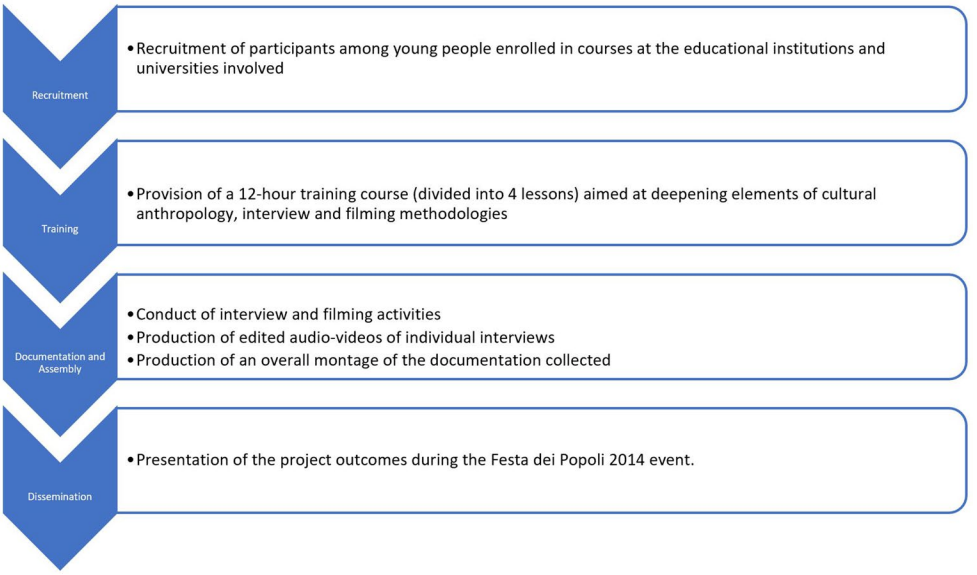


Figure 2. Project phases of the project "Il cibo a 4 occhi".of the educational institutions and universities involved.

Europe—especially Albania and Romania—there was a noted lack of awareness and understanding among young people and the broader local population regarding the presence and specificities of these communities and their migratory experiences. Acknowledging the growing number of young foreigners (first- and second-generation migrants) enrolled in local high schools, the project aimed to provide an opportunity to bridge this knowledge gap by focusing on the individual experiences of young people, shared among peers. Adopting a peer education approach centered on multicultural themes, the project sought to foster empathic bonds (Pagani & Robustelli, 2010) among coevals capable of overcoming entrenched "embarrassments" (*imbarazzismi*, Komla-Ebri, 2000) and forms of more or less implicit marginalization of migrant youths.

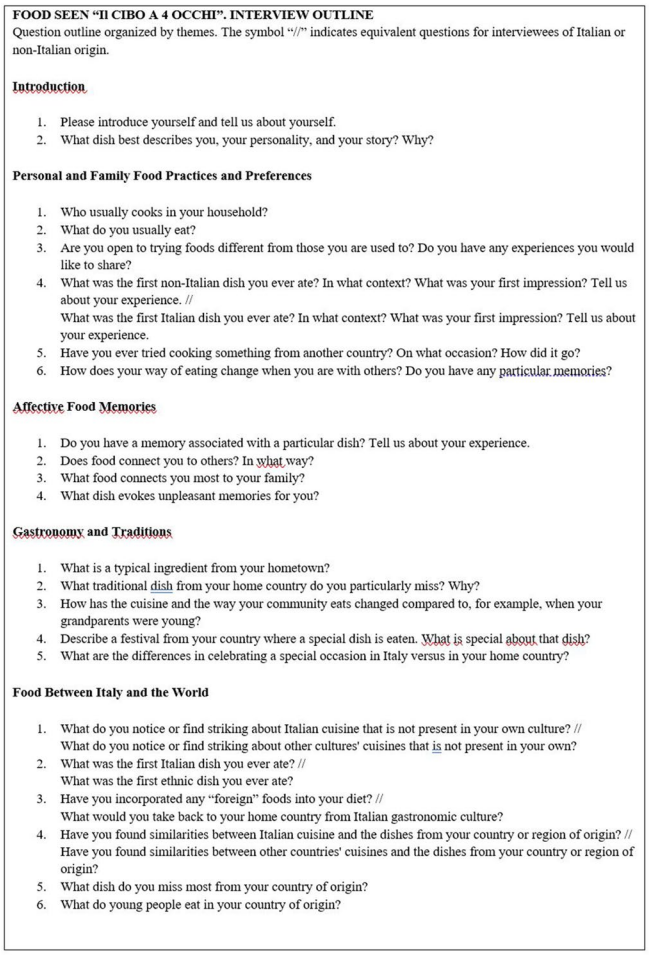
To this end, the intervention focused on the development and sharing among participants of autobiographies (Bichi, 2000) centered not on the migration experience per se, but rather on the development of individual food cultures, considering food as a particularly powerful medium for narrating the intersection of experiences, places, emotions, and contact between different cultural worlds (Abbots, 2016).

"Il cibo a 4 occhi" targeted young people aged 18 to 20, of both Italian and foreign origins, enrolled in high schools in the province of Vercelli. Through collaboration with these educational institutions, all students were invited to participate voluntarily in this training program, the completion of which would grant them the acquisition of educational credits necessary for their academic curriculum.

Recruitment coincided with the start of the project's first phase, which entered its active stage beginning in October (Figure 2). A group of 28 students was involved, divided roughly equally between Italian and foreign participants. They were engaged in a three-week training program, organized into six afternoon sessions of approximately two hours each, conducted by trainers from the two participating universities.

During these meetings, the participants were educated on topics related to food culture and migration, through a reflection that highlighted how food serves as an expression of cultural identity and as a medium for narrating the histories of peoples and individuals (first week). They were then introduced to the project's methodological approaches, such as life story interviews and the conduction of video interviews (second week). Finally, they were guided in drafting an interview outline aimed at exploring the interviewee's life story and the characteristics of their food culture and eating habits (third week) (Figure 3).

Once the interview outline was developed, the students were divided into pairs, with the aim of pairing each foreign student with an Italian student. Each participant was assigned the task of interviewing the other member of the pair, video recording the interview according to a pre-established technical protocol (Grimaldi & Porporato, 2012). All recordings were then individually edited and made publicly available through a dedicated online database (Fontefrancesco, 2019, pp. 39–41). A 13-minute summary video was subsequently produced, including short excerpts from the interviews and



FOOD SEEN "Il CIBO A 4 OCCHI". INTERVIEW OUTLINE

Question outline organized by themes. The symbol "//" indicates equivalent questions for interviewees of Italian or non-Italian origin.

Introduction

1. Please introduce yourself and tell us about yourself.
2. What dish best describes you, your personality, and your story? Why?

Personal and Family Food Practices and Preferences

1. Who usually cooks in your household?
2. What do you usually eat?
3. Are you open to trying foods different from those you are used to? Do you have any experiences you would like to share?
4. What was the first non-Italian dish you ever ate? In what context? What was your first impression? Tell us about your experience. //
   What was the first Italian dish you ever ate? In what context? What was your first impression? Tell us about your experience.
5. Have you ever tried cooking something from another country? On what occasion? How did it go?
6. How does your way of eating change when you are with others? Do you have any particular memories?

Affective Food Memories

1. Do you have a memory associated with a particular dish? Tell us about your experience.
2. Does food connect you to others? In what way?
3. What food connects you most to your family?
4. What dish evokes unpleasant memories for you?

Gastronomy and Traditions

1. What is a typical ingredient from your hometown?
2. What traditional dish from your home country do you particularly miss? Why?
3. How has the cuisine and the way your community eats changed compared to, for example, when your grandparents were young?
4. Describe a festival from your country where a special dish is eaten. What is special about that dish?
5. What are the differences in celebrating a special occasion in Italy versus in your home country?

Food Between Italy and the World

1. What do you notice or find striking about Italian cuisine that is not present in your own culture? //
   What do you notice or find striking about other cultures' cuisines that is not present in your own?
2. What was the first Italian dish you ever ate? //
   What was the first ethnic dish you ever ate?
3. Have you incorporated any "foreign" foods into your diet? //
   What would you take back to your home country from Italian gastronomic culture?
4. Have you found similarities between Italian cuisine and the dishes from your country or region of origin? //
   Have you found similarities between other countries' cuisines and the dishes from your country or region of origin?
5. What dish do you miss most from your country of origin?
6. What do young people eat in your country of origin?

Figure 3. The outline of questions developed within the "4-eyes food" project.

offering an overall overview of the experiences that had emerged. This video was publicly presented to the city during the event "Quando il cibo è per tutti" ("When Food Is for Everyone") on November 28, 2014, as part of the *Festa dei Popoli 2014* festival, promoted by the Diocese of Vercelli.

Overall, based on the feedback left by participants, the project represented a moment of increased awareness regarding the phenomenon of migration and provided an opportunity to learn about elements of the culture and customs of communities different from their own. In particular, for young people of foreign origin, the project constituted a moment of communication and expression of an aspect of their youth experience that was generally silenced and not shared in the public sphere or with their peers: the experience of migration, which shaped a network of relationships with often distant places. In most cases, this defined the concept of "home" as a transnational space that connected Italy with other locations—often far away but perceived as equally central to their individual identities and personal histories.

3.3. "Pazzesk@"

Milan was one of the main epicenters of Covid-19 in Italy and faced significant challenges related to the pandemic. The project *Pazzesk@* was developed by the Spazio di Mutuo Soccorso to address the growing psychological distress among adolescents and to support high school and early university students in confronting their difficulties through collective dialogue on this condition.

Born in response to episodes of severe mental suffering, including the tragic suicide of a student shortly before her final high school examination, the project focused on creating spaces for dialogue and support for young people.

The project aimed to analyze the dynamics of psychological distress in order to understand how young people experience and perceive their mental health in the post-pandemic context. From the early stages of its implementation, it became clear that an additional crucial point was to explore the impact of the pandemic and the processes of individual and generational identity construction. Moreover, the broader purpose of *Pazzesk@* was to constitute a non-clinical space for dialogue and extra-scholastic support (Figure 4).

The emergence of individual experiences of psychological distress and the collective discussion of this condition, accompanied by professional psychologists, generated an awareness of the structural and generational dimension of such distress. This awareness, which was a hypothetical objective of the project, was confirmed by its outcomes. It served as a tool available both to the young participants and to professionals—strengthening, in the former case, individual and collective agency, and, in the latter, providing an interpretative framework useful for enhancing the therapeutic effectiveness of clinical interventions.

In the preceding years, the Spazio di Mutuo Soccorso had promoted the *Staffette di Mutuo Soccorso* ("Mutual Aid Relays") project, in which approximately 80 young people from districts 7 and 8 of Milan participated in the collection and solidarity-based distribution of food and basic necessities during quarantine periods. The *Staffette di Mutuo Soccorso* project also included a multilingual psychological counseling and support desk operated by professionals. *Pazzesk@* represents the development of these actions: many young participants of the *Staffette* continued to

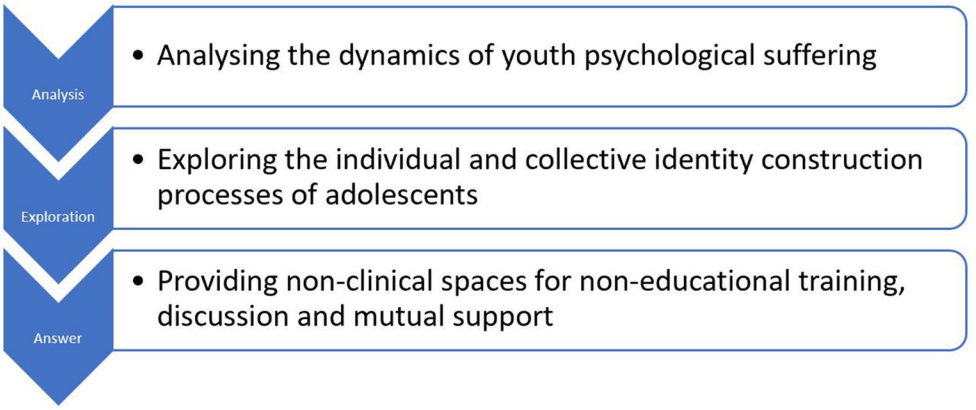


Figure 4. Objectives of the "Pazzesk@" project.

frequent the Spazio beyond their quarantine-time volunteering, finding in turn a space of support for the distress that arose with the return to in-person social and educational life.

The *Pazzesk@* project adopted a participatory ethnographic approach, combining different methodologies to collect and analyze data (Figure 5).

The main method adopted was the creation of talking circles (Trinchero & Robasto, 2019), organized collaboratively between the young participants and professional psychologists. The talking circles were made public through the social media channels of the Spazio di Mutuo Soccorso, a decision taken jointly with the participating youths, to allow peers and the local community to take part. The professionals listened to and supported the expression of the young people's emotional and psychological experiences, providing them in an accessible manner with tools and concepts developed within their discipline.

During the course of the intervention, the anthropological contribution focused on participant observation during the meetings, conducting semi-structured interviews with participants aimed at further exploring the themes that emerged in a safer and more private context, and collecting audio messages from the students via WhatsApp, formulated as responses to open-ended questions shared through the same platform (Figure 6).

The project responded to the urgency triggered by the emotional impact of a suicide, leading to a very rapid initial planning phase, lasting approximately 20 days, during which students and other activists from the Spazio di Mutuo Soccorso collaborated with mental health professionals. However, the planning activity remained ongoing throughout the duration of the project, with activities being updated in response to ongoing analysis and feedback.

Between the second half of July and September, six talking circles were held, each involving between 15 and 40 students. In parallel, the collection of semi-structured interviews and WhatsApp audio messages also began. Data analysis took place concurrently with the activities, as it was functional to adjust the project's actions in real time and to support the reflection and self-reflection of the participants in *Pazzesk@*.

In January 2024, the overall results of the analysis were shared with the participants themselves, in order to design a subsequent follow-up phase, which materialized into a permanent study group that is still ongoing (Figure 7).

Figure 5. Research methodologies of the "Pazzesk@" project.

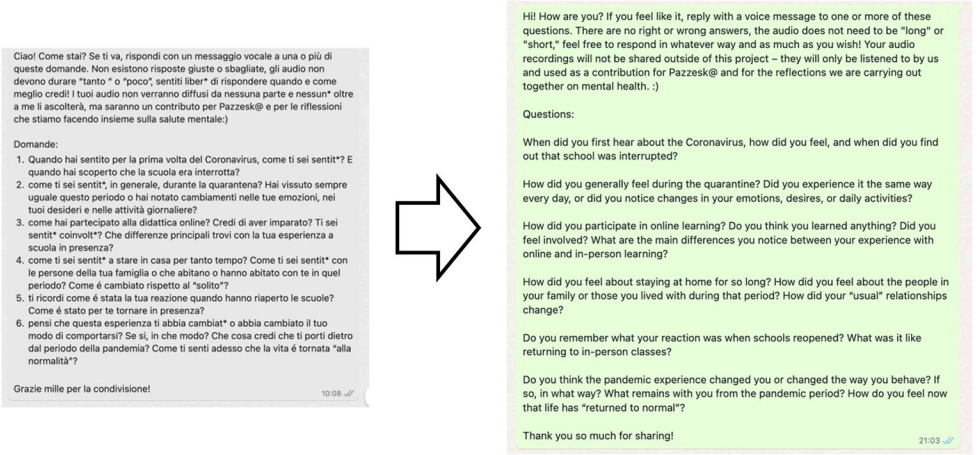


Figure 6. Open questions via Whatsapp for the collection of audio messages in the 'Pazzesk@' project (original in Italian on the left, the English translation on the right).

The recurring themes that emerged were related to the emotional and psychological experiences during Distance Learning (DAD) and the quarantine periods, initially characterized by a sense of relief from the suspension of duties, followed by mental and physical immobility, frustration, and depression. There was a strong sense of regret for lost time, the loss of routines and academic and social stimuli, and the suffering caused by the lack of suitable and safe spaces and tools to endure isolation or attend DAD, particularly in cases involving preexisting mental health issues, family conflicts, situations of domestic violence, housing insecurity, and socioeconomic marginalization.

The period recognized as the most challenging was the partial return to in-person activities or the intermittent quarantines, during which it was particularly difficult to find personal and relational balance.

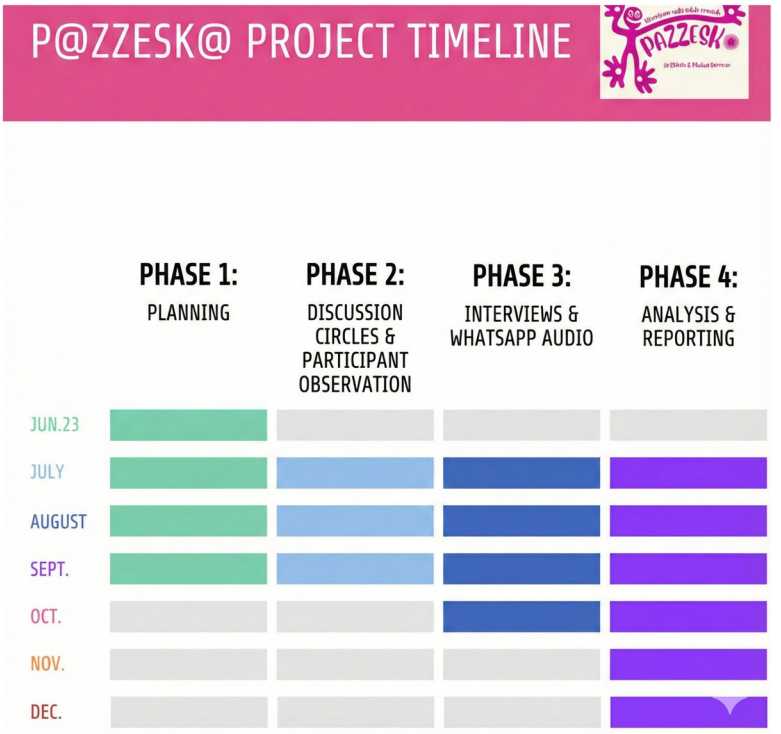


Figure 7. Timeline of the "Pazzesk@" project.

The lack of experiences of key developmental milestones and rites of passage generated incapacity, insecurity, and fear regarding school learning and the management of social relationships.

Particularly significant was the emergence of a notable youth focus on mental health, accompanied by the destabilizing effect of self-defining identities through pathologizing terms such as depression, ADHD, or bipolar disorder.

Despite the evident need for greater education and support in the process of individual and collective reflection and care, this heightened attention among young people emerged as a foundation for the elaboration of strategies for individual and collective agency, implemented more or less consciously in their daily lives and through their participation in the *Pazzesk@* project itself, consciously used as a space to redefine their relationship with suffering and mental health.

4. Bringing out and Exploring Youth Worlds

4.1. Common Approach, Specific Objectives

The three intervention cases presented are situated in three different time periods, namely 2005, 2014, and 2023. All of them were developed within extra-scholastic educational contexts, that is, non-schooling settings (Barbieri, 2016), leveraging the relational fluidity that characterizes these environments compared to strictly scholastic

ones (Guy et al., 1994). This approach was employed both to open ethnographic windows onto lived realities and to contribute to the formation of young people's identities, in synergy with formal educational contexts (Simonicca, 2011), and to create observation points on the life-worlds of young people, making them a shared heritage within broader communities.

Despite their temporal and specific-objective differences, the three interventions allow for the identification of certain elements of continuity and change in the configurations of communication, dialogue, and even reciprocal visibility between youth worlds and the local communities in which they are embedded.

The time-space of the pandemic, in which the *Pazzesk@* project unfolded, acted as an accelerator, amplifier, and illuminator of ongoing dynamics in the adolescent growth process. On the one hand, Covid-19 embodied a condition of exception (Agamben, 2020); on the other hand, it revealed slow-moving and often latent structural phenomena, making them more visible.

This occurred, for instance, with the limitations of the healthcare system (Caporale et al., 2022), the phenomenon of domestic violence (ISTAT, 2021), and the inadequacy of contractual protections for essential workers (Cornice & Parente, 2024).

Similarly, in the domains of youth development, education, and well-being, the pandemic served as both an opportunity and a tool to render the invisible visible. In this sense, the state of exception can become an extraordinary ally for social research, facilitating the emergence of submerged worlds.

Amid the fragmentation between generations, marked by digital technologies, existential precarity, and the desynchronization of perspectives between present and future (Aime, 2017), these projects have constituted crossroads for encounters and exchanges of perspectives among various actors engaged in the educational arena (i.e., the young participants, the various professionals involved, and the diverse local stakeholders) (Piasere, 2013), thus bringing the educational process to life.

This process developed through a tripartite sequence (Figure 8): initially, young participants engaged in a training phase, during which, with the help of trainers, they acquired theoretical and methodological models for interpreting and communicating their lived experiences; this was followed by a second phase, where they expressed their experiences, outlining the characteristics of their world or of a part of it; and finally, a third phase, during which these experiences were communicated to the wider public through exhibitions, videos, or public meetings.

Within this model, each project developed its own specific objectives:

- *Bang! Immagini daValenza* brought to light the hidden perceptions of young people regarding their city, highlighting a vision of Valenza as lacking spaces for socialization and entertainment. Through photography, the youths were able to express their daily experiences and feelings, shedding light on aspects of their lives often overlooked by the municipal administration.
- *Il cibo a 4 occhi* revealed the migration experiences and integration challenges faced by first- and second-generation young people. Using food as a narrative tool, participants were able to share personal stories that reflect cultural and social tensions, offering a window into the inner worlds and complex identities of young migrants.

Figure 8. Intervention structure.

- Through talking circles and interviews, *Pazzesk@* uncovered the profound psychological difficulties experienced by Milanese youth during and after the pandemic. Themes such as mental immobility, depression, loss of routine, and family conflicts emerged as hidden aspects of youth distress, offering a more comprehensive understanding of their inner struggles and the social consequences of long Covid.

4.2. Enhancing Agency and Youth Worlds

All three projects analyzed operate within the framework of applied anthropology and were aimed at understanding and valuing the worlds of young people through participatory methodologies. In this sense, they shared the goal of strengthening youth agency within the relational context of their respective local communities, making explicit their viewpoints, narratives, representations, habitus, and the ways these elements influence individual growth processes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970). Specifically, in all three cases, an approach was adopted that actively involved young people in the research and construction process, proposing a sharing of responsibility within informal educational processes, and negotiating roles and mutual expectations not only among peers but also with other participants (Biscaldi, 2013).

In this way, the conception of who "adolescents" are was explored through the eyes of those who embody a category that, although it may seem obvious, is neither natural nor universal, but influenced by socioeconomic, cultural, and political variables and changes (Ferraris, 2011).

Indeed, the migrant adolescents of Vercelli are not adolescents in the same way as their native peers with whom they engaged through food, just as high school students in 2023 are not adolescents in the same terms as those from 2005.

4.3. Examples of Applied Anthropology

The comparison of applied anthropology projects differing in time and space allows for an exploration of the transformations of young people through changes in the world, and the transformations of the world through changes among young people. In Western societies, the adolescent is the quintessential unstable figure, positioned at the age when identity is being defined, caught between declining traditional values and emerging new norms (Garelli & Offi, 1997). Mapping perceptions, aspirations, challenges, and fears helps young people themselves, as well as local educational communities, to navigate this liminal time in which indeterminacy implies that all future possibilities remain open (Turner, 1967).

This indeterminacy becomes particularly significant when it intersects with marginality—border spaces and times that are preliminary to new forms of social and cultural life—as happens, for example, in the case of those living in transforming urban peripheries, leaving one country to settle in another, or facing the crucial years of their socialization during a period of suspended social life (Remotti, 2020).

4.4. Multimodality

The media employed to carry out the projects were diverse: the camera, the interview script, WhatsApp voice messages, and spoken word. Each of these tools was entrusted to the hands, eyes, and voices of the young participants, who were able to appropriate and adapt them to their own expressive needs and languages, in a parallelism with other educational experiences addressed by this journal (Canevari, 2021). In this sense, the investigations adopted a multimodal methodology (Collins et al., 2017; Dicks et al., 2006). In particular, the use of the camera, reciprocal interviews, and the employment of a widely-used medium for informal and peer communication, such as WhatsApp, facilitated the overcoming of barriers between observers and observed (Devereux, 1967), thanks to the communicative features of these tools and the participants' own experience with their use (Miller, 2016).

The dissemination of the projects took place through two different modalities: at the end of the activities, directed outward; and during the course of the activities, addressed primarily to the participating group. In the cases based in Piedmont, the work produced within a closed project was presented to the surrounding territorial community—through a photographic exhibition in Valenza and through a presentation at a public event in Vercelli—in order to raise awareness among the public, social workers, and policy-makers. In contrast, a different strategy was adopted in the Lombardy case. Specifically:

- "Bang!" invited adults to view the public urban space through the lenses of cameras and the eyes of local high school students.
- "Il Cibo a 4 Occhi" used food, a powerful medium for the construction of the social, to narrate identities, experiences, and migration pathways, raising awareness within the community. In the Lombardy case, public dissemination proceeded in parallel with the project's development, as the talking circles were announced on social media and open to public participation.
- The final anthropological dissemination, however, took place at the end of the project and was addressed to the members of the talking circles, as a tool for self-reflection and follow-up planning. "Pazzesk@" allowed the young participants to find their voices, words, and tools to express and verbalize the experience of psychological and relational distress, previously lived as an individual and silent trauma: this voice was first heard by the young people themselves and, secondly, by the mental health professionals who accompanied them.

4.5. Potential of an Applied Anthropological Approach

The three projects demonstrate how anthropology applied to territorial education can serve as a powerful tool to explore and understand the social and psychological

worlds of young people, particularly through interdisciplinary and participatory approaches. Indeed, applied anthropology, being co-constructed through relational engagement with a problem (Fontefrancesco, 2023), is an anthropology of presence, where understanding is intrinsically linked to the transformation of both the researcher and the observed subject (Palmisano, 2014). The application of anthropology in the field of educational projects facilitates a process that turns groups of participants into learning communities (Saverna, 2020), where educators, students, and the broader public learn from each other by opening, visualizing, and sharing worlds. Exchange thus becomes the foundation for building a common cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970) through informal educational dynamics, which gradually structure themselves through cultural and communicative interactions, themselves closely linked to the characteristics of the urban spaces in which they are embedded (Canevacci, 1997).

Active participation is also an intrinsic element of the behavior of young people and adolescents, who, in all three projects, emerge as agents of social transformation. Despite the difficulties, ambivalences, and uncertainties regarding a future that tends to vanish as a reference point for choices and actions (Savonardo, 2007), young people react and become promoters of identity and relational changes, in ways that are more or less evident and explicit. The search for identity—through presence in urban spaces (La Cecla, 2000), within the context of globalization and its flows (Melucci, 1996), or through recognition in experiences of distress (Aillon, 2019)—demonstrates an effort to negotiate and reclaim a place in the world, avoiding the dual risk of infantilization and permanent marginalization in the face of an overall aging of the population (Aime, 2017).

5. A Lesson

In light of all this, the experiences explored as a whole offer a response to the question regarding the possibility of bringing to light, narrating, and making the youthscape known to the broader reality of a community. Such a path is possible, particularly when operating within non-formal educational contexts. The interventions described address distinct needs, yet they succeed in revealing at least specific fragments of worlds that are often invisible to adults and institutions, through a participatory intervention methodology. Through this methodology, young people involved in the projects explored their relationship with the territory, culture, and their personal experiences, thus expressing their agency and acquiring tools to engage with intergenerational and institutional dynamics.

The challenge of understanding the youth world thus appears to lie in creating opportunities for dialogue that develop from paths of self-representation and self-narration. To this end, the interventions follow a tripartite structure, where participants are initially engaged in a training phase, followed by the narration and representation of their own experiences, and concluding with a public restitution open to the community, offering a youth perspective. This approach arises from the need to create a theoretical and expressive framework shared across generations, allowing the youth experience to emerge not only in terms of perceptions but also through languages and expressive means chosen by the young people themselves.

The use of multimodal tools, identified based on instruments close to the experiential world of young people, fosters authentic and immediate communication, overcoming traditional barriers between observers and observed, thus helping to create a space where young people can negotiate their place within the community. The presence of other professionals (psychologists, pedagogs, social workers) alongside anthropologists further ensures a holistic and transdisciplinary approach, facilitating a complex reading of youth contexts and enabling more accurate and targeted interventions.

From an anthropological perspective, the projects demonstrate how informal education rooted in the community can facilitate the active involvement of young people and support their individual and collective growth processes. These interventions contribute to the debate on the anthropology of education, showing how the discipline can move beyond observation to actively intervene and contribute to the creation of shared cultural capital. The dialogue born within the projects has generated a patrimony for the community and has provided institutions with tools to address the complexity and fragmentation of the youth world. Moreover, the projects demonstrate how involving young people in the co-construction of educational processes can not only strengthen their autonomy and sense of belonging but also produce a reflexive effect on educational and social institutions themselves, which, through this dialogue, can rethink their practices from a more inclusive perspective.

In this light, these interventions also emerge as tools for understanding and shaping the future, as theorized in the opening of the article (i.e. not in a deterministic sense, but as a cultural and interpretive horizon that individuals and communities navigate in relation to their own lived experiences). Where the future is not a neutral temporal dimension but a narrative and cognitive construct forged through engagement with the present, by allowing young people to articulate their perspectives, define their places in the world, and express often unspoken desires, fears, and aspirations, these interventions contribute to the social imagination of what is possible and desirable. They help map emerging meanings and latent trajectories, offering interpretive keys to understand how young people anticipate, inhabit, and contest the future. In doing so, applied anthropology does not merely describe a given reality—it becomes an instrument for illuminating how futures are imagined, negotiated, and potentially transformed, both individually and collectively.

Building on these insights, future research should further investigate how the capacity to imagine and interpret the future can be systematically integrated into educational practices. This involves exploring how young people conceptualize their own futures—not simply in terms of professional aspirations or life goals, but as narrative frameworks through which they make sense of their present and define possibilities for agency. Educational contexts, particularly non-formal and community-based settings, can become laboratories for this kind of anticipatory reflection, fostering forms of critical imagination that are crucial in times of socio-economic, ecological, and cultural uncertainty. Anthropological research can play a pivotal role in documenting and interpreting these future-oriented practices, highlighting how different cultural, social, and institutional environments shape the ways in which youth envision and navigate the unfolding of their lives. By making these perspectives visible and actionable, education can serve not only to transmit knowledge, but also to cultivate the interpretive and imaginative capacities needed to inhabit and transform the futures we collectively anticipate.

It is evident that, as with any comparative case study, despite significant results, the research presents limitations that open possibilities for future improvement. For instance, the limited scope of the interventions makes it difficult to obtain a comprehensive representation of youth experiences, and the sometimes ambivalent response from the adult community suggests the need to promote greater awareness to avoid distorted or marginalizing perceptions of the youth world. Additionally, the short duration of the projects constitutes a constraint, limiting the ability to assess long-term changes, both among young participants and within community dynamics. Nonetheless, looking ahead, these experiences invite reflection on the need to expand and structure applied anthropology interventions aimed at young people, extending them also to formal school contexts and promoting a closer link between research and youth policies. Interventions that develop and consolidate long-term inclusion practices, in synergy with institutions and local communities, could contribute to transforming education into a true tool of social participation. Finally, greater temporal continuity of interventions and the extension of the model to new territorial and educational contexts would offer a broader and more complex picture of the ways in which young people navigate the challenges of the contemporary world, allowing them to build their own collective identity and actively participate in the construction of the society in which they live.

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ORCID

Michele Filippo Fontefrancesco http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3247-6110
Elena Fusar Poli http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5368-271X

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