CHAPTER 3

Lifelong Education in Diverse Communities
Reading Ettore Gelpi and Leonardo Zanier on Complex Environments ‘in Transition’

Davide Zoletto

Abstract

The chapter starts by focusing on some of the emerging characteristics within socio-culturally diverse environments, particularly highlighting the overall complexity that researchers and educators have to deal with within such contexts. It then proceeds to present some of the key educational concepts in Ettore Gelpi’s analysis of diverse urban environments and of the relations between culture(s) and lifelong education. The paper suggests that Gelpi’s idea of culture is close to Williams’ seminal idea of “culture as a whole way of life” and that, within the Gelpian perspective, living and vital cultural practices play a relevant role in lifelong education in diverse environments.

At the same time, the chapter suggests that, in a Gelpian view, researchers and educators working in diverse communities should change the way they usually consider migration diversity. They should try not to consider migrants as merely beneficiaries of educational interventions, but as an active cultural and educational reference who make a full contribution to lifelong education within complex environments ‘in transition’. To conclude, the paper presents Gelpi’s great regard for the educational activity of the Italian educator, trade unionist and poet Leonardo Zanier and in particular his work on the issue of migrants’ linguistic education.

Keywords


1 Introduction

In one of the closing chapters of his Lifelong Education and International Relations Ettore Gelpi highlights a contradiction that sometimes seems to
characterise the relationship between the educational demand emerging in social contexts and the institutional offer drawn up by the various educational institutions themselves (Gelpi, 1985, p. 170).

Gelpi hypothesises that one of the consequences of this contradiction between supply and demand is twofold. On the one hand, educational institutions and educators could find themselves in a situation where they are looking for a public (with its presumed characteristics and ‘needs’) that in fact, may not even exist in the social educational context. On the other hand, the real public – which includes children, young people, and adults – could end up not seeing their own educational requirements satisfied because the institutional offer of education sometimes “confines them in a traditional and/or technological and/or cultural illiteracy; it is not sensitive to their demand to acquire the means to express themselves in the workplace, in social life, in the family. It sometimes conveys messages (which are) often manipulative, sometimes outmoded, and often not very creative” (Gelpi, 1985, p. 170).

The risk of such a contradiction existing between the ‘reproduction’ of educational institutions and societies ‘in transition’ which express new demands, new expectations and new needs, is becoming progressively more relevant today in educational contexts that are more and more complex and diverse in their different aspects. One example of this complexity can be seen in the educational contexts within today’s urban areas. In fact, in the introduction to a monographic issue of the International Journal of Lifelong Education, entirely dedicated to emerging educational issues in contexts of urban diversity, Ruud van der Veen and Danny Wildemeersch pointed out that cities are characterised by many forms of diversity. On the one hand, there is the diversity linked to the consequences of migration processes and to the different ways in which the various components of the migrant and post-migrant population locate themselves within different neighbourhoods. On the other hand, there are other kinds of diversity which can be connected to the socioeconomic differences emerging in the different urban areas or even in the same neighbourhood. Furthermore, there are other differences which naturally emerge in urban contexts related to the age of the population, gender, and lifestyles that can characterise different individuals and groups (van der Veen & Wildemeersch, 2012, pp. 5–6). In each of these fields many transformations have long been underway. These transformations are linked to ‘global flows’ (Appadurai, 1996; Carney, 2009), as well as to technological changes (Floridi, 2014), but also to the different ways in which changes are localised within different contexts (Hannerz, 1992). This in turn increases processes of individualisation and the deepening of differences within and between different social and geographical contexts.
Van der Veen and Wildemeersch themselves have outlined from a pedagogical perspective at least three fields in which various ‘tensions’ emerge. The first tension is between institutional places for education and new more open educational spaces. The second tension is between real and virtual environments while the third tension is between social cohesion and social laboratories where new forms of community can emerge (van der Veen & Wildemeersch, 2012, p. 6).

While these three tensions can be seen as something that could lead to new and positive developments, at the same time the intersection of differences (Semi, 2012) can also bring an intersection of vulnerabilities. This is also part of a more general situation in which marginal areas emerge (Save the Children, 2018, pp. 114–132). This is the case, for instance, of some neighbourhoods with a high migrant or post migrant component classifiable as socio-culturally highly complex environments. Of course, in these situations there are many other issues to be taken into consideration. For example, the local job market, housing conditions, family structure and education (at the international level, see, for example, van Zanten, 2001; Butler & Hamnet, 2007; Oberti, 2008; with regard to the Italian situation, see the recent analyses offered by Pacchi & Ranci, 2017, and by Reports such as those of Caritas Italiana, 2018, pp. 131–184 and Save the Children, 2018).

2 Educational Contexts ‘in Transition’

Understanding this complexity helps to clarify how current educational contexts, especially urban contexts, continue to be ‘in transition’, as Gelpi suggested. It is in this perspective that this chapter will try to read, within current educational contexts, some elements emerging from the work of Gelpi (1933–2002) and Leonardo Zanier (1935–2017). Gelpi was a known expert on lifelong learning and an educator himself, while Zanier was a trade unionist and an educator, as well as a poet. Both were active in the field of lifelong education and education of adults, both with a specific emphasis on the issue of migrants, as well as on issues around creativity and cultural and linguistic diversity. Gelpi and Zanier shared great respect for each other and a friendship which grew in the context of the activities of ECAP (Ente Confederale Addestramento Professionale), an organisation for adult education and vocational training founded by the Italian trade union CGIL (Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro) in Switzerland in the seventies (Riccardi, 2014, pp. 103–110). ECAP started working with Italian migrants in Switzerland from the beginning of that period. Their educational programmes were intended to help Italian ‘Gastarbeiter’ to
achieve the middle school exam they lacked and did this within the “150 ore” (150 hours), an Italian programme born in the seventies to promote workers’ educational access (Barcella & Furneri, 2020, pp. 83–84). ECAP programmes in Switzerland in the seventies also included vocational courses, language courses, conferences and other cultural activities, as an essential contribution to the integration of Italian migrants (and of their children) in the Swiss schools, labour market and society (Barcella, 2014, pp. 107–121; Zanier, 1977a). In 1974 Zanier himself succeeded in setting up the first CGIL vocational education centre in Germany, where Italian ‘Gastarbeiter’ in the same years had to deal with difficulties similar to those they were experiencing in Switzerland (Barcella & Furneri, 2020, p. 86).

In the case of Gelpi, we do not want to retrace his complete work as it is vast and spans many different fields (Fiorucci, 2014, p. 9), and there are numerous studies which deal with this, from the more ‘classical’ ones such as those of Ireland (1978) and Griffin (2001, 2003), to the more recent research by Lima (2016), Riccardi (2014, 2021) and Puglielli (2019). Lima, Riccardi and Puglielli’s research highlights specific aspects of Gelpi’s work that are relevant today, especially in research fields such as those of lifelong, intercultural and adult education. The aim of this paper is something more specific and focuses on a particular issue that highlights how Gelpian perspectives can provide insights for educators and researchers working within socio-culturally complex environments with a high migrant or post-migrant component.

3 Contexts in Which New Cultural Values Emerge

In his work Gelpi focuses on the emerging characteristics within urban environments, highlighting particularly the issues of diversity, uncertainty and complexity. In fact, he emphasises that “new cultural values” emerge in these contexts and he underlines that among the demands on those living in urban environments there is a call for training and self-education so as to master “the foreseeable and often uncertain future” (Gelpi, 1985, p. 83; see also Gelpi, 1982).

Gelpi is well known for his “dialectical” approach to educational thought (Griffin, 2001, p. 274), thus he is aware that we cannot decide once and for all whether one or another educational approach could work or not or is positive or not. He suggests that we always have to see how each approach works within a context. He does not hesitate to ask, following Paulo Freire’s suggestions, when and how lifelong education can be a tool of emancipation and when instead, there is the risk that it perpetuates unequal relationships that already exist within the context (Gelpi, 1985, p. 7)?
When considering urban areas, Gelpi argues that lifelong education can play a relevant role in urban areas for at least two reasons. First, he observes that in urban areas there is a “waste of human creative resources, intellectual and physical”, and there is a great disregard for these resources which should be taken into account in education (Gelpi, 1985, p. 83). On the other hand, he emphasises our “limited knowledge” of the “needs, demands” and cultural practices of those who live in the city, the “city-dwellers” (Gelpi, 1985, p. 85).

This is why Gelpi underlines the importance of doing research on the relationships between culture and education in urban areas (Gelpi, 1985, p. 85). This is something that emerges from research in the field of cultural studies in urban environments (García Canclini, 1990), and it is very similar also to Michel de Certeau’s work. De Certeau was also very attentive to daily cultural practices (de Certeau, 1980) and to the relationship between these and educational issues, even in multicultural environments (de Certeau, 1994).

Once again, we can pinpoint here one of Freire's lessons on the importance of learning to learn from those we wish to teach. Without this learning from below, we cannot teach anything. This is central for Gelpi’s work.

4 Culture in Its Broader Significance

The concept of ‘culture’ used by Gelpi, therefore, is crucial. He argues that it is necessary to explore culture in urban environments by applying the notion “in its wider significance” (Gelpi, 1985, p. 87). That is, “not as a static end-product, but more as an innovative and creative process” (Gelpi, 1985, p. 87). This is very much in line with Raymond Williams’ well-known definition that ‘culture’ is “a whole way of life”, that is, “a way to interpret our everyday experiences” (Williams, 1958, p. 21). Williams developed this concept thanks to his experience as a teacher in courses of adult education in the England of the ‘fifties (Williams, 1976, p. 13; see also the essays collected in McIlroy & Westwood, 1993). He states that it was a question of studying the “actual language”, that is “the words and sequences of words that particular men and women have used in trying to give meaning to their experience” (Williams, 1958, pp. 21–22).

Gelpi, similarly, underlines that the focus on the role of ‘culture’ should not lead to an “academisation” of our idea of culture itself. But it is rather thanks to the introduction of a lived culture within education that “we can bring life into the educational experience” (Gelpi, 1985, p. 88). For Gelpi, if an educational project is to be a tool for promoting self-reliance in the learners, a “life culture” needs to be introduced in that project. Gelpi sees it as a “pre-condition” (Gelpi, 1985, p. 88) for an education that aims at being relevant for real people.
For both Williams and Gelpi, building on this broad idea of culture seems to have a strong impact on the way in which we choose specific cultural practices that we introduce in education. For example, Williams refers to adult education courses in the late ‘forties where adults attended courses in a huge range of cultural practices (Williams, 1989, p. 154). In this broad sense, Gelpi speaks about both folk cultures and mass cultures. Following his dialectical approach, he is aware that they can both contribute “to promoting democratisation and development processes”, but in other cases they can also lead “to the strengthening and reproduction of the existing social system”. However, he also stresses that when cultural practices “promote self-reliance rather than dependence in the social, economic and educational fields” they permit individuals to “have a greater participation and control in all areas of life” (Gelpi, 1985, p. 87).

Cultural Services and Migrant Communities in Diverse Urban Areas

As already mentioned, Gelpi’s perspective is based on a dialectic awareness that building on cultural practices emerging within urban environments does not in itself guarantee an education promoting inclusion, equity and social mobility for all individuals and groups. Gelpi uses the availability of cultural services to migrant communities as an example. He points out that “the city can sometimes limit itself to providing migrant workers only some of its cultural and educational services”, while in other cases the city can “put all public facilities at their disposal and can thus become centres for cultural creation and inter-communication with the native population of the various districts of the city itself” (Gelpi, 1985, p. 87).

Gelpi points out that this is not just a question of accessibility. In his view, we also have to ask ourselves what role migrants can actually play within cultural services in diverse communities. He states that we have to change the idea of “education for migrants”, which our plans and interventions are sometimes still based on, writing that “education for migrant workers is but one dimension of an issue that extends beyond literacy training and educational assistance both for workers and for their families” (Gelpi, 1985, p. 97). For he makes it clear that educational interventions with migrants should not be interventions that maintain or strengthen already existing relationships of dependence. They should rather be a part of a broader effort to work towards a “new world order of education” in which “migrant workers would not only be the beneficiaries, but to which they would also make a full contribution” (Gelpi, 1985, p. 97).
In many respects there is a real shift in perspective here: for Gelpi we should clearly not consider migrants as merely ‘defective’ people, that is, people who only have needs, or are at most potentially employable. Gelpi asks us to consider them as “an active cultural and educational reference” (Gelpi, 1990, p. 137), as people who have personal and collective histories, with knowledge, skills, and cultures from which to build a common project together (see also Riccardi, 2014, pp. 8–9).

6 Reading (and Building on) the Plural Character of Urban Cultures

Gelpi points out that in order to explore this diversity, we have to change the way we usually consider migration diversity. In a chapter of *Lifelong Education and International Relations* with the meaningful title “Migration and creativity” Gelpi notes that research and studies concerning migrants reflect the perspective of institutions and the governments of the society of immigration and do not reflect (or only partially reflect) the perspectives and stories of the migrant workers themselves (Gelpi, 1985, p. 97).

This is a perspective shared by other authors researching in the same years that Gelpi was writing, for instance by Abdelmalek Sayad, a well-known scholar in the field of migration. Sayad, a few years earlier in his essay of 1981, significantly entitled “*Le phénomène migratoire, un relation de domination*” (later collected in a volume of his essays *The double absence* of 1999), noted that we almost always “tend to refer to the issues related to migrants and migration from the perspective of the so-called immigration sciences” (Sayad, 1999, p. 164). This is because “it is easier to establish a science of immigration and immigrants (i.e. a science based on the perspective of the society of destination) rather than to start from a science of emigration and emigrants (that is, a science which reflects the perspective of the society from which the migrants originate)” (Sayad, 1999, p. 164).

Gelpi’s line of thinking is similar to that of Sayad, however, in the Gelpian perspective this attention to the migrants’ point of view and their cultural practices takes on educational and pedagogical relevance. Understanding migrants’ perspectives is fundamental in order to answer the questions and expectations of migrant workers, while avoiding two opposing risks. The first risk is to reduce our response to migrants simply to educational training interventions related only to economic factors and questions of employability. The second risk is that of falling into forms of “sentimentalism, pity and paternalism” (Gelpi, 1985, p. 97). These two risks may have opposing effects, but they both reflect, as both Sayad and Gelpi stated, the same often stereotyped answer our society employs.
Moreover, Gelpi writes that “the culture of the city also includes the culture of migrant workers who fight for better living conditions, not only for themselves, but also for those who still live in their home countries” (Gelpi, 1985, p. 88). Gelpi is clearly aware that the diversity of urban cultures can also be seen in what subsequent research would later define as a transnational or trans-local perspective (Vertovec, 2009), especially (but not only) as a result of the networks that migrant and post-migrant components of the population have with their countries of origin, as well as with migrants of other countries or places.

Gelpi emphasises how important it is to deepen the study of the cultures and educational traditions of migrants so as to “develop more fruitful intercultural relations” for all those involved – both migrant and native populations (Gelpi, 1985, p. 97). He is neither naive nor unrealistic as he knows that ‘intercultural’ research, too, can run the risk of becoming “an instrument to maintain forms of dependency” (Gelpi, 1985, p. 99). On the other hand, when and if the relations between migrants and non-migrants are equal relations, then “education and culture will no longer be products only to be given ... to immigrants”, and migrants themselves will be able to “take part in political life, in cultural life creation, in production, in communication” (Gelpi, 1985, p. 100; see also Gelpi, 2000, pp. 41–42).

7 Zanier and the Creativity of Migrant Cultural Practices

As we have seen, within the Gelpian perspective cultural practices which should enter lifelong education should be those living and vital practices that are part of a person’s everyday experience. He notes that if education is built on culture as “the expression and the creative manifestation of each of us at home, at work, in leisure time, in social life”, then this type of education would help “to locate a person in relation to his environment” (Gelpi, 1985, p. 111). Such creative cultural and educational experiences would be fully capable of being, he argued “the action of all, and by all” (Gelpi, 1985, p. 174). This is one of the clearest definitions that we can find in Gelpi’s work on lifelong education. An example Gelpi refers to is Leonardo Zanier’s work.

Gelpi declares that despite the diverse fields of his activities – which range from vocational training, trade unions, and the cooperative movement, on the one hand, and his poetry and literature, on the other, the main aim of Zanier’s educational action was “to make everyone in individual and collective terms, master of his work and his choices, and, above all, capable of creation and production” (Gelpi, 1985, p. 174).
This is a question that emerges, for instance, in the way in which Zanier deals with issues of adult education and vocational training (Barcella, 2014, pp. 93–121), especially in connection with diverse migrant communities, languages and education. The field of diversity in languages, was one of the fields that Gelpi highlighted as typical of the ‘in transition’ contexts in which migrant workers live (Gelpi, 1985, pp. 111, 114). On these questions Zanier organised a conference in 1975 in Muttenz (Switzerland), entitled ‘La lingua degli emigrati (The language of emigrants)’ (ECAP-CGIL, 1977). Gelpi was also involved and in the proceedings of this conference he affirms that the linguistic education of the migrant workers is “one of the challenges for lifelong education” (Gelpi, 1977, p. 31). For Gelpi it is more than just a matter of learning the host country language, but rather promoting “the practice and learning of the mother tongue”, as well as the “participation” of migrants in the different spheres of life: “in cultural life, in the workplace, in housing communities, in community life, in trade unions, etc.” (Gelpi, 1977, p. 39).

This awareness can be seen both in Zanier’s works and in his work with ECAP-CGIL in issues related to the linguistic training of migrant Italian workers in Switzerland. Zanier underlines that there are different factors, both social and organisational, that are connected both to “strengthening the mother tongue” and to the “acquisition of the second language” (Zanier, 1977a, p. 9). He also pinpoints how, starting from language issues, we have to rethink the ‘integration’ of migrants (in this case Italian migrants in Switzerland) because this should not be seen as “acculturation”, but as a form of “participation” and “creation of a critical attitude in order to understand and deal with the social reality” in which migrants and also the native population live (Zanier, 1977a, p. 14). Zanier never abandoned this approach towards the factors involved in the social integration of migrants, not when he returned to Italy to work in the CGIL central offices in Rome, nor when he went back to Switzerland after the mid ‘eighties. Significantly, as both the socio-historical context and migration flows changed, bringing more and more non-European migrants to Italy, Zanier's attention turned increasingly to the difficulties of these new groups of migrants in the Italian context.

Not surprisingly, in his poems mainly written in Friulian, the language of the migrants coming from his region in the Italian Northeast, Zanier (1981, p. 118) explains that when as a young man he first started writing poems, he started to think and write about “emigration”. During this period, he tried to understand and describe the collective and individual reasons that bring people to move (see Zanier, 1998). However, year after year he went on to broaden his perspective, and the issue of migration then became an opportunity to think about “every other acculturation process” (Zanier, 1981, p. 118; see also 1979). Thinking
(and writing poems) about migration thus helped him to better understand certain aspects of the social reality in which he lived (Zanier, 1981, p. 119). This awareness emerges clearly in Zanier’s cultural (and poetical) production both in the ‘eighties and ‘nineties. As Barcella and Furneri state: “after the mid-eighties, [Zanier] integrated the issue of foreign immigration into his trade union and cultural work and, on the wave of the conflicts that – around immigration itself – were starting to spread within Italian factories and in Italian society, the question as well of the Italians’ real or alleged xenophobia, which, in the view of many observers, was a striking contradiction for a people who had emigrated for so long” (Barcella & Furneri, 2020, p. 105).

In conclusion, both Gelpi and Zanier tried to promote the creation of a “critical attitude towards social reality” (Zanier, 1977a, p. 14) and this attitude may be seen basically as one of the results of lifelong education in the Gelpian perspective. In relation to the diverse communities of the time in which they wrote, Gelpi and Zanier tried to suggest the relevance of building on the histories, expectations and resources (including the linguistic resources) of all sections of the population, migrants included. In a Gelpian view, this effort can perhaps lead to a better understanding of social reality in its broader sense, in a perspective embracing the whole, diverse community where both migrants and non migrants live together.

Referring back to Van der Veen and Wildemeersch’s findings on the tensions presented by urban life (van der Veen & Wildemeersch, 2012, p. 6), this Gelpian perspective seems highly relevant today for those working as educators or researchers within environments which are characterised by complexity and diversity, as well as by the ambivalence of being ‘in transition’. The tensions highlighted by van der Veen and Wildemeersch call for new attention to respond to the gap between that which is offered by institutions and the educational demands emerging today in increasingly diverse communities. How then is it possible to respond to Gelpi’s and Zanier’s invitation to build on the resources of whole communities, in the current context in which “practices of non-formal and informal education became incorporated in education institutions” (van der Veen & Wildemeersch, 2012, p. 7)? And how should we recontextualise today, when “technological innovations make it possible to be simultaneously connected with multiple and distant here and nows” (p. 9), the attention that from the ‘eighties on both Gelpi and Zanier were giving to transnational factors of migration? Steps in these directions – in the Italian context – can be seen, for instance, in the ways in which CPIA (Centri Provinciali per l’Istruzione degli Adulti, which are local public institutions for adult education, belonging to the Italian Ministry of Education) are trying to “translate” newly arrived migrants’ informal and non-formal learning experiences and
competencies, in order to build on these competencies and experiences within CPIA’s educational programmes (see Floreancig et al., 2018).

Gelpi would have said that lifelong education is not a magic wand. However, if we learn to stay within uncertainty and we try to read complexity emerging within environments ‘in transition’, we can activate the resources that we find within diverse communities, which are not reduced to migrants, but are seen in a relationship with the whole community itself. In this way lifelong education can help to empower people living in those communities, concurring in enabling them to deal with the challenges that they find in their everyday life. Valuing their own experiences and practices, histories, and origins.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Mityana Vaccaro, who gave fundamental help in preparing the final English version of this chapter.

References


Riccardi, V. (2014). L’educazione per tutti e per tutta la vita. Il contributo pedagogico di Ettore Gelpi. ETS.


Zanier, L. (1979). *Che Diaz ... Us al meriti. Storias e storiutads tradizion e ‘migrazion dets e inventets eretics, santus e santons*. Centro Editoriale Friulano.
