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How Can Living In A Hall Of Residence Support The Students' Personal And Professional Development? The Case Of The Collegio Di Milano

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Abstract

Colleges, dormitories and halls of residence are crucial organizations in the students' experience. The literature concerning these structures is generally focuses on freshmen, academic performance, and psychological diseases. Less attention is given to their contribution to students' growth. This research aims at exploring the residents' perspective concerning their experience at Collegio of Milano, and if and how living there contributes to their personal and professional development. The Collegio di Milano is a peculiar hall of residence: it was founded by seven Universities and it hosts students enrolled in diverse Universities. A phenomenological approach was adopted; 18 residents were involved; semi-structured interviews and Life-Space Drawing were used. Remarkable results emerged concerning how this experience helps students to develop soft skills and their professional project.

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1. Introduction

Colleges, dormitories and halls of residence are structures aimed at university students. On the one side, they have some common features, but, on the other, they differ in terms of settings and specific characteristics (e.g. size, supplied services, facilities, national and organizational culture). In any case, they are complex, widespread, and

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crucial organizations that play an important role in the life and educational experience of a considerable amount of university students. The students experience the life in colleges, dormitories e halls of residence during a significant evolutionary phase, that also corresponds to the period in which they either get trained in order to enter the working environment, or are near to deal with this important transition.

Since these complex organizations are important in the students' life, it is more and more crucial to identify and highlight both the issues solicited by these life experiences, and the contribution and support they provide to the personal and professional students' growth. We reckoned that analyzing these contexts using the case-study method could produce a significant outcome; the aim was therefore to reach a deeper comprehension of a specific organizational context and of its contribution to collegiates' development (e.g. which is the specific contribution that living in a hall of residence can provide in comparison to attending the University?).

We shall now present information about the case-study background, the research methodology, the main empirical outcomes, and some conclusive remarks.

2. The background

This paragraph is aimed at outlining the case-study background considering both the literature framework in which this paper is set, and the main characteristics of the analysed organization, that is the Collegio di Milano.

2.1. Literature review on colleges, dormitories and halls of residence: some features

The international literature concerning colleges, dormitories and halls of residence is considerable. The literature review allowed to point out some relevant issues. First, this literature is mainly and physiologically strongly focused on university college/campus organized according to an Anglo-Saxon model (e.g. US campuses). Substantial research has been carried out in these contexts probably because colleges/campuses are widespread and interesting, and because they are accessible and close to the researchers. Second, the analyzed literature is mainly focused on:

- issues such as the psychological diseases that can arise living in a college/campus (e.g. depression), the drugs and alcohol use/abuse, and the freshmen experience (e.g., Furr, Westefeld, McConnell, & Jenkins, 2001; Park, Sher, & Krull, 2009);
- the relationship between living in a college/dormitory/hall of residence and the academic performance, the cognitive development, and the college student engagement (e.g., Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006).

Second, less attention is given to the contribution that living in a college or dormitory or hall of residence can give to the students' personal and professional growth (e.g. outcome in terms of learning knowledge and skills; e.g. Jessup-Anger, 2012; Cabrera et al., 2002) and to the development of their life and professional projects.

2.2. The Collegio di Milano: a picture of the most relevant characteristics of this hall of residence

The Collegio di Milano is managed by the Fondazione Collegio delle Università Milanesi, that was founded by the seven Universities of Milan and is supported by important public and private organizations. The Collegio di Milano (the Italian word "Collegio" is not equivalent to the English word "College") is an inter-university hall of residence dedicated to host and train 100 Italian and international students admitted on the basis of a selection process based on merit and motivation. The candidates must be enrolled in one of the seven Universities of Milan; there is no restriction of subject. The structure hosts visiting students and professors too. Living at the Collegio di Milano and attending the University are two diverse educational experiences running in parallel, but at the same time both contributing in a specific way to the students' growth. The Collegio di Milano is recognized by the Ministry of Education as "campus of excellence" and it aims at promoting the culture of merit, the internationalization of the university system, the valorization of the talent, the college life, the social mobility, the active citizenship and the development of the future managerial class. The Collegio delivers various training, educational and residential services: e.g. the Cultural Activities (a mandatory, high-quality cultural program including seminaries, laboratories, project works, English courses, meeting with top scholars and professionals); tutorship, international exchange, and orientation and placement services; canteen, cleaning service and various facilities.

3. The Case Study: methodological features

On the basis of these premises, a qualitative research was conducted in order to: A) explore the residents' point of view concerning their overall life experience at the Collegio di Milano; B) investigate the students' perspective regarding if and how living at the Collegio contributes to their personal and professional development considering both perceived outcomes and learning, and which elements support their development. In order to achieve these knowledge objectives we conducted a qualitative research adopting a phenomenological approach (Richards & Morse, 2007). We used this approach because it allows to get close to this specific context, to deepen the subjects' perspective, to explore the individuals' lived experience and how they attribute sense to those experiences, and therefore to investigate the research objects. Different tools were used for collecting data. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted: they were crucial to investigate in particular the students' experience (e.g. evolution, resources, criticalities), the contribution that living at the Collegio di Milano is providing to their personal and professional growth and how this is happening (e.g. thanks to which activities/occasions). Second, during the interviews we proposed the production of a Life-Space Drawing, that is a semi-projective tool adapted from the Family Life Space (Mowstin, 1980; Gozzoli & Tamanza, 2008). We proposed three versions: one referred to the actual personal life-space, one referred to the future life-space (in 5/6 years) and one concerning the one's own life space understood as experience at Collegio di Milano. Here we chose not to present the detailed analyses and examples of Drawings, but we underline that they were useful in order to better understand the students' experiences and projects and to "read" in a more articulated way the contribution provided by the Collegio di Milano within each life history. 18 resident students were selected through a purposeful sampling in order to select people with diversified experiences (e.g. age, attended University and subject, academic year, years at Collegio, origin Country/Region). Concerning the data analysis: the content analysis of the interviews (verbatim transcription) were realized with the support of ATLAS.ti; the 54 Life Space Drawings were analysed at a descriptive-phenomenological level.

4. The case-study results

A number of results emerged, but we decided to present only a selection of three of the main issues in order to point out the distinctive traits of the experience at the Collegio di Milano from the students' perspective.

4.1. The representation of the Collegio di Milano and of the experience in this Institution

The content analysis allowed to identify 20 features used by the interviewees to describe the Collegio di Milano and their experience in this context. Here below we analyze the 6 most recurring features, often in a redundant way (overall the frequencies of these 6 categories cover the 61% of the total frequencies). Regarding the representation of the Collegio, it emerged that it was described frequently using the following features: A) the community life and 'being a micro-society'(16%); B) a context that offers stimuli (e.g. intellectual, interpersonal) and encourages openness and reflection (14%); C) presence of various types of diversities and being a place where confrontation and debate are possible (11%); D) identification with one's 'home' (8%). By grouping these data into two macro-categories, two distinctive characteristics of the Collegio emerged in the students' perception: on the one hand, the daily life that flows in the Collegio, and on the other hand the idea of a stimulating place, where one can meet something new and different and embark in an enriching confrontations/debates (e.g. with students). It is important to stress how these two macro-aspects are often presented together, thus highlighting how living in such a community (homogeneous to a certain degree) represents the strongest stimulus towards a personal growth and the most distinctive trait of Collegio di Milano. Beside that, two other ways to perceive and describe the Collegio di Milano and one's personal experience in this context also emerged: as an experience that is instrumental to reach one's objective (6%) (e.g. to test oneself, to develop necessary knowledge/skills, to reconcile social life and study) and as an opportunity (6%) (both for the stimuli that one receives, and for the initiatives that are brought to one's attention and that can be exploited).

4.2. *The main contributions of the Collegio di Milano to the students' growth*

The case-study allowed to highlight which are the contributions that in general the Collegio di Milano provide to the collegiates' personal and professional growth in the students' perception; 16 types of contribution were identified and they can be attributed to 3 macro-categories: personal evolution also in terms of approach (31%); general or specific enrichment (41%); soft skills development (28%). The 5 outcomes that more frequently emerged (overall their frequencies cover the 63% of the total frequencies) concern: A) the development of a broader perspective/vision about: experiences, points of view and characteristics which are different from one's own, work, workplaces, existing opportunities, disciplines, study environments, and fields of practical application (22%); B) the will to plan, or sometimes to re-plan one's path thanks to the stimuli that have been offered and the knowledge that has been acquired (13%); C) the improvement of the abilities of managing the interpersonal relationship (11%); the involved subjects referred this learning in particular to the horizontal relationship and they underlined the role played by the community life; D) the development of knowledge and skills that are usable both at a personal and at a professional level (9%); E) a deeper comprehension of themselves (8%; e.g. discovery and greater awareness of personal characteristics and interests) due in particular to the encounter/confrontation with the diversity and with various opportunities offered by the Collegio that allow to enlarge their perspective and to reflect both on themselves, and on their personal and/or professional project (to solicit this outcome a significant role was played by the community life, but also by the Cultural Activities and by Orientation and Placement Service delivered by the Collegio). Finally it is worth mentioning that, even if less frequently (3-8 times), the interviewees believe that living at the Collegio allowed them to work on soft skills, such as the ability to manage the available time and to get organized, to work in a team, communicate, be able to confront oneself with the others and manage a network.

4.3. *Which influence is played by the Collegio di Milano on the students' professional projects*

Two types of influences played by the Collegio di Milano on the students' professional projects:

- Type 'Syntony and Strengthening': this is the approach of those who consider the Collegio as a strategic experience 'to be done', which is aligned with one's own professional project and which can contribute to strengthen a professional project which is basically already planned and defined. The more or less intense contribution provided by the Collegio is fulfilled in different ways such as an experience that enrich substantially and formally the Curriculum Vitae, that provide opportunities/possibilities (e.g. network, project work), and that allows students to learn further knowledge and skills.
- Type 'Opening and (Re-)Planning': this is the approach of those for whom joining the Collegio represented a turn in their life, as it allowed a significant broadening of one's perspectives and the development of knowledge and abilities that allowed and contributed to the idea of deeply re-planning one's path.

The construct of "professional identity" is strictly connected with the professional project development. The development of the professional identity is a never ending process since it is always solicited both by people, and by training, organizational and professional contexts that we meet and attend (Giust-Desprairies, 1996). This case-study showed how the experience at the Collegio di Milano can solicit in various, but equally significant, manners the students' professional identity development and the students' way to approach and manage the construction of their educational/formative and professional project.

5. Conclusions

This case-study allowed us to outline how the Collegio di Milano and the lived experience in this specific hall of residence are perceived by the resident students and which are, from their perspective, the contributions it provides to their personal and professional growth (an issue that is less treated by scientific literature). It emerged that this organization (with its specific organizational and educational setting and proposal) is perceived by the interviewees as a place that encourages confrontation, reflection and openness and that significantly contributes to one's personal and professional growth. In their perception an essential contribution is given in particular both by the creation of a heterogeneous community of collegiates (e.g. Italian and international students attending different Universities and

Departments), and by the proposed Cultural Activities that are delivered by scholars belonging to different Universities and subjects that try also to create a connection among students, work environment and high-level professionals. The involved students reported that living at the Collegio di Milano supported them in developing skills and competences that are important both at a personal and at a professional level and that they already used (e.g. soft skills) or that they consider as usable in their future. Another significant contribution of the Collegio is the influence on the professional project development. The results produced by this case-study are useful since they allow to outline what this specific organizational context can produce in terms of learnings and outcomes considering, for example, that the halls of residence provide different residential, formative and educational proposal/services. Second, this research contributed to begin to identify the specific contribution and the added value of the experience at the Collegio di Milano in comparison to attending the University. Finally, this case-study provided indications that can be valuable in planning and in managing the halls of residence (e.g. Tutorship, Orientation and Placement Services). Concerning future developments, it will be interesting both to further deepen this research (a quantitative phase is foreseen), and to analyze other colleges/dormitories/halls of residence using the case-study method since it would allow researchers to evaluate the existing differences and draw articulated conclusions on the outcome of different educational and residential settings.

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