

EDITORIAL

Talking again about schools... but seriously this time!

Over the past months, education has been talked about a lot in newspaper articles and on TV debates, in daily conversations and in the statements made by politicians. But what was actually the topic?

School desks on wheels, understaffed schools at the beginning of the school year, social distancing measures and remote education versus face-to-face teaching were among the most discussed topics. Even though they are certainly important, one wonders whether this is the essence of the matter and whether these are the real issues. The facilities (spaces and furnishings), the availability of the necessary number of teachers, the health regulations that redefine the way in which we attend schools, IT equipment, face-to-face learning and remote education are inevitable, necessary topics right now but, one might say, not sufficient.

Going beyond

Crises do not teach us anything *per se* but they break into our way of living, disrupt it and put what we took for granted under a magnifying glass. This is why they offer an opportunity to question the meaning of what we do and help us imagine for the after Covid period something which does not simply repropose what we had before but integrates into our daily life what we now perceive as essential. This is a possibility, not a certainty. We can talk a lot about education and this is certainly better than not talking about it at all, but to stop at furnishings, the number of teachers, health regulations and the use of remote education means to waste an opportunity and to remain on the surface of things. Speaking about changes is not sufficient if they are not really meant to bring about an improvement in the matters that support and promote the school experience.

Schools and teachers are ready

In 2020 one thing has become clear: schools and teachers are ready. Research works, including the national research conducted by SIRD and by several professional associations¹, have shown the readiness of teachers to take the challenge and reinvent themselves. Although the overall picture is made of both light and shadow - and this calls for a reflection at various levels² - the conditions that led to this result can be summarised into the concept of forming with colleagues a community of practice which is strongly characterised by mutual support and professional training/research³. In the case of teachers, a positive response was given in

1. Lucisano, P. (2020). *Fare ricerca con gli insegnanti. I primi risultati dell'indagine nazionale SIRD "Per un confronto sulle modalità di didattica a distanza adottate nelle scuole italiane nel periodo di emergenza COVID-19"*. In: Lifelong Lifewide Learning, Vol. 17, No. 36, pp. 3-25. This issue also presents a first in-depth investigation of the qualitative part of the SIRD research work and a comparison and contrast between Trentino and national results. Furthermore, other interesting research works are presented.

2. Girelli, C. & Arici, M. (2020). *Which school will we have in the new school year? It depends. Not only on Covid-19*. In RicercAzione Vol. 12/1; Editorial pp. 9-14.

3. Asquini, G.(eds.) (2019), *La Ricerca-Formazione. Temi, esperienze, prospettive*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

contexts featuring strong educational leadership, not only on the part of school leaders but across the board, and initial and continuous professional learning.

The school context experienced as a professional community⁴ and training supporting a profession characterised by a reflexive and research-oriented attitude⁵ are the positive elements that have emerged. And yet, they indicate something that is ‘already and also not yet’ fully achieved, something that has to be constantly supported and fostered at the level of individuals, individual schools and the system at large⁶.

What we did before is no longer enough

The health emergency situation is not over yet. Our strong desire to leave it all behind makes us hope that we can go back to normality and pre-pandemic conditions. This is certainly desirable but, when it comes to education, we should ask ourselves whether this is enough.

The EU Commission’s report entitled “Education and training monitor 2020”⁷, published in November, offers fruit for thought while analysing the development of education and training in the EU and in Member States. Its goal is to promote educational systems that can offer all European citizens ‘the best start in life’. Italy scores below the EU average in several sectors: reading, maths and science, early leavers from education and training, tertiary educational attainment, transition into employment, and adult learning. The data reported must be read and interpreted at different levels (national and local, types of schools, professional roles), but we certainly cannot make do with overcoming the emergency and going back to former normality. This is not enough.

What is the purpose of education?

It is always useful to keep open the question of what you wish to achieve in order to understand how change can be brought about. What is the purpose of education? This is a question that we should always keep open because all answers are partial and need to be updated in terms of scientific and political reflection as well as in terms of teachers who work with a group of students, of professionals in schools and of parents.

The indications given in European documents and in national guidelines to the different types of schools⁸ are clear: educating people who can actively and responsibly participate in the construction of their context of life.

At international level, in a UNESCO report⁹, Delors indicated as the task of education in the second millennium that of promoting in students *learning to know* and *learning to do* because simply learning content is not sufficient given overall complexity, and also *learning to be* to sup-

4. Sergiovanni, T.J. (2000). *Costruire comunità nelle scuole*. Roma: LAS.

5. Mortari, L. (2009). *Ricercare e riflettere. La formazione del docente professionista*. Roma: Carocci.

6. Initial and in-service training for teachers is a strategic element for the quality of the school experience; if this need is not met, starting the school year with sufficient staff is an important organizational requirement but is certainly insufficient to guarantee the educational quality of the school experience.

7. The full report is available at https://ec.europa.eu/education/resources-and-tools/document-library_en. Data about Italy are in volume 2 pp. 175-185.

8. E.g. MIUR *Indicazioni nazionali per il primo ciclo di istruzione* (2012). Policy documents about the second cycle of education: MIUR *Indicazioni nazionali per i licei* (2010) and MIUR *Linee guida per il triennio degli istituti tecnici e professionali* (2012).

9. Delors, J. (eds.) (1996). *Nell'educazione un tesoro. (The Treasure Within)*. Roma: Armando.

port personal growth and *learning to live together* for social growth.

What skills should be trained?

There is consensus on focussing on a type of education that promotes skills.

What remains to be accomplished is the difficult and not immediate task of translating this into everyday school life and also the task of facing reality and of accepting to further investigate the dimensions of the indicated skills and to identify new ones.

The experience of the Covid-19 pandemic has shown that the health situation requires that people possess the skills to be able to live in such a critical situation without being upset as individuals and communities and without triggering disruptive social processes. These are reflections that we should all make as adults if we do not want to remain on the surface of this emergency and consider only numbers and health aspects while neglecting the impact of all this on people and on the quality of human relations.

Since we work in the field of education, we are expected to ask ourselves how we can help adults and students to live with the situation without being 'deformed' by a heavily upset everyday life.

A recent WHO publication entitled 'Doing What Matters in Times of Stress. An Illustrated Guide'¹⁰, meant to combat post-traumatic stress disorder, can help us reflect about this issue. The point is not to medicalize those behaviours that reveal difficulties and that are increasingly frequent. We should rather ask ourselves how we can help children and youth in their daily educational experience at school so that they can develop those elements that must integrate active citizenship skills in order for them to be able to live in and with everyday traumatic and stressful situations¹¹. This is not the task of education if we conceive schools as deliverers of content. But it is indeed a possible and unavoidable task of education when schools use their cultural tools to ask what skills are useful in interpreting reality, in living it and in promoting its inclusive dimension.

What type of learning should we promote?

A school, a teacher capable of meeting this challenge must ask a number of questions and take them as criteria to guide their actions:

- What type of learning should we consider and promote?
- What is the goal of assessment and what forms should it take?
- What type of teaching should we propose?

Let us address the first question.

Certainly, a type of learning that initiates and supports a *habitus* useful in promoting long life

10. WHO, *Doing What Matters in Times of Stress. An Illustrated Guide*, 2020. In <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240003927>. The translation into Italian is also available, edited by Enna and Verona Universities.

11. Cf. Cahill, H.; Dadvand, B.; Shlezinger, K.; Romei, K. & Farrelly A. (2020). *Strategies for supporting student and teacher wellbeing post-emergency* in: RicercAzione, (2020) vol. 12/1; pp. 23-38 in: <https://bit.ly/304wJKw>.

learning cannot be based on memorizing and reproducing pieces of knowledge. It takes much more than that. Research on learning has valuably contributed to this. In a publication of the OECD-CERI ILE (Innovative Learning Environments) project, De Corte¹² summarises with the CSSC acronym the main features of the socio-constructivist perspective on effective learning, which is constructive, self-regulated, situated and collaborative.

Assessment: why and how

Let us now consider the second question.

Assessment is often a misunderstood action which is difficult to deal with. Possibly this is because we want to reduce it to one interpretation only, in which meanings are flattened and levels are confused. In particular, we should recall that testing and assessment do not coincide, that assessing implies making reference to criteria, that it cannot be reduced to sheer quantitative calculation and, especially, that it serves various purposes and is not limited to evaluating what has been learnt¹³.

With reference to the assessment of pupils' learning, the recently published '*Linee guida sulla formulazione dei giudizi descrittivi nella valutazione periodica e finale della scuola primaria*'¹⁴ (i.e. Guidelines on the formulation of descriptive evaluations in interim and final assessment in primary schools) is an important contribution to the growth of professional practice. It is stated that assessment must perform a fundamental formative function in an 'assessment for learning' perspective. Assessment becomes meaningful if it is situated within a context in which assessing means accompanying one's individual development and also triggering processes which help in adapting teaching to the real educational needs and learning styles of pupils, modifying activities based on what has been observed and starting from what can be valorised. If the main focus shifts from checking what pupils have learnt to supporting their individual development, we need to strive for consistent practices. Tools and methods may vary, depending on the age of pupils and on what should be assessed, but the formative 'soul' of assessment should not be betrayed.

What type of teaching should we propose?

And now the third question.

Didactics is the very centre of school experience. Its quality.

This is the reason why talking about education again cannot be a superficial exercise and cannot be reduced to slogans.

The debate on face-to-face learning versus remote education is misleading if it remains on this level. In this debate, stating that relationships are irreplaceable is certainly important and the same applies to integrating new tools but the problem remains: relationships alone are not enough and tools alone are not enough either.

12. De Corte, E. (2010) *Historical Developments in the Understanding of Learning* (pp. 35-68) in the OECD-CERI ILE Project. *The Nature of Learning: Using Research to Inspire Practice*. Paris: OECD. Among recent Italian contributions focussing on teaching see Castoldi, M. (2020). *Ambienti di apprendimento. Ripensare il modello organizzativo della scuola*. Roma: Carocci.

13. Cf. Castoldi M., (2012). *Valutare a scuola. Dagli apprendimenti alla valutazione di sistema*, Carocci, Roma.

14. Excerpts from the document can be found in the 'Experiences and reflections' section of this issue of RicercAzione.

Quality teaching is needed for the school experience to unfold all its educational potential for everyone.

Offering a definition of quality teaching would be an oversimplification. Teaching is not a theory to be applied but a practice to be carried out in a constant dialogue between theoretical knowledge, professional knowledge and reality, in order to identify in each situation the best suited action to make the potential of single individuals and of the group 'flourish'.

As individual teachers and as a professional and research community, questioning the quality of one's own teaching is possibly one of those questions that we should ask all the time and leave open, as a guiding criterion for our actions, while

- promoting the necessary skills for a type of education that enables everyone to develop their potential and contribute to an inclusive society
- supporting a learning quality that helps to be active and cooperative in one's approach to others and to reality
- re-valuing the educational dimension of relationships in terms of care¹⁵ and encouragement¹⁶
- redefining assessment as 'valuing' pupils, in order to foster everyone's development and accompaniment.

These could be interesting and meaningful directions to take in examining everyday education and research.



In addition to the interesting contributions in the "Experiences and reflections" section, including, in particular, the above-mentioned very recent Guidelines of the Italian Ministry of Education on interim and final assessment in primary schools, and the Guidelines by SIPeS for inclusive education, and in addition to the stimulating suggestions in the "Reviews" section, we would like to pinpoint the richness and depth of the scientific papers in the "Research" section.

The first paper, by Pietro Lucisano *et al.*, focusses on understanding the experience of emergency remote education on the part of teachers in Trentino schools, starting, as mentioned above, from national data collected by SIRD and by various professional associations.

The second paper is closely related to the first one. Federico Batini *et al.* describe the method used to analyse qualitative data in the SIRD research, to illustrate the structure and categories that have emerged and the weaknesses and strengths of remote education, the difficulties encountered by pupils and the comments and reflections of teachers.

The paper by Elisabetta Nigris *et al.* offers a qualitative in-depth analysis of the professional experience of kindergarten, primary and lower secondary school teachers during the shift to remote education. It explores in particular the formative impact of the experience itself in relation to the professional profiles of teachers and the role played by their working context.

Valentina Pagani's and Franco Passalacqua's paper also offers an in-depth qualitative examination of the experience of remote education of 12 Italian teachers of kindergarten,

15. Mortari, L. (2015). *Filosofia della cura*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina.

16. Franta, H. & Colasanti, A. R. (1991). *L'arte dell'incoraggiamento. Insegnamento e personalità degli allievi*. Firenze: La Nuova Italia Scientifica.

primary and lower secondary schools. Their point of view is explored with a specific focus on the impact on professional learning.

Maria Cristina Veneroso *et al.* illustrate the results of an online questionnaire developed within a research-action project promoted by IPRASE and conducted at national level, aimed at primary school teachers with the goal of investigating their perceptions while experiencing remote education. Specific attention was paid to a number of aspects deriving from Neurosciences and the area of learning disorders.

Zoran Lapov, against the background of an intercultural experience developed in Florence, examines in depth the dynamics of remote education with recent immigrant pupils to shed light on its relational implications. The goal is also to contribute to pedagogical reflections on educational processes in emergency contexts and the production of relevant operational models.

The paper by Silvia Gabrielli *et al.* presents objectives and methods applied in the UPRIGHT European project, based on the co-creation and delivery of a training programme on mental resilience, to promote a culture of psychological well-being in lower secondary school communities.

Cristina Vedovelli's paper seeks to answer the fundamental questions of impact assessment by proposing a possible model applicable to programmes to combat educational poverty and by outlining an operational path that, from the identification of a guiding construct, accompanies us in the structuring of a logical model of change that specifies the dimension of the analysis, indicators and measurement approaches.

The paper by Cristiana De Santis and Giorgio Asquini considers the use of RAV (*Rapporto di Autovalutazione*, Self-Assessment Report) in the context of four DADA schools (*Didattiche per Ambienti Di Apprendimento*, Didactics for Learning Environments) through a specific analysis of the self-assessment carried out in two successive periods, considering the evolution of the scores and related reflections in the RAV reports.

Elisabetta Nigris *et al.* present the contribution of CRESPI to the research on the education and training of teachers and their professional competences. The approach is that of research-training, a methodology which entails that educational research be carried out *within* the schools and *with* teachers, in order to develop/transform teaching and education and to enhance teachers' reflexivity.

Finally, Bill Rogers in his paper proposes a model of inclusive leadership that suggests the implementation of four entry points which allow for the creation of relationships based on mutual trust and mutual respect, which are key to creating positive and effective teaching and learning environments if entry points are implemented in an interconnected and integrated way.

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