

## EDITORIAL

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# In an obstinate and opposite direction: for a school that can make the difference

*«Every war leaves the world worse than it was before. War is a failure of politics and of humanity, a shameful capitulation, a stinging defeat before the forces of evil»<sup>1</sup>.*

24 February 2022. Russia's military attack on Ukraine made a dramatic appearance in our daily lives. The media coverage, geographical vicinity and many personal bonds have made us particularly aware of this war. The worries and fears of adults have interwoven with those of children and teenagers, and the war has also come knocking on the doors of our classrooms.

In the last two years, the Covid-19 pandemic has interrupted the ordinary school routine, while amplifying the problems: educational methods too often based on transmission, the worrying phenomenon of implicit dropouts, the role of socialisation, and growing unease that has increased problems linked to mental health<sup>2</sup>.

In various ways, war also affects schools and those dealing with education; the rationale based on violence and subjugation poses questions for the educational environment in relation to the relative objectives and teaching. In the case of education that does not just wish to transmit knowledge, but also develop life skills, creating active, aware and responsible citizens, war is a reality that undermines the underlying sense of education in a personalised, democratic and inclusive perspective.

### Who wins?

The news reaching us, with the names of cities conquered or lost, the buildings hit by missiles, and the number of dead and injured, fails to transmit the dramatic nature of broken lives and the interruption of everyday life. The emotions aroused are not automatically transformed into empathy with other people, but may give rise to anger and hate, or vanish and dim over time, like the news which gradually shifts from the front page of newspapers to gradually be

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1. Pope Francis (2020), *Lettera Enciclica Fratelli tutti sulla fraternità e l'amicizia sociale*, 261.

2. C. Girelli, M. Arici (2021), 'Reimagining schools to make a difference, every day', *RicercaAzione*, Vol 13.2, pp. 10-26.

given less and less attention. Becoming accustomed to news about the war anaesthetises perception of the dramatic effect of the events on people's lives. The 'normalisation' of war risks polluting the very way of thinking about living and coexisting, now and in the future.

The reality of war violence imposes the law of the strongest, destroying the value and diversity of others by dehumanising them, making the individual no longer a unique and unrepeatable person, but rather an enemy. The enemy is not like us, they do not have a name, or a life made up of everyday events and relations, people who love them and who they wish to return to, with dreams and plans to be accomplished. The enemy is just someone on whose destruction our life depends; both at individual and at national level. The relationship with the enemy is structured in terms of negative interdependence: somebody wins and somebody loses. In actual fact this is not true: in a war nobody wins, whatever the final result.

### Everybody loses

Everyone is a loser, because the loss of humanity that has transformed the other, person or people, into an enemy, shakes up the relationship, which becomes dehumanising for all those involved.

Seizing on the principle of dialogue as essential for promoting the quality of human experience, Buber<sup>3</sup> identified the possibility for the *self* to recognise and fully develop its potential only in a relationship recognising others as *you*; whereas when others go from being *you*, respected and recognised, with their own face, name, history and diversity, and are instead reduced to a thing, an *it*, an enemy or an immigrant for example, the same deterioration of humanity also takes place for the *self*.

War drags reality into dehumanising turmoil.

It is indeed the human condition of fragility and lack of self-sufficiency that makes the ability to relate to others a structural condition of experience; thus living is coexisting, and the very possibilities for one's life and personal fulfilment depend on the quality of this coexistence. «*Relational ability intimately affects the human condition. The quality of one's life is indeed shaped by the networks of relations that give form to one's living space. Relational ability represents the essence of the human condition, because to exist each person always needs something that only others can give them. Nothing that depends on oneself alone makes one's life good and safe. Because every element of one's living space is inevitably intermingled with others. The relationship with others is a prerequisite not just for nourishing cognitive and emotional life, but also for seeking excellence, namely the best possible form of one's own existence. In this sense it is possible to affirm that "personal fulfilment and solidarity have the same origin"*»<sup>4,5</sup>. War, like all violence, introduces the seeds of dehumanisation to reality, acting more or less openly to poison it, and preventing people from developing their potential, because the negation of others offers no possibility for growth or a good life for anyone.

3. M. Buber (1993), *Il principio dialogico e altri saggi*, San Paolo, Milano.

4. R. Rorty (1989), *La filosofia dopo la filosofia*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, p.1.

5. L. Mortari (2008), *A scuola di libertà. Formazione e pensiero autonomo*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano, pp.71-72.

## Peace is not the absence of war

For this reason, it is important for war to end as soon as possible, but this does not yet represent peace. Peace is not simply the absence of war, but rather the assertion of a different anthropological and social vision. Peace demands the cultivation of human qualities that recognise rights for all and the freedom to best fulfil one's potential. Only through relations, personal and social, that recognise fundamental positive interdependence, put into effect by both sides, is peace possible, acting as a stimulus for a quality of life that allows each person to become the best possible version of themselves, while respecting and promoting others.

War, like every form of violence and evil, is instead the assertion of an individualistic vision, at individual or national level, based on one's own fulfilment through the subjugation of others. Unfortunately, like many 'low intensity' wars that drag on out of the limelight<sup>6</sup> or many situations of injustice and abuse of power present in the world, also in our own society, the war in Ukraine would seem to affirm that this is the reality, whereas peace is only a utopian dream. Peace is undoubtedly not a reality, but nor is it utopia. It should be taken as an ideal regulating action, an ethical horizon that orients personal and political choices towards a good life with and for others within just institutions<sup>7</sup>.

## Working against evil, living for something

Even in the darkest hours of history<sup>8</sup>, when the will to destroy others prevailed, whether individuals or peoples, the desire to live in peace and rediscover the humanity present in everyone was not extinguished. It is in these thoughts and actions, surviving the brutality of injustice and violence, that a ray of hope remains, in the faith that a better life is possible. They are words and actions of personal resilience<sup>9</sup> and social resistance.

Heller, a Hungarian Jewish philosopher who survived racial persecution, writes: «*Anne Frank believed in the future, in an improvement in the world and in all peoples. Some time ago I read the last letters of those condemned to death by the Nazis. They shared a faith in an improving world and the progressive liberation of mankind from evil. Without this faith it was not possible either to die or to survive. They did not wish to die pointlessly, even if the world had not improved and populations were not developing at all harmoniously and peacefully. However, even if this was all an illusion, in any case they did not die in vain. Anna Frank certainly did not die in vain. She died for something and lived for something. She lived intensely in her fight against death*»<sup>10</sup>.

6. Pope Francis has described the dramatic nature of this widespread and often forgotten conflict, describing it as "a Third World War in parts and pieces" (*Lettera Enciclica Fratelli tutti sulla fraternità e l'amicizia sociale*, 2020, 259).

7. P. Ricoeur (1993), *Sé come un altro*, Jaca Book, Milano.

8. H. Arendt (2006), *L'umanità in tempi bui*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano.

9. E. Malaguti, B. Cyrulnik (2005), *Costruire la resilienza*, Erickson, Trento; E. Malaguti (2005), *Educarsi alla resilienza. Come affrontare crisi e difficoltà e migliorarsi*, Erickson, Trento.

10. A. Heller (2019), *Anne Frank, a drop in the ocean of humanity. Our 90 years: she was lost, I survived*. Extract from the speech celebrating the ninetieth anniversary of the birth of Anne Frank (12 June 1929) made by Ágnes Heller in the Paulskirche in Frankfurt on 12 June 2019. Translation

Following the destruction caused by the Second World War, during which evil took its most concrete form in the Nazi extermination camps, the absence of war in subsequent decades did not become a culture of peace. The inhumanity of war has taken on different names, with the illusion that by remaining circumscribed, and above all by not involving us, it is less devastating. The oral testimony and written or film accounts of real or realistic events allow us not to forget, to ask ourselves about the negation of humanity and to hope in a different form of coexistence.

«*Even when I am far away from Srebrenica my mind is there. I think of all my friends who were killed just because they had a different name*»: recounts Hasanović, a survivor of the Srebrenica genocide, one of the most atrocious episodes of the war in the Balkans in the 1990s. He has become a narrator of the tragedy, his own and that of his people, and now acts as a guide at the Potočari Memorial. He tells his story in the hopes that this may raise awareness and encourage people not to surrender to evil and to continue to look for good, as happened with the school pupils who decided to translate the book containing his testimony, after meeting him,<sup>11</sup>.

### Recovering an awareness of the ethical significance of education

By disseminating hate and destruction, war makes the present unbearable and the future inhospitable, like any kind of violence and injustice, whether it takes place on a structural or everyday level. Without the hope of justice and a vision of the future giving it sense, education loses its ethical meaning and is reduced to mere manipulation and indoctrination.

Starting from his educational experience during the Nazi regime, Arendt<sup>12</sup> recalls that education limited to instruction and knowledge, no longer oriented towards cultivating thought based on moral sensitivity, had made people incapable of grasping the evil that was taking shape in German society.

Keeping thinking rooted in experience<sup>13</sup> demands an openness to questioning, without requiring dogmatic or absolute answers, but rather seeking a direction that makes it possible to provide a sustainable sense to personal and social life, within the complexity and impermanence of reality.

In this context, Mortari underlines that «*ethical education is necessary to develop a pro-*

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from German to Italian by Peter Paul Litturi. The speech is contained in Ágnes Heller's book, "Il demone dell'amore", written with Francesco Comina and Genny Losurdo, Gabrielli editori, 2019.

11. H. Hasanovic (2019), *Surviving Srebrenica*, Gabrielli editore, Verona. This is an account of the birth of the book, now available in Italian: 'We met Hasan in February 2018, during an educational trip to Potočari, at the Memorial where he works. Initially we were surprised by the proposal for a trip to Bosnia, to visit Sarajevo and the surrounding area. We only had a general idea of the events that had taken place in the area, so we began to do some research. As for all wars, there are different narrations: one official and one more human and less detached, drenched in tears. So the story of a boy from Srebrenica who lost his loved ones in this conflict could not be lost. After having lived ten years without managing to talk about what had happened, Hasan decided to write this book and allowed us, secondary school pupils, to translate it, in this way permitting us to let other people know about his story. From Hasan we learned the value of testimony and we therefore believe that the story of a painful personal experience can help to reflect on the precarious nature of the human condition, when confronted by ideological prejudice. Class IV BI Liceo N. Copernico, Verona - 2017/18 school year.

12. H. Arendt (2004), *Responsabilità e giudizio*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino

13. J. Dewey (2014), *Esperienza e educazione*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano.

*ensity to reflect on what is happening, to then take a carefully considered position. For this reason, Weil<sup>14</sup> advocates a public education system capable of providing cognitive tools that enable the individual to experience the call to do good, and expressive tools to voice rejection of any action that causes pain. Good ethical education does not only make the mind capable of paying continuous attention to others and of being sensitive to their suffering, but also encourages translation of this sensitivity into actions of solidarity»<sup>15</sup>.*

Education thus has an inescapable ethical dimension when orienting itself and focusing on the future, motivated by the desire for a good life and animated by a passion for care and the flourishing of humanity among all people, in view of the hope for justice and happiness for every and each individual.<sup>16</sup> The ethical dimension underlies education and the experience of teachers and pupils at school is fundamental; knowledge cannot represent the ultimate objective, but rather becomes a means for forming independent thought and promoting aware and responsible citizenship skills.

### A culture to be constructed

Educating, as parents or teachers, brings with it a responsibility to create a culture that interprets the existing world in a critical manner, with all its traces of dehumanisation, and makes it conceivable to consider a future of coexistence imbued with new humanism.

In the Fratelli Tutti (All Brothers) encyclical, Pope Francis underlines that *«real and lasting peace will only be possible on the basis of a global ethic of solidarity and cooperation in the service of a future shaped by interdependence and shared responsibility in the whole human family»* (127).

The centrality of the individual, new humanism, rights and justice for all, and sustainable development are just some of the pivotal issues around which to build a culture of peace<sup>17</sup> that leads to a good life, in ethical terms. As regards this, it may be useful to promote further reflection by drawing on documents resulting from international initiatives.

Directing attention specifically at the value and role of education in promoting a new humanism, the documents produced by UNESCO are undoubtedly of interest. The last of these dates to 2021, with an invitation to reimagine our future together, starting from a new social contract for education<sup>18</sup>: a future capable of dealing with the climate crisis, pandemics, poverty and injustice is only possible with an awareness of the positive interdependence linking the whole of humanity, but this change requires a vision of reality, a culture that can only develop from a

14. S. Weil (1996), "Giustizia" in R. Esposito (editor), *Oltre la politica*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano, pp.63-92.

15. L. Mortari (2008), *A scuola di libertà. Formazione e pensiero autonomo*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano, p. 82.

16. L. Mortari (2015), *Filosofia della cura*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano; L. Mortari (2019), *Melarete - Vol. I: Cura Etica Virtù*, Vita e pensiero, Milano.

17. References to the central nature of the individual and a new humanism are also present in the MIUR documents orienting our school curricula. See for example the paragraphs in the chapter "Culture, education, and the individual" in the 2012 *National indicators for the curricula of infant, primary and middle schools*.

18. UNESCO, Reimagining our futures together. A new social contract for education in [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379707\\_locale=en](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379707_locale=en). The report was presented on 10 November 2021, in the context of work at the 41<sup>st</sup> General Conference of UNESCO. Almost thirty years ago UNESCO presented an important report: Delors, J. (eds.) (1996), *Learning: the treasure within*, Rome: Armando, summarising the fundamental tasks for education in the new millennium. This contribution was followed in 2015 by another interesting UNESCO report, with the significant title *Rethinking education: towards a global common good?* available at <https://unevoc.unesco.org/e-forum/RethinkingEducation.pdf>

new commitment to promoting education.

Among the international documents recognising the common dignity of all people and calling for responsible action to construct a global reality sustainable for all, the Earth Charter (2000) and the 2030 Agenda are undoubtedly important points of reference to be aware of and use as a source of inspiration.

The Earth Charter «*is intended to inspire in all peoples a new sense of interdependence and shared responsibility for the wellbeing of people, the greater community of life, and future generations. The Charter is a vision of hope and an appeal to act*»<sup>19</sup>. The product of a decade of work by an independent international committee, the text is spare and essential, its 16 principles being developed around four broad commitments: respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, social and economic justice, and democracy, non-violence and peace.

The 2030 Agenda for sustainable development is instead a programme of action for people, the planet and prosperity signed in September 2015 by the governments of 193 UN member countries. It includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals within a major programme of action, with a total of 169 ‘targets’ or objectives. These are objectives that should guide the world along a path to be followed in the coming years, given that they orient the actions of nations, and the signatories have made a commitment to achieving them by 2030. The 17 goals include objectives directed at a *promoting the dignity of people* [no poverty (1), zero hunger (2), good health and wellbeing (3), quality education (4), gender equality (5), and reduced inequalities (10)], to *harmonise the environment and economic development* [clean water and sanitation (6), affordable and clean energy (7), decent work and economic growth (8), industry, innovation and infrastructure (9)], and to *respect and promote sustainable life in relationship to nature and social contexts* [sustainable cities and communities (11), responsible production and consumption (12), action against climate change (13), life below water (14), life on land (15), peace, justice and strong institutions (16)].

These are undoubtedly actions requiring the collective political commitment of state governments, but the role of individuals is important in creating critical awareness and cultural sensitivity to these issues. One starts with oneself, without waiting for others, to act with an awareness of one’s own role, while for those with educational responsibilities, there are no alibis for failing to promote a culture representing a breath of life.

### Education can make a difference

What use is education? What goals should be pursued?

These are questions that do not have definitive answers, but rather require continuing responses in the everyday life of schools, which must deal with a constantly evolving reality and

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19. Presentation of “The Earth Charter” at the official Italian website <https://www.cartadellaterra.it/>.

situations; with the obstinate faith that changing awareness also seeps through in the words and minor actions taking shape in the relations developing in our classrooms<sup>20</sup>.

Perhaps this is not everything or even much, but it is what each person can do, like the little hummingbird.

*An African fable recounts that one day a fire broke out in the forest and all the animals were running away. However, a lion saw a hummingbird flying in the opposite direction. Worried, he tried to stop him, but the little bird explained it was going to put the fire out. Amazed, the lion replied that it would be impossible to extinguish the fire with the single drop of water it was carrying in its beak. The hummingbird firmly replied: I do my part.*



The “Research” section of this publication opens with a paper by Marco Orsi that has much in common with the considerations contained in the first part of this editorial. By citing the “Moon Mission”, that took man to the Moon, and the “Earth Mission”, which has the task of focusing on the 17 goals of the 2030 UN Agenda for sustainable development, the author indeed aims to support the need for an “Education Mission”, because in his opinion education systems can make an indispensable contribution to a sustainable and peaceful future. This is only possible if they are capable of overcoming their traditional narrow-mindedness and self-referentialism and if each school becomes capable of animating the whole educational community. In this context the author also underlines the importance of sensitive leadership that puts its faith in people.

In the subsequent paper, Elena Falaschi presents a study focusing on surveying, monitoring and promoting subjective and intersubjective “resilient wellbeing” in the working groups of 16 educational and school departments, with the involvement of 190 educators and teachers. The project adopted the action research method, with the direct involvement of the participants in every phase of the research. On the basis of authoritative theoretical models, a questionnaire was created to survey the perception of resilience and wellbeing, with reference both to professional’s own experience and to their working group.

The article by Noemi Mazzoni *et al.* returns to the issue of distance learning activated during the Covid-19 emergency, which highlighted problems regarding the participation of pupils with special educational needs. In response to these new needs, the authors illustrate the BEST-DaD project, in the context of which a platform was created, easy to use and practical for different neurocognitive

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20. As regards this, see the page “Parole di scuola, azioni di pace” at the IPRASE website (<https://www.iprase.tn.it/parole-di-scuola-azioni-di-pace>), set up to promote and share considerations and experience coming from schools in response to questions raised by the news and images of war, and to underline the commitment for justice and peace.

profiles, to promote inclusion; furthermore, special teaching materials were created, and training directed at teachers was put into effect to help them to prepare adapted teaching material.

In their article written in English, Ivan Traina *et al.* present an action research project about a transition programme carried out in Ireland, directed at five young adults with mental disabilities, designed to support their inclusion in work environments. The programme is based on a systematic review of the literature and on the carrying out of standardised assessment before and after intervention, in order to measure the improvement in the quality of life and behavioural changes in the subjects involved.

In their paper Debora Musola and Mattia Oliviero present the process of constructing a set of graduated tests to assess the comprehension of narrative text in primary schools, set up in such a way as to be able to observe pupils' different skill levels: each type of information investigated had four levels of difficulty. The questions verified the recognition of implicit information and a selection of grammatical information on which the 'Logogenia' approach to comprehension of text is focused.

The article by Giovanni Bonaiuti *et al.* is based on the conviction that in order to achieve systematic implementation of educational robotics in Italian schools, it is necessary to start from a better understanding of the convictions and attitudes of teachers to this practice. The work analyses the results of a pilot investigation, carried out using a structured questionnaire completed by 117 infant and primary school teachers, followed up with a focus group, and reports on knowledge, attitudes and ideas regarding the educational efficiency of using educational robots, in addition to the inclination to make use of robotics workshops.

Tatiana Arrigoni *et al.* present some considerations on the teaching of Civic and Citizenship Education in schools in the Province of Trento. These considerations are the result of accompanying training and monitoring actions carried out during the second year of implementation for this subject. Specifically, use has been made of the main results of a questionnaire directed at all primary and secondary schools, the ideas emerging during discussion in workshop groups organised with teaching staff at all levels, and analysis of the documentation provided by schools.

Lastly, the article by Manuela Valentini and Francesca Cirigliano focuses on the prerequisites for school learning involving different skills in a transversal manner (linguistic-communication, motor, attention and control), which must be structured and automated before entry to primary school, so that the children are "ready" for future learning. After a careful and systematic review of the literature, the article presents educational research with the contribution of play-motor activities carefully designed to focus on the prerequisites for schooling, for children aged 5 at two infant schools in Urbino, providing a critical analysis and considerations regarding the data gathered.

To conclude, we underline the wealth of stimulation and materials presented in the "Experience and Reflections" section, along with the bibliographical and filmographic references contained in the "Reviews" section.

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