

EDITORIAL

The subtle appeal of merit. Opportunities and risks

In autumn, when the new government took office, Italian schools were presented with the news that the relevant Ministry was to change its name to the *Ministry of Education and Merit*. The Ministry's change of name is neither casual nor neutral, but rather illustrates a desire to affirm a political-administrative vision of the education system that promotes merit as way of overcoming inefficiency and regaining social recognition for the role and authority of schools.

Words 'create' worlds

By interpreting reality, words orient the way it is understood, conferring meaning and contributing towards giving it shape. For this reason, it is interesting to briefly retrace the evolution of the title adopted by the Ministry.

In 1928, the name of the *Ministry of Public Education*, established following the creation of the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, was changed to the *Ministry of National Education*, highlighting the autarchic nature of the emerging Fascist regime and an increasing desire to make schools instrumental in supporting the regime.

The birth of the Republic led to adoption of the original name, however with the adjective 'public' reinterpreted in the context of the dawning constitutional perspective of promoting the common good, while the administrative vision remained statist and centralist. From the 1970s, the administrative vision of schools instead moved towards autonomy for schools, with the name of the Ministry 'oscillating' between the more neutral *Ministry of Education* and the *Ministry of Education, Universities and Research*, highlighting an intention to consider education as an ongoing process interacting with research.

So what idea of the education system does the new title *Ministry of Education and Merit* foreshadow?

The new political and administrative direction undoubtedly cannot disregard the vision of inclusivity and promotion of active citizenship on which the legislation and reality in Italian schools has been based in the last few decades, implementing the dictates of the Italian constitution and European recommendations.

What direction does merit suggest?

This is a question that must remain open and will require critical analysis of the action taken by the new Ministry in the near future, to understand the educational value and impact on every aspect of the school system.

For the moment, the Italian Minister Valditara's thinking, outlined in a book written with Amadori, *'È l'Italia che vogliamo'* (September 2022), would seem to be oriented towards translating merit by making the most of individual talent, personalising educational itineraries to promote personal potential on a non-selective basis, placing reorganised technical and vocational programmes alongside more academically based secondary schools. The forms taken by these intentions will clarify the sense attributed to merit by the Minister.

Merit is an ambiguous term

As could be expected, the innovation has led to lively debate, focusing attention on the question of schools and not just for those in the field, a debate also extensively covered in national newspapers. The idea that merit is an absolute conceptual term, whose meaning can be easily agreed and objectively measured, is the result of only superficial interpretation.

Opinions have often been polarised, with on the one side criticism of merit because it is understood to infer competition, the absence of inclusion and selective intent, and on the other a vision of merit as generating opportunities for all as an expression of social justice.

Despite the ambiguity and pitfalls the term brings with it, it has an undeniable appeal. The reason perhaps lies in the intrinsic promise of social justice, of seeing one's own merits recognised. Who could fail to agree with a similar vision, designed to reduce the privileges of birth, overcome favouritism and recognise effective skills? However, even two centuries ago, in his book *Dei Meriti e delle Ricompense*, Melchiorre Gioia wrote: «*The ideas corresponding to the word merit in people's minds are, as everyone knows, infinitely different: they change in terms of object, degree, scope and extent, not just between one people and another, but also between one class and another in the same city*». In a paper written in 2000, the winner of the Nobel Prize for economics Amartya Sen affirmed that «*The idea of meritocracy may have many merits, but clarity is not one of them. The lack of clarity may relate to the fact [...] that the concept of merit is deeply contingent on our views of a good society*»¹. The word merit attributes a value to certain actions compared to others because they contribute towards achieving what is believed to be positive. To begin with, it is thus necessary to ask oneself about the scope of schooling and thus what actions are worthy of being recognised and rewarded with success.

1. Sen, A., Merit and Justice. In: Arrow, K. et al. (2000), *Meritocracy and Economic Inequality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 5.

Promoting dignity and citizenship...

In the introductory parts of ministerial documents orienting the curricula of the various phases of schooling, it is possible to find significant indications of what good schools should promote.

Purely as an example, it is possible to cite the titles of the first few sections in the *National Guidelines for the Curricula of Infant and Primary Schools*: 'The centrality of the individual', 'For a new form of citizenship, and 'For a new form of humanism'. The student educational profile towards which schools should work is clear and leaves no space for interpretation. The choice to orient education towards gaining skills that allow pupils to exercise active citizenship in the future, and not simply to acquire knowledge of determined subjects, thus demands that these introductory statements take concrete form in the everyday life of schools with a commitment to change the educational model.

The provisions on school autonomy reform also set forth the objective of promoting development of the individual, with action *«suitable for different environments, the demands of families and the specific characteristics of the individuals involved, in order to guarantee them educational success»* (Decree of the President of the Republic of 8 March 1999, no. 275 article 1, paragraph 2). The same concept is picked up on and specified in article 4, paragraph 1: *«Schools [...] shall put into effect national objectives with educational programmes designed to achieve the right to learn and the educational growth of all pupils, recognising and making the most of diversity, promoting the potential of each individual and adopting all initiatives useful for achieving educational success»*.

It seems clear that it would be simplistic to identify the adjective educational with school. We could instead translate it as allowing everyone to become the best possible version of themselves, recognising and making the most of the dignity of each individual, linked to improvement of their potential and not simply the achievement of performance. Paradoxically, there may be school success (if the school is oriented purely towards acquiring knowledge) that does not correspond with educational success.

On the 100th anniversary of his birth, rereading Don Milani may help to restore a sense of the role of schools in developing the dignity of each person through instruction, recognising the value and social value of culture in terms of contributing to the common good².

... for transformative lifelong learning

In the last twenty years, Italian schools have been actively discussing the subject of skills. Having gone beyond behavioural interpretation, also thanks to the EU Recommendations in

2. Starting from *Lettera ad una professoressa*, Don Milani's writing continues to provide stimulation and raise topical questions. Among the texts commenting Don Milani's thinking in educational terms, we can note Reggio P. (2014). *Lo schiaffo di Don Milani. Il mito educativo di Barbiana*. Il Margine: Trento (now available in Edizioni La Meridiana).

2006 and 2018, the concept of acquiring competence and skills has directed the action of schools towards promoting lifelong learning that allows each person to acquire «essential social and civic values such as citizenship, equality, tolerance and respect» (2006 Recommendation, item 6), along with «personal fulfilment, health, employability and social inclusion» (2018 Recommendation, item 12). Schools are therefore required to carry out their activities in this context, to allow each person to gain skills useful for interpreting their future, with a view to fully developing their possibilities and allowing them to exercise active citizenship. Skills, or competences³ referring to specific fields of knowledge (functional language, multilingual, mathematical skills, competence in science, technology and engineering, and digital skills) lead to reinterpretation of the sense and value of school subjects, not in terms of self-referential thinking, but as bridge towards reality⁴. Skills related to everyday life that do not make specific reference to school subjects are even more stimulating in terms of school activities: personal, social skills and the ability to learn how to learn⁵; competence related to citizenship and entrepreneurship⁶, and skills related to cultural awareness and expression. Recently, as a further development of the educational reflection at European level stimulated by the Green Deal, presented by the European Commission on 11 December 2019, the JRC published *GreenComp. The European framework for sustainability competences*⁷ which recognises social, cultural and economic aspects as intrinsically part of environmental sustainability, thus demanding a holistic approach to education promoting learning that transforms the current situation in the light of sustainability.

The framework outlined in these two sections, albeit briefly, offers an idea of school quality acting as a point of reference in terms of recognising what can be considered as deserving. It is a very complex idea of quality, undoubtedly going beyond a simplistic view of merit merely as the acquisition of quantitatively measurable knowledge and instead requiring the ability to assess everything contributing to the educational success of each person in the context of the common good.

Assessing merit

It is indeed relatively simple to assess school success if this is understood to mean measur-

3. The reference is to skills identified in the European Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 regarding key skills for lifelong learning. In: [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01)).

4. The contrast between 'self-referential' schooling and education providing skills presenting an introduction to reality through the contribution of subjects is effectively conveyed by Comoglio with the metaphor of wall teaching and bridge teaching respectively (*Insegnare e apprendere con il Portfolio*. Fabbri: Milano, 2003).

5. European Commission, Joint Research Centre (2021). *LifeComp: The European Framework for Personal, Social and Learning to Learn Key Competence*, Publications Office of the European Union. In: <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC120911>. The document is presented in *RicercaAzione* vol. 13, no. 2 (December 2021) in: <https://ricercazione.iprase.tn.it/article/view/48>. Considering the importance of the document, the magazine's management team supervised the Italian translation and made it available at the site as the first issue in the "Resources" series.

6. European Commission, Joint Research Centre (2016). *EntreComp: The Entrepreneurship Competence Framework*, Publications Office of the European Union. In: <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC101581>. In 2018a user guide was also issued: *EntreComp into Action - Get inspired, make it happen: A user guide to the European Entrepreneurship Competence Framework*. In: <https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC109128>. As regards this framework, attention should be drawn to educational use of the term entrepreneurial spirit instead of entrepreneurship.

7. European Commission, Joint Research Centre (2022). *GreenComp. European framework for sustainability competences*. Publications Office of the European Union. DOI: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/172626>.

ing cognitive performance. In this case, merit corresponds with a competition in which some win and others lose, almost like a competition that considers only the order of arrival, without worrying about participants' points of departure.

The problems are clear.

First of all, it is an *unfair* 'competition', because it should be noted that there is no justice without fairness⁸. To cite Don Milani, there is no worse injustice than to treat those who are not equals as equals. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider the psychological implications, with those who excel tending to feel superior and thus attribute their academic success to their own abilities, while those who fail instead develop a sense of impotence that leads to disengagement and lack of motivation, initiating a vicious circle⁹ reinforcing the perception by the individual, and also those assessing them, that they deserve failure. Without educational intervention effectively capable of leading to deconditioning compared to the starting conditions, as affirmed by Domenici in his extensive editorial: «*All meritocratic intervention, as scientific research and meta-analysis of the results of numerous surveys in the field of education have shown, reinforces rather than attenuating differences in interindividual learning, attributing the merit to the individual and not to their sociocultural origin, determined by chance*»¹⁰. By pursuing the ideal of social justice without real attention to encouraging equal educational opportunities, one obtains the perverse effect of transforming diversity into inequality, what is more legitimising it ethically.

Secondly, it is an *incorrect* 'competition' because this way of interpreting merit gives rise to a concept of schooling that is not in harmony with the framework outlined in the previous sections. These instead show that national and European documents give schools the goal of promoting the educational success of each pupil so they can develop lifelong learning allowing them to take an active role in society on the basis of their skills. Promoting the educational success of each person cannot involve characterising some as winners and others as losers. For this reason, attention must be paid when talking about merit, because as it is not an absolute concept, rather depending on the idea of quality in the context to which it is applied, it affirms the validity of a decidedly outdated idea of schooling in terms of educational debate and practice, at least in the last forty years.

Thirdly, the very idea of assessment applied to this 'competition' is *distorted*. It is indeed an assessment *of* learning and not *for* learning. The question is what purpose assessment serves. Assessment is also a complex subject, regarding which the perspective indeed changes depending on whether the scope is to monitor or develop learning¹¹, establishing its role in educational success. In the first case the focus is on reporting, while in the second case the

8. Lucisano P., Problemi di merito, *Giornale Italiano della Ricerca Educativa*, XV, n. 29/2022. In: <https://ojs.pensamultimedia.it/index.php/sird/article/view/6090/5153>.

9. Girelli C. (2006). *Costruire il gruppo. La promozione della dimensione socio-affettiva dell'esperienza scolastica*. La Scuola: Brescia, pp. 13-14.

10. Domenici G., Insidie e illusioni della "meritocrazia perfetta", *EPSC Journal*, 26/2022, p. 13. Doi: <https://dx.doi.org/10.7358/ecps-2022-026-edit>.

11. Castoldi M. (2021). *Valutare gli apprendimenti nella scuola primaria*. Mondadori: Milan. The translation of a recent paper by Hadji C. (2023) is particularly interesting as regards the concept of assessment. *Una valutazione dal volto umano. Oltre i limiti della società della performance*, Scholè-Morcelliana: Brescia.

educational vision does not consider assessment as extraneous to the process of teaching and learning, but rather as an important part of this, to the extent that it is an essential part of learning¹². The recent rules on assessment in primary schools courageously acknowledge this evolution of the international scientific debate as regards assessment¹³, while experiences of trials in secondary schools have also demonstrated the feasibility and fruitfulness of this approach at other levels of schooling¹⁴.

Merit and the Italian constitution

The debate over the last few months has also highlighted the constitutional roots of the attention paid to merit.

Indeed, article 34 of our constitution recognises that *«competent and worthy individuals, including those without means, are entitled to arrive at the highest levels of education»*. This value refers to a sense of social justice towards individuals, but also to the opportunities this recognition can lead to in terms of social improvement for society. The importance attributed to merit by the Italian constitution does not however legitimise a meritocratic system, as it must be also be balanced with respect for other constitutional principles, first of all those relating to equal dignity, equality and non-discrimination set forth in article 3, with which the Republic commits itself to *«removing economic and social obstacles which prevent the full development of the individual and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic and social organisation of the country, effectively limiting the freedom and equality of citizens»*. Applying the principle to the educational environment, this is a challenging recommendation that recognises it is not sufficient to guarantee the right to education, but also demands fairness so that everyone can effectively make use of it according to their own abilities. Indeed, *«while it is true that the compulsory education programme is guaranteed for everyone, it is also true that the school system, as it is currently organised, creates a form of selection from the very first months of the first year at primary school, and if we wish to go beyond this, even in terms of the possibility of experiences from the age of 9 months to 6 years (nurseries and infant schools to use the old definitions) in stimulating environments where it is possible to develop relational, emotional and social skills that make children more secure, serene, confident and open to learning. Our system guarantees everyone access to education, but within this system there is a rigorous selection from day one, perhaps unintentional, but not for this reason without responsibility, distinguishing between those who accumulate deficits and those who can afford*

12. Girelli C. (2022). *Valutare nella scuola primaria. Dal voto al giudizio descrittivo*. Carocci: Rome.

13. Ministry of Education, Ministerial Order of 4 December 2020: *Periodic and final assessment of pupil learning in primary school classes and Guidelines: Formulation of descriptive opinions in periodic and final assessment in primary schools*. For authoritative commentary on the text see: Nigris E. and Agrusti G. (editor) (2021). *Valutare per apprendere*. Pearson: Torino; Agrusti G., *Approcci criteri alla valutazione nella scuola primaria*, in *RicercaAzione*, vol. 13, n. 1, pp. 25-38. <https://ricercaazione.iaprasedn.it/article/view/50/50>.

14. Benvenuto G. et al., *La ricerca-azione diventa ricerca-formazione. Genesi e vita del progetto "La Scuola delle Relazioni e delle Responsabilità"*, in this issue of *RicercaAzione*.

to overcome them»¹⁵.

It is instead a question of enabling the full development of the individual (reference is made to educational success in the Regulations for the autonomy of schools) and effective participation in the political, economic and social life of the country (reference is made to promoting active citizenship skills in European Recommendations and ministerial documents).

Giving these constitutional principles concrete form requires a political and administrative vision of schools that is able to encourage the promotion of each person's talents, however many or few these are, avoiding the pitfalls of meritocracy¹⁶, but also everyday teaching practices that recognise and make the most of individual skills, promoting educational success for everyone¹⁷.

Schools betray their trust: the broken elevator

Schools have the task and opportunity to fully fulfil their students' potential. Thanks to schools, each person has the chance to follow a different pathway compared to their background. This is recognition of the right to education, «to implement the right of all pupils to learn and achieve educational growth » (D.P.R of 8 March 199, no. 275, article 1, paragraph 2). Generally speaking, the metaphor of schools as a social elevator has been used to depict this task. So is this 'elevator' working?

Analysis of the data on the school system shows that the elevator is stuck. Metaphors aside, guaranteeing the right to education by simply allowing freedom of access to school education is not enough, albeit necessary, if fairness and equal educational opportunities are not guaranteed.

«Of the OECD nations, Italy is the country with the lowest level of social mobility - states Liuzzo, President of the Guido Carli Foundation, making reference to the data in Global Social Mobility, a report by the World Economic Forum, highlighting that - in 42% of cases on average, the children of those without a secondary school diploma do not in their turn obtain a diploma. The figure is 37% in France, and 32% in Germany, while in Italy the figure reaches the record level of 64%. In short, those coming from disadvantaged families are much more likely to fall behind in terms of education, as if it were a hereditary gap. Without regard to merit»¹⁸.

Educational poverty is strongly associated with economic poverty, which is on the rise, according to the most recent data from ISTAT¹⁹, in terms of the level of absolute poverty among

15. Scalfi L., E se con il termine 'merito' ci riferissimo alla scuola e non agli alunni? *Il Sole 24 ore*, 24/11/2022.

16. Reflecting on meritocracy in the economic field, Becchetti recalled that «The history of the paradoxes involved in meritocracy has taught us that talent is not deserved, but it is important to stimulate it to produce results whose benefits can be disseminated to all citizens. One particularly interesting form of merit is precisely the ability to improve and empower those who find themselves starting at a disadvantage, for various different reasons, and seek an opportunity for redemption» (Il paradosso meritocratico, *Avvenire*, 5/12/2019).

17. Educational practices are not indifferent. They could be assessed on the basis of their inclusive potential, understood as the ability to offer opportunities for improvement to each individual according to their characteristics and possibilities. In this context, particularly stimulating reflections are contained in Tomlinson C.A. (2023). *La differenziazione in classe per rispondere ai bisogni di tutti gli alunni*. Scholè-Morcelliana: Brescia.

18. Liuzzo R., Merito, il fallimento "non detto" e il valore dei processi dinamici, *Il Sole 24 ore*, 11/11/2022, p. 16.

19. ISTAT, *Le statistiche dell'ISTAT sulla povertà. Anno 2021*, published on 15 June 2022. See: https://www.istat.it/it/files/2022/06/Report_Povert%C3%A0_2021_14-06.pdf.

children, going from 13.55% in 2020 to 14.2% in 2021 (representing 1,382,000 children). The relationship between economic and educational poverty is also highlighted by recent research carried out by SAVE THE CHILDREN: *«It is indeed children from the most disadvantaged families in socioeconomic terms that have seen the lowest levels of learning in the last few years, and these are also the children most at risk of abandoning schooling. Schools should represent a bulwark against the growth of inequality, guaranteeing all children the opportunity, to learn, experiment, blossom and freely develop their skills, talents and ambitions. However, unfortunately Italian schools have a longstanding scarcity of resources, obliging them to deal with educational poverty using very limited means»*²⁰.

This picture is also confirmed at international level. For example, the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on pathways to school success recognises that *«The data confirm that the socioeconomic context of origin is the best indicator for forecasting school results. Pupils from disadvantaged environments are overrepresented among those dropping out of education and training without achieving a secondary school qualification in most EU countries. [...] Academic literature confirms that pupils coming from unfavourable socioeconomic contexts tend to encounter more difficulties in developing academic and linguistic skills. They have more frequent behavioural problems linked to learning and low levels of motivation for learning and abandon education and training earlier, with lower qualifications and with insufficient skills for full participation in society»*²¹.

The effect of students' social and family origin as factors influencing the effective possibility of making efficient use of the opportunities offered by the school system has also been studied in Italy by Benadusi and Giancola, who have talked about 'spurious meritocracy', precisely due to the inability of the school system to guarantee fairness in terms of starting conditions for school pathways²².

Without suitable intervention targeted at promoting equal opportunities, accessing the school system with unfavourable conditions leads to what Nussbaum calls a "corrosive disadvantage"²³. It conditions other existential spheres and threatens the future of educational pathways, undermining the very possibility of individuals developing the abilities that allow them to exploit the right to education. The overrepresentation of non-Italian-speaking minors in vocational training programmes and their almost total absence in academic-based secondary schools is a clear demonstration of the effect of the corrosive disadvantage.

The concerns about levels of early leavers and those dropping out of school without achieving higher levels of education are amplified in terms of negative impact due to the phenomenon of low achievers. These are pupils who have gained secondary school qualifications, but

20. SAVE THE CHILDREN, *Alla ricerca del tempo perduto*, p. 3, published on 7/9/2022. In: <https://s3.savethechildren.it/public/files/uploads/pubblicazioni/alla-ricerca-del-tempo-perduto.pdf>.

21. EU, *Proposal for Council Recommendation on pathways to school success*, published on 30/6/2022, p. 18. See: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:3605c49b-f881-11ec-b94a-01aa75ed71a1.0007.02/DOC_1&format=PDF.

22. Benadusi L. & Giancola O. (2022 new ed.). *Equità e merito nella scuola. Teorie, indagini empiriche, politiche*. Franco Angeli: Milano.

23. Nussbaum M. C. (2012). *Creare capacità. Liberarsi dalla dittatura del PIL*. Il Mulino: Bologna.

nevertheless have not obtained the basic skills necessary to ensure adequate social inclusion, placing them at risk of increasing the ranks of 'NEETs'²⁴. In the last surveys by INVALSI, low achievers went from the 7.5% recorded in 2019 to 9.8% in 2021 (reflecting the serious effect of the pandemic), and standing at 9.7% in 2022²⁵. In a paper published by this magazine²⁶, Ricci, President of INVALSI, underlined the many problems related to this phenomenon, which requires both systematic intervention and a different type of teaching.

Talent is not earned, but rather a gift

In the previous section we underlined that merit, defined by the achievement of school success, is largely conditioned by baseline socioeconomic characteristics. However, merit is undoubtedly the result of a series of factors worth taking into consideration: personal talent, motivation, personal commitment, and the background of relational and environmental conditions.

Let us begin by considering talent.

A person's talent is not based on personal merit: it is a 'gift'; something that does not depend on the individual. It represents part of the diversity characterising humanity and requires recognition of equal dignity so it is not transformed into a form of inequality. Starting from recognition of the dignity of each individual, independently of the talents they have, the problem is thus how to make the most of their diversity to ensure everyone develops their own skills and finds a way to contribute to collective wellbeing. Interpreting talent in the context of meritocracy instead means rewarding some people with success and noting the failure of others, treating talent with a positional approach typical of competitions, which necessarily require losers so there can be a winner²⁷. An inclusive approach by schools creates an environment where the full diversity of talent is stimulated²⁸, in contrast with selective schools that only recognise some talents as worthy and penalise those without them. This position is often criticised as bringing everything down to the same level, however international data paints another picture: *«in general, countries with low levels of underachieving pupils also tend to have high percentages of pupils with excellent results, which suggests that excellence and fairness of school*

24. As regards this, the 56th Censis report on the social situation in countries notes "An especially Italian form of fragility is represented by NEETs, young people who neither study nor work, and for whom our country has the record in Europe: 23.1% of 15-29-year-olds compared to an EU average of 13.1%. In southern Italian regions the figure rises to 32.2%. Ultimately, they represent an impotent army of young resources needing to be reactivated" (published on 2/12/2022, p. 11). In: <https://www.censis.it/sites/default/files/downloads/Sintesi%20Fenomenologico%202022.pdf>.

25. See <https://www.invalsiopen.it/dispersione-implicita-prove-invalsi-2022/>.

26. Ricci R., Gli apprendimenti ai tempi della pandemia, *RicercaAzione*, vol. 13, n. 2 (December 2021), pp. 29-55. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32076/RA13207>.

27. Among the papers on the subject of meritocracy in the social and economic field, we note: Sandel M.J. (2021). *La tirannia del merito. Perché viviamo in una società di vincitori e perdenti*. Feltrinelli: Milan. Sandel is a major critic of the 'American dream' and the 'self-made man', because he underlines that personal success does not coincide with merit (talent and commitment), but is rather the fruit of several other social factors not depending on the individual. He highlights how an unequal society has constructed an ideology, meritocracy, around merit, morally justifying those who succeed, and condemning and humiliating those who do not make it, thus dismantling the sense of the common good and solidarity, which are essential elements in an inclusive and democratic society.

28. Lascioli A. (2014). *Verso l'inclusive education*. Edizioni del Rosone: Foggia.

education systems can go hand in hand»²⁹.

After having considered an ‘external’ interpretation of talents, it is appropriate to discuss their subjective roots. While each person has talents, they undoubtedly need to be recognised and cultivated to allow them to be exploited, as without action they would remain unproductive³⁰. This action depends on individual responsibility and commitment, which however develops in a context that can facilitate or hinder the process. In this context, ‘personal success’ is not a form of individual merit, but rather the fruit of supportive and encouraging relationships³¹. Recalling the prizes awarded by the Foundation to figures who have distinguished themselves for their social and entrepreneurial commitment, Liuzzo was struck by the fact that *«behind each of the prize-winners, there was one, or often more than one person, who had the courage to believe in them and invest in them. We are not monads»³²*. The commitment to developing one’s own talent requires a learning environment³³ with a relational climate favourable for self-improvement: these are collaborative contexts where confidence and promotion of a sense of self-worth stimulate intrinsic motivation and support attention-seeking. It is a distortion to think that the competition to excel over others develops the individual’s talents; in actual fact it dries up the relational environment fuelling them. When intrinsic motivation and personal action and commitment to developing their own talent is lacking in pupils, it is at least opportune to consider first of all the relational quality of the environment. This is because development takes place with experiences of success, creating virtuous cycles beginning with positive recognition of the value and dignity of each person, independently of the point of departure and outcome of one’s work³⁴. When this does not happen, due to excessive competition or identification of a person’s value with their productivity, this gives rise to vicious circles of failure contributing towards creating a sense of assimilated impotence in the pupil, leading them to disengage, one could almost say bury their talent, thus legitimising the teacher in ‘blaming’ the pupil, attributing them with full responsibility for their action.

Merit: individualism and inclusion

It is precisely consideration of the relational context as a positive factor in supporting individual merit that reveals an underlying problem: the ambiguity of merit is also a question of the perspective from which one observes it. Two different ideas of schooling confront each other here, one individualistic and meritocratic and the other instead characterised by solidarity and inclusiveness³⁵. While in the first type of school *«merit is linked to individual performance,*

29. EU Proposal for Council Recommendation on pathways to school success, published on 30/6/2022, p. 6.

30. The biblical parable of the talents can offer useful food for thought as regards the selective or inclusive vision of the role of schools: the coins are not distributed by the Master equally between the servants and on their return the recognition of their actions does not depend on the number of coins returned, but on the responsibility and commitment of having made use of them or not.

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

32. Liuzzo R., op. cit.

33. For further information, see: Castoldi M. (2020). *Ambienti di apprendimento. Ripensare il modello organizzativo della scuola*. Carocci: Rome.

34. Girelli C. (2006). *Costruire il gruppo. La promozione della dimensione socio-affettiva nella scuola*. Brescia: La Scuola, pp. 123-124.

35. Pastori G., Zecca L., Zuccoli F. (editors) (2022). *La scuola come bene di tutti, la scuola per il bene di tutti. Quale scuola vogliamo?* Franco Angeli:

measured and classified - with numerical marking and quantitative tests - over and beyond the conditions in which testing takes place (social origin of the pupil, school environment, quality of the teaching); in the inclusive model, other variables and the object of the assessment are also considered - relating to process rather than outcome - not so much the individual's final performance as the overall performance of the class in a cooperative and non-competitive context»³⁶.

These are two different value models orienting the decisions of politicians, along with the perceptions and practices of teachers and parents, independently of the legislation defining the public role of schools. Legislation is necessary but not enough. It is necessary to jointly build a common culture, understood as a shared vision, albeit starting from different perspectives, in the individual places where schooling takes place.

As regards this, it may be useful to consider the relationship between learning and the social relations experienced in educational practices. Only a vision of learning purely as a receptive and mnemonic activity excludes the influence of the relational context, but to implement skills-based teaching this vision is absolutely inadequate. Significant learning requires reinterpretation by the pupil, for whom the relationships established are not indifferent, indeed they are a key aspect³⁷, according to the social-constructivist perspective, making it possible to support higher-order thinking processes more coherent with skills-based education, as Anderson and Krathwohl's taxonomy highlights³⁸.

A further contribution to this shared construct may come from the debate that has developed on the subject of sustainability in the last few years³⁹. The climate emergency has increasingly raised concerns and an awareness is developing that the concept of sustainability is not limited to the environmental field, rather highlighting how the life and development of each individual depends on positive interdependence not only with environmental aspects, but above all with other people. In the *GreenComp* document⁴⁰, the JRC has proposed a *European Sustainability Competence Framework* to promote an approach to sustainability, not only at environmental level, but also at economic and social level, in different educational contexts. The COVID-19 pandemic we recently experienced demonstrates this: it is only possible to think about oneself or any aspect of reality in the context of the system⁴¹. We are relational beings.

Milan. Open access document. Sergiovanni, T.J. (2000). *Costruire comunità nelle scuole*. Rome: LAS.

36. Voce Merito da Tuttoscuola, *Il 2022 della scuola, dalla A alla Z*, newsletter, published on 31/12/2022.

37. Pontecorvo C., Ajello A.M., Zucchermaglio C. (1991). *Discutendo s'impara. Interazione sociale e conoscenza a scuola*. La Nuova Italia Scientifica (subsequently Carocci): Rome.

38. For a closer look at Anderson and Krathwohl's taxonomy in relation to teaching skills, see: Trincherò R. (2018). *Costruire e certificare competenze con il curricolo verticale nel primo ciclo*. Rizzoli: Milan.

39. Climate change represents a threat for the planet and the living beings inhabiting it. The European Union was one of the first players at international level to draw up a systematic plan for trying to deal with the challenge underway, thus renewing its leading role in the global fight against climate change. The Green Deal was presented by the European Commission on 11 December 2019 and summarises the new strategy for European growth, moving towards ecological transition with the general scope of achieving climate neutrality in Europe by 2050: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:b828d165-1c22-11ea-8c1f-01aa75ed71a1.0006.02/DOC_1&format=PDF.

40. European Commission, Joint Research Centre, *GreenComp, the European Sustainability Competence Framework*, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022. In <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/172626>.

41. Girelli C., Arici M., Quale scuola avremo nel nuovo anno scolastico? Dipende. Non solo dal Covid-19, *RicercaAzione* vol. 12, n. 1, pp. 9-20 (June 2020). In: <https://ricercaazione.iprase.tn.it/issue/view/31/30>.

What kind of schools do our pupils deserve?

In the debate about the Ministry's change of name, it has been taken for granted that merit refers to the pupils. From the considerations explored in this editorial, it seems clear that the possibility of developing talent does not depend solely on commitment and individual responsibility but is also substantially attributable to the family and social contexts where individuals grow up, along with the school environments experienced.

For this reason, it could be interesting to talk about merit with a change of perspective: *«if we talk about a Ministry of Education and Merit - Scalfi suggests - would it not also be important to apply the concept of merit to those providing schooling (the teachers), managing it or who have responsibility for its organisation and policy (the directors and managers of the Ministry, also at regional level)? Or do we really think that merit should only apply to the last link in the chain (the pupils), who often suffer from the inability of others?»*⁴².

In this case, talking about merit would concern the quality of the school system.

It is not possible here even to hint at all the issues involved: from structural deficiencies in terms of space and equipment and overcrowded classes to management procedures for all the processes necessary to ensure the operation of schools, procedures for the recruitment of teachers and managers and their in-service training etc. It would only appear necessary to underline a single aspect: one particularly delicate and influential factor in the quality of the school system is the initial training of teachers and managers, which would appear to be valid and internationally recognised for infant and primary school teachers, whereas it is dramatically lacking and inadequate for other levels of schooling and for managerial roles.

Asking ourselves what kind of schools our pupils deserve is an interesting perspective from which to consider merit. It is a question that should be kept open, so that responsibility is not always 'offloaded' to pupils, also when there are other causes.

What if we were to replace the MEM with the MEW?

What if the Ministry of Education and Merit were to be replaced by the Ministry of Education and Wellbeing?

This is not intended as a wisecrack or a provocation. The link between learning and wellbeing is clear: without wellbeing there is no possibility of significant learning, as the emotional and relational dimension of experience at school cannot be separated from the cognitive dimension and has a strong influence on it. Indeed, personal and social skills are closely linked to the ability to learn how to learn⁴³, representing one of the eight lifelong learning skills described in the European Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018⁴⁴. The decrease in wellbeing at school

42. Scalfi L., op. cit.

43. For further information on this important skill, *RicercaAzione* has made available the Italian translation of *LifeComp* drawn up by the JRC at its website.

44. Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018, op. cit.

and the growth of bullying are highlighted internationally as phenomena that have devastating consequences on school performance. In the recent European Council Recommendation on pathways for school success it is underlined that «*The emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and adolescents has become a key question in Europe, where around 10-20 % of school-age children suffer from mental health problem during schooling and half of them develop problems before the age of 14, above all anxiety and depression. It is a serious problem that has a negative effect on school outcomes*»⁴⁵.

To conclude this editorial on the subject of merit, we believe it is useful to list the objectives proposed to the members of the European Union in the Council Recommendation on pathways to school success:

- «*decoupling the level of education and school performance from social, economic and cultural status;*
- *reducing the percentage of underachieving pupils and those abandoning education and training early in the EU to reach the 2030 EU goals for the European Education Area;*
- *promoting inclusive education and training that includes fairness, quality, school performance, commitment, wellbeing at school, mental and physical health and respect for diversity;*
- *further developing, through mutual learning, a shared understanding of the factors allowing the promotion of school success and wellbeing, with special attention for pupils from disadvantaged environments*»⁴⁶.



We continue the editorial by underlining the wealth and substance of the academic articles in the “Research” section of this publication.

In the first, Federica Valbusa *et al.* focus on teachers’ social-emotional skills, highlighting how these positively condition the relational climate of the class and pupils’ learning processes, but also emphasising how necessary they are to successfully deal with the educational challenges raised by the school environment, including those linked to inclusion and assessment, and more generally to ethical aspects of the experience.

Lucio Cottini analyses elements leading to inclusive education and concentrates on the Primary Education Science curriculum, viewing it as an educational model strongly oriented towards training teachers capable of dealing with the differences making up and enriching our classes.

Gabriella Agrusti’s article focuses on the idea of continuity between nursery, infant and primary schools, considering dialectically the contrast between school readiness and the ready

45. Council Recommendation regarding pathways to school success (published 30 June 2022), p. 7. In: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:3605c49b-f881-11ec-b94a-01aa75ed71a1_0007_02/DOC_1&format=PDF. It should be noted that the term school success used in the Italian translation, given the considerations contained in this Recommendation, corresponds better to educational success.

46. *Ivi*, p. 9.

school, and identifying the training programme of the degree course in Primary Education Science as a possible model to be followed to facilitate a paradigm shift placing pupils' educational needs at the centre of attention.

Claudia Fredella *et al.* present the results of an intercultural and interdisciplinary programme on citizenship education and aware use of social networks by pupils in the fifth year of primary schools and first year of middle schools in Cesano Boscone, using assessment based on the exchange of experience between the participants.

The paper by Elisabetta Nigris *et al.* illustrates the results of monitoring Montessori experimentation carried out at the Riccardo Massa institute in Milan, the lead school in the "Montessori programme middle schools" network involving four schools. In this case a collaborative approach was again used, with exchanging of experience between the participants involved.

Elisa Farina's paper is designed to make a dual contribution to linguistic and educational research. On the one hand it proposes the description of an automatic model for the analysis of texts using unconventional spelling, while on the other it is intended to describe, analyse and understand the phenomenon of word segmentation by children, in order to make the relationship between learning and teaching more coherent.

The essay by Federica Valbusa and Susanna Puecher presents educational research implemented with a 2nd year primary school class. This provided for a drama programme to promote ethical reflection, and the carrying out of qualitative research to understanding what meaning the children involved attributed to respect, in terms of respect for other people's bodies, for the shared environment and the objects within it, and for other people in general.

Ivan Traina *et al.* analyse the question of careers advice for young people with disabilities, with reference to what takes place in Italy and Ireland. The study shows the need to plan careers advice starting from schools, promoting skills to effectively implement the rights provided for by the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Lastly, in her paper Caterina Scapin presents the process involved in drawing up a specific digital tool for use by schools, health facilities and families to carry out joint observation of pupils with disabilities, on the basis of the WHO's ICF-CY classification, and consequently to draw up individual education plans.

To conclude, we underline the stimulating contributions in the "Experiences and Reflections" section and the interesting mentions in the "Reviews" section.