

## **DISTANCE LEARNING AND PEDAGOGICAL RIGHTS**

### **DIDATTICA A DISTANZA E DIRITTI PEDAGOGICI**

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#### **Abstract**

The exceptional circumstances generated by the pandemic have led, among the main consequences, to a reconfiguration of teaching in schools and universities. In general, the continuity of educational practices has been ensured through an emergency response mainly relying on digital learning technologies.

This analysis builds on the issues that have emerged during the pandemic, on the needs and shortcomings – existing at different levels as well as on multiple levels (cultural, structural, professional, organizational, and systemic ones) – of the whole education system. The paper thus highlights that the difficulties in dealing with the educational crisis, which was already evident before the pandemic, are mostly due to the inadequacy of the epistemic structure of current pedagogy. By examining the main limits of the science of education, the author presents a possible approach to rethink education, as well as pedagogy, starting from the subjects of education and from the real needs for human formation.

Lo stato di eccezionalità generato dalla pandemia ha determinato, fra le principali conseguenze, una riconfigurazione della didattica nella scuola e nell’università. In generale, la prosecuzione delle attività formative è stata assicurata dalla risposta emergenziale di affidarsi al digitale come strumento di continuità delle pratiche educative.

L’esperienza dei due semestri scolastici e accademici trascorsi costituiscono dal punto di vista della ricerca pedagogica il terreno per un primo bilancio ma soprattutto, sulla base dei primi risultati raccolti, un oggetto più generale da sottoporre ad analisi. Muovendo dai temi-problemi che sono emersi, dalle necessità e dalle carenze a diversi livelli e su molteplici piani del sistema dell’educazione e dell’istruzione (culturali, strutturali, professionali, organizzativi, ordinamentali), il contributo mette in luce che la difficoltà di fronteggiare la crisi educativa, manifesta già prima della pandemia, risiede in primo luogo nella inadeguatezza propria dell’assetto epistemico della attuale pedagogia. Nel ricostruire i limiti principali della scienza dell’educazione, l’autrice presenta delle possibili chiavi interpretative per ripensare l’educazione, e la pedagogia, partendo dai soggetti educativi e dai reali bisogni di formazione umana.

#### **Keywords**

Distance Learning, Pedagogy, Cultural Crisis, Human Formation, Reform of Education.

DaD, Pedagogia, Crisi culturale, Formazione umana, Riforma educativa.

## 1. Digital Learning and Educational Crisis

The events of the last few months have accelerated the need of the school system to change and to face the health, social and cultural emergencies. The issue of teacher training and recruitment has once again become central in the public debate and in the political agenda of governments, and specifically, of Italy. Similarly, over the last few months, those marked by the Covid-19 pandemic, the need for renewal has arisen; such need is linked, in general, to the multi-faceted nature of present-day democracies and in particular to the introduction of digital technologies in teaching and work practices. On the one hand, all this has inevitably raised the awareness of the centrality of education and of the fact that it constantly needs updating in order to manage phenomena and conflicts that affect societies and people at different levels. On the other hand, the transformation of places and the processes for the construction of knowledge, the introduction of media communication, today's combinations of knowledge and skills, and the condition of youth, have urged us to think more carefully about a renewed profile of teachers and of socio-educational operators (Bruni, 2019a, pp. 103-122).

These are some of the aspects that invite us to consider and rethink the configuration of educational agencies to make them more capable of addressing today's students' human needs and more efficient in providing suitable pedagogical "care". In this perspective, teacher training is the litmus test of a long, convoluted, perverse, and inexorable history, mainly marked by political inertia and trade unions' instrumental opportunism, which have in fact prevented any authentic, farsighted action to improve the cultural and educational system in Italy.

It is a paradox that – as the situation recently generated by the Coronavirus pandemic has revealed (cultural, structural, professional, organizational, and systemic) needs and shortcomings at different levels and on multiple levels of the education and education system (Bertagna, 2020a) – once again the opportunity is being lost to turn the initial pressure to implement special emergency actions that could respond to the extraordinary circumstances of the moment into a real opportunity for long-term, bold, effective planning, to overcome the inefficiencies of the education system. Proof of this is that real problems have remained unchanged within an old education framework, which is based on obsolete cultural and educational aims; real problems have been addressed through hasty amendments, in the spirit of emergency response. Teacher training and recruitment still remains a crucial issue, a major sign of political and institutional failure.

The number of precarious teachers is increasing; at the beginning of the current school year some classes had no teachers in the certain disciplines; even unqualified candidate teachers were allowed to occupy permanent positions through *ad-hoc* laws, which has resulted into a regulatory chaos, with new provisions overlapping with – but not replacing – old ones (Bertagna, 2020b). The teachers in service, although personally motivated, continue to work with no training policy to support their continuing professional development. Furthermore, they work within a school system that was originally born as the privileged place to *educere* but has been affected by political designs aimed at altering, as history demonstrates, its most authentic nature (cf. Bonetta, 2020).

If we focus on the discourse on education, especially the discourse on schooling, we can easily see that it is largely concerned with the "engineering problem", as Postman called it at the end of the last century (1995). The debate focuses on the tool of education, while the "metaphysical" issue is overlooked. In other words, the idea of education is still bound to the conception of learning as a mechanical skill, whereas its broadest and most correct meaning as a necessary means to form personal identity is not taken into consideration. Something important is still missing. Today's pedagogical discourse and educational practices lack a reason, a narrative, to be understood as a "tendency to", a "motivation towards" what Morin (2014) defines as "the primary need for living": "although our education provides the necessary tools to live in society (reading, writing, arithmetic), even though it gives the (unfortunately separate) elements of a general culture (natural sciences, human sciences, literature, arts), and however dedicated to preparing or providing professional education, it is affected by a serious lack regarding a vital

need: deceiving ourselves and falling into illusion as little as possible, recognizing the sources and causes of our mistakes and of our illusions, seeking at every opportunity the most pertinent knowledge possible”<sup>1</sup>.

Alongside this deficiency – which is related to the fact that the complexity of human formation is not regarded as a continuous transformation that affects all human dimensions, from the rational-logical ones to the social and cultural ones, up to the most intimate ones –, the need is felt to improve the inadequate way in which traditional pedagogy investigates educational processes.

## 2. Beyond educational technicality: the centrality of human formation

The criticism levelled at today’s education systems and their inefficiencies – which have become even more evident as a result of the extraordinary isolation imposed by the coronavirus – is connected to the fundamentals of the gnoseology of education that inevitably trigger a short circuit between the pedagogical scientists’ announcements (of change, of transformation, of evaluation of multidimensionality, of the overcoming of scientific fragmentation, of the enhancement of the ICTs) on one hand, and facts, on the other. Such proclamations nestle, at the theoretical level, around anachronistic hermeneutic paradigms and, at the practical level, around the disillusionment about the expected results with a certain degree of intention.

Given the universal scope of certain phenomena, in the light of the metamorphosis of the processes of humanization, in the light of radical changes in central aspects of educational practices, such as the communication and interaction between people, the pedagogical rights cannot be denied or ignored. It is crucial to avoid confusing the means with the ends, the “what” with the “how”, that is, with the substance and the quality of educational actions that take into account the learner’s educational experience, the human relationship, and the corporeity as personal social interaction. Technologies cannot be understood as *a priori* tools, separated from people, who are only given the task of learning how to use these “objects”.

Educational rights cannot be simplified in an arena where technology fanatics and diehard traditionalists clash. The issue is at the core of training and identity processes; in a broader sense, it is a core issue for the survival of the societies themselves.

The problems that have emerged in the months of so-called “distance learning” are nothing more than amplifications of educational difficulties already underway and already denounced; that is, they fall within an educational crisis that has, first of all, the connotations of a cultural crisis.

The issue is very complex in its nature: from the point of view of the discourse on education, it is worth noting the connection between the physiognomy of current cultural models and the forms of education. Educating is first of all interpreting, that is, knowing how to process images and patterns to read and give meaning to the reality in which one’s own potential can be fulfilled. It must be taken into account that such reality is mostly modelled or constructed through the *media*, namely that «i media non *rappresentano* un reale “già fatto” che sta da qualche parte là fuori, autonomamente, ma anzitutto *costruiscono* il reale, lo *modellano*, offrendo quei paradigmi valoriali, identitari, comunitari con cui agiamo e facciamo il mondo» («the media do not *represent* a “ready-made” reality that is somewhere out there, and is independent from everything else, but first of all they *build* the real world, they shape it, offering those paradigms

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1 This quotation was freely translated from the French version of Morin’s book as no English version is available. Here follow Morin’s original words in French: “notre éducation, si elle donne des outils pour vivre en société (lire, écrire compter), si elle donne les éléments (malheureusement séparés) d’une culture générale (sciences de la nature, sciences humaines, littérature, arts), si elle se voue à préparer ou fournir une éducation professionnelle, souffre d’une carence énorme en ce qui concerne un besoin premier du vivre: se tromper et s’illusionner le moins possible, reconnaître sources et causes de nos erreurs et illusions, chercher en toute occasion une connaissance la plus pertinente possible” (2014, pp. 16-17).

of values, identity, and community whereby we act and build up the world», Lorusso, 2018, pp. 10-11). All this considered, it is in the spirit of thought that we can trace the potential that proves to be necessary – more than useful – to read the complexity of the real world in a “free” and independent way. The education of thought – critical and responsible thought – is an indispensable, powerful shield to avoid being overwhelmed by the dehumanizing domination, by the dominating techno-media (and economic) apparatus that hinder the possible authentic fulfillment of individuals, as well as the possibility of reasoning independently and thinking for oneself, i.e. a possibility nourished by creativity, subjectivity, and openness to new opportunities.

The only form of education that can be usefully implemented today more than ever is one which is not focused on shaping professionals; it is rather one that is connected with people’s life experiences, and can help them develop their intellectual and human potential. In another words, today more than ever, schooling must not provide vocational or job-specific training: jobs are rapidly changing and being replaced by new, increasingly unusual and creative ones. On the contrary, schooling must be focused on shaping the Man and, it is according to this aim that forms, contents, as well as teaching and learning methods and practices should be reconsidered.

The road to take is therefore the so-called “didattica della prossimità” (“teaching of proximity”, Moliterni 2020), promoted by well-trained teachers, educational support, cooperation and real inclusiveness. It is certainly to be preferred to an exclusive educational distance, whereby not every learner is involved (20% of students have remained excluded from distance learning), traditional teacher-centred lessons are simply moved to the web and learners are requested to perform meaningless tasks.

### **3. Conclusions: possible pedagogical perspectives**

Distance learning, in its definition as an open construct (cf. Pearl, Felisatti, Grion, Agrati, Gallelli, Vinci, Amati, Bonelli, 2020, p. 21), was identified as a solution for keeping education going in exceptional conditions, which will never be suitable to totally replace in-class education. However, it offers a special perspective for photographing and interpreting the world of life experiences, feelings and emotions, fears, weaknesses and sufferings, especially of school-age children and of teachers, as well as the consequences on the motivation to learn and the behaviours of all those who were involved in a new situation of loss and distance. From this point of view, distance learning is a real possibility to reform the traditional educational model in terms of time, space, practices and teachers’ mindsets (cf. Pentucci, 2018).

After the distance learning emergency phase, it will be necessary to rethink in-class education by integrating it – that is, by supporting it – with the advantages of distance learning, bearing in mind that in the near future it will be impossible to do without it. Digital technologies must be understood as aids to teaching and learning practices. Such practices must genuinely take into consideration individual needs for care; they need to be based on a new relationship with the real world; finally, they must respond to teachers’ demand for training and learners’ educational demands (cf. Giaccardi, Magatti, 2020, pp. 128-138).

As the results of some national surveys reveal<sup>2</sup>, during the emergency phase, distance learning was mostly implemented by embedding traditional teaching into online formats. In this phase, despite the fact that the continuity of education was ensured through technological means, some difficulties emerged; they were related to some pedagogical themes that are fundamental for teaching and learning practices (see Twenge, 2017; Rivoltella, Rossi, 2019): the focal issues of mediation in education, formative communication, evaluation of learning, the above-mentioned professional profile of teachers, and the needs and pedagogical care of students. Pedagogy is thus involved to support education in the re-elaboration of epistemological

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2 [http://www.almadiploma.it/info/pdf/scuole/esempi/esempio\\_indagine\\_a\\_distanza.pdf](http://www.almadiploma.it/info/pdf/scuole/esempi/esempio_indagine_a_distanza.pdf),  
<http://www.asduni.it>; <http://www.sird.it>

categories, which are still anchored to some ideological instances that have no connection with real human reality or today's educational needs. As underlined above, the educational crisis is primarily a cultural crisis, which directly involves the epistemological basis of pedagogy as it is known and the paradigmatic canon of traditional education.

In practical terms, although a reform of investigation methods and a renewed educational conscience with new aims had been advocated, the *form* of epistemology remains quite clearly anchored to ideological instances. These are hidden behind predictions that are unattainable both because they are unrelated to human reality and society, and because the sole pedagogical investigation cannot grasp them. Such inability of pedagogy is due to the fact that it is based on classical (Cartesian-Newtonian) reason, which does not understand what lives and acts in the other, unconscious spheres, i.e., in the shadow areas where corrective reason aims to restore order through censorship (Nussbaum 2001; Bruni 2016).

The traditional conception of episteme adopted by pedagogy is therefore unreliable for investigating objects, subjects, and realities that cannot be reasonably categorized and rigidly controlled. Such objects, subjects, and realities call for a type of rationality which for them can interpret the multidimensionality of existence and actually produce future horizons of meaning. These are only announced today; yet, at the same time they are almost unattainable, as they go in and out of fashion, soon become outdated and are never implemented. And thus education defies pedagogy: and pedagogy intervenes by theorizing, when educational processes and phenomena have already "passed", or when they proceed autonomously, and even when they can hardly be captured (Bonetta, 2017, pp. 25-30).

In the light of the most recent experiences, reforming education means giving new impulse to educational research, therefore overcoming the temptation to rationalize the *paideia*, to give up the opportunity – which paradoxically the postmodern era fully grants – to "open", to "fly", to "emancipate" the thought from the old and new dogmas that keep us down (Bruni 2018, 2019). Human training is no longer – nor can it be – a linear, controllable, logically predictable path. Between nihilism and possibilism, the two most obvious implications of the postmodern condition, it is clear that today's Western pedagogy and, consequently, the educational paths it designs, are based on immobility; the risk is to reject the spirit of construction and of a reconstruction that has never taken place (Lyotard, 1989; Volpi, 1996; Cambi, 2006). The pedagogical involution draws attention to the need to return to epistemology, to the structural configuration of this science and to the categories of the Western paideutic model (*paideia* as a regulative idea). That utopian impetus must be recovered and employed for a positive purpose, as an instrument of criticism, as energy operating within the science that observes historical reality and actual human reality.

On the other hand, Dewey (1938) had already stressed the Cartesian error inherent in the theoretical and epistemic itinerary adopted in the field of education. Dewey regarded the pedagogical theories linked to the most traditional foundational paradigm – which lends an abstract coherence to theories – as retrospective and reproductive. In many ways, Dewey and, in the years of the postmodern turn, Rescher (1988), challenge the nature of rationality, which is the foundation and engine of research. Following this perspective, it is obvious that the pedagogy of essence and education as a universalistic and dogmatic regulation cannot be integrated in the current cultural and social system.

It is evident that the man of today, conceived of and "educated" according to the dictates of specialism and denials, feels easily disoriented. It is clear that there is an increasingly marked distance between school practices and real educational processes. On the other hand, studies point out that young people learn more outside than inside the school. Not only that: teachers themselves have lost much of their social prestige, motivation and vitality, which should underpin their function (and mission). The school seems to be abandoned to itself, victim to inconsistent political designs, which even undermine that spirit of socialization and integration that has always been inherent in the project of educational institutions.

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