

## **THE FIGURE OF THE EDUCATOR BETWEEN PAST AND FUTURE PROSPECTS**

### **LA FIGURA DELL'EDUCATORE TRA PASSATO E PROSPETTIVE FUTURE**

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#### **Abstract**

The connection between the identity traits of the figure of the educator and the processes of change of the historical-cultural contexts in which he operates make it constitutively uncertain, at times almost elusive, constantly being defined, reluctant to any attempt at stabilization within a rigid and exhaustive review of tasks and functions. The aim of this work is to outline a definition of the historical-cultural framework that outlined the development of the educator, intersecting the historical, reflective-pedagogical, inclusive and normative registers, in order to reduce the fragmentation produced by different perspectives, trying, at the same time, to recompose the complexity of a history of training and professionalization that has always been affected by articulated processes of rethinking and (re)signification, open to pedagogical and public debate.

La connessione tra i tratti identitari della figura dell'educatore e i processi di cambiamento dei contesti storico-culturali in cui opera la rendono costitutivamente incerta, alle volte quasi sfuggente, costantemente in via di definizione, restia a qualsiasi tentativo di stabilizzazione all'interno di una rassegna rigida ed esaustiva di compiti e funzioni. L'obiettivo del presente lavoro è quello di tracciare una definizione del quadro storico-culturale che ha delineato lo sviluppo della figura dell'educatore, intersecando i registri storico, riflessivo-pedagogico, inclusivo e normativo, al fine di ridurre la frammentarietà prodotta da sguardi prospettici differenti, cercando, al contempo, di ricomporre la complessità di una storia di formazione e professionalizzazione che è stata da sempre interessata da processi di ripensamento e (ri)significazione articolati e aperti al dibattito pedagogico e pubblico.

#### **Keywords**

Socio-pedagogical professional educator; downside; disability; training of the educator; social inclusion.

Educatore professionale socio-pedagogico; svantaggio; disabilità; formazione dell'educatore; inclusione sociale.

## **1. The historical evolution of the professional figure of the educator**

The multiple transformations resulting from the processes of modernization of Italian society and the construction of the welfare state have given rise to the search for a professional figure, initially with functions of control, custody and assistance, but which was then oriented towards the promotion of collective well-being (Villa, 2008). Before the advent of capitalism, in fact, the security of survival was not guaranteed by specific institutions because it was possible to count on methods of managing educational functions and interpersonal help within the social group to which they belonged; women, the elderly and children of all ages participated in the production cycle and in the tasks of mutual assistance.

Capitalism, as an economic-social system based on the exchange of goods and services, introducing a distance between labor and private ownership of the means of production and distribution, created social inequalities that exacerbated manifest expressions of poverty. The Industrial Revolution accentuated, in turn, the separation between labor and exchange activities and other social activities. The spread of begging and wandering of beggars also changed the image and perception of social problems, leading to the formulation of questions of control and security that required organized forms of assistance.

The concept of education as a profession has taken a long time to emerge from the long tradition of assistance provided, since the Middle Ages, mainly by charitable organizations belonging to religious orders or congregations, or through private initiatives with beneficial or philanthropic purposes.

The ideas and cultures of service, which initially defined the aims of assistance as control and reparation and then progressively opened spaces for educational intervention aimed at promotion and prevention, were strongly influenced by the different philosophical and religious conceptions of the human person, his nature, his rights and his needs (Diomedè Canevini, 2005).

The function of the Church and of charitable institutions always placed the educational principle alongside the principle of assistance and material needs as preeminent towards a moral and religious conduct based on the love of neighbour and of God. The educational model also tended to achieve knowledge and skills, but above all it placed moral honesty and religious devotion as the main goals of education (Groppo, 1994, p.96).

Education was accomplished mainly through the example and lived witness of moral principles by whole and coherent people who posed themselves as authoritative and valid reference models for young people who considered them according to the custom of the time with respect and obedience (Groppo, 1994, p.97).

In the widespread educational culture, it is still possible to recognize some traits of educational work attributable more to a value than professional sphere, which have taken root over the centuries, assumed as "good a priori" without subjecting the related criticalities to an adequate analysis: the care of the other as a "vocation", for example, is the basis of the imbalance in the relationship between natural education and professional education because it enhances the propensities and personal characteristics of the operator at the expense of a specific training that is not immediately perceived and thought of as really indispensable.

Educational work can certainly draw on values of religious origin, but it requires a secular approach to problems, in the encounter with subjects who can be bearers of different

representations and belongings; to reduce the risks of intolerance, exclusion and conflict and support new paths of subjective planning, it is necessary to take an open look at what is possible and at dialogue, to listen and to compare different representations and values, the foundations of which must be sought and the impositions unmasked.

The confessional connotation of educational interventions has therefore been progressively integrated with the lay mandates that the modern State first and the welfare State later, have assigned to welfare and educational services.

Although at the beginning the State intervention in assistance materials and public education essentially consisted, especially in the Italian context, in a formalization of the existence (Villa, 2008, p.130) progressively reducing the charitable and discretionary trait, assistance becomes a public function and is configured as a right, recognized in a universalistic rather than particularistic way. It aims to prevent or eliminate situations of need related to age, to states of physical and mental disadvantage, to problematic conditions that do not find protection in normal areas of life. (Ferrario, 2015, p.41).

The problem of childhood and maladapted youth, felt in particular in the post-war period, assigns to the educator the normative role of "jailer" within juvenile institutions, carrying out actions oriented to adaptation to widespread moral and social norms.

The residentiality, prolonged over time, entrusts to this professional figure also the role of "parental substitute" (Macario, 1999, p.20).

The political-social movements of the Settantotto stimulate in the educator the awareness of the scope of his actions, which do not concern only the individual subjects, but have repercussions on the entire social system; he therefore makes his own a purpose that is not only that of protection of society, but also of possible and desirable change of the latter (Macario, 1999, p.21).

The double focus on individual-society has led over time to an expansion of the gaze on the context in which the individual moves. The interest in extracurricular education and the centrality of the social context begin to characterize the educator as an agent of change and to stimulate a discussion about his social functions; the interventions begin to be designed according to a territorial logic that seeks an integrated relationship between social service, educational service and family / relational network of the recipients.

The levels of proximity and humanization increase, to the point that in the years Sessanta and Settanta a radical criticism of the totalizing institutions is made (from re-education houses to institutions, from juvenile prisons to judicial prisons and asylums) (Macario, 1999, p.35).

The consequent experimental experiences of deinstitutionalization have started paths of integration and autonomy, leading to the closure of psychiatric institutions (Ongaro Basaglia, 1981) and of the so-called "special schools for the handicapped"; we are witnessing a progressive renovation of services, supported by a push for social and cultural change that seeks quality through innovation, emphasizing the need for ever greater educational skills in the mode of intervention on discomfort. We question the meaning of educational work and seek new strategies of action capable of producing individual and collective well-being.

The structuring of educational interventions starts, therefore, from a careful analysis of the contexts in which it operates, monitoring cultural and value changes, changes in the demographic structure of the population and the effects of transformations in the labor market,

which tend to increase the vulnerability of the subjects, producing new social emergencies. The themes of law, equality of opportunity and participation maintain a centrality in the spaces of thought of educational work as well as in the social and pedagogical debate.

## **2. Training courses**

The formation of the professional figure of the educator has been the subject of reflection and debate for a long time, to the point of being considered a "historical" question in the transition from charitable spontaneity, progressively integrated by the experience gained in the field, to university education. The historical path of the formation of the professional figure of the educator in Italy follows the reflections that developed in Europe in the fifties, when it was already advocated a training of educators that would tune theory with practice. The first International Congress of AIEJI (International Association of Social Educators), of 1952, coincided with the creation of schools for the training of educators. The Congress of Brussels, in 1954, laid the foundations of a methodology of re-education. One realizes that it is not enough to teach an educator how he can use his natural gifts: it is also necessary to help him integrate theory into professional practice and into his personality. This integration constitutes the capital purpose in the training of specialized educators (Zavalloni, 1967, p.278).

The first training activities aimed at educators date back to the fifties, and are promoted by public bodies (Ministry of Justice, ENAOLI - National Body for assistance to orphans of Italian workers, Municipalities, Provinces, religious congregations) in response to cognitive or operational needs related to specific problems or areas of intervention (Macario, 1999). The first training centers for educators were opened in the sixties with the establishment of the study center of FIRAS (Italian Federation of Religious of Social Assistance) in Turin and the ESAE Foundation (Ente scuola assistenti educatori) in Milan (Peirone, 2001).

Since the seventies, the most significant experiences at national level are represented by the two-year and three-year courses in Turin of SFES (Training school for specialized educators), which in 1984 became SFEP (Training School for Professional Educators); and those proposed by the Regional Schools for Social Workers of the Municipality of Milan, included since 1975 in the vocational training plan of the Lombardy region.

In 1970, alongside the regional schools, two universities were built in Rome directed for special purposes for community educators, at the University of La Sapienza and at the Magisterium S.S. Assunta. The schools for educators were closely connected with the Schools of social service, as the training of social workers with predominantly sociological skills was envisaged, as regards the social worker, or psycho-pedagogical in reference to an educator with a multipurpose and interdisciplinary preparation to be employed in territorial services for users ranging from childhood to old age, with particular reference to disabled people, or to people with mental disorders or with social deviance (Groppo, 1990, p.210).

In the eighties the National Coordination of schools for educators was born, to which the schools of Turin and Milan joined, as well as the FIRAS, the High School for social workers and specialized educators of Novara, the Regional School for social workers IAL-CISL of Brescia, La Nostra Famiglia of Bosisio Parini (L C), the School for the training of community educators of Florence and Lucca and the High School of Bari. The sense and effectiveness of

the didactic approach of schools for educators have made it the matrix on which the structuring of university courses in the following years has been based.

The debate on the meaning of the formation of figures responsible for education is still open and can be traced back to three main orientations, which show a prevalent focus "on the need, on the territory or on the contents of educational actions" (Scurati, 1994, p.41).

The focus on the need involves the development of the ability to analyze the contexts and the historical-social changes from which individual and collective needs derive, in continuous evolution of coherent and effective responses, as timely and personalized as possible.

The nature of educational phenomena must, therefore, be investigated in a scientific way, using a rigorous method, tending to the structuring of a dynamic knowledge on education, which follows "a spiral logic, open to the directions according to which specific discourses are intended to be built and deepened" (Gherardi, 1995, p.33).

The university training system prepares the conditions for this process to take place: the interdisciplinary theoretical knowledge, confronting itself with the educational practices observed and tested during the internship, provide effective interpretations to the analysis and understanding of educational phenomena and become anchors from which to start both theoretical and methodological research paths, tending to raise the cultural value of educational professionalism. The three-year degree, therefore, cannot be understood as a professionalizing course that structures knowledge and skills that can be immediately spent; it defines the meaning frame of a profession and provides basic notions and orientations that become the coordinates to be taken into account in the construction of a complex professionalism that is constantly evolving and, therefore, needs a permanent formation.

### **3. Pedagogical reflections that have helped outlining the professionalism of the educator**

The eclectic professionalism of the educator is based on the interconnection of multiple knowledge of pedagogical, sociological, psychological, anthropological, historical matrix. The educational gaze must necessarily be systemic and interdisciplinary in order to be able to grasp and manage complexity.

The beginning of the nineties were affected by a push to identify the elements that most influenced the pedagogical thought underlying the "under construction" identity of educators. Reflections have emerged with respect to the (re)declinations of different disciplinary approaches. Education is a very complex process, the variables of which are not always controllable and the outcomes are often unexpected. Education consists in stimulating subjects to be active seekers of new meanings of their being in the world. Although the processes can be conditioned by the deepest bio-psychic predispositions possessed by the individual for innate, genetic predispositions, however prior to his encounter with the environment, the margins for change are wide when educational actions take on rewarding implications, which become motivational stimuli to the experimentation of new cognitive and essential possibilities.

The phenomenological approach emphasizes the centrality of subjectivity: the person is seen in its particular "existential declinations", meaning its particular modalities of "being-in-the-world"; its history appears to be a reflection of "lived events" (Caprara, 1987, p. 322).

Educational phenomena are read in reference to their significance and the intentionality of the subject.

The educator is, therefore, involved in a continuous dialogical and recursive relationship with the subject and with the context, within which he is willing to invent, create, prepare places, environments, situations capable of allowing significant relational encounters (Demetrio, 1990, p.80); at the same time, he welcomes the resistance of the subject as legitimate and possible, leaving room for other experiences capable of inducing changes that are not intentionally sought after, but no less significant.

Focusing on methodological dimensions, the history of pedagogical ideas shows therapeutic, activist and cooperative currents as predominant (Demetrio, 1990).

The therapeutic orientation qualifies as a way of "taking care", responding to needs of care, adaptation, personal fulfillment and social inclusion through processes of facilitation, mediation, emancipation, that are accomplished through a discursive relationship, based on empathic listening and tending to the (re)signification of life stories. An activist methodology structures educational *settings* as regulatory contexts in which subjects can experience self-education, experimenting as protagonists of educational processes, urged to develop self-awareness and take responsibility for their own design autonomy.

A further articulation, accomplished by shifting the attention from the individual to social groups, sees in the cooperative dimension the concretization of a tension to change that has collective value and is accomplished, therefore, in the definition and realization of a shared project, albeit realized with different styles. The three educational styles, showing the theoretical and operational reasons, reflect the transformative intentions of educational actions. They must be analyzed and problematized to trace the salient pedagogical issues that have always questioned and regulated educational work and thus contribute to defining the professional identity of the educator.

The theories of the different pedagogists of the past whose thought a professional educator cannot ignore (Demetrio, 1990, p.107) can contribute to supporting this process; therefore, we will propose very briefly some "portraits of the author" taken from Demetrio (1990) and Cambi (2003; 2005), (sending to historical and reflective insights), which are able to represent particularly significant theoretical and methodological guidelines in relation to the process of construction of the pedagogical thought on which educational professionalism is based.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), recognized as the "father" of contemporary pedagogy, is responsible for the theorization of an education of the homo as such (and not of man as a citizen) through his "return to nature" (Cambi, 2003, p.153): experience, research, adventure, travel, become educational methods that put the child at the center of educational action, welcoming his needs and respecting his times and propensities; Social conditioning is subordinated to the stimulation of learning on a motivational basis and self-experimentation.

The activist and interdisciplinary pedagogy of Montessori, nourished by anthropology, biophysiology, psychology, focuses on an image of hardworking childhood, constantly committed to doing it themselves (help me to do it alone is the appeal that the child addresses to the adult), to self-transcend both their own chains of subjective origin (instincts, inclinations, needs) and the possible "deviations" of objective origin produced by an erroneous adult interference such as to cause atrophy, impoverishment, mutilation of personal life (Frabboni, 1974, p.86).

Educational actions affect both the subjects and their contexts of belonging, facilitating autopoietic changes through bodily and intellectual activities that allow the child, as an "absorbing mind", to learn to self-educate. The educator is attentive to processes, without assuming a managerial and coercive role; his function is mediated by the preparation of spaces, activities and scientifically organized teaching materials. The evolution of the professional figure of the educator is closely interconnected with the legislative changes that have affected *welfare* and social policies. From the conformation assumed by the social services we begin to derive the recognizability of the areas of intervention of educators, whose functions and contractual guarantees have been regulated at the sectoral legislative level, progressively expanding the participation of third sector organizations in the design and provision of services - through, in particular, the laws on social cooperation (law 8 November 1991 n.381) and on volunteering (law 11 August 1991, n.266).

The structuring of policies and services initially took place in reference to five problem areas: family and minors, disability, drug addiction, mental health and the elderly. Investigating and describing them, Ferrario (2005) shows how laws can be considered an expression of the cultural transformations that have taken place over the years, from which follows the complexity of the normative landscape in which educational work is placed. The professional educator is a social worker who, on the basis of a specific professional training of a theoretical and technical-practical nature, and in the context of extracurricular socio-educational and educational-cultural service, residential or open, directs his activity to the benefit of people of different ages, through the formulation of educational projects characterized by intentionality and continuity, aimed at promoting and contributing to the full development of the potential of personal growth and social inclusion and participation, acting, for the pursuit of these objectives, on the interpersonal relationship, on group dynamics, on the family system, on the environmental context and on the organization of services in the educational field.

The educator, therefore, is in the first instance an operator who bases his professionalism on the integration of technical-practical skills, acquired in the field through experience with a conceptual training that allows to reorganize, according to theoretical coordinates, an articulated practical knowledge. It is a clarifying redefinition, decisive with respect to the specificities of role and functions: he is "one" operator among the many (cultural and extracurricular animators, social and home workers, psychologists, etc.) who work in the social field (Marcon, 1991).

A significant aspect of this definition, not so much from the lexical point of view but substantial, is the attribution (from this moment on, definitive) to the educator of the adjective "professional": a characteristic that emphasizes the distancing from a general and natural educational dimension, charitable and philanthropic, qualifying as an activity, of an intellectual and operational order, exercised in an intentional, competent and responsible way. The professional educator sees the definition of his own areas of intervention in reference to categories of subjects considered most vulnerable, or to precise expressions of social hardship, assigning tasks and functions in terms of performance (Barbero Avanzini, 1990). The professional figure of the educator was born in the eighties because three crises were irremediable: 1. The crisis of the centrality of time-space school; 2. The conceptual crisis of those who have reflected on the meanings of education having only the school as a term of

comparison; and, finally, 3. The crisis of those who, on a daily basis, are professionally called to teach, entertain and socialize others (Demetrio, 1990, p.3).

We are currently going through a new crisis, which is proving to be multiple and complex, both economic and social; the crisis of *welfare* and the development system are, in fact, interrelated and require integrated responses, starting from new interpretative hypotheses of socio-economic phenomena (Orsi, Ciarrocchi, Lupi, 2009).

The current crisis also challenges and involves the figure of the educator, who can look at it with an oppressive concern (which risks proving dysfunctional, albeit legitimate) or convert it into a propulsive push for the rethinking of the places and times of education. The tasks and functions of educators can be expanded, especially with reference to the definitions of learning – divided into permanent, formal, non-informal and informal – contained in Legislative Decree no. 13 of 16 January 2013, which gives way to open interesting spaces for experimentation. Education, in fact, stimulates and introduces learning in the life courses of the subjects, in terms of alphabets (instrumental, relational, procedural) necessary to live [...], values and norms of the social groups to which they belong, but above all it activates thought processes that help to learn a possibility other than oneself (Tramma, 2011), imagining alternative ways of being in the world, weighing the practicability of new existential dimensions and the sustainability of one's own projects.

The meaning and value of educational actions aimed at promoting and supporting informal experiences, not attributable so much to specific places and times as to existential, individual and collective dimensions of meaning. The educational work, therefore, takes the form of coaching (and support) in the management of everyday life; in the observation and listening to life stories (sometimes fragmented or multiproblematic), in which episodes, encounters, experiences are intertwined in a seemingly random way, while they contribute to the (re)writing and (re)signification of existential plots. Every experience lived as meaningful leaves a trace, produces learning and is, therefore, educational. The complexity of educational work lies precisely in the need for the educator to maintain a broad and multifocused look, not limiting himself to framing the subject and analyzing it in detail to the point of fragmenting his identity into characteristics that can only be understood in relation to the social and territorial context of life. He is responsible for the search for the red thread that unites as coherently as possible the personality traits, the choices made or avoided, the nodes of the relational and affective network that are supportive or obstacle to the autonomous expression of oneself, the places lived not as empty spaces of transit, but as "hot zones" that create a sense of belonging. The educator is the one who deals with the establishment of a "field of experience", mediated by the educational relationship, which allows to experiment with other styles and relational modalities, to formulate and internalize new meanings through which to prefigure new design perspectives.

The solicitation to enter into the merits of the cultures of educational work, bringing out the representations and perspectives underlying its multifaceted declination, is one of the most significant outcomes of the debate that accompanied the parliamentary process of the Iori law proposal n. 2656, Discipline of the professions of educator and pedagogue, which was presented to the Chamber of Deputies on October 7, 2014 and approved on June 21, 2016, transmitted to the Senate on June 22, 2016 as bill n.2443 (text Iori-Binetti), Discipline of the



professions of professional socio-pedagogical educator, professional socio-health educator and pedagogist, and condensed in paragraphs 594°-601° of Article 1 of Law 205/2017. The latter has filled a regulatory gap, defining profiles and areas of intervention of the socio-psychopedagogical professional educator and the pedagogist, as professionals working in the educational, training and pedagogical fields, in relation to any activity carried out in a formal, non-formal and informal way, in the various stages of life, in a perspective of personal and social growth, according to the definitions contained in Article 2 of Legislative Decree n.13 of January 16, 2013, pursuing the objectives of the European Strategy approved by the Lisbon European Council of March 23 and 24, 2000 (Law 205/2017, art. I, paragraph 594°).

A key issue for the exercise of a complex profession with a profound political and social value, is the introduction of the need for university education which, in addition to underlining the scientific value of pedagogical culture and educational professionalism (Iori, 2018), includes the acquisition of educational knowledge, skills and competences in the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (see Law 205/2017, art. I, paragraph 595°).

Educators do not improvise: professional skills are necessary and qualify the scientific foundation of educational interventions (Iori, 2018).

One year later, an integration of paragraph 594° of the 2018 Budget Law was ordered, carried out pursuant to art. I, paragraph 517° of the law of December 30, 2018, n. 145 (Budget Law 2019):

The professional figures of the socio-pedagogical educator and the pedagogist work in the services and in the socio-educational and socio-welfare presidia, towards people of all ages, primarily in the following areas: educational and training; scholastic; social-welfare, limited to the socio-educational aspects, as well as, in order to achieve cost savings, in services and social-health and health facilities limited to socio-educational aspects; parenthood and family; cultural; judicial; environmental; sports and motor; of integration and international cooperation (Law 205/2017, art. I, paragraph 594°, with integration by art. I, paragraph 517°, Law 145/2018).

Within the draft law n.2443/2016 it was provided, with a greater level of detail, the indication of public and private services and facilities "in which the professional activity of the socio-pedagogical professional educator is exercised" (Article 4).

The declination of professional skills was instead matched in specific educational and training activities, described in Article 6, according to which the professional socio-pedagogical educator:

- a) designs, plans, implements and evaluates educational and training interventions and treatments directed to the person in the areas and services identified by this law;
- b) accompanies and facilitates learning processes in contexts of lifelong learning;
- c) accompanies and facilitates learning processes in vocational training contexts;
- d) accompanies and facilitates work placement interventions;
- e) cooperates in the definition of training policies;
- f) cooperates in the planning and management of network services in the territory;

- g) collaborates in the implementation of integrated systems for the management and enhancement of human resources and for the development of skills.

Educational work is complex and multifaceted, difficult to inscribe within a detailed taxonomy of skills, functions and areas of intervention that are often declined in a contextual way. Thinking and educating, therefore, in a continuous process of balancing between operations and theorizations.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The educator is a multifaceted professional who must know how to prepare favorable conditions for the development of change processes as well as for the awareness of their meaning by the many subjects (individual and collective) who, with different roles and levels of involvement, intentionality and planning, become co-builders of educational actions and experiences.

The educational professions have always evolved following the historical, social and cultural transformations from which emerges the perception of the degree of problematic nature of the individual and collective stories of citizens, whose well-being is instead guaranteed by the State, tracing the guidelines that guide the definition of a professional role exercised according to a social mandate. The meaning of educational work as a way of taking charge of social problems is, therefore, at the base of the processes of rethinking and requalification that affect, since the Second World War, the professional figure of the educator who, in the light of the recent normative recognition, finally sees the reduction of the spaces for delegitimization of the value of their knowledge and the solidity of their skills, expressed through the implementation of the transformative (or conservative) functions assigned and recognized in our time.

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