

EDITORIAL

The Italian school between celebration and uncertainties

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As a title of this editorial, we could have also written: *between good achievements* - some, actually, very good (rather than best) - *and missed opportunities*. Rather, deliberately missed.

A whole political class, obviously the Italian one, – who misses bravery and foresight, on the one hand (due to incompetence? acrobatics? fear to innovate?); and, on the other, is haunted by the absurd and narcissistic need to “go down in history” (but how? with a series of missteps?) – instead of making a serious school reform, it “complicates”, and has only complicated so far, the functioning of the Italian school. As a consequence, the Italian school has been removed from the top of rating in Europe and worldwide. On the contrary, the political class has obtained only the result of throwing mud on parties, social categories and, finally, on “pedagogists” – the object, alternatively, of critics or praises – and of attributing to the latter ones opinions and pronouncements that they actually never expressed.

Something similar happened to Italian university.

From the failure of the Gui reform in the mid 60s, a convulsed movement of reforms started, which, from then onwards, almost every nine years, smashed cyclically what had been introduced in the previous decade. All of this has gradually relegated Italian University in gradually lower places in the international rankings – while, in contrast, for example some Asian universities (almost unknown a few years before), went up in the vertices.

Moreover, we have fulfilled the not exciting result that the Italian higher education system – far from becoming more democratic – has only become a “mass education system”, that is made of a high number of students and professors. In the meaning that only “rich and deserving” students – as well as professors, maybe more competent on the side of the possession of foreign languages useful to the need – continued to have more and more chances to access culture and employment, compared to the rest of the

“poor and clever” students, representing now the Italian graduates who are inevitably “unemployed” (in the absence of a good planning of admittance to the university as well).

Going on in the editorial of this issue of “Education Sciences & Society”, we will organize it into three steps.

First: the “moment of celebration”, which seems in itself highly significant.

Second: the exposition of the contributions published in this issue.

Third: the analysis of the DDL on the “good school” in Italy. The debate is presently under discussion (in the Italian Senate), while we deliver to print these pages (without considering the implementing decrees and the eighteen months ahead of such additional decrees etc., and/or unexpected “surprises”, something usual, in this nation, in all issues concerning Italian school and university).

2015 is indeed a year of important “anniversaries”, particularly for the primary school which is the main focus of this issue. Once called the elementary school (a denomination which is still present in the common language), this institution celebrates respectively the thirty years (1985) and sixty years (1955) of the enactment of its programs.

Nowadays, these “anniversaries” are interesting because in this school year 2014/2015 the transition has taken place from “school of programs” to the “school of indications”, and a “national evaluation system” started and introduced the “certification of competences” for children of the first cycle of education.

Today, as in the past, the school, especially the primary school, is really a kind of social, cultural and educational “border” of our country, as well as a real “laboratory” of how to address the issues/problems that characterize, and will increasingly characterize the Italian society in this second decade of the twenty-first century (in anticipation of the “unexpected”, in the language of Thom and catastrophe theory).

Let’s consider, among other “themes” – only for example – the today’s challenges: intercultural, processes of inclusion of pupils/students in distress, or with disabilities, digital literacy. So, the school is, not less, an important boundary for the protection of the quality of life of children, for the first experiences of responsible citizenship by them, and in order to introduce them to the different cultures, today, in Italy.

Starting from these “considerations”, while - as we have already been written, and we will return at the end of this Editorial - the (anything but mild and harmonious) political debate is bustling around the bill “The

Good School” proposed by the Renzi government, it seemed appropriate to devote the first issue of 2015 of the journal just to the challenges and perspectives of the Italian school system, especially the “primary”, from the ritual question: where does the school go?

This number, as always monographic, does not aspire to give a comprehensive response to this endless question, but rather aims to offer, in a reasonable and argued way, some significant suggestions for reflection about the challenges and perspectives of the school in Italy, starting with some issues that we consider strategic, especially for teacher education and training.

On this issue are precisely focused four articles, contained in the present issue; the other three ones represent the significant framework, context and output to the whole matter under discussion.

The first paper by Marguerite Altet Université Nantes (and internationally renown professor and leading expert in teacher training and particularly in the field of “analysis of practices”, who carried out research in schools in different countries of the world, and directed organizations and projects for research and teaching), and Tindaogo Valléan Université de Koudougou and Mouhamadoune Seck Université de Thiès, is entitled *Teaching in primary school in Sub-Saharan Africa. The lesson of the OPERA research in Burkina Faso: observations of the practices of teachers in their relations to learning*, and presents a very interesting research on teaching practices (OPERA) in Burkina Faso. From observations of classroom sessions, questionnaires and interviews for students, teachers and principals of 45 schools, the survey has identified at best the needs of teacher training, contributing to improve the quality of education systems in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The following article *Teaching transposition: toward significance and legitimizing of knowledge* has been written by Elisabetta Nigris (Professor of Didactics and Special Education at the Department of Human Sciences for Education “Riccardo Massa” of the University of Milan Bicocca and head of the National Coordinating Committee of the Presidents of the graduate course in Primary Teacher Education; she studies the relationship between communication, teaching of disciplines and general education, as well as instructional design and active teaching methods). This contribution is motivated by the fact that teachers in training, once inserted in the context of real school, beyond their major concern to be able to “survive” in the classroom management and its dynamics, are wondering how to translate their theoretical knowledge into successful teaching practices, which make the contents proposed more accessible. Nigris highlights that the

problem is to give significance to knowledge teachers for pupils, to give meaning and understanding, not least, what constitutes the training aspect of a specific disciplinary knowledge for a specific class group. Where such arguments are placed also in the framework of the appropriate didactic transposition, making the proposal of starting from the “come out” of tacit knowledge, the way in which the students “will give an account of things” and give a name to the experience, to truly enhance the way of knowledge related to it. Such choice corresponds, in the end, even with the dual goal of being able, on the one hand, to “catch” students to their own ground and motivate them; on the other, to plan activities and tasks that can interrogate their naive conceptions and / or challenge them to build scientific knowledge formalized.

Closely related, is, therefore, the article by Patrizia Magnoler (confirmed researcher - with qualification awarded to associate professor - of Didactics and Special Education in the Department of Education, cultural heritage and tourism at the University of Macerata and scientific director for the training activities of the Degree in Primary Teacher Education of the same Department, and a member, to act as secretary, of the Executive Board of the Italian Society of Educational Research, she has, for years, studied and researched in field of professionalization of teachers and teaching practices), entitled: *“Peer” learning. An exercise in democracy*. It retraces some working models, which have compared the world of teachers with academic research, in order to develop useful proposals for innovation, to analyze in depth the learning processes of students and to allow teachers to regain a more epistemological-didactical knowledge. Starting from the research “on” and “for” teaching techniques, from “action research” and “collaborative research”, this article highlights the figure of a teacher-researcher “otherwise engaged”, not only because it changes the subject of research, but also his own personal posture, highlighting multiple modes of interpreting the forms of participation in a collective life and a common challenge. If this professional dimension is obvious, retracing the research practices in the school of the last 50 years - concludes Magnoler - in the ministerial documentation does not appear any attention toward an initial and in-service training designed to create a “teacher-researcher”.

This “theoretical quad” is concluded by the article *Competence of research and professional practice of teacher* by Katia Montalbetti (researcher confirmed - with qualification awarded to associate professor - of Educational Research at the Department of Pedagogy of the Catholic University of

Milan, and expert and organizational coordinator, the CeRiForm, who has long taught and researched on issues of methodology of planning and research in education, and in evaluation processes of training systems, with several publications in the field). This paper analyzes the “quality of teaching”, considered a key element in building a knowledge-based society, and able to guarantee social cohesion, economic growth and competitiveness. The lively debate on teacher education in our country underlines the disconnect existing between ideals and shared aims, on the one hand, and operational decisions, on the other, so that the profile of the “reflective teacher and researcher”, which is often referred to, seems not to have found, so far, consistent training strategies. The empirical research illustrated, therefore, has an exploratory nature and is the first step of a broader path, still in progress. At the origin of it, we can retrace the widespread difficulty by future teachers to recognize the relevance of the research competence within the framework of their professionalism, and, downstream of the training process, it is usually understood as a set of technical-instrumental skills rather than as a provision personal and professional innervating substantiated and, jointly, both educational activity that the professional identity of the person who implements. The evidence collected on the field, provide sufficient details to improve the quality of university teaching, allowing also to develop some interesting reflections.

Then, three articles follow.

First, *A “friendly” assessment for a “good” school*, by Luca Girotti (researcher of Educational Research at the Department of Education, cultural heritage and tourism at the University of Macerata and manager of quality assurance for teaching in the same Department, which has, for years, studied the relationship between educational research and public policies, the issues concerning the design, management and evaluation in systems/processes of education and training, such as the selection and training of university teachers of the school childhood and primary, participating in the project “Marie Curie” - 7th Framework Program). In this paper, the *assessment* is presented as the dominant theme and the strategic issue in the current phase of the Italian school, both on the side of student’s learning, and of the school system as a whole. Starting from the consideration that “for the student the over-evaluation is not imaginary”, the contribution highlights the need to achieve a “friendly” assessment as a condition, and expression of a “good” school, i.e. a school that cares about the welfare of children in primary school. The text analyses, therefore, the function and the charac-

teristics attributed to assessment in the “National Guidelines”, and then points out some elements that put “at risk” its nature of “accompaniment of the processes of learning and stimulus to continuous improvement”. Finally, a renewed evaluation is proposed in the name of “shared responsibility” of all actors involved: teachers, parents and pupils.

The following contribution *Col-laborate. The Italian case of the Serendipity school in Osimo* Fabrizio d’Aniello (Associate Professor of General and Social Pedagogy at the Department of Education, cultural heritage and tourism at the University of Macerata, that has researched, for years, on issues of pedagogy work and intercultural education, as in the past, also of poetry education, moral education and early learning; and, since 2014, director of a specific scientific series geared specifically to the “pedagogy of work”, and, for some time, member of the scientific committee of a magazine addressed to Italian pedagogical arguments concerning the continuing education). Starting from instances of collaboration that come from the contexts of productive work, the article comes to illustrate how we can strengthen collaborative attitudes since childhood, in view of the achievement of a mastery functional to work and life in general. With this aim the paper describes a positive example and possible educational experiences conducted by the school “Serendipity” of Osimo. Compiled with critical-argumentative approach, and also based on the results of unstructured interviews, this paper unfolds in four interconnected argumentative segments in which, first, the need is highlighted for collaboration expressed primarily by productive organizations together with the difficulties that arise in satisfying them, to clarify, finally, the object of investigation and perspectives explicitly pursue educational means; in second place, the shift is illustrated from drive-collaboration congenital interaction with environmental factors typical of childhood; in third place, the work is analyzed of the aforementioned school with regard to collaborative education; finally, D’Aniello illustrates his own pedagogical reflections on the matters addressed here.

At last, in “Alia”, dedicated to “other contributions”, but still related to the issues of different monographic dossiers, we find the article *Empathy as an educational tool* by Sabina Colombini (PhD student at the Graduate School in “Humanities and Social Sciences” Department Philosophy and Educational Sciences of the University of Turin, with a project on the role of emotions in the development of life skills in early childhood, and currently coordinator of educational services for early childhood). The author

reports on the World Health Organization, which recognizes in the so-called life skills, those skills that are essential for individuals to pursue their life goals and to properly operate within social contexts. Between the skills considered essential we find: problem solving, decision making, emotions management and more. But it seems, in the theoretical proposal presented here, that in the overall development of the individual, starting from early childhood, and with specific attention to the increase in emotional skills, a more important role is played by: empathy. The analysis highlights all its importance within the educational relationship, in particular in the first years of life, since it constitutes an indispensable element of and interpersonal relationship that can be defined as strictly educational. According to what the “theory of mirror neurons”, the hypothesis advanced here is that empathy of adults induces corresponding reactions in preschool children, although not all the care-takers seem to be fully aware.

Now, the third step, with reference to D.D.L. n. 1934 on the “good school”, and with explicit reference only to Article 22 (the former 21, and then 23, in different stages in The House of Representatives and now in The Senate) on teacher training, of which we here highlight the “points” that we believe the most fundamental and innovative. In our opinion, these same points clearly outweigh the theme of the primary school, and rather focus on the whole Italian school system, and promote the alignment of the future paths of initial training of secondary school teachers, with those already in place for teachers schools and primary.

Finally, the introduction of a unified and coordinated system – including both the initial training and procedures for recruitment of teachers, and in-service training –, entrusts the different training paths to schools, universities and institutions of higher art and music education, with a clear distinction of roles and responsibilities and within a framework of structured cooperation and mutual interest, which aims to promote the carrying out of research activities by teachers.

Again, the D.D.L. contemplates the beginning of a regular system of annual national selections for the recruitment of teachers in the state secondary school, with a three-year fixed-term paid training and apprenticeship (or otherwise not very dissimilar). The qualifications required for accessing this selection are the following: bachelor’s degree, or an academic degree of second level for the arts and music, consistent with the class specification for competition, but only in the case that students have completed, within the course degree or academic degree (or with further grad-

uate or academic study), at least 36 credits in educational disciplines, and particularly in educational methods and technologies, as well as in anthropo-socio-psychological subjects that are specifically related to the field of Education. With the possibility, in addition (but still to be verified and, not less, “think”), to create temporarily and experimentally degree courses ad hoc, since currently certifications are particularly lacking in the humanities - for example in low secondary school - or in mathematics, to reason as well as many potential subscribers etc.

With regard to the aforementioned “36 CFU”, we still need to explore solutions, to build *ex novo* a “training package” as well as a system expertise, to think about offering such courses, if possible in parallel with the degree programs followed by the students involved (as in the past, for additional “semester for the support” of the Degree course in Primary Education Sciences), or later (a sort of “bridge”), that is after obtaining the various titles of degree – perhaps using the CFU also free to those same degree courses.

With the obligation, also, during these three years, to achieve a degree of teaching in secondary (to be activated *ex novo*), lasting one year, to be set up, also in agreement with schools or school networks, by universities or institutions of higher education in art and music under (respectively, Article 3, paragraph 7, of the Minister of Education, University and Research n. 270 of 22 October 2004 and Article 3, paragraph 5, of the decree of the President of 8 July 2005 n. 212). This specialized course is intended to complete the preparation in teaching, pedagogy and education of future teachers; while it is hoped, given their very specific nature, that it can be hinged at the departments of Education Sciences, or similar, or where these skills are more present in the different universities. Providing not less, in that regard, appropriate tutorial teachers.

The other “open” problem concerns the “position” of this course in the three years: whether in the first year, or, rather, between the end of the first and second years, as a sort of “meta-structure reflexive” to guide training, with additional internships, workshops and interdisciplinary etc. With gradual assumption of “teaching function”, also in replacement of teachers “absent” at schools or school networks mentioned. And with the transformation, at the end of the three years, of fixed-term contracts for training and apprenticeship into a permanent contract as a professor, on condition that the activity carried out by people has been successfully evaluated by the regional school system, in cooperation with universities. And the same prediction that overcoming the modalities and procedures relating to those

three years to become, gradually, the only access to teaching in the state secondary school, as well for making the substitutions. And the subsequent reorganization of disciplinary classes and the rules governing the allocation of the teachings in the specific class according to the principles of simplification and flexibility, after the assessment of competences required. Until you reach the progressive abolition of the present qualifying title of teaching in secondary schools, while “we would like” that the achievement of such a specializing degree constitutes, nevertheless, the title needed to enable the teaching in private schools for teaching Catholic religion in public schools (subject to the provisions of the decree of the President of the Republic December 16, 1985 n. 751 and the Law of 18 July 2003 n. 186).

Still to be debated, and defined (as for the curriculum) is the future training path for support teachers: with the current one-year course of specialization (or maybe two-years, as a possible alternative), followed by other courses or master more targeted about different disabilities (about autism, specific DSA, hyperactivity etc.); or with a new degree focused on this specific teaching role (an hypothesis that we are absolutely against), and clearly differentiated from the “regular” teacher. Going on, in this way, to break even the class group into two distinct sub-groups: the children “so-called normal” and one of “pupils in difficulty”, a sort of “special class” within a “normal” class. Something that would throw back the legislation, the educational as well as the social, civil and democratic culture of inclusion (that was, in Italy, a “positive symbol of progress”).

Such a comprehensive reform of the Italian school can not be addressed and discussed with a national perspective only; on the contrary we need an international comparison, in a life-giving and enlightening process, which is able to bring back the school on a worldwide, competitive and innovative scenario.

This is the reason of the joint signing of this Editorial with Mrs Simone Aparacida Capellini – who already co-signed previous Editorials in 2013 and 2014, too – from the State University “Julio de Mesquita Filho” of San Paolo in Brazil, with which we are intensifying important scientific relationship of research, mutual benefit, and that has the topics addressed in this issue among its main areas of investigation and proposal.