

For a pedagogy of the subject: the centrality of the person in educational interventions

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ABSTRACT. – This article proposes and expounds a professional point of view on contemporary pedagogical knowledge and practices, focusing in particular on the centrality of the subjects in education. Pedagogical knowledge is in a state of ‘uncertainty and precariousness’, leaving open a number of core issues concerning educational, cultural and social models. The clarification of the ‘precariousness’ of educational work deserves to be acknowledged: uncertainty becomes a healthy weakness, as Sergio Tramma points out in ‘L’educatore imperfetto’, the ‘unstable constitution’ of the educational area is its intrinsic strength because it represents the constant openness to transformation, to possibility, to the reading of change. What tension should accompany the educational mission of professionals working in the field of social sciences, which values should accompany educational action, and, finally, which proposals can be activated to create a fertile pedagogical terrain harbinger of ideas? The paradigm of complexity that runs through ‘social knowledge’ should not only concern itself with the problems inherent to readings of the contemporary world, but also activate unexpected energies and resources, promoting a rethinking of the role of the competences of all the functions having an educational-social value (teacher, territorial educator, social worker, community animator, psychologist, mentor). The challenge is to generate theories and transformative experiences that can restore a leading role to the subjects in education, both in their individual as well as in their collective roles.

Key words: Person; education; complexity; synergy; educational community.

Which subject?

The training of people represents an important pathway that makes it possible to provide adequate and particularly intense readings of the people themselves. In my personal case, it is no coincidence that my studies were oriented in a double direction, that of philosophy and that of the human sciences, in particular pedagogy. In preparing to write this article, I cannot therefore refrain from thinking of myself first of all as a human subject,

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secondly as a teacher of history and philosophy, and finally and even more importantly, as a pedagogue.

Constructing a view that can represent and condense the three dimensions would provide an opportunity to analyse the theme of the subject and its centrality within the world system.

There is a very suggestive reading by Franco Cambi which in my opinion reflects a significant current condition of the subject.

‘In the course of the 20th century, in the sciences, in philosophy, in social psychology itself and in the lifestyle of mass technological societies, the Western subject, as it came to be delineated in its long history dating back to classical Greece, moving forward and becoming ever more complex in the Christian world, and finally reaching the bourgeois, capitalist modern era, has been radically called into question and has proposed, in today’s culture, the ‘question of the subject’ which Postmodernism by no means archived. On the contrary: it has decanted and become ever more complex. The deconstructive process of Western subjectivity has been examined several times, in the crisis of the cogito (think of Nietzsche), in the acknowledgement of the a-priori innervating it (think of Freud’s unconscious), in the downgrading of consciousness, in the discovery of the biological roots of its behaviour, already inscribed in the DNA.

All this has outlined the decline of the sapiens theoreticus model of Western man, and called into question all traditional humanism, to the extreme theories of the death of man’.

There are echoes in the background of these words an extreme suggestion that destabilises and at the same time fascinates even those who, like me, work in the unlimited and uncertain field of education. In this framework emerges the awareness of living an epochal crisis of man as a subject, man who no longer knows how to distinguish the boundaries of humanities, who has lost sight of the horizon of meaning, and who is laboriously searching for new identities to the point of already imagining a post-human condition.

It is in the cultural climate of postmodernity and in relation to the profound repercussions that this climate has on individuals and their existence - both personal and social - that the question of the subject becomes central and a priority in pedagogical reflection.

Even though it is with reference to the acquisition of useful skills to cope with the uncertainty, disorientation and lack of meaning typical of the present time that the ‘fundamental’ educational needs of individuals are defined today, these individuals are then called upon to continuously determine and construct themselves in the absence of models, of criteria, of certain or evidential terms of reference.

Hence the decisive role of educational intervention. Hence also the difficulties that pedagogical theorising encounters in defining this intervention.

In our social context, a number of profound changes have altered people's behaviour and lifestyles, confronting us with questions that inevitably imply a problematisation of education and the identification of training practices for the orientation of the subject. The tendencies of today's society, in this particular historical moment, perceive education as being pushed towards efficient, productive models, which reduce man to a predominantly economic dimension, as a producer-consumer.

Those who work and operate in the field of training for human resources would like to see paths that are capable of orienting the training of post-modern man in the direction of enhancing the humanistic character, an objective that is increasingly difficult to sustain in today's reality.

For example, in the context of school education, the recent dissemination of the so-called STEM disciplines, an acronym for Science, technology, engineering and maths, has led to the addition of the A in Arts, and become STEAM, as if to emphasise the need for a profound dialogue between the world of technology and the world of being, and has raised a fundamental question: what kind of subject do we want to shape for the future? How to orientate learners and with which values?

Imagining a reference value range for developing subjects, as they have been termed, has become a difficult operation, often requiring intense metacognitive work on one's own figure as educator and pedagogue. In the uncertain semantic and practical horizon linked to interventions in the field, the educator's thoughts and actions risk, on the one hand, not having a sufficiently coherent basis and, on the other, charting uncertain and unreliable paths.

My own work - I work mainly with adolescents - certainly suffers from the ambience of precariousness enveloping the educational context. Traditional educational agencies are struggling to cope with the consolidation of practices that are hard to challenge and are based on efficiency and consumption.

Promoting new or at least different issues is often viewed with indifference or, even worse, with a strong sense of criticism. The spread of youth violence, for example, has become the terrain of dialogue only for so-called experts and is not explored from the inside, by and with the young people themselves.

When facing the sense of bewilderment that at times pervades the pedagogical approach, there appears an urgent need to recover some traditional instances that refer precisely to the centrality of the subject, making it possible to avoid false and easy generalisations about subjects.

The absence of certainty and stability and the possibility of walking uncertain, even impossible, paths, places pedagogy, like any other science, before new challenges in order to enable the subject to cope with innovative tools and methodologies.

As some of the classic pedagogical demands on which traditional

educational assumptions have been based have disappeared, pedagogy is faced with the need to reformulate its epistemological status and its theoretical and pragmatic apparatus.

There is the need to develop new training paradigms that enable individuals to grasp and accommodate the complexity of reality and redefine subjectivities.

The continuous construction-deconstruction of the self, which our new life system entails, requires from the subject a capacity for orientation, which only training can offer and ensure.

The current categories of multiplicity, precariousness, transience, aleatoriness, represent the only possible horizon in order to grasp, in a reality in continuous and rapid transformation, the terms of human and social development, as well as the sense and direction of an educational action that can be translated into effective orientation practices.

It is a question of training people, subjects open to the formation of a pluralism of ideas and cultures, to the construction of management and control devices for governance, to the development of integration processes in every sphere, as a premise for coexistence based on solidarity in an increasingly expanding and enlarged world. Subjects capable of developing systems of orientation and self-orientation in diverse personal, social and cultural spheres, in order to ensure the promotion of environments capable of preserving formulas of life that are the bedrock of humanity.

The centrality of the subject

I have been working for about twenty-five years in the field of education, in the formal sphere as a teacher in schools (for about 10 years), and in the informal sphere in socio-educational projects in youth centres, street education projects, listening spaces.

Our projects have been mainly aimed at adolescents; for several years now, I have been meeting up with hundreds of girls and boys on a daily basis, both at school and outside school: the possibility of moving through both spheres, the institutional and the informal sphere linked to adolescents' leisure time, has allowed me to activate a two-fold gaze, capable of observing the rich polyphonic panorama of adolescence.

It is a multifaceted, all-round view that needs to come to terms with the complexity of the educational interventions proposed to subjects in that age group, interventions that have multiplied and taken on different forms over the years. The educational institution itself has mutated over the decades and today, more than ever before, it is trying to come to terms with the epochal changes we human beings are experiencing in terms of self-formation and personal development.

It seems to me that we can glimpse a shared horizon in the analysis of this phenomenon; over the years, the theoretical corpus linked to the academic world, the institutional corpus, and those working in the third sector have increasingly focused their attention on the adolescent as a subject.

Writing this article has strongly called to mind this suggestion and its powerful image: adolescence as a category and its translation into action have taken shape thanks to a strong collective awareness which identifies the young people of our territories as potential protagonists and not just passive spectators of the adult world.

Today I can say that one of the first lessons I learned at the beginning of my career was the centrality of the person. A statement which might seem banal in its power and breadth of vision. The subjectivity of the person facing you, with his psychological substrate, his body, his actions.

I remember the first time I heard the statement, uttered by an elementary school teacher, Maria Munarini, to whom a park has been dedicated in my hometown, Parma; it invited me to reflect on the fact that in my educational interventions I should always put the person, their individuality, at the centre, not the idea of that person, not the symbol, not the category.

It was a revelation, within a cultural humus made up of the great pedagogues of the past, whom I got to know along the way: Don Milani, Freire, Mario Lodi.

My degree in Educational Sciences from Milano Bicocca has given me the clinical viewpoint of a trainer working in the social field, thanks to figures such as Massa and Demetrio.

The clinical approach to education proposed by Massa helps to contextualise and historicise educational techniques through the lens of complexity, in order to better master them. 'It is education that through the dimensions intrinsic to its apparatus refers to the corresponding ones in the natural and biological, psychological, social, cultural, semiotic and historical order. In other words, it assigns to existence its concrete aptitude. It is through education as a comprehensive apparatus for each of them that the transition between nature and culture, and the unfolding of history takes place' (Massa, cit.).

The discovery of education as an unavoidable faculty in the determination of persons and of the subject in general. Pedagogy is set up as an independent discipline with its own dignity, in constructive dialogue with psychology, philosophy and ethics.

The experiences encountered in the field were gradually and simultaneously accompanied by their symbolisation, enabling me to focus on the construction of pedagogical apparatuses designed and structured in accordance with the contexts. The setting up of a listening space, the preparation of a socialising space, the management of a group of adolescents in a project are all dimensions which primarily require the creation of a pedagogical setting which considers diverse issues.

The centrality of the subject is one of them: it is the most important, as well as the respect for time and space, the attention to the bodies, to the gaze.

The activation of a clinical view, which should not refer to a medical or psychoanalytical approach, recalls the need to value the individual, the subject, with a strong importance attached to the dimensions of listening and observation. At the same time, the meeting of a clinical pedagogical viewpoint with clinical psychology can undoubtedly promote a constructive exchange.

This kind of approach allows the educator to suspend his planning intentions and to place the interpretative dimension only at the end of the process. It is the hermeneutic character of the pedagogical potential inherent to the clinical view that helps to build shared interpretations. Education becomes an ongoing wager on the subject, through a symmetrical and not hierarchical relationship.

In my training and professional experience, the encounter with the other, and in particular with adolescents, has meant activating diverse interpretative looks, reinterpreting the role of educator several times, interpreting symbols and myths of the subject in education. In the most difficult situations, the activation of this view allows the unravelling of the web of myths and latencies that usually involve the suffering, deviant, problematic subject.

In the best conditions, the educational process achieves the miracle of involving both the subjects in action, educator and learner, through the partial re-reading of their own representations, of the mental schemes linked to their roles, of the cultural models that guide the logic of interpretation and understanding of reality. The possibility of re-visiting these processes together sometimes brings magic to the encounter, which becomes 'naked', natural, able to produce education.

The educating subject

What are the characteristics of the educating subject? Is there a sort of toolbox through which each person approaching the profession of educator can use as a guiding light, as a sort of user manual?

The answer is ambivalent and may seem ambiguous, it can be affirmative but can also be negative if some characteristics of the subject are not in line with the suggested practices. After years of experience in the field, I can state that there is a sort of general alchemical formula for educators, a sort of empathic stance that certainly helps from the very beginning to understand who is best suited to carry out this profession.

Practice in the field allows me to theorise a kind of attitude which motivates the subject who intends to educate, the subject who is going to educate with a leading role in his territory, in schools, in social spaces, in the educating community.

Adults who take on the challenge of originality, of novelty, even impropriety in their relations with others, and in particular with the new generations, must be able to surprise, to unhinge and open up a gap in the daily routine and the distinctive rhythm of everyday life; in short, they must have a different light in their eyes, in their gaze and in their body, which really and truly determine a posture recognisable in the act of education.

Anyone approaching the educational experiment should at least try to take on this kind of positive outlook, which lights up at the mere sight of a group of children, yearning to take on the challenge of education.

Educators, teachers, social workers, psychologists, any professional wishing to come into meaningful contact with the other, in this case the Other Adolescent, should aspire to this kind of posture, which I would call 'mystical', a sort of innate garment that one almost does not need to show off because one has had it since adolescence. And adolescence in these people still inhabits vast spaces, often invalidating the educational effort by a sort of excess of youth, often giving the educational actor intoxicating moments of professional life.

Are there any working hypotheses for those who focus their professional tension on the subject, and can one formulate working guidelines for those who work with children and adolescents on a daily basis?

The answer is obviously affirmative, a number of guiding practices can be condensed and some avenues can be traced.

First of all, it is necessary to suspend judgement on adolescence and its protagonists, to risk a sort of epoch of the judging gaze that adults tend to construct and materialise around the myth of adolescence. Unfortunately, as in any discipline, categorisations and generalisations do not help except at the end of a very dense process of identifying the centrality of the subjects: teenagers are different, they have different family and social histories, they come from different cultures and subcultures. The clumsy adult attempt to create categories and adopt a uniform vocabulary fails to restore the heterogeneous picture of the manifestations of this age.

Secondly, clearing the field of the judgmental logic that states 'today's young people do not...', judging young people for what they are not, defining them through a logic of lexical subtraction does not help to weave constructive threads. Judging through the 'not' generates a flattened and undoubtedly partial view.

The same precariousness emerges in reverse, in what is still one of the most important educational agencies, the school, where judgement is passed on accumulation of knowledge, where learning is sequential and gradual. There is no provision for personalised, intuitive, plural, multi-directional learning.

Again, as Marchesi states in '*Cose da fare con i giovani*' ('Things to do with young people'), 'we need to build bold working hypotheses, to offer

alternatives to current events, to the society of the image, to consumption. We need to take the risk of proposing pathways that really bring transformative dynamics into play, to wager on intergenerational projects, encouraging generative experiences’.

Finally, there is the education of care, which is aimed at the weakest subjects, those in difficulty. There is a beautiful phrase by Heidegger that says: ‘care has to do with existence, indeed it is the structure of existence’.

It is precisely the urgency of care that accompanies us as human beings from birth that constitutes an essential dimension to our actions, and how often do we think about this?

This unavoidable question constantly accompanies the educator, who is undecided between action and respect for silence. In our society, care is a hidden dimension, as if to conceal what is not functional. In reality, care has always been with us, unavoidable, it is a bodily experience from the very beginning, a cognitive and affective experience, care is knowledge.

A helping relationship becomes salvation for many, not the care based on Foucault-style power practices, not objective care, but subjective care, carried out by the subject.

The school as a central space in the formation of the subject

As a teacher, I cannot avoid focusing attention on the school as a founding place of education, a central space for individual and collective growth. The pandemic period has made it possible, despite its dramatic nature, to highlight some latent critical issues present within the school system, as if there was a need for a disruptive event to bring them to light.

I and many others found we stranded in front of the screens populated by thousands of boys and girls in search of answers. During the period of distance learning, one of the structural limits that still mark our school system emerged very strongly, a sort of unresolved dualism in which several factions are pitted against each other.

Which vision of school to espouse, an instructive school, based on notion and transmission, or a formative school, in which the subject being educated can truly lay the foundations for his or her own human growth? This debate has been going on in schools for several decades and no adequate answers have as yet been found; there are still two factions, the purists supporting traditional knowledge, mnemonic knowledge, and the innovators who are looking for new ways and who, above all, see flaws in the system.

It is precisely the training of the teacher as a subject that is of vital importance, even before that of the learners; there are teachers who are very well prepared but not very empathetic, and teachers who are attentive to relationships but not very competent - there is often a very thin line between

the two dimensions, and they bear the burden of latencies accumulated during a long past history.

Reflecting on the identity as well as on the instrumental aspects of the profession is a strategic resource of the teacher because only a strong and well-structured professional personality can tolerate the uncertainty that is typical of an ever-changing system. In particular we refer to some characteristics of teachers, such as attitudes, professional preparation and success with pupils - in other words, the characteristics of the 'good teacher', but also their ability to create a context of interaction in the classroom that makes learning possible.

It is therefore a question of considering the complex web of cognitive, affective, social, technical and instrumental competences that make a teacher sensitive to the characteristics and variations of the specific situations in which he or she operates, showing flexibility and adequacy of solutions in an ever-varying context and the individuals who are part of it.

The teacher's personality is a relevant element, a strength which must be supported by knowledge, skills and abilities acquired in the training process.

Training is also an essential element of the teacher's professional identity: training should be continuous: the teacher's professionalism cannot be based on the transmission of knowledge developed by others but should be configured as a 'researcher's competence' in constant transformation. The teaching profession may thus be summarised in a number of functions: the ability to take care of pupils in the sense of understanding what may be useful to them; the willingness to commit oneself personally to them; the readiness to undertake ongoing training.

In the contemporary context, a number of non-negligible variables are also strongly emerging: learning methods are changing, learning times are changing, spaces need to be modified, attention needs to be focused on the student as the protagonist and co-constructor of his own knowledge.

Opting for active didactic solutions, 'moving' the class from one setting to another, hypothesising interdisciplinary contents are just a few of the new competences required of the teacher, who would otherwise be lost in the stasis of twentieth-century didactics which, on its own, cannot deal with the genetic change taking place in the forms of learning. The transition from analogue to digital, resorting constantly to contents only superficially acquired, similar changes in practices and techniques in the world of work, the enhancement of team work, the increasing importance given to life skills, the 'design thinking' processes studied in companies and institutions are all parts of a society in constant evolution that the traditional school system is not able to process and support.

This new process needs to be supported by attention to the subject in education, the student, the learner. Consequently, the relational space that is built in the school environment becomes a fundamental element in planning the setting of the school institution.

Placing a humanistic-relational scenario alongside the technical scenario of the transformation, accompanying people in their development through the mutual exchange of social skills, building profiles that are competent on a relational level and not only on a technical level.

This could be an interesting hypothesis for working alongside the subject-student, our young people.

More on the subject or of the subject

Within the pedagogical framework I have outlined in the previous paragraphs, a suggestion emerges, barely visible, which takes us back to the subject as the founding element of human nature. A subject, the contemporary one, that needs to relocate itself, to outline new horizons, to build new hypotheses of the self. There is a term that often echoes in the cultural debate and which I radically agree with, as it is both utopian and concrete, real: the suggestion of a new humanism. 'New humanism' is a strong term that evokes an epochal transition.

The term 'humanism' is generally used to mark historical and cultural periods: Greek humanism, Christian humanism, Italian humanism, or the season that prepared the Renaissance. For all these historical junctures, the term humanism was adopted to mark an evident break in continuity. Paradoxically, two terms deriving from the term 'human' contrast violently with the idea of a rebirth and are increasingly present in contemporary scenarios: dehumanisation and post-human.

The processes of dehumanisation are the most obvious, the ones that attract the most attention. They generally take the form of the overbearing return of xenophobia: ethnic identities hurled against others, to delimit who is inside the fence and who is outside. In countries of immigration, the more developed ones, it takes the form of intolerance towards immigrants. In other countries, it takes the form of aggressive, ethnically- and religiously-based supremacy.

In addition, there is an individualism that envisages a reduction in the relations and values of solidarity. Something has broken in the fabric of society. Today, we are witnessing the spreading fragmentation of work, and we are increasingly noticing a loosening of the bonds of territorial communities.

At the same time, post-human societies are envisioned, in which technology takes over, man is replaced and almost forgotten, removed from himself. Scientific progress aims to reach new dimensions beyond man's natural boundaries, to change the development of future humanity. This means that natural human traits are integrated with non-human traits, leading to the creation of hybrid individuals with new physical and cognitive capacities.

What future for the subject in such a context?

The answer is not easy, one of the most viable ways is to be found in the pedagogical dimension that has always animated man as a subject, in close dialogue with other disciplines, with the aim of forging a kind of humanism for the third millennium.

Talking about humanism today means embracing an inclusive framework for the concept of human and restoring vitality and meaning to the humanities that ran through traditional humanism.

A systematic comparison between humanism and anthropology seems unavoidable, between the universal idea of humanities and the different models with which man represents himself, with which he defines and directs the relationship between his nature and his destination, his being and his capacity-to-be. A re-visited and re-discovered model of man combining anthropology and philosophy, pedagogy and psychology, a systemic approach that can truly lay the foundations for a re-visitation of the meanings that bind human nature.

‘Social’ proposals

In today’s society, there is a noticeable lack of the dimension that used to be defined as ‘collective’, the sharing of thoughts and practices is today increasingly fragmented and fragile, even in the field of social sciences.

How to recompose a collective proposal that is able to interpret the ideas, even when heterogeneous, and the suggestions that come from pedagogical theories and practices and from psychological studies, sociological analyses and anthropological studies?

How do we move from the valorisation of the individual to the recovery of meaning for the collective, how do we re-educate an individual who is truly interested in the collective, who literally cares about the public discourse?

We are dealing with a cultural challenge that also affects adult education; the alliance and connectivity between the educational and social sciences, and therefore between their respective competences, practices, polysemic readings and transformative opportunities provide a strategy that can generate excellent synergies and nurture prospects for real change.

The practice of techniques that enhance the subject in education implicitly absorbs and favours the collective dimension as well, since it succeeds in activating competences referring to the empowerment process that promote greater empathy and collaboration in the group dimension. The school classroom can provide generative experiences in this sense if stimulated by didactic proposals that highlight this potential. Certain extracurricular group

experiences can also exert a strong positive influence on the individuals who experience them, as can be seen in very successful volunteer projects.

By way of example, autobiographical practices can be applied collectively, constituting very strong group experiences, such as the construction of a class memory archive or the activation of a memory archive project dedicated to the local neighbourhood; debate techniques can stimulate democratic confrontation, enriching individuals and the group through the proposal of specific techniques that favour dialectical exchange. Debating techniques can stimulate democratic debate, enriching individuals and groups through specific techniques that encourage dialectical exchange. Furthermore, stimulating real, highly experiential civic education classes, in which young people gain first-hand experience of situations linked to solidarity, share values of protagonism and inclusion in the community, can offer fundamental and strongly formative experiences for the group.

Schools in particular must still rise to the role of main educational agency, after the family. Dialogue with the local neighbourhood is vital and never before in our liquid contexts has it been so successful and enriching. Therefore, the school as the driving force backing the educating community.

For some time now, I have been hoping for the formation, in our country too, of stable teams of mixed professional figures, in which teachers are present alongside educators, psychologists and significant figures capable of making a concrete contribution to training, capable of producing scenarios and hypotheses for the future of the children who inhabit the schools.

In general, one can state that today, even in the presence of a series of structured and well-defined pedagogical techniques and practices, there remains a latent difficulty in signifying the dimension of the collective, from the point of view of meaning, the horizon delineated by neo-humanism, which needs to be re-designed.

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Conflict of interests: the author declares no potential conflict of interests.

Ethics approval and consent to participate: not required.

Received for publication: 14 December 2021.

Accepted for publication: 13 January 2022.

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Ricerca Psicoanalitica 2022; XXXIII:607

doi:10.4081/rp.2022.607

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