

Re-thinking Method in Educational Work The contribution of Piero Bertolini's pedagogical theory

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Abstract

With the aim of clearly defining how we may best understand 'method' in the field of education, this paper offers an analysis of the methodological model proposed by Piero Bertolini in *Per una pedagogia del ragazzo difficile* (Pedagogy for the troublesome juvenile). This work is of great contemporary relevance for two reasons. First, the theoretical and anthropological assumptions are clearly stated and their intimate connection with the methodological and pragmatic aspects of educational work compellingly demonstrated. Second, the author suggests a fertile way of thinking about educational method and educational intervention that goes beyond the merely technical or 'applied common sense' approaches that are widespread in social work and education.

I outline the key elements determining the current value of Bertolini's way of conceptualizing and implementing the educational method, especially his specifically pedagogical focuses of attention. These methodological focuses run counter to certain contemporary tendencies, providing the basis for a solid educational professionalism that always maintains an attitude of inquiry, and that has the capacity to work with the structural uncertainty of educational situations.

Keywords: method, 'educational doing', methodological model, interpretative pedagogy, phenomenological pedagogy

There is an accepted common-sense understanding of the term "method", including in the field of education, whereby its meaning seems to be taken for granted (Jedlovsky, 2008, p. 19). "Method" is mainly associated with systematic ways of conceptualizing and doing educational work: the "Montessori method", the "Feuerstein method", the "TEACCH method". Consequently, those who practice a certain method are thought of as holding specialized expertise to be applied with

subjects in particular situations (e.g., autism or disability); thus, the expert follows predetermined and scientifically-founded procedures, in which absolute trust is often placed. However, in practice, this level of trust does not appear to be justified. While it may be reassuring for practitioners to think of their method in these terms (Fook & Gardner, 2007, p. 6), mastery of a method in this sense will not help them to decide how best to act within the “supercomplexity” of contingent situations that defy all attempts at simplification (Barnett, 1999). Today, in a professional scenario that is marked by a widespread cultural – and not solely economic – crisis in the educational and social services (Fook, 2012; Manoukian, 2015), “doing education” entails developing transferable knowledge and skills that enable educators to approach the multiple existential and social situations they are continuously called to deal with from a range of different perspectives (Fook, 2002; Caronia, 2011; Palmieri, 2012). The ability to recognize and read the complexity of real-life situations is a key prerequisite to intervening in and caring for these situations, thereby generating possibilities for change (Iori & Rampazi, 2008).

This implies the need to critically rethink the meaning of method in educational work. If the original etymological sense of method was “investigating to discover something new”¹, and if we intend our inquiry to remain close to real life, then method cannot be reduced to a set of rationalized, simplified, and standardized procedures (Mortari, 2006). Rather, it should be seen as embodied in practices and in educational life: in the words of Zambrano, it is the necessary condition for gaining experience of both oneself and the world (2008, p. 35). Clearly, if this is the case, “having experience” does not involve merely living, but enjoying the possibility to live in a meaningful way: that is to say, the possibility to make sense of our lived experience, and therefore being able to think about it (Mortari, 2003, p. 15).

Thus, method cannot be confined to acting, or acting to fix something that is not working. It cannot be viewed as equivalent to applying procedures devised by others or engaging in functional actions. On the contrary, method entails the ability to “act” (Arendt, 2017; Natoli, 2010, p. 9): to seek, step by step, the meaning of the experience that one is living out *while* doing something. It is not enough for each individual educator to be open to this perspective. Making sense of lived experience does not solely depend on individual abilities or inclinations, but also on received cultural models, both common-sensical and scientific. These models form the environment in which educators’ ways of knowing and interpreting, as well as their ways of operating, develop (Moscovici, 1989). Therefore, it is crucial to modify the cultural paradigms that inform our educational services, or, at least, to be aware of their existence, and to consciously decide how to think and act.

From a methodological point of view, therefore, doing education implies that there are always assumptions (personal and cultural) of which to be aware, and that is fundamental to think about one's implicit and unconscious models of both education and the subject (Palmieri, 2016). It is also crucial to be aware that models can potentially be chosen and to accept responsibility for choosing them (Caronia, 2011, p. 118). Educators are called to take a stance. First, they must clarify what they understand by education (e.g., experience, personal spiritual growth, etc.). Second, they need to explicitly identify the representations of the subject that inform their own way of doing education (e.g. competent or incompetent; determined by his or her psychophysical characteristics, social and environmental conditions, etc.). Third, they must therefore develop an awareness of the biunivocal and indissoluble connection between how we represent and how we interact with reality, subjects, and educational experience (Massa, 1989; Barone, 2009, 2011; Caronia, 2011). In other words, educators must be brought to the realization that there is a difference between conceptualizing education as experience and viewing it as a subject's process of spiritual development, or between seeing a child as a competent person rather than as wholly defined by his/her care needs: each of these representations will be associated with a different way of doing education and vice versa.

Pedagogia del ragazzo difficile (hereafter PDR) as well as its updated second edition (*Ragazzi difficili. Pedagogia interpretativa e linee di intervento*. [Though youngsters. Interpretive pedagogy and guidelines for practice], hereafter RD)² propose a specific view of both pedagogy and education, and a particular idea of the subject, and relates these to a specific way of doing education. Above all, it allows method to be conceptualized as complex educational action and situationally-dependent practice, that cannot be reduced to abstract prescriptions. Therefore, it restores to method a dimension of thought and inquiry that reflects the vitality and meaningfulness of educational work, without denying its problematic nature.

The aim of this paper is to explore Bertolini methodological proposal in detail, particularly in relation to its value for contemporary pedagogy.

The methodological framework proposed in “Ragazzi difficili”: its relevance to contemporary pedagogy

In PDR/DR Piero Bertolini analysed his educational experience with the inmates of the “C. Beccaria”, juvenile reform institute in Milan, in light of a phenomenological approach to pedagogy, practically illustrating both the limits and potential of the phenomenological paradigm.

In the 1960s, Bertolini's thinking was revolutionary within the field of pedagogy. First, it proposed a radically different understanding of "difficult youth", by restoring to these subjects both existential responsibility and a "possible" life path (Barone, 2011, 2015). Second, it conceptualized pedagogy as a science whose theoretical and practical dimensions are fused together into an approach that is both rigorous and flexible. This notion is still revolutionary today, in professional contexts where the peculiar characteristics of education are constantly at risk of being overlooked and uncatered for, where paradigms that are distant from the logic of education³ are the order of the day, and where both routine and emergency grip constantly the educational contexts.

Bertolini went on to further develop his proposal for a phenomenologically-based pedagogical science (Bertolini, 1988; 2001). Within this framework, *PDR/RD* is the work in which the methodological dimension acquires the great theoretical importance, both because it is "dense with thinking", and because it is viewed as the heart of the educational intervention itself, and the key to the legitimacy, radicality and potential effectiveness of educational work.

The following quotation illustrates Bertolini approach to method in education:

Proposing a model, *a set of fundamental guidelines in support of each concrete rehabilitative intervention* does not imply instating a rigid schedule, a compulsory sequence of steps that must all be gone through, invariably, in the same calmed and guaranteed manner. No pedagogy, including a pedagogy of difficult youth, is or can be a closed, defined, and definitive system; on the contrary, it offers a *coherent set of orientations presented as flexible from the very outset*. The practical-methodological side of a pedagogy of difficult youth is not a prescription laying down the required interventions, their order of execution, and their dosage; rather, it takes shape as the operative outcome of interpretations and orientations, and, thus, rather than proposing specific actions, it suggests the directions that action may take⁴ (Bertolini & Caronia, 2015, p. 94, auth. trans.).

Thus, *RD* is a book whose primary aim is to provide theoretical and practical direction. Yet, it is not a prescriptive book, which tells us what should be done, in absolute and abstract terms. And in this lies its brilliance. It is not a textbook that describes a simple and simplifying knowledge that neatly divides up into branches (Doll, 2005, p. 24). In its authors' own words, it does not offer recipes, but neither does it ignore the demands of educational work, which must be looked after down to the last detail, despite the fact that the details are never known in advance of entering the specific educational situation. Crucially, educators' thinking must be underpinned by clear assumptions that orient their action while leaving them the creative task of discerning how best to embody this orientation into concrete gestures. Precisely for this reason, the work is of great contemporary relevance, and is

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as necessary as it runs counter to current organizational and cultural trends in the education and social services sectors (Biesta, 2006), including notably the standardization of interventions for resolving complex and problematic situations (Seden, 2005; Fook, 2012; Manoukian, 2015).

In contrast, the methodological model proposed by Bertolini is focused on the *meaning* of educational action, and therefore accords a key role to *interpretation*. Within this framework, it is essential for the beneficiaries of education services to be able to make sense of their educational experience: that is to say, they should be able to identify the influence of the educational intervention on their previously held dysfunctional visions of the world, the access it has offered them to new fields of experience, and the tools for living differently and effecting sustainable change that it has provided them with.

Fixing or containing people's needs or health conditions is not the core focus of educational intervention. Rather, these issues should be viewed as key factors, whose causes, both existential and environmental, need to be teased out. Their problematic nature is the very starting point from which the educator should strive to understand how subjects have learnt to make sense of their situations and live accordingly. Thus, need and illness are viewed as complex and challenging situations that must be interpreted in order to create alternative situations in which subjects can experience other ways of relating to themselves, the world, others, and the very need or disease that is an integral part of their existential background.

Given these assumptions, educational action can never be standardized or based on abstract procedures or prescriptions. Rather, educators must develop a "way of doing education" that is simultaneously both flexible and rigorous, as advocated by Bertolini. What does this entail, from a pedagogical point of view?

The word "flexibility" evokes an ambiguous scenario (Sennett, 2001). On the one hand, it indicates the ability to "resist", and to "revert to the previous situation", but also to adapt to "changes without breaking" (ivi, p. 45, auth. trans.); on the other, it is associated with both precarity and the feeling of "losing control" (ivi, p.17). This suggests a backdrop of contingency and unpredictability. If we accept these factors as built into both educational experience and educational work (Palmieri & Prada, 2008; Fenwick & Edwards, 2010; Ferrante, 2016), we might interpret flexibility as a necessary condition, both for understanding the singularity of each educational situation, and for identifying strategies that are appropriate to a *given* specific situation, as opposed to others (Caronia, 2011, p. 115). *RD* offers a flexible approach to educational work by rejecting prescriptive, univocal solutions as methods and techniques thought up "elsewhere", in the abstract, or with different situations in mind. The perspective underlying this pedagogical model leaves educators free to identify ways of doing education that are in keeping with specific lived situations, which are always unique. Educators are not at a loss, because their

work is informed by solid educational theories. But neither are they mere executors: they are interpreters and co-constructors of a way of doing education that takes shape step by step; they are (or can be) creators of educational situations *that make sense* for those experiencing them.

Therefore, uncertainty, disorientation, and exposure to the unforeseen can only become valuable methodological resources when educators are rigorous in their epistemological and theoretical choices. Operating in conditions of uncertainty without the “fear of losing control” requires some form of orientation, or “possible directions for action” (Bertolini & Caronia, 1993/2015, p. 94, auth. Trans.), based on a clear and explicitly acknowledged conceptualization of education, subjects, and pedagogical knowledge. To put this another way, educators must be familiar with, recognize, choose among, and test – through their daily educational work – the ontological, anthropological, and epistemological models underpinning their educational action. It follows that these models should never be put forward dogmatically (Caronia, 2011). Hence, the methodological recommendations presented throughout *RD* embody a way of thinking about education, subjects and pedagogical knowledge, that is continuously under construction.

Today, it is more important than ever to explicitly recognize the assumptions underlying the practical dimension of educational work. This means restoring thinking and reflexivity to educational practice, as well as shedding light on the implicit and latent dimensions that lead all educational methods to promote a given perspective and to exercise the power to implement (or not to implement) given actions or experiences. Awareness of the assumptions that implicitly shape our way of doing education is key to avoiding the ingenuous belief that methods, techniques, and practices are “neutral” or purely instrumental. For, on the contrary, they invariably imply a particular vision of the world, subjects, and knowledge (Fook & Gardner, 2007) that delimits fields of action and possibilities.

In *RD*, all the operational guidelines offered go hand in hand with the authors’ way of thinking about education and subjects: this is not an automatic consequence, but, following phenomenological pedagogical theory, entails an act of reflection that can never be omitted but must be committed to time and time again. Failure to reflect would mean straying from the model, but above all engaging in spontaneous modes of action unsupported by a theoretical framework, and at the mercy of the relational, emotional and organizational dynamics characterizing the “here and now” of the given situation.

Thus understood, flexibility and rigour combined allow us to rethink the meaning of educational method, restoring its dimension of inquiry and critical thinking and rescuing it from a reductively operational perspective.

The methodological model proposed in *PDR/RD*: the pedagogical focuses of attention

Defining a method implies focusing on the elements that characterize it, being aware that its uniqueness is given by their dynamic intertwining, rather than by their joint presence per se (Rinaldi, 2002). The methodological model put forward in *PDR/RD* is characterized by specific pedagogical focuses of attention, which embody the phenomenological gaze, and together offer a specific way of thinking about and doing education.

I now focus on those that appear most relevant today in term of their potential to counteract contemporary cultural tendencies within the education sector.

The contemporaneity of knowledge and action

First, there is the need, in educational work, for knowledge and action to develop hand in hand.

From a common-sense perspective, including in the pedagogical field, acquiring the relevant knowledge comes before educational action, especially knowledge relating to the subject; knowledge thus becomes the prerequisite for “good” educational action. Accordingly, knowledge gathering is conceptualized as an “unembodied” and “a-contextual” operation that may be carried out “at one’s desk”, for example by reading reports about subjects; this is seen as useful, as preventing mistakes that might be caused by a lack of knowledge. This represents a linear view of the relationship between knowledge and action: knowledge precedes action, and action is the execution of a task. Implicit in this view is a “diagnostic” epistemology with its roots in the healthcare paradigm (Palmieri & Prada, 2005).

In contrast, *PDR/RD* recommends thinking about knowledge and action as elements that are inseparable and present at each stage of the educational process. Although there are settings in which knowing the young people is the focus of the educational work (for example, when educators consult together as a team), and other settings in which the emphasis is on “doing something together” with them (for example camps, educational activities, etc.), what educators know about the beneficiaries of their educational intervention always prompts specific actions and acting in turn prompts continuous questioning about the meaning of the lived situation, and a broadening of the educators’ naïve perspective.

Hence, Bertolini radically rethink some knowledge-gathering practices. First, observation. He argues that, even when getting to know the young people takes the form of the practice of observation, it is never a matter of “watching” but of “*living with*” them, which necessarily entails emotional and experiential involvement

on the part of the educator (2015, p. 77, auth. trans.). It is impossible for observation to be neutral and detached for two reasons. First, it always happens in material and relational contexts, in which educators and boys and girls *do something together*, while sharing a place. Second, observation is an action that must be conducted in a particular way. Specifically, observing does not mean gathering data in order to define a youth in the abstract, but entails describing his/her behaviour in different situations with a view to bringing to light his/her intentions, motivation, and vision of the world.

This leads into the definition of other familiarization practices, which are a crucial part of educational work. First, the initial encounter. This time initiates the educational process, and requires appropriately prepared settings, and gestures and rituals designed to help the youths and educators get to know one another. Crucially, this enables both parties to identify and put to the test their prior assumptions and prejudices about the other. Bertolini views as particularly important, at this juncture, the practice of “*epoché*”, or “suspension of judgement” (ivi, pp. 101-103, auth. trans.; Bertolini, 1988, p. 118-122). This may be defined as a set of internal actions on the part of the individual educator or the team of educators, with a view to recognizing their inevitable preunderstandings and “bracketing them” (Bertolini & Caronia, 1993/2015, pp. 101-103, auth. trans.). This procedure helps to limit the impact of the educator’s prior understandings on the educational relationship, and increases the scope for getting to know the youths as they express themselves in the here and now of a concrete situation. The second practice is *intropathy* (Bertolini, 1988, pp. 39-41;), for which *epoché* lays the ground. This practice too may be conceived as a particular posture on the part of the educator, which is achieved by acting on oneself to move as close as possible to the other’s vision of the world, in terms of striving to understand it “as much as possible”, while maintaining one’s own educational role and the asymmetry inherent in the educational relationship. Intropathy is a cognitive disposition, which creates knowledge via the act of interpreting the other’s point of view (Caronia, 2011, p. 125). Thus, the resulting knowledge always needs to be tested. Furthermore, it is a posture that must be learnt, through the exercise of *epoché*, or the practice in distancing oneself from one’s own vision of the world. Also, the development of this kind of knowledge will ideally take place within a broader framework of action. That is to say, intropathy and *epoché* require the support of the education team, which should collectively focus on understanding the youths’ situation, and their potential to be educated, going beyond diagnoses and social categorizations.

The educational action will rely on the practices just described when its aim is to create the right conditions for youths to live out meaningful experiences, that is to say experiences that can broaden their vision of the world and enrich their existential trajectories.

Hence, within this approach, understanding the other's point of view, and the way a subject has learned to make sense of life, the world, him/herself and others is a pivotal starting point. This understanding is not only acquired at the beginning of the educational process, but throughout its entire duration. Indeed, it is required at all stages and across different situations to identify what truly motivates the subject, with a view to engaging him/her in the succession of educational activities. Educational action must be informed by detailed knowledge of both youths' educational histories and the current educational context, in addition to the intropathic attitude described above. Such knowledge helps the educator to identify appropriate rituals, activities, timing, rhythms, and gestures, and to work out what may usefully be said and what not – in short, all the elements that structure the dynamics of educational situations.

We all know that educational work relies on the identification of so-called “mediators” – activities, objects, projects, tasks, and people that help subjects to embark on, live out and move on from educational experiences (Canevaro, 2008; Palmieri, 2011). But this is impossible without bringing to bear an inquiring and hermeneutic perspective. As PRD/RD shows, it is equally essential for education action to be underpinned by a constant questioning of what is actually happening in educational situations, a continuous striving to understand the meanings the young people attribute to their own experience (present, past, and future), and on-going monitoring, on the part of the educators, of their own reactions, thoughts, feelings, emotions. These objects of knowledge, along with due attention to the youths' reactions and behaviours, are crucial to the identification of appropriate mediators.

Educating through experience: “indirect strategies”

The second element that characterizes this methodological model is a focus on educational experience and its construction. In this case too, Bertolini took up his own distinctive position within the pedagogical debate: education they argued is not only relational, social, and learning-oriented, but first and foremost an experience in which all of these elements are systematically linked as both components and effects (Massa, 1987; Bertolini, 1988). As we shall see, it is an experience that involves both the body and the mind, viewed as inseparable, and with its own specific contents and forms. It is therefore important that educational experience be thoughtfully designed, monitored, and evaluated. Particularly in relation to method, this position runs counter to the current tendency to simplify our habitual way of thinking about and doing education.

Educational work is portrayed by Bertolini as the continuous involvement of youths in experiences that can offer discontinuity with their prior experience. Therefore, the educational setting must be different to that which they were previously accustomed to. The youths in the study reported in RD were forced to live in a juvenile prison: it was difficult for them to accept this place as it was. Thus, educators need to ask how a setting may be modified from the inside, becoming a place where *these* youths can experience something different from the life they have lived *up to now*. Indeed, the rehabilitation setting, by definition, must offer experiences that can challenge the youths' usual everyday ways of feeling, thinking, and relating. In each context (e.g., prison), something new and different needs to be established, which is based on in-depth understanding of young people's individual situations, and is developed not merely with a view to putting them at their ease but also to "leading them somewhere new" (Massa, 1987, p. 21).

Furthermore, engaging subjects in a process with the potential to lead them to modify their "model of intentionality"²⁵ depends on the *educational indirect strategies* that educators are able to design and implement. This has two implications. First, the educator's job does not consist of telling the young person how to behave or directly acting on his/her behaviour – although this is perceived as "normal" from a common-sense perspective. Rather, it is a matter of understanding how to respond to the youth's implicitly and explicitly manifested needs. Sometimes, the educator will need to start from basic needs, caused by living in an environment in which educational care was lacking. But, as the authors emphasize, this is only the first step, because once objective deprivation (e.g. lack of food, sustenance, and emotional caring) has been removed, the young person can then experience the possibility of living in a different way and can discover other needs and desires. This helps to engage them in other activities and experiences that, if sufficiently in tune with their way of feeling and thinking, and their needs, can draw them into new relationships and life contexts. Such new experiences take the form of an "adventure": that is to say, an encounter with the new and unforeseen, a putting oneself to the test, and "coming back" changed (see also Massa, 1987, 1989).

"Educating to beauty" and "educating to difficulty" are examples of how, indirectly, subjects may be stimulated to change by *giving them the space and the time to put themselves to the test and to identify by themselves* the direction they wish to take, their desires. This is possible when educators offer situations designed to help young people come to terms with their own limits; discover their potential; or experience independence within a network of dependence that is an inevitable aspect of life.

Therefore, the educational experience based on the proposed model must have the following features. First, it must involve concrete tasks, totally engage both the educators *and* the young people, and motivate the youths to attain key goals for themselves. Yet, at the same time, it mainly represents a kind of "pretext" for the

educators. It is crucial that this kind of educational experience is lived to the full, because by deploying abilities and resources in the attempt to meet specific objectives, the young people actually learn something else: a different way of experiencing their bodies, of being with others, of relating to adults. In other words, these experiences are first and foremost a means of providing youths with the opportunity to test such “existential” competences (Massa, 1987, p. 22).

Indirect strategies can be effective on two conditions. First, educational experiences (Bertolini, Caronia, 1993/2015, p. 150) must be constructed: educators cannot improvise or react on the impulse of the moment; they must think carefully about the activities, situations, and tasks to be proposed and how to present them. In addition, while the educational action is ongoing, they must be capable of modifying their plans based on the young people’s reactions, fine-tuning their mediations step by step. The second condition concerns the educators’ position: they “must believe” in the proposed activity and at the same time remain aware that their aim is educational, and thus different from the particular objective of the task. This means that educators must be able to maintain a paradoxical and complex position.

Educational presence

According to Bertolini, educators play a key role in the (re)educational process. They are “strategically oriented disturber[s]” (*ivi*, p. 184, auth. trans.), creators of experiences in which they themselves *personally take part*. They do not just tell the beneficiaries of their educational interventions what to do, but design, set up and live out educational experiences. To use a theatrical metaphor, they are both the director of, and an actor within, educational experience, continuously oscillating between these two positions (Palmieri & Prada, 2008; Antonacci & Cappa, 2001; Palmieri, 2011, pp. 11-113). They educate through experiences that they themselves live out and participate in. Given that their key educational strategies are indirect, within the experiences that they set up, their own presence functions as *an educational instrument and something to be experienced*.

The fact that educators design, construct, and participate as individual men and women in educational experience, raises the issue of the connection between the professional and personal dimensions in educational work. This concerns the quality of the educator’s “presence” in educational situations and is a critical theme in the contemporary social context, where professionalism risks being seen as a merely technical matter (Mortari, 2014), and the personal dimension as spontaneous, emotional and private. These representations are in opposition to one another, creating an artificial division in the lives of educators, who inevitably experience

their educational work both professionally *and* personally. Denying value to one or other of these two poles leaves educators without the cultural tools they need to process their everyday experience in the education services where they work, and prevents them from drawing on their own lived experience to create educational paths.

PRD/RD focuses on the need for total involvement on the part of educators, as both an educational instrument and a prerequisite for educational work: fulfilment of their educational role demands their “authentic presence”. In educational situations, educators represent for the young person the opportunity to “experience the other”: through their gestures, postures, gazes, and words, they embody a particular way of being adults and *a* new or different “model of intentionality”. As Bertolini clarifies, they are not “the” example or model that the youths must follow (Bertolini & Caronia, 1993/2015, p. 163), but a *presence* that enters their field of experience. Thus, boys and girls have the opportunity to experience the educator’s way of living, being, and attributing value to things and to themselves. It follows that educators must *be present “to the fullest degree”*. This does not mean abandoning themselves to the relationship with the young people, but using their *own* existential and professional experience as a source of feelings, thoughts, and actions. This is important for two reasons. First, these resources help educators’ to gain insight the youths’ world view, by exercising “intropathic understanding” (*ivi*, p. 107, auth. trans.). Second, they allow fields of experience to be opened up that can provide young people with opportunities to redefine their relationship with adults and with others more generally.

Educators can achieve this on two conditions. First, they must have in-depth awareness of their own existential and formative histories and their own “models of intentionality”. Second, they must modify their “way of being in the [educational] situation”, using it to illustrate an existential possibility and therefore turning it into an educational opportunity. Evidently, this entails the ability to recognize the emotional dynamics that are generated in educational situations, especially pedagogical transfer and counter-transfer (*ivi*, pp. 164-173). They further require the ability to manage these dynamics and in a certain sense to plan their own feelings – assessing how best or whether to fine-tune or embody them, whether to make them explicit etc. – as strategic components of their educational role, so as to offer the kind of presence that a given youth needs to encounter. This ability will foster the “pedagogical eros” that can elicit the young people’s desire to engage with the educational situations offered (Bertolini, 1999).

The chief difficulty that educators can encounter – and at the same time the creative potential of this position – concerns living out this process without betraying their role yet being themselves in that role, in *the specific* moment and situation that they are experiencing with the youths in their charge. To succeed, they

must first have a clear view of the management of emotional dynamics as a key element of their professionalism as educators. Second, they must be fully aware of the key part played by setting, activities, and the group in mediating the relationship between educators and subjects. Third, they must never lose sight of the intrinsic aim of educational intervention: to create conditions of experience enabling subjects to identify possible changes and ways of attaining them.

The presence of the young people and the group dimension

In keeping with the principles outlined to date, the role of educators is constrained by the true protagonists of the educational process: the young people themselves, in the flesh. The methodological model we are analysing here relies on “the assumption that the youth is the protagonist of both the process of renewing his vision of the world and the reorganization of his intentional activity” (Bertolini & Caronia, 2015, p. 183, auth. trans.).

This implies a representation of young people that is strongly at odds with current common-sense and educational representations of children and youths, who tend to be viewed as individuals without values and enthusiasm, hyperactive or depressed, divided into bullies and victims, hedonistic, narcissistic, apathetic, and for good measure, frenetic consumers (Fabbrini & Melucci, 1992; Galimberti, 2008; Palmieri, 2012)⁶.

PRD/RD questions all assumptions, prejudices or *a priori* categorizations of youth, viewing these as the outcome of social and formative processes. Basing their interpretation of the phenomena of marginalization and deviance on the category of intentionality, the authors propose that it is not that young people *are* deviant or criminal, but that they *have become like this*. Therefore, they *can learn* to be different. The task of education is to offer them possibilities, to elicit the desire to change. This is possible, when educators both take into account the fact that the youth may put up *resistance* and leverage the young people’s *motivation*.

Therefore, the point of departure is the subjects receiving the educational intervention, who must be viewed as *constraints* that put the educators’ pedagogical and methodological experience and resources to the test. The antidote to rigidity and dogmatism is to unceasingly strive to access the individual subject’s vision of the world. Accordingly, the educational method can only provide broad guidelines, because what one will do in a certain situation can only be thought out, planned and set up in light of the *specific* participants and not on the basis of misleading generalizations.

There is a further constraint that, in the authors’ opinion, educators must take into account: the *group*, or *acting and doing activities as a group*.

This topic is of great contemporary relevance yet counter-cultural. In the educational debate today, discourse about the one-to-one relationship seems to dominate; this tendency is encouraged by the current emphasis on individualizing and personalizing educational paths. All the more so when the recipients of education are children, adolescents, or youths with disability or special needs, adults who are socially marginalized or affected by severe mental health issues, multi-problematic families, and elderly people who are alone. The group appears to be acknowledged in the educational context as an instrument, methodology or technique – see cooperative learning or peer education⁷ – for managing specific situations, in schools as in street education. What we rarely find today is recognition of an educational strategy that involves setting up the group as an *educational environment in itself* and as a group that includes both adults and youth, educators and subjects. A group in which boys, girls, and educators “do things together” (Massa, 1977, p. 131; Bertolini & Caronia, 2015, pp. 149-151).

However, this is precisely the essence of Bertolini’s pedagogical proposal: to construct experiences in which an educator works in a group – with colleagues and youth – or, when working alone with an individual youth, behaves as though in a group, viewing the relationship with the young person as a “collectivity of two” (2015, p. 170, auth. Trans.). This is not a mere technique. The group is a complex environment, the crucial setting for experimenting with intersubjectivity as both a constraint and an existential possibility, and for recognising in others and oneself the ability to construct meanings from lived experience. We know that intersubjectivity is the basis for acknowledging both the other’s and one’s own subjectivity, and, in addition, the possibility to change something, to negotiate rules, to plan a project, to carry out a task. The group becomes a container for the special relationships that form within it, but in the first place acts as a kind of formative “dispositive” giving rise to new and different relational possibilities.

Groups must be set up, regulated, and managed: the authors describe how to compose a group so that it can function as the environment for the educational experience, examining aspects such as the number of members, the roles and tasks to be assigned, etc. A crucial aspect is the educator’s role as both director of the group and an actor within the group: this is necessary in order to facilitate the autonomy of the group and its members, and to gradually reduce their reliance on the educator’s help.

Towards a model of pedagogical professionalism

What is the contribution of this methodological model to the professionalism of the education practitioner? What is the profile of the educator that emerges from the model?

Let us consider the capabilities that the authors identify as essential for doing educational work: “intropathic ability, knowledge of the techniques required to construct meaningful experiences, group management skills, ability to organize the everyday educational setting, the pedagogical management of “adventure”, ability to monitor one’s self-presentation to the young person” (ivi, pp. 156-157, auth. trans.). This is clearly a professional model that is not based on applying a method, but requires strong hermeneutic skills, which are expressed through a gaze and a style that can tolerate the uncertainty and ambiguity of the educational situation. It is a sophisticated, complex, critical, troubled, and creative model of professionalism that involves constantly maintaining an attitude of inquiry, and carefully evaluating lived experience, and learning from it.

It is also a professional model that is constructed, in line with its method, in the intersubjective context, through both the experience lived out with subjects, and intense sharing with other practitioners. Bertolini makes explicit the need for professional teamwork. He specifies that the educator’s role in the team is to stimulate the transition from describing to understanding situations, and subsequently to planning interventions. A key aspect of this is evaluating the educational potential of each individual subject, not with a view to excluding him or her from educational opportunities, but in order to identify the boundaries of each intervention. Working with others is not merely something that educators are obliged to do or a means of avoiding professional isolation, but is above all the context in which they can assess the limits and potential of educational situations, and identify strategies for fostering change, whether great or small.

This brings us back to the rigour and the flexibility that characterizes the methodological framework proposed in *PDR/RD*. Rigour, not dogmatism, in relation to making theoretical choices with epistemological and pragmatic implications; and flexibility, not changeability or acritical concessions to contextual needs, in relation to grasping differences among people and situations, and, therefore, factoring needs and desires as well as the scope for and constraints on intervention, into educational action.

Thus, *PDR/RD* offers a description of the professional educator that is well-defined but open to transformation based on experience and constant inquiry. To develop this kind of professionalism, it is not sufficient to attend academic courses: the educator must also constantly engage with “the field”, concretely relating to educational settings, subjects, colleagues, and other professional figures as well as

remaining constantly in touch with the existential experiences of self and others, which are always unique. We are looking at a non-linear and problematic training process, that is rooted in “learning-by-doing”, and that must be allowed to take place in “its own time” (Mortari, 2003).

Today, the world is in a rush to identify quick and predefined solutions for all apparent manifestations of illness or disadvantage. It is intolerant of ambiguities despite being full of them and tends to identify experts for every critical situation. Hence the value of carefully attending to Bertolini's way of conceptualizing educational method, and accordingly educator professionalism.

Notes

¹ Method comes from the Greek “metà” (after) and “*hodòs*” (path, track, road); it means “going beyond to inquire into, investigate” or “attaining a goal” (online etymological dictionary, <http://www.etimo.it/?term=metodo&find=Cerca> (last consultation: 28/07/2016).

² The second updated edition of the book was published with a different title and written with Letizia Caronia (Bertolini & Caronia, 1993). As explicitly stated in the book, Caronia's contribution didn't affect in any significant way the former pedagogical framework of Bertolini. We therefore refer our analysis mostly to Piero Bertolini's theoretical perspective as it has been developed in PDR and RD.

³ For a detailed study of the crisis in the social services and the prevailing health paradigm see Manoukian, 2015; for detailed background on the contemporary crisis in education, see Tramma, 2015.

⁴ Italics is of the author of this paper.

⁵ The way in which subjects have been taught to relate to and attribute meaning to themselves, the world, and others (Bertolini & Caronia, 1993/2015, pp. 72).

⁶ For further background on this topic in relation to adolescence, see Barone, 2009, pp. 33-43.

⁷ These methodologies have been investigated in depth in the fields of both education and health. For a comprehensive overview, see: Johnson & Johnson (1998); Pellai, Rinaldin, & Tamborini (2002).

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