

Being educators in extreme contexts When practice challenges theory¹

Francesco Lo Presti

Naples “Parthenope” University

Fausta Sabatano

Regina Pacis Teaching Centre, Naples

Abstract

Educating in extreme contexts means accomplishing a challenge with at the same time different degrees of complexity and difficulty. Of course, the skills and professionalism of an educator (professional, teacher, children’s entertainer) who works in such contexts must have characteristics of such specialization so as, in some way, to “systemize” the emergency, its being not a random event to be managed, but a condition of the working context. Starting from these premises, this contribution intends highlighting the importance which the professional training of educators takes on in the construction of transversal skills in particularly problematic contexts, in the proposal of a phenomenological perspective of education, focused on the subjective value of experience and sense making.

Keywords: phenomenology, inclusion, social malaise, marginality, professional training, transversal skills

Preamble

Educating in extreme contexts means accomplishing a challenge with at the same time different degrees of complexity and difficulty. Of course, the skills and professionalism of an educator (professional, teacher, children’s entertainer) who works in such contexts must have characteristics of such specialization so as, in some way, to “systemize” the emergency, its being not a random event to be managed, but a condition of the working context.

Let us imagine a climber who decides to face Everest; clearly, it will be crucial for him/her to be in perfect physical condition and possess extremely refined

climbing techniques; in fact, it would be pure madness to think of facing such an insidious mountain with only basic knowledge, albeit consolidated through different experiences, considering in any case that even expert skills will never be able to guarantee an absolute degree of control over the imponderability of unexpected variables.

The context in which these reflections have matured is an "extreme" one, since the educational endeavour takes place with *difficult* children and young people, who live in *difficult* neighbourhoods, in *difficult* cities, in a *difficult* region.

In 2005, the Integra Project² was launched in the Phlegrean area of the Campania Region. It was initially conceived for children coming from immigrant families but, immediately after, it became the place chosen by the Camorra families - or at least with experiences of deviance, delinquency and social marginality - to take their children off the streets; they had the idea (or curiosity) that it might just represent a different chance of life for them. Since then and for years, work has been carried out in a constant dialogue between theory and practice to ensure increasingly more effective and incisive action. Over the years, the Integra project has given birth to a Method (Sabatano, 2011, 2015) – of the same name - now experimented in different situations and studied by researchers, but also students and trainees.

The experience relating to the Integra Method was acquired within three very problematic Neapolitan districts: Quarto, Rione Traiano, Licola. To date, the Project has involved about 900 children and their families, offering an extracurricular training course. Every year, 150 children are involved (aged between 6 and 14), who cannot be defined as "at risk", but "beyond risk", inasmuch as they cannot be considered in the condition of persons able *to risk* their physical and moral integrity, but have in fact already suffered violence, neglect, deprivation and are therefore already bearers of the need to elaborate these traumatic life experiences. Alongside the children and young people, their parents or adults of reference are also actively involved, especially teachers, in the conviction that only a training measure *in the plural*, which therefore involves all significant training experience contexts, is crucial for a truly emancipatory educational effort.

Clearly, educating in this specific situation means *embodying theories and orienting practices* in order to address this daily situation, this audience, made up of children and young people all in the same conditions of difficulty, but each with his/her own personal history.

This contribution, starting with this experience, aims to highlight the central role which the professional training of educators - one of the cornerstones of the Integra Method - assumes in the construction of transversal skills, in presenting a phenomenological perspective of education, focused in particular on the subjective value of experience and of sense making which involves all the players in the educational event.

The inclusive dimensions of education

The inclusion-education binomial indissolubly represents the cornerstone of an idea of education necessarily aimed at achieving the goal of unleashing the potential of the people involved, substantiating the project of democracy as a form of associative and inclusive life. This basic acquisition calls into question educational institutions and the professionals who work in them, with respect to the need and responsibility to build and express skills suitable for the plurality, fragmentariness and complexity which characterize the educational experience in this modern day and age. The formation of the skills of an operator who lives in contexts with a high level of criticality therefore becomes a central element which cannot be ignored in the construction of professional figures who, in various capacities, participate in the configuration and management of training and educational courses.

The profession of educator is a social profession that places the individual within systems distinguished by complex and elusive variables which essentially refer to *being a person*; a profession which implies profound skills in the management of the relationship in its broadest sense; profound abilities as regards interpreting and knowing oneself and others and, consequently, in the expression of consciously regulated and effective dialogical content (Lo Presti, 2010).

Training an educator engaged in inclusive processes implies, in particular, a substantial change in perspective compared to more traditional educational logics: from focus on the problems of children, pervasive in educational contexts in general and in particular in schools, to a re-centring on the subjectivity of the educator, in the conviction that the construction of professional growth within his/her skills, requires approaches which guide him/her in the discovery and analysis of the thoughts, beliefs, hardships and doubts which make up his/her personal knowledge (Forlin, Loreman, Sharma, Earle, 2009); elements, that is, wherein originate the behaviours, actions and choices which, if not understood starting with the origin of the self, can implicitly determine unconscious outcomes, sometimes in the direction of exclusion, refusal or the opposite of an excessive and dysfunctional link with the children or young people being confronted.

However, the culture of common sense, as well as the culture more widely spread within the educational institutions themselves, still does not appear to have clearly understood this particular approach. The expression of this lack of reception can be seen in the didactic models and educational practices still widely used, as well as in the training courses for educators (Boffo, Fedeli, Lo Presti, Melacarne, Vianello, 2017).

In this sense, reflections on education cannot be separated from a careful and necessary historical-cultural analysis of the self, inserted in the contemporary

world. Those involved in education must understand themselves and the world in which they live, because this is the only way to be able to articulate a reflection appropriate to the issues posed by the real context of experience; these issues are never unrelated to a concrete dimension deriving from ideological implications, political choices, fashions, beliefs, opportunities or contingencies. In this sense, pedagogical discourse cannot and must never express a purely interpretative attitude, but must instead be actively and concretely "transformative" (Taylor, 2006; Mezirow, 2003; Bertolini, 1988).

Reflection on the true inclusive dimensions of education cannot, therefore, but contemplate cultural, ideological and political aspects, which refer to the logics that implicitly govern educational practices as regards political-institutional concreteness and which form the professional self: there can be no widespread and effective practices, except against a background of wider cultural reforms which become real pathways for coherent and concrete actions.

Inclusion as a cultural, social, but also substantially formative revolution implies, in this sense, the central collocation of the category of *subjectivity* in the background of educational and didactic programming.

Moreover, since pedagogy, as a discipline positioned between theory and practice, constitutes *planning knowledge*, the anthropological-cultural challenge posed by plurality is adequately faced only if knowledge is *contaminated* with practices, producing dynamics of change. Inclusion is not, therefore, the result of mere emergency or accommodation strategies, but should be considered as a complex process of reciprocal and dialectic mediation between the theoretical and the strategic-procedural levels in which subjectivity becomes the central fulcrum; only in this way does it express the possibility of contributing to an effective and complete cultural revolution which operates in the direction of and within a pedagogy of emancipation, which feeds on situations of dialogue, of proximity oriented towards listening and of constructive communication.

For pedagogy, accepting the task-challenge of inclusion of difficult children means, therefore, undertaking to outline the use of tools for which the educational function is prepared and controlled (Sabatano, 2011); a pedagogy of inclusion therefore starts from the conviction, supported by sociological and anthropological reflections, that "interaction [...] is a fact within which reason must prevail over chance. Reason that, in pedagogical language, means mediation and confidence in the possibilities that everyone can learn to know the world of the *other*, to understand points of view and ways of being. Pedagogy is, in general, a form of mediation" (Favaro, 2004, p. 37).

The management of professional experience in the field of education requires, in short, that those who work in this sector acquire knowledge and skills suitable for addressing the singularity of the diversified needs that characterize people, starting from the recognition of their own. In particular, professionals who work

in extremely problematic contexts must develop specific skills in managing their relationship with others, since it is through the quality of this relationship that the possibility of carrying out truly effective educational and inclusive actions is measured. Only when the relationship is positive, based on listening, trust and reciprocity is it possible to believe that the foundations have been laid for the development of a truly emancipatory process.

Obviously, it is not necessary to enunciate this principle in order to translate it into concrete action inspired by it; in actual fact (and in particular in contexts characterized by social risk), concrete problems, adverse circumstances, the plurality of unpredictable variables, which shape educational contexts from time to time, arise as barriers, very often unconscious and insurmountable, with respect to the possibility of translating this principle into practice. It is not enough, that is, to impress all one's human and professional dedication within one's job, relying on a mere missionary spirit, in order to avoid falling back into error or into erroneous interpretations that unpredictably condemn professional action to failure, with the consequent effects tied to frustration and the lowering of self-esteem and motivation, on the human and professional side.

The achievement of success in the educational field, in terms of the effectiveness of one's actions, which in this case is measured by the actual perception on the part of the students of being *cared for and welcomed*, can only be built through specific training courses, which use knowledge of oneself and of the other as a filter for the development of skills, which translate into strategies, methods and practices for the management of the self in relation to the other.

The phenomenological perspective in educator training

Educational work in extreme contexts, since it refers to a field of application particularly distinguished by complexity, discrepancy and variability, creates such a horizon of unpredictability that it is impossible to imagine using knowledge, procedures and rules of absolute value; therefore for the educator who works in such contexts, the need is not to master procedures, but rather to be able to work on the basis of an interpretative "sensitivity" which enables him/her, from time to time, to reconstruct choices and directions within a critical and constant dialogue with the situation in which he/she is immersed. This situation is basically made up of people all of whom have particular difficulties and, therefore, of uncontrollable interpretative and communicative variables determined by the psychological, socio-cultural and emotional processes at play.

The fundamental core on which the development of a phenomenological perspective for the training of educators is based does, therefore, consist of the theme of confrontation with the personal ways through which the person attributes a

sense and direction to his/her own training experiences (Bertolini, 1988; Cavana & Casadei, 2016), understood as singular, concrete and situated experiences, which serve as a context for the maturation of interpretative and theoretical-procedural lines.

Educational skills are not therefore achieved by acquiring knowledge and standardised methods, since they must necessarily interpret and deal with the critical and different situations of educational contexts in an original, unprecedented way. Hence, within the Integra method, training in educational skills does not propose an educational and didactic strategy oriented merely towards the transfer and internalization of knowledge, but is designed and conducted by exercising the use of reflexivity, as a systematic strategy: this means that it is not only by acquiring knowledge and procedures that these skills are acquired, since the latter stem from the intersection between the emergence of continuous pressures and the possibility of questioning oneself in the face of them, thereby questioning the tacit foundations of the personal and professional knowledge which unconsciously orientates the relationship between the professional person and his/her own professional actions.

In this sense, the very concept of knowledge distances itself from the possibility of using the objective explanation of reality as the main vehicle for the production of knowledge (traditional matrix); it is rather the systematic capacity to doubt the objective explanation, which makes one able to enter into an effective relationship with the problems and events which constantly characterize these contexts.

This kind of training therefore is centred on a work of reflection on the pre-conditions and the systems on which the interpretations and explanations of experience are often tacitly based.

To express this possibility implies the construction of transversal, critical-reflective, communicative-relational educational skills (Lo Presti, 2014); skills which enable us to enter into a relationship with those individuals who are the recipients of the educational action, starting with a total willingness to dialogue with the subjective sense of experience, constantly and systematically questioning personal beliefs, points of view, consolidated knowledge structures. In other words, it is a matter of avoiding the mistake of attributing "objective" meanings to experience and understanding instead that, for the purpose of inclusion, it is essential to appreciate the sense of inclusive or exclusive actions and behaviours, whether deviant or not, according to the value and meaning they assume starting from the person who generated them, from his/her being in the *natural world*, from the experiences he/she has had (Bertolini, Caronia, 2008, p. 39).

Generally speaking, the fundamental requirement of the contemporary educational system is based on the need to train educators capable of including *everyone* through the recognition of the plurality of the *living*, inner, social and cultural experiences of each individual. In a nutshell, a good educator is such if he/she is able

to include all children or young people (including those with particularly difficult lives and in difficult physical, psychological, social and cultural conditions), relating positively with each of them, making learning interesting and engaging for all, mastering methods and tools to support every person in difficulty (Sharma, Forlin, Loreman, 2008). This is the path along which truly effective professional training should move, because this is the way to intervene within that domain of experience which we can identify with the fluctuating, irregular, not standardizable set of psychological, emotional, relational, communicative-symbolic processes that affect in an implicit and absolutely decisive way the concrete directions of professional action in the educational field.

In this perspective, against every form of technicality and fragmentation of knowledge which still influences training, it is possible to say that: "the sense of human beings, in fact, and therefore the sense of their non-sectorial training, is not there once and for all, but is dynamically constituted in a teleological process which is their own life and their own foundation. This is Plato's great discovery too often forgotten or misunderstood: the being of humans is not something static or closed or - which is basically the same thing - something which develops and achieves in a determined and mechanical way, but is a "being-towards", a "tending-to", a continuous opening up, in short, a being oriented towards never perfectly achieved ends. Hence there is a history of mankind and because of this it is not possible to carry out research on human beings or pretend to indicate a way for them to follow, outside of a historical consideration" (Bertolini, 1988, p. 10).

From a phenomenological point of view, every individual as a living entity, has his/her essential characteristic in the intentionality of consciousness, in his/her capacity to give sense to the natural and social world. Any mental activity of human beings, be it a desire, a memory, a judgment, a perception, follows the fundamental structure of consciousness. Between consciousness and object there is, therefore, a necessary relationship, the nature of which does not however consist in a passive recording of the objects of the world, but in a process of active signification. Consciousness, therefore, in assuming an intention, attributes a meaning and a value to the object which, consequently, cannot be considered as a reality which already has a sense and value in itself. In other words, *reality* assumes a meaning in relation to the person who attributes such meaning to it.

The individual is not the result of a series of forces and impacts of a natural world; "the world offers pretexts on the suggestions of which and within the constraints of which the individual builds up texts, i.e., sensible representations of the world, the construction of which strongly involves the individual, his/her system of relevance, and his/her way of grasping traces of meaning in the world" (Bertolini, Caronia, 1993, p. 41). This particular principle becomes even more inescapable when the worlds compared are characterized by diversity; therefore, in difficult contexts, more than ever, the willingness to abandon the falsely objective categori-

zations, dictated by one's own cultural habitus, and the willingness to recognize the origin of the meaning of the other, assume the value of a fundamental prerequisite for the interpretation of critical issues and the construction of intervention strategies based on understanding and dialogue. This means that educating can never mean colonizing (Freire, 1971, 2004) the minds or lives of others, imposing meanings and mortifying the intentionality and freedom of the individual. Rather, it is necessary to accept the points of view of others, even if they are extraneous to one's own horizon of meaning or even opposed to it, in a relational dynamic founded on the authentic openness of the educator (Rogers, 1970, 1973).

A phenomenological approach to the training of educators therefore guides the delimitation of the contents and method of training itself not simply towards mere facts, which define the educational experience, but towards the impact these have on individuals and on the meaning they assume in their lives, "phenomenology is seeking realities, not pursuing Truth" (Mortari & Tarozzi, 2010, p. 18).

In this sense, in the definition of the central issues and challenges related to the task of education in extreme contexts, both the gaze of the trainer itself and of all the participants in the training process play a central role. These latter aspects support an idea of reality understood as a complex social construction that cannot be reduced to an objective photograph of the phenomena that characterize it.

The skills of the educator in *extreme* contexts

To exercise the educational profession in particularly difficult contexts, therefore, good will, passion and good sentiments are not enough, even if they represent essential elements for nourishing educational intentionality and practice. It is therefore necessary to structure a profile of skills crucial for responding to the complexity and variety of educational needs. Proceeding in an inclusive way therefore requires matching skills and needs. This is a fundamental problem that can only be tackled by achieving ever greater clarity with respect to the professional profiles which accompany the life of an individual with ordinary or special needs (Canevaro, 2013).

The educator is the person who takes on the delicate and burdensome task of realizing the educational experience in the concreteness of everyday life, according to the orientations of meaning and the theoretical perspective chosen, in an attempt to subtract practice from improvisation and, therefore, from non-scientificity (Bertolini, 1988, pp. 299-300). Educational professionalism is therefore characterized by "the intention and ability to act in an educational way according to principles and orientations that belong to the science of education". Not all people can be educators. Saying that this category includes anyone involved in various forms of education (parents, entertainers, teachers) is a wide-

spread misunderstanding, as well as dangerous. The educator is, in fact, the one who must possess general and specific knowledge and know-how useful, on the one hand, to be able to make conscious choices and orient him/herself within the complex dynamics affecting educational practice and, on the other, to work by means of methods, techniques and tools consistent with the horizon of sense within which the latter acquire meaning. This means that even the most specialised skills that he/she can and, in certain circumstances, such as those described, must possess, have to pass through the filter of a general pedagogical perspective, in order to avoid the risk of a crush on doing, of reductionism in a technical sense. Only in this way does practice become a fundamental moment of a conscious processuality; i.e., factuality is attributed to theoretical developments with doing that becomes reflection in the course of action (Gatto, 1996). From what has been said, the idea emerges that specialization represents an *internal*, not an *external* dimension of educational professionalism. It does not constitute, in other words, a response to specific external conditions (age, disability, malaise, deviance), but rather concerns the *dimension of the quest* for those tools, not ready for use, but of a critical and reflective nature, which put the educator in a position to face reality inasmuch as it is brought to our attention. Erdas indicated four types of tools (Erdas, 1991, pp. 156-157).

1. *Tools of a paradigmatic nature*, meaning those assumptions, paradigms and convictions usable as perspectives from which it is possible to depart to obtain a picture of general problems with respect to which an action programme is to be developed.
2. *Tools of an explicative* (or epistemological) *nature* traceable back to all those conceptual frameworks or ideas through which the different sciences interpret and explain reality and which have an undisputable value in terms of operation and the translation of a need into programmes able to provide answers.
3. *Informative tools*, i.e., tools useful for identifying the context in which educational intervention is placed, making it more effective, inasmuch as better able to respond to the specific situation.
4. *Technological tools*, by which is meant all the models, methodological itineraries and therefore methods that can be followed in concrete situations and which guide practices (e.g., Rogers' non-directive model, Ausubel's meaningful learning, etc.).

The task of the educator is, therefore, to master these tools to know how to use them, when the situation requires it, without rigidity, but starting from listening to expressed and emerging needs.

It should be borne in mind, however, that the specific nature of certain skills must never be translated into closure or exclusivity. The risk of a closed skill implies that the possibility exists of such a presumption that one's own competent

gaze eliminates every other reality. The drift of a closed skill can be that of assessing those realities seen through one's own skill as the only ones of importance, neglecting the interactions and the relations between such realities, visible through the eyes of the skill, and the outside, and the context, or better the contexts (Canevaro, 2013). Obviously, it is necessary instead that the educational system, in the various contexts in which it expresses itself, be based on the interaction between the different educational figures; the complexity of the problems posed does in fact make an *integrated approach* crucial; one which is inclusive, non-exclusive; one in which the different skills can dialogue with one another to jointly build the educational path. In an inclusive perspective, being competent means, therefore, also knowing how to transmit skills through dialogue and exchange to colleagues who do not have the same skill profile. This means that the skill profile includes the ability to make the context competent, seeing the work team as a reflective mind that operates within the context.

It would seem useful, at this point, to dwell on the *proprium* of the social educator: which are the pedagogical skills that characterize this figure? Which tools, which methods should he/she master?

Over the years, sector studies have provided different and numerous classifications with respect to the educator's skills, in order to define his/her professional profile and to share, at European level, criteria for the recognition of qualifications and levels of expertise required to practice the profession of social educator in the various Countries³.

In this case, we have chosen to refer to the reflection put forward by Bertolini (1988, pp. 308-311) which, although developed several years ago, shows an impressive degree of modernity and seems to be the most consistent with the experience acquired during years of work; by observing the skills of the educators in action, all the topicality has appeared of those qualities which the Bolognese pedagogue indicates and which ought to characterize and inform the competent action of the educator.

First of all, *globality*, which derives from interpreting the educational event in the systematic nature and complexity of the dimensions and variables which distinguish it, recalling the need for a skill which, as stressed above, does not bring the understanding of reality to a dead end in its point of view, but is characterized by openness and, therefore, is able to interact with other professional outlooks to interpret the phenomena and identify possible strategies of intervention.

Secondly, *operativity*, understood as the assumption of a conscious orientation towards the future and, therefore, towards the *possible*. This happens in the actions put in place, in supporting, stimulating, sustaining and encouraging young people along the path which leads them towards being *more*⁴ and imagine an *otherwise* and an *elsewhere* (Rutter, 1985, pp. 598-61).

Thirdly, *relationality*, which comes from interpreting the educational event as a *doing with*, a *living together* which feeds on a skill in communicating, putting oneself into play as a protagonist of the educational relationship. The stories of people (educators and students) are intertwined and so each relationship has its own story, which is the story involving such people, a story marked by different stages which affect the quality of communication.

We are all in relationship with others and linked, in different ways, to others. *Being with* is a *proprium* of human beings, "man is a social animal" maintained Aristotle, while Seneca argued that "people are not made to live alone", to emphasize how the lives of men and women are marked in a social sense.

Training to relate, improving one's skills, is, therefore, a responsibility/opportunity for each individual, but in particular for those who play an educational role.

Relational skills are grafted onto three dimensions: *knowledge*, *knowing how to do*, *knowing how to be*. The first dimension concerns *knowledge* understood as the interweaving of three levels: *scientific*, relating to consolidated knowledge and scientific theories possessed; *implicit*, connected to beliefs, to ingenuous theories, to prejudices shared within a culture and which implicitly shape our knowledge; *personal*, relating to the idea of the world produced by one's own experience, one's own history, perception of one's own self. The second dimension concerns *knowing how to do*, understood as that set of skills which outline the specialist skill of the educator. The third dimension concerns *knowing how to be* and, therefore, the ability to listen, empathy and enteropathy⁵, the awareness of how to know and feel, the experimenting of emotions (Gaspari, 2002, p. 96).

Finally, defining the horizon of sense of the social educator's skill is *integration between the individual and society*. The educator must necessarily look at his/her action in a social direction, i.e., orienting educational practices in order to increase the child's awareness of being a member of a community which shares rules and culture. This involves a constant invitation to personal commitment and autonomy, so that children can progressively develop a sense of self-awareness as members of a community. This process is particularly delicate in contexts of social malaise and deviance, since belonging is not a non-existent feeling, as one might think, but rather very much developed with respect to a series of values, rituals, behaviours proposed by the deviant and illegal culture, which identify individuals, families and the community and which children absorb and make their own. As J. Bruner (1997) points out, cultural belonging offers a *toolbox*, a set of beliefs, rules, values and worldviews that outlines those cognitive patterns on which knowledge and experience are based. In this perspective, it becomes crucial to recognize the dignity and legitimacy of the models of explanation of the persons undergoing training (parents and children), who confront themselves with the knowledge, values and ideas proposed, adapting their meaning and interpretation on the basis of their

own experience. The problem, then, is not so much providing the child or teenager with a new toolbox, but understanding *what is in* the one which he/she uses. It is a question of keeping in mind the *principle of perspective*, which concerns the subjective ways of producing meaning: "the meaning of any fact, of any proposition or meeting is relative to the perspective or to the frame of reference according to the terms of which it is interpreted [...]. Logically, an official educational initiative will cultivate beliefs, skills and feelings in order to convey and express the ways in which the culture that sponsors them interprets the social and natural world. It follows, then, that an effective education is always in precarious equilibrium, both in culture as a whole and in the groups that represent it" (Bruner, 1997, p. 26). The educator's skill is therefore expressed in educating children to properly use the tools at their disposal, adding new ones in the confrontation with experience.

The construct of skill in the relationship with reflexivity

Educational skills must, therefore, be built up as the upshot of a cognitive process generated starting with a reflection on oneself, and on the other, on a relationship measured not only on the basis of knowledge, but also expressed in the way of selecting and processing information, in the rules used to solve a problem, in the strategies adopted to perform a service or to take a decision. These skills therefore refer, as we have said, to subjective aspects of an emotional, cognitive and relational type and do not terminate at explicit service level (Cambi, 2004, p. 24).

The pedagogical perspective insists on underlining the complexity of the constitutive and founding elements of skill itself; in this sense, it "has overseen such spaces of more organic and correct interpretation of skill, withdrawing them from any functional definition and bringing them back both *within a process* and *within a person*, which is mind and person at the same time, and which is beyond the productive social player, but also contains, assumes and activates it" (Cambi, 2004, p. 124). This approach aims to safeguard the *dynamic* and *integrated* aspects of the skill: for the former, skills are constantly *in progress*, being renewed and restructured, even radically, in correlation with the cultural model, knowledge, practices of *a* historical period and with the cognitive/productive needs of *a* society; as far as the integration aspect is concerned, however, it is necessary to relate skills with that on which they are based (basic, method and advanced *knowledge*, etc.) and on what allows them to be exercised (*metacognition, reflexivity, criticality*) (Cambi, 2004).

In this perspective, it is possible to trace a number of fundamental characteristics attributed to the construct of skill. *Dynamism*: skills are not static, but are developed and learned continuously through the personal and professional experiences of the individual; *multidimensionality*: skill is attributable to a complex set of

individual factors, determining and being determined by behaviour and contexts, not only work contexts; furthermore, it informs and is informed by the entire personality of the person; *systemic character*: skills contain the overall legacy of resources and quality of the individual through integration and are not the mere sum of the single dimensions; *contingency*: skills are concretized in effective and functional behaviours and only through such behaviours do they become observable; *situated character* (Cannac, 1985): skills manifest themselves, therefore, in the interaction between a person and a specific context, being, in fact, as we have said, *contextualized*, i.e., linked to the particular context in which they are enacted, but also *contextualizing*, inasmuch as they can actively modify the environment in which they are expressed; *flexibility*: skills consist of general ways of acting and strategies, expressing the need to know how to behave in different situations and emphasising not so much a specialised way of playing a role - certainly necessary, but not sufficient – as rather "knowing how to do different things" (Pellerey, 2001) and a knowledge of when to choose one or the other skills, since the latter, by its very nature, implies decision making.

Considering skill in this broader sense therefore allows us to relate it to *reflexivity*; on reflective thinking, in fact, the possibility is based on developing *transversal skills*, which have a *regulatory function* in the dynamic relationship between knowledge and *metacognitive activity*, thus permitting intelligent self-regulation of their cognitive resources (Cunti, 2009) and representing, in this sense, an essential resource in educational work, especially with difficult children and teenagers.

The relationship between knowledge, skill and reflective thinking is articulated in some substantial references: *knowledge*, if built in a conscious way, crosses and avails itself of the capacity to analyze, understand and interpret reality; such abilities can be traced back to *reflective thinking*, exercised not only and not so much in the relationship with experience, but also in its organization and systematization; finally, reflective thinking solicits the activation of *transversal skills* relating to problem solving, decision-making, control of one's own forms of knowledge, and the ability to communicate knowledge and experience effectively.

In particular, in socio-educational work, it is necessary to design paths aimed at an empowerment of the reflective capacity inherent in skills.

The first step consists in *reflecting on one's own actions and personal and professional knowledge*, making the individuals aware of the relationship existing between theories (scientific and naive) and action, to unmask the automatisms of one's actions, to understand their sense and origin.

The second element, the more specifically reflective one, consists in *reflecting on one's own knowledge*, since there is no true knowledge, unless knowledge is also applied to knowledge itself, in an act of self- or meta-reflection. Reflecting on one's own knowledge, therefore, re-examining its truthfulness, crossing its boundaries, comparing it with one's own personal history are the elements of knowledge

aimed at change and innovation. Therefore, the training of educators must aim at cultivating the *metacognitive* level and *transversality* by refocusing on the individual (Sabatano, 2007), on his/her processes of building knowledge and on personal knowledge.

In the creation of a reflective professional environment, which favours a continuous critical link between specialist knowledge, personal knowledge and experience, lies the possibility of a conscious management of knowledge and, therefore, of its creative and original expression. Only such a structured environment can resist the shocks and the frustrations of educational practice - which in contexts of marginality constitute a daily experience - just as only a reflective environment can enable a person to elaborate his/her own experiences, his/her own emotions through the filter of theories and knowledge.

It is therefore necessary, when training, to consider two types of skills: one of *content*, the other *methodological*. The former refers to specialist knowledge, related to disciplines, their codes and statutes; the latter refers to a more critical form of knowledge, linked to the ability to manage knowledge, to *general know-how* which critically guides the use of *specific know-how*.

Making skills - and in particular reflective skills - the object of intentional training is possible only by identifying the specificity of the elements susceptible to development and their nature, in order to be able to have a profitable impact on them. Such elements of skill development can be found in *knowledge*, not in the actions in which it is expressed: it is theories which guide even the most trivial action and they, therefore, must be made the subject of training. Flexibility, the capacity for control and self-regulation, the capacity to decide become the fundamental subject of an *intentional formation* of a reflective nature for educators. Reflexivity, acting as a privileged instrument of thought for the creation and conscious management of this relationship, becomes a central dimension in and for educational work.

It is however necessary to realize that the possibility of expressing skill in a reflective sense depends not only on the quality of the training provided, but on the *quality of the life or work context*, i.e. on the possibilities provided to express it, according to the permitted margins of autonomy, creativity and innovation (Meghnagi, 2006, pp. 22-23). There are, therefore, two elements at stake: the *individual* who potentially has the capacity to enact reflective skills and the *context* of action which gives the individual the opportunity or not to express them.

In the foreground of the training process, therefore, is the dimension of reciprocity, exchange, communication, sharing of knowledge and skills of the members of the working team. The latter, in fact, originates only as a result of conversational processes and mutual learning. This area of intersubjectivity produces what K. Weick calls *sensemaking* (literally the act of building or making sense) as “the organizational space in which relationships, interpersonal exchanges, inter-

subjectivity are condensed, in their most meaningful symbolic value; in this sense, it is also a new way of looking at organization, at its internal processes, attributing the right amount of importance to that game of continuous construction and reconstruction of sense and meaning of the organizational life in which everyone takes part, sharing situations, accidents, successes and failures, fortunes and misfortunes, projects and stories.” (Weick, 1997).

This process of sharing is of course gradual: in this sense, J. Lave and E. Wenger speak of "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave, Wenger, 1991), meaning by this the progressive approach of the individual to a specific organizational culture, through learning processes that lead him/her to participate in a certain culture, first in a *peripheral* and, subsequently, in an increasingly legitimate and conscious way. It is through this progressive path of training and sharing that individuals become part of a community of practices, not so much and not only by acquiring abstract, explicit knowledge from experts, but learning to behave as members of a community and, consequently, finding themselves in the condition of having to change their personal identity as well (Seely Brown, Duguid, 1995, pp. 327-353). *Practicing* means knowing how to make the culture behind the practice operational; there is, therefore, not just a single practice, but many possible practices which each social player can choose to enact in a particular situation: practice, therefore, not as repetition, but as reflection, ability to decide and reflect on one's actions.

The path of sharing and reflection on theories and practices frees constructive possibilities (Goodman, 1988), in the sense that individuals, through it, create, shape and build reality itself in an *enactment* process (Weick, 1993) through which individuals and groups create the contexts with which they interact by performing actions. Such contexts, therefore, are not endowed with objective characteristics, but derive from a continuous and active process of construction of reality carried out by individuals who experience it. This discourse presupposes a conception of learning as a *situated* (Lave, Wenger, 1991) and *distributed* process. It means that it is, on the one hand, a process of knowledge creation within a given context that must be recognized as constitutive of the mind and of learning processes and, on the other hand, a heritage *distributed* among different individuals who contribute to the construction of knowledge (Striano, 2000).

Realizing the perspective described in an educational project requires several efforts: first of all, to manage to untie skills from uncritically consolidated ways of action and revisit them in a *metacognitive* and reflective way; secondly, to set sights on a type of training which looks at the complexity of the individual's knowledge⁶, focusing on the different dimensions (personal, scientific, implicit) which knowledge itself expresses in their experience; thirdly, to aim at the involvement of educators capable of looking at the reflective quality of the processes and products of knowledge, recovering even their most personal aspects. In fact, it is the latter

which can ensure the implementation of training aimed at activating processes of change such as to substantiate training action of a renewed critical capacity for constant review and validation of the paths and of the results deriving from them.

Rethinking educational professionalism

The outlined set of acquisitions regarding the educational profession constitutes the expression of a precise culture of training which represents one of the most strongly perceived and advanced margins of pedagogical reflection. However, institutional vocational training continues to persevere in using a model of knowledge, and therefore an educational model, essentially aimed at the delivery of knowledge and techniques, in the traditional sense, and neglects the critical-reflective dimension, the only one able to determine the real exercising of transversal skills (reflection in progress/reflection on reflection). Currently, the condition of social risk represents an extremely pervasive criticality of the educational experience in general, since it also pervades those contexts considered institutionally more solid and structured, such as schooling itself. In fact, for several years now we have been witnessing an increasingly wide and more significant sequence of events which make tangible the generalised crisis situation in which the main formal and informal training agencies in society find themselves; a crisis which is deeply tied to the emergence of unexpected behaviours, easily classifiable as deviant, describing a reality with respect to which operators in the delicate training process reveal their uneasiness and their insecurity to an increasing extent. The need to develop new skills *appropriate* to the emerging problems is therefore evident and concerns the whole education system, of which the experiences classified in the *risk context* category represent only a part: the entire educational system seems *to run the risk of becoming a risk context*. The intention to develop transversal skills therefore requires, as is indicated by the entire theoretical framework of this contribution, intervening in the same transversal way on the methods of vocational training: theory and method cannot be separated. Transversal skills cannot be *used* according to traditional logics and didactics, since these same transversal skills are the expression of attitudes, tendencies and sensitivities that do not concern the putting into practice of procedures or techniques, but the constant and systematic use of an *attitude* towards *thinking*, *feeling* and, consequently, *acting*. An attitude which, by orienting these three levels critically, through continuous and recursive modifications, reorganisations of self and of the context, generates those *virtuous dimensions* of doubt and uncertainty which substantiate professional growth starting from the necessary boost of ongoing research, of the need, that is, *to ask oneself suitable questions*, rather than refer to *preordained answers*.

In Italy, in particular, the educational policies and concrete actions which derive from them are not consistent with this theoretical-methodological background; institutionalized practices do not refer, that is, to validated scientific acquisitions, but rather are carried out starting from skills that do not stem from pedagogical knowledge or knowledge generally related to the sciences of education. The reference to a scientific and research tradition of pedagogical origin is, in this sense, often only occasional, superficial or arbitrary. This makes the problems and critical situations of educational work twice as complex. Educational work is, as has been said, by its very nature a difficult and problematic endeavour, because it requires the acquisition and development of transversal skills, which do not arise from a theoretical-methodological horizon with a predictive and prescriptive value in a linear and absolute sense, due to the characteristics of variability and discrepancies defining the plurality of educational and training contexts. Consequently, and even more so, when the institutional system of education is marked in an inconsistent way with the theoretical-methodological horizon of a pedagogical discipline, criticality increases even further. The result of this inconsistency is that the responsibilities of a good and effective education, which the system is not able to deal with, reverberates to an even greater extent on the individual educator who, in solitude or, at best, within micro communities of comparison and growth, must promote from below quality training courses, based on validated scientific achievements, on a tradition of accredited research, on rigorous and recognized methodologies. The latter are all public elements, present and available in the horizon of known scientific knowledge, but which, due to a degenerate way of practising educational policy in Italy, are not taken advantage of by those who work in the education system and schools.

All this has made evident an extremely pernicious result, which could in time produce even more serious consequences than it has already caused: *an education system inadequate for our times*. We are experiencing a serious tendency to live education as processes oriented by a fragmentation and exploitation of knowledge, in which we risk losing the sense of a holistic cultural formation which, in particular as regards training for the teaching profession, represents instead the essential background for the construction of those complex and transversal, reflective, meta cognitive goals and relational skills required for the realization of professional *performances* in the educational field which are appropriate, effective and of quality. For example, as regards institutional training courses for teachers - which, it should be remembered, have the legal purpose of making individuals formally and institutionally *able* to teach - it seems rather inconsistent to define paths which develop in a transmissive way, in an idea of knowledge as an object to be internalized, which perseveres in the metaphor of cumulation, ignoring instead the value of knowledge as a living and pulsating element which *changes* itself during confrontation and which *changes*, when it manages to play that crucial role in the theory of

training. This elevated and fundamental training goal cannot be achieved only by transferring knowledge, albeit valid, but which is often also devoid of concreteness and correspondence with the authenticity of the contexts.

Lacking perhaps is that particular junction in institutional training which provides skills with respect to the capacity for critical-reflective dialogue with the situation. In other words, educational skills cannot be merely "taught" through traditional didactic procedures, as this would be an epistemological contradiction. Transversal skills cannot be simply explained; their maturation requires medium and long-term training and self-training processes which use experience and reflexivity of experience as a means of research and *transformative change* (Mezirow, 2003). In other words, it is necessary to plan and implement didactic-training courses which take advantage of complex knowledge models, methodologies, practices and tools through the planning of long-term internships capable of making a breach in consolidated styles of thought; it is, then, a question of working on the individual and on the deep and silent knowledge which make him/her up, by starting courses within which one has the opportunity of perceiving oneself *changed*. All this implies accepting the living and irreducible dimension of the educational space resulting from being in relationship as a specific area of professional growth and scientific research, an area which requires the development of skills which are the result of long and complex training and self-training, based on exercising the use of reflexivity which has as its goal experience, self-awareness, systems of knowledge and communication, and cognitive and emotional processes.

Notes

¹ This article, although the upshot of teamwork and based on a common writing project, is to be attributed, as regards the *introduction and paragraphs 3 and 4* to Fausta Sabatano, and *paragraphs 1, 2 and 5* to Francesco Lo Presti.

² The Integra Project, promoted in 2005 by the Diocese of Pozzuoli, was moved in 2013, at the request of the Bishop of Pozzuoli, to the new Regina Pacis Educational Centre (www.centroeducativoreginapacis.it) set up with the aim of offering the Diocese (which includes about 600.000 people) a reference point for the training of educators, catechists, parents and families. In 13 years of activity the Project has involved about 500 children and teenagers from 4 to 14 years of age, immigrants and Italians and their parents to build with them trajectories of change, conceived and built together with the children, in the belief that it is impossible to force a change, however valid the proposal is, just as it is presumptuous to think of knowing where it is right to take these children and their parents.

³ See in particular the document edited by the European Section of the International Association of Social Educators, "Common Platform for social educators in Europe", January, 2005.

⁴ Freire argues that a context which is satisfied with the existing generates shrinking, a *being less*. Only a critical approach to reality provokes *just anger* and, therefore, a rebellion against that reality which immobilizes and therefore betrays and denies the specific vocation of the human being: that of *being more*. Paradoxically, it is precisely this *incompleteness* - of which man must become aware - that gives the human being greatness, a leading role in the adaptation-integration dialectic, obliges to seek, to improve, to become an entrepreneur of culture, history, sociality and politics. (Freire, 1971)

⁵ Enteropathy is characterized by the ability of those who listen, in this case educators, to decentralize and put themselves in the shoes of the individual being educated. According to Bertolini, it is a relational style aimed at *including knowledge*, meaning the authentic understanding of the experiences and interpretations which sustain the actions of the individual being educated. This type of relationality allows giving "right of citizenship" to the subjective meanings that direct behaviour. (Bertolini, Caronia, 1998, p. 92 et seq.)

⁶ Franco Cambi says: "It's about grafting knowledge in the self and making it become an inner life, in order to give life to a rich, articulated and therefore critical individual [...] and to a mind capable of being divergent. [...] Individual and mind which are flexible and open, but centered in themselves, self-shaped and capable of ongoing education. As such, capable of passing through, as individuals-persons, the complex society of information and knowledge, of the flexibility (of work and of the individual) in which we are now definitively immersed» (Cambi, 2004, p. 59).

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Francesco Lo Presti (PhD) is assistant Professor in General and Social Pedagogy in the University of Naples “Parthenope”. He was scientific coordinator and member of some national and international group research. His research interests relates to the processes of choice in the construction of self identity and educational guidance in a critical-reflexive perspective. About this perspective he published several articles and books.

Contact: francescolopresti@uniparthenope.it

Fausta Sabatano (PhD) was post doctoral research fellow in general and social pedagogy at the University of Naples “Parthenope”. She is the Caserta District scientific director for the inclusion and the Educational Diocesan Center “Regina Pacis” scientific director, where she coordinates the educational and training activities. About inclusion she published several articles and books.

Contact: fau.sabatano@gmail.com