RENEWING SCHOOL: THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES FOR A PROJECT OF ENGAGED RESEARCH FOR SCHOLASTIC INNOVATION

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Abstract

Italian schools are going through a very challenging moment, as they are required to renew the educational proposals and the teaching structure, on the one hand by the need to refer to the European indications which outline a curriculum oriented towards achieving key skills to meet political, cultural, economic and social needs; on the other by the demands of renewal made by the players directly involved (teachers, children, families).

The project of scholastic innovation, A school, which has its roots in the Manifesto we wrote (http://unascuola.blogspot.it/p/manifesto-per-una-scuola.html), is situated in this dynamic context offering itself as an experimentation of educational and didactic methods rooted in the long and articulated history of Italian pedagogical and didactic thought, but at the same time oriented by the most recent theoretical and practical suggestions in Italy and abroad.

The project intends to present the start of the project of engaged research which directly involves head teachers, teachers, families and the local services in the definition of the main structures forming the basis of the proposal of scholastic experimentation, highlighting theoretical and methodological, pedagogical and didactic nuclei, which support the transformative possibilities of A school. The innovation concerns in particular the organization of the setting, in terms of space, time, groups, materials, and curricula. The formative offer is based on the experiential and explorative methods and implemented by the educating community in terms of shared pedagogical and didactic strategies. The tools of the research include video and audio recordings of the decision-making and project development moments, but also the diary documentation by the different subjects involved of the passages deemed crucial to support the transformative processes, of themselves and of the school.

Keywords: Innovation, Scholastic Innovation, Engaged Research.

1 INTRODUCTION

The history of education is studded with significant experiences which have developed innovative schools as an alternative to schools based on a classical model defined as transmissive, hierarchical, and organized around single-subject knowledge and same-age groups of learners (Montessori, 1950; Dewey, 1951; Neill, 1979; Massa, 2000; Freinet, 2002; Morin, 2001; Mottana, 2009; Fielding & Moss 2014) and educational approaches that emphasize expressive, exploratory, imaginative and active modes of learning (Agazzi, 1950; Lodi, 1970; Ciari, 1972; Malaguzzi, 1995; Robinson, 2001; Rossi Cassottana, 2004; Zavalloni, 2008; Salen, 2008, 2011; Smith, 2012; Gray, 2013; Lorenzoni, 2014).

Italian schools are going through a very challenging moment, as they are required to renew the educational proposals and the teaching structure, on the one hand by the need to refer to the European indications which outline a curriculum oriented towards achieving key skills to meet political, cultural, economic and social needs; on the other by the demands of renewal made by the players directly involved (teachers, children, families).

This widespread movement is outlining an articulated map of schools which have started projects of innovation, some with known and more historical references, others with evolving and more recent experiences. This is also what emerges from the recent “Mappa della scuola che cambia” (AA.VV., 2017), outlined in the project “Tutta un’altra scuola”, which for some years has been trying to collect the numerous experiences of experimentation under way in Italy. This mapping, which starts from the grassroots by self-reporting of the experiences, indicates in the first place an increase in the number of schools still considered innovative, although they come from the pedagogical and didactic tradition, in particular with Montessori and Steiner schools, which in this period are seeming to find new lifeblood and being multiplied.
As far as the Steiner schools are concerned, the National Federation of Steiner-Waldorf Schools in Italy describes a movement made up of 61 schools, including nursery schools, primary schools and secondary schools, especially in the private sector. The Montessori method schools, in addition to the 48 crèches, 250 sections of Children’s Houses and 325 primary school classes already present, as stated by the Opera Nazionale Montessori – a sort of second life is taking place as this offer is finding increasing space inside state schools, in which experimentations are being started even in state middle schools. This is an important figure, which not only acknowledges the importance of an offer such as the Montessori one which has developed all over the world, but indicates a widespread desire to experiment even inside schools usually considered traditional like state schools. This figure is also supported by the increasingly wider spread of other and more resent experimentation, still in state schools. To give an idea of these, reference can be made to the numbers given by the innovation movement “Avanguardie educative”, which is recording the state schools which, in various ways and according to different criteria, are conducting innovative projects and which is currently made up of 570 state schools (http://avanguardieeducative.indire.it/). The “Rete Senza Zaino per una scuola comunità,” started in Lucca on the proposal of a single head teacher (Orsi, 2006) has also taken on significant dimensions and in a few years has spread to 160 schools throughout Italy. It bases its experimentation on some key concepts, including rethinking the use of space and materials. Alongside this widespread network, the Italian Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) has authorized a special experimentation for three schools: the Scuola-Città Pestalozzi in Florence, the experimental Rinascita-Livi school in Milan and the Don Milani experimental school in genoa, each of which has been carrying out for some time experiments in interesting methodological innovation. Lastly, mention must be made of the “Rete nazionale delle scuole pubbliche all’aperto”, which in its first year of life has attracted 14 comprehensive schools in various Regions (https://scuoleallaperto.wordpress.com/), all of which are ready for a three-year experimentation to foster the continuous use of outside spaces as “widespread classrooms”, with the intention of rebalancing the traditional relationship between the outside and the inside that normally has considerably more time spent in the former to the detriment of that spent in the latter.

Alongside these experiences, which although heterogeneous are nevertheless all included in the extensive Italian school system, there are other experiences which due to their structure, but also their legal status, are placed in the margins of this system; these include the “libertarian schools,” the nurseries and schools in the wood (which in only three years have increased in number from a few units to over 60), the experiences of home-schooling, parental schooling and unschooling, today collected in a national Network which concerns about a thousand children and youngsters and which in the past few years have shown growth.

Each of the experiences mentioned contributes to outlining a rich and complex picture, which as a whole states a strong tension towards renewal, with the common intention of increasingly fostering increasingly better educational and school offerings, which can meet the formative needs of children and youngsters, not only from the point of view of the single individuals, but also from that of the community.

2 THE PROJECT: A SCHOOL

The project of scholastic innovation which has its roots in the Manifesto we wrote (http://unascuola.blogspot.it/p/manifesto-per-una-scuola.html) can be situated in this panorama of transformation. A School Manifesto has been chosen by some teachers of the San Fermo school, of the Don Rimoldi school in Varese, attracting the interest of many parents in the city and finding the support of the institutions, of the council of Varese and of the department of education, as well as of the head of the school. It was also widely reported in the press (http://unascuola.blogspot.it/p/rassegna-stampa.html) as an innovative project, presented in an area which had a need for transformation of the traditional scholastic system. Three primary school classes following the methodology of the A school project will start in September 2017.

The project is placed in this dynamic context, offering itself as an experimentation of educational and didactic methods rooted in the long and articulated history of Italian pedagogical and didactic thought, but at the same time oriented by the most recent theoretical and practical suggestions that come from Italy and abroad (Agazzi, 1950; Lodi, 1970; Ciari, 1972; Malaguzzi, 1995; Robinson, 2001; Rossi Cassottana, 2004; Zavalloni, 2008; Salen, 2008, 2011; Smith, 2012; Gray, 2013; Lorenzoni, 2014).
A school recognizes that the roots of teaching and learning lie in the educational models of the past. We wish to define, in the past as in the present, the learning structures, as a symbolic and material space in which culture in its various forms is preserved, re-elaborated and handed on. At the same time, a school looks to the future, because it is open to change and receptive to innovation processes, understood as the means by which the world as it is, may be transformed into the world that will be.

In the first place, a school must actively promote the participation of all its actors, both adults and children. The central focus is the community rather than the individual child. Personal wellbeing is in constant dialogue with collective wellness, without prejudice to personal freedom: thus, the individual will be more focused on how to create a better world than on being satisfied or dissatisfied with his or her own educational development (Fielding & Moss, 2011). The group is the dominant dimension of experience, because it is the place in which everybody can share,analyse and discuss their findings, and can share the joy of learning. The students’ families are partners of this process: ad hoc communication and documentation tools are used to clearly illustrate the school’s educational programmes and offering coeducation, and partnership. This kind of documentation is intended to be an on-going work of the translation of needs and requirements, of rights in dialogue with duties, and of freedom in relation to the responsibilities of individuals and groups. The relationship with the wider community has the aim of sustaining dialogue between school and civil society so that all the subjects can renew their political vocation. A key role is attributed to learning contexts, which are the core element of the teaching-presenting knowledge method. These settings must be complex, intriguing, varied and imbued with passion, as well as speaking through different languages. Rather than traditional class groups, the students are organized into fluid and mixed-age groups, without rigid and stable divisions, because, working in open groups defined around goals of enquiry allows individuals to nurture their own personal needs together with others who have similar requirements. Likewise, timetables are fluid in the interest of promoting dynamic movement and enquiry on the part of the children, without interrupting learning processes just because the lesson-time is over and the bell has rung.

The school that we have in mind is open to the world, and therefore in dialogue with both the environment and the society beyond its own borders. Here, children and adolescents have the opportunity to recognize themselves as part of that Nature to which they belong. For all of these reasons, the time spent outdoors is therefore equal in importance but also equal in amount to that spent inside the school building. Learning must be driven by a demand for meaning, on the part of each individual subject: teacher and student. Teaching is therefore oriented towards developing students’ desire to explore (Smith, 2012; Guerra, 2013), research and transform, without separate subjects, categorizations and disciplinary “boxes”. All of the children’s experiences at school should be informed by the dimension of play: the complexity of learning and the effort involved should be the consequence of the students’ choosing to overcome their own limits and other obstacles and impediments, because they desire knowledge to transform contexts and situations (Antonacci, 2012).

This kind of school prompts a complete revisiting of existing educational programmes, not in terms of their contents, but in relation to teaching styles, languages to be used and transmitted, and modes of acquiring knowledge and experiencing the world and others. It is not a question of organizing teaching around “projects”, but of viewing knowledge as an organic whole that needs to be approached from different perspectives in order to be completely understood and valued. Thus, the disciplines cannot be the starting point of the knowledge acquisition process, which is naturally transversal, spanning different spheres, but will be the end point of enquiry, to the extent that specific languages and dedicated instruments have been called for.

For all of these reasons, assessment has to be an interpretative dimension related to the meaning of things, a meaning that must be continuously translated in order to be understood by the different actors in play. Both younger and older pupils should be observed, listened to, questioned and valued on an on-going basis, with the support of appropriate instruments. But teachers too should be continuously observed and assessed via permanent instruments and opportunities. Assessment should therefore become an organic system of documenting processes, discussed in relation to the learning paths of the group and individuals, using ad hoc materials that help to bring into focus both strengths and critical aspects (Guerra, 2014).

3 METHODOLOGY

The paper intends to present the start of the project of engaged research which directly involves head teachers, teachers, families and the local services in the definition of the main structures forming the
basis of the proposal of scholastic experimentation, highlighting theoretical and methodological, pedagogical and didactic nuclei, which support the transformative possibilities of A school. The innovation concerns in particular the organization of the setting in terms of space, time, groups, materials and curricula. The formative offer is based on the experiential and explorative methods and implemented by the educating community in terms of shared pedagogical and didactic strategies.

The aim is to build up a habit of enquiry that will prompt the learners to conduct their own in-depth investigations of the world and of knowledge, through the constant experiencing of things and ideas. The construction of open research questions, which each subject is encouraged to engage with based on his or her current competences, makes A School a naturally inclusive place, in which special educational needs are the educational norm.

Coherently with the A school project and with investigative approach to knowledge it promotes, the research started with the school involved also identified a participatory approach as favourable, which invited the participation of all the subjects involved in various capacities. This refers in the first place, as far as the work started with the teachers is concerned, to the characteristic features of research-education, i.e. a way of research that intends to be educational for those taking part in it, as it supports practices of reflection with an internal focus, generating shared knowledge (Nigris, 1998; Orefice, 2006; Barbier, 2008). Above all, the form of engaged research has been identified as ideal, which “describes a wide range of rigorous research approaches and methodologies that share a common interest in collaborative engagement with the community and aim to improve, understand or investigate an issue of public interest or concern, including societal challenges. Engaged research is advanced with community partners rather than for them” (Engaged Research Report, 2016).

Consequently, the instruments of enquiry identified have been borrowed from the methods of qualitative analysis (Mantovani, 1998), which more easily allow collecting and considering representations, ideas and project-building of individuals and groups, this way allowing the project to be really engaged and shared.

The research includes different instruments, first of all video and audio recording of the decision-making and project development moments. These are instruments that allow going into greater depth than those offered by reports, however accurate these may be, as they allow an accurate reconstruction of the processes of discussion activated, the different nuances emerging and of the crucial passages. All this allows identifying the decisions taken by the research group, allowing to bring them to the system and therefore composing the structure of the project of experimentation. Discussion itself is an instrument of the research under way, as it allows directly questioning the experience and the thoughts of the subjects involved in the field and, at the same time, represents an opportunity for exercise of what makes up one of the central practices of the work of teachers with children in the A School project. Discussion with children is effectively a fundamental instrument to probe how they relate experiences, what makes an impression on them, which reflections emerge from the group but also to build up a capital of shared knowledge that outlines the knowledge of that community.

Alongside these instruments, another significant group is that made up of the observational instruments, in particular written and video-recorded (Bove, 2009) observations of the actions experimented by the teachers with the children and the diary documentation by the different subjects involved of the passages deemed crucial to support the transformative processes, of themselves and of the school.

These observational instruments make a privileged contribution to the purpose of exploring and describing the setting, gradually outlining the significant elements and allowing some shared observational categories to be identified, that will subsequently be useful to build up evaluation instruments connoted by a narrative approach yet anchored to some phenomenic evidence (Demetrio, 2013). In particular, the request for self-observation through the use of a diary allows documenting the experience and returning to it later, supporting the habit of reflecting and dwelling on one’s actions, but also the consolidation of a project-development in progress, which is built up step by step and which forms the methodological heart of the A School project.

The choice of several instruments, although they are all coherent with an approach of the qualitative type, intends to foster the collection of the different voices of the numerous subjects involved, contributing to give rise both to a shared project and to engaged research.
4 RESULTS

The research is now at the phase for the training of the teachers, both those directly involved in the classes which will start in September, and of other teachers of the school who will start with the same structure described in the project with the first classes in the following years. The participation in the training, which we, the researchers have proposed, is on a voluntary basis; the change of one’s teaching methodology must be a choice for each teacher, which cannot be imposed. The lengthy work of communication through programmatic documents and presentations of the project, together with a desire for innovation obviously already present have led no fewer than fifteen teachers to decide to take part in the training and join the project.

The course began with a space to listen to the teachers’ wishes and expectations. The main questions that emerged concerned the desire to manage the school time differently. The school time is experienced as compressed and fragmented, “a container of things to do”. The teachers say they have the sensation of always being in a hurry, of never having time to listen to the needs of the children and to go further into the questions that come up in the classroom, feeling pressed by the many subjects on the syllabus that has to be completed in the required period of time. The desire that was clearly stated and shared by the group is that of proceeding with slowing down (Zavalloni, 2008) in order to use the time in a qualitatively more functional way for the needs of learning.

In the same way, they feel trapped by education which is finalized to provide a great deal of information and many notions and, conversely, they feel the desire to experiment a style based on shared questions that can be dealt with slowly, following the natural development of the children’s competences.

They feel the need to give children greater freedom in school life to allow them the possibility of greater self-determination in their learning path: children have a natural need to express their uniqueness and to feel welcomed and appreciated, and this can best take place in a school that is willing to listen to their questions, putting them in a circle for the whole group. In this way, the knowledge and the curiosities of each child can find a space of expression and research and gain dignity for everyone, The children have to increasingly become active subjects in their educational process and in that of their classmates, not forgetting that the teachers should also always put themselves in an attitude of research, willing to learn from their pupils, in a circular process of knowledge. It will be possible to allow children to be free in their learning path, however, only if a rich learning setting is built up, which lets teachers take a step back to let them experiment autonomously.

In this sense, the reference is to an education of experience, as in the active methodologies à la Dewey, where the processes of transaction help experience become rich knowledge because it has been accomplished and thought (Dewey, 1951). Experience in this sense is understood as a context in which to reflect while doing, being in contact with the world inside and outside school, with particular attention to outdoor teaching (Guerra, 2015), including in contrast with the hyper-protective tendency of today’s parents (Lee, Macvarish & Bristow, 2010).

Building up together, proceeding by trial and error does not, however, mean absence of rigour; the objective is being able to improvise, but also making the methodologies part of the system, with continuous shifts between practice and theory. This is why it will become fundamental to keep a record of what will be done, through diaries, photos, observations, with the intention of giving rise to a school of questions: the ones the adults ask and the ones the children ask, even when they do not seem functional to the objectives of the syllabus. Last but not least, there will be the questions of the families, which will be listened to, if we want the parents to be willing to support this innovative project.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The experience started seems to represent to all effects an experience of engaged research (Engaged Research Report, 2016), in a model of research which has programmatically chosen to have competences, resources and different gazes dialogue. We, the researchers, have accepted the needs that emerged from the community, as different public and private stakeholders - policy makers, civil and civic society organisations - and actors - local services, schools, families.

The interpretative nature of the qualitative methodologies of investigation adopted – from written and video observation, to self-observation using diaries, to discussion – promises to foster a productive discussion on the way to understand and offer objectives, proposals, evaluations as they emerge and, in parallel, to build up a well-structured and complex source of plural knowledge.
Together with the teachers and children, we will all be involved as researchers in this project which does not have the ambition of being a method, but wants to prepare an organic structure of an innovative school. The instruments and the methodologies that we have described to learn reciprocally and build up a real engaged learning environment will be put on the line: A School.

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REFERENCES