Officina 2020: Education and futures

Report of the Panel Discussion of the
Provincial Student Council of Rome on the theme:

Education in times of uncertainty: the view of the students of the Provincial Council of Rome

Outcome of a lively debate on the futures of education - convergences and distances emerging on the methods and objectives of teaching in the school

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Students of the Provincial Council of Rome participating in the discussion:

Jacopo Augenti, Matteo Baldassari, Daniele Conti, Tommaso Esposito, Gabriele Francesconi, Flavia Lepizzera, Gabriele Manzo, Benedetta Gaia Meloni, Maria Monina, Silvia Pagliarulo, Giovanni Sicca, Daniele Svolacchia, Leonardo Soffientini, Erica Tomassetti
Coordinator: Adriana Valente (CNR-IRPPS)

SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE:

Adriana Valente, Valentina Tudisca, Claudia Pennacchiotti (CNR-IRPPS)
Michela Mayer (CNR-IRPPS, IASS)
Mara Di Berardo (CNR-IAC)
Elena Gaudio (DGOSV-MI)
Alessia Vagliviello (USR Lazio)
Maya Prince, Daniela Bianchi, Noah W. Sobe (UNESCO)

Recordings of all the work sessions can be viewed on the website: https://www.officinaeducazionefuturi.it/

Education in times of uncertainty

Introduction

The results follow of the work of the online panel discussion of the Provincial Student Council of Rome on the theme "Education in times of uncertainty". The discussion was held on April 28, 2020 as part of the " Officina 2020: Educazione e Futuri (Education and Futures)", organized by the Institute for Research on Population and Social Policies, "Social Studies of Science, Education, Communication", of the National Research Council of Italy in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and the UNESCO initiative "Futures of Education".

The discussion focused on the principles which should inspire educational strategy, and on the objectives and methods of the learning action.

Among the proposals arisen there are: the adoption of multiple teaching methods, the personalization of courses, the opposition to early specialization, the prsuit of equity and the enhancement of the learning process.

The emergence of opposing visions among participants was also of great interest, in particular with reference to citizenship competences, to the concept of "progress" and the role of politics in the school system. Many different opinions also contributed to the debate on competences, particularly as regards technology and school assessment and evaluation.

The school was also examined with reference to the functions of space and time.

Visions and proposals

Imagining the education of the future, a first consideration is that rather than on the optimal didactic approach, we should be talking about a variety of didactics. This means structuring a greater range of teaching methods and adopting **multiple didactics**, which would help take into account students' different learning means.

The didactic approach must be identified and **personalized** because everyone learns differently. In this perspective, the issue of overcrowded classes - so-called "classi pollaio" (chicken-coop-classes") - should be overcome. Organization into smaller classes would improve the relationship between students and teachers and would enable the teacher to pay more attention to the needs of each individual student.

Education action must be able to grasp new interests and needs, and it should be able to make everyone achieve what they want and dream of doing. It should be an incentive and not an enemy. There should be no **early specialization**, nor a distinction between high school (*liceo*) and technical school courses, at least in the first two years of upper secondary education. The enhancement of experience could also play an important role, limiting the mere use of a *predefined* educational offer. The school must also evolve for reasons of equity, in order to build **a fairer and more just society**. Today, the school is perceived as a place where the social divide is widening and which is not able to help the student to overcome social and cultural barriers. Traditional teaching (rigid times and spaces, standardized education) leaves those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds behind. Technology alone is not enough. On the contrary, this period of crisis and the consequent adoption of distance learning have led to inequalities among young people living in small spaces and with fewer resources. Distance learning can however be a source of opportunity, as will be seen below. Meritocracy too often

translates into selection based on the context of origin. Instead, the right to study is much more than just the right to enter school.

Education should **focus on the learning process and not on performance**. We should not expect everyone to arrive at the same point, but we should focus on the individual process. For the future, we hope to use integrated teaching methods that respect the different styles and learning times of individuals, giving everyone the opportunity to learn.

Controversial themes: citizenship, progress, politics

Two parallel meanings of "**citizenship education**" emerge. Harmonizing them is a great challenge for the school.

A first interpretation refers to the fact that everyone lives in a society and must contribute to social well-being. The school should contribute to forming the competences that society and the productive world require. Resilience and adaptability are examples of pivotal features in this approach, together with those of interest for the productive world. The goal is to educate individuals who know how to live consciously and integrate into society. The lack of enhancement of each individual's particular characteristics generates insecurity and difficulty in imagining own place in society.

A second interpretation, linked to criticism of the role of technoscience in society, denounces a vision of school as a training field in which we focus on what is useful for society and not on what is important for the person. The school must, above all, help the individual to form a critical conscience and not merely follow the needs of the market. It must be an institution that welcomes and promotes the change of society by renewing itself, promoting cultural, spiritual and political development. The goal must be to educate individuals who operate in a transformative way.

Likewise, we need to discuss - and where possible harmonize - the ideas of **progress** that we desire. This may mean "to make better machines" - closely linked to technological innovation as the driving force of changes for the benefit of all society - or "better people" - people who build an inclusive society, who *have ideas* and are also ready to *change those ideas*.

According to some students, **politics** at school is also fundamental as a vision of the future, a vision of the future society to be built, and should not be demonized. Politics should become a proper subject of study, also based on action, and capable of creating a bridge between school life and future life. According to other students, teaching politics may make sense from the point of view of deepening **geopolitical issues**, but a real political education is difficult, because it would require a teacher capable of forming a critical conscience in the students, to help them to analyze critically also what he is teaching.

However, there was general agreement on the vision of politics linked to action, as a possibility of "contributing together".

Competences

In the future there will likely be a need for **competences** other than those required today. It is necessary to stimulate the construction of **competences connected to practice** and yet we must avoid sacrificing cultural competences in favor of those that are considered more useful in terms of job opportunities. The school should reward **learning and reasoning competences** and not simply the acquisition of notions. In order to live in a community with respect for the other and the identity of

the other, **education about emotions and affectivity and sexual education** is fundamental, which in many cases still constitute two taboo areas.

Among the main **transversal competences**, problem solving, ability to work together, critical thinking and critical spirit should be enhanced. The school should also encourage the expression of opinions and promote exchange of ideas and debate.

The recommendations contained in international documents, including the Recommendation of the Council of Europe on key competences of 2018, should also be effectively applied in educational paths. **Technological and scientific competences** should also be enhanced. Many digital natives are actually digitally illiterate. They use social networks, but they do not know how to use technologies in a broad and competent way.

This is also because **technology** has 2 facets: a positive one, which helps us to grasp the changes; and a negative one, which brings with it alienation and isolation. For this reason, the use of technology represents a risk, especially among the very young.

In this respect, in addition to traditional subjects, there should also be learning oriented to how we relate to technology. To make the best use of technology, it is necessary to bring about discussion at local, national and international levels, comparing the different uses of technology and its effects, also considering the basic differences between countries. As we have seen during Covid lockdown period, distance learning can accentuate inequalities, which makes it necessary to think about a variety of alternative ways of teaching. For the future, in secondary schools, it could be useful to integrate teaching with online platforms that have been used during the lockdown phase. In this way it would be possible to do more tailored schoolwork, enhancing the relationship between student and teacher. For example, many teachers are taking advantage of distance learning in order to offer more individual exchanges with students and promote broader spaces for communication. In this way it is possible to support the student's choice to debate and go into greater depth with the teacher.

School as space and time

Students must have the opportunity to use the school to meet and engage with their peers. This vision of politics acts as a connection point between **teaching and spaces**. In promoting group didactics, there should also be a rethinking of school environments and learning locations. Individual, group, class and community should all find own space and not be opposed to one another. One issue that has arisen in the debate is whether the school will exist as a physical location in the future or whether it will no longer exist. This reflection has a social value and impacts on personal fulfillment because school is not only the place where knowledge is learned, but also the place where the individual lives in a community and integrate into it.

Also regarding this aspect, it is necessary to identify the good practices implemented in own as in other countries. For example, it is necessary to know and compare different realities where the **school is open** all day, as a place for physical encounter and extended exchange and debate, an indispensable space in the life of a community.

In order to experience the school as a place of aggregation and not only of study, it is also important to give greater importance to **sport**, which would also help to stimulate greater cohesion and a sense of belonging to the school.

In our discussion, **time** was analyzed as a dimension of the educational process and as a dimension perceived by the student. With respect to the former point, the need emerged to respect learning

times (reassessment of slowness), relative to a society that is accelerating and requires the individual to acquire early professional competences. According to the students, there is a conflict between this request and the time it takes for the individual to form own individuality and own cultural background. As regards the perception of the student, the need has emerged also to teach students that learning demands time to settle and reflect, and acquire critical knowledge. We should learn to **stay with the questions**, to keep them with us in order to be able to go into depth over time.

Evaluation

With respect to the practice of **evaluation**, we can emphasize the constructive exchange it brings with itself, that is reciprocal improvement, and on the other hand the fact that evaluation is frequently perceived as competition and therefore leads to rivalry between students.

Evaluation should be a factor that contributes to everyone's growth, a positive lever, an incentive and not a weapon, nor a simple tool to "respect the rules". If the school is to enable learning to learn, evaluation cannot be punitive. If the student studies just to get a passing grade or to obtain a good mark, but not to learn the subject or to increase own interest in studying, then the educational system has failed.

We should focus not so much on being better than the other, but on bettering ourselves with the help of the other. In the verses of Hesiod: "so the one who works with less haste can reach who works swiftly".

It is above all necessary to change the perception of the grade. It should not be a value for either teachers or learners, nor should it be considered as an overall judgment on the person. Evaluation should be functional to learning and not the contrary, otherwise the risk is that rather than developing the necessary competences or knowledge, students merely develop techniques to obtain good marks.