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Encounter and Dialogical Learning. A Relational Pedagogy Path Incontro e apprendimento dialogico. Un percorso di Pedagogia relazionale

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Abstract

People build themselves in their life, in relationships, in inputs and in requests they get. Everyone's life is marked by encounters, stories and experiences shared through emotions and languages, signs and phenomena that require sensitivity and communicative and relational skills to be got. These skills are the basis of dialogic intelligence (Rossi, 2005, 2015; Gómez, Alonso 2014) that enables people to read words, feelings and non-verbal languages.

Narration, dialogue spaces, listening exercises and reflexive silence build the different phases of an active critical methodology through that people explore personal worlds (inner and others' worlds) and collective landscapes. Actions and thoughts make sense in these contexts of life, otherness paths (a topic debated by relational pedagogy), that engage the single person and the whole community, are taking shape to involve the School and the civil society.

Key words: Relationship, Pedagogy, Education, Listening, Dialogue.

Introduction

The present historical and cultural context highlights the effects and the contradictions of a world that strongly wants to involve all the continents in the globalization effects. Single states are called to work together in order to face common and world's problems, such as the ones derived from a collapsed ecological system and from huge immigration problems. Still, cooperation often remains a dead letter (such as international treaty and agreement) and doesn't translate into reality, not to produce the expected effects. We should to think about it, and, moreover, think about those processes and workings that didn't produce the wished results, in terms of collaboration and sharing. Maybe the interests of few ones prevail and probably it is not easy to share the same perspectives, and it is not simple to find strong common motivations, that are able to realize a concrete praxis that works at political, economic and social level. A possible explanation to it can be found out in the strategic purpose absence, those which, independently of latitude and longitude, should join people and instead of dividing them. It lacks the sense of community: it lacks the collective will to converge our views to a unique direction. For this reason it is required to reawaken the convivial spirit, feeding it with incentives, exalting those values that can get people and cultures together instead of dividing them. This aim is reserved by the Relational Pedagogy, engaged in the rescue of collaboration and cooperation dimensions, through the promotion of a hermeneutic intelligence that will be ethic and respectful (Rossi, 2005; Gardner, 2007) in the moment when it will give value and meaning to every person, independently of his or her history, life, place of birth and membership. These ways force the education to carry the contradictions and conflicts that could erase the every human beings' value and dignity of life. This is the reason why in the late modern age it is easy to get "ancient regimes" (Delson, 2008; Veca, 2014), the ones in that the few ones, who think, take decisions for the others, a historical period called Post Modernity by many academics, where dreams collide with a hard reality that is able to dampen every good purpose. It is necessary to believe and to bet on the possibilities to show more hope and trust on the future, not to relegate to an impersonal and anonymous future, in order to work actively to get the result. The unique message that is able to honour every people and to involve the education and Pedagogy is to get back human relationships. Pedagogy, being the science that studies the variables and the dynamics of educative processes, can't avoid a critique reflections about human life contexts. This Pedagogy doesn't lose in the time its utopian power, on the contrary, it makes this power firmer and firmer thanks to the Educational Science with which Pedagogy has a dialogue productively. This proposition emerges in the moment when Pedagogy redefines and proves its principles, methods and tools. To overcome the "evils" and "lacks" of the present time (narcissism, hedonism, egoism, individualism and indifference) Pedagogy, through a systematic study of the education, can prove its utility and planning that are used in pointing the educational purposes able to guard and exalt the human freedom. Caring about the integral education of the person means to recognise peoples' ontological primacy that doesn't lose itself in the abstract nature (like many Pedagogy critical could state) as it enhances freedom, that is strictly related to expression and autonomy of judgment and thought. A new "being culture" becomes the Pedagogy task in the moment when it works for the human redemption. Having success in this attempt means to exercise feelings and intellect, will and conscience (Mollo, 1996, 2004; Rossi, 2005, 2015; Goleman, 1996, 2007, 2014). It is impossible to

be free men if people have no personal autonomy, when the thought leads to homologation, and the mind falls into the trap of conditionings and prejudices. The question is how to form autonomous, but not self-sufficient people; independent ones but not isolated; sure but not insensitive. These principles find in the education a possibility of challenge, a card to play in the life match to get away from isolation and closure that make indifferent and so unable to welcome, feel and think according to a community perspective (Baumann, 2000, 2009). How can we work in this direction? Answering to this question implies to feel the question: we have then to proceed on the way of the engagement that implies the educative challenges against indifference, lack of sensitivity and respect, such symptoms of a society that tends to call everything into question, in a dialogue where small talk substitutes words and a simple hearsay becomes the truth. In order to get out of contradictions, we have to rediscover the authentic dialogue, on which the relationships become stronger and stronger and can increase and develop. That is, in brief, what building the meeting in a dialogical-relational point of view is (Orazi, Pattoia, Rosati, 2014; Rossi, 2005, 2015; Gómez Alonso, 2014). In this sense we need to make room for others' ideas and beliefs, taking care with multiple points of view, greeting the others' message with openness and intellectual honesty, with the aim to open-mindedness and discussion (the so called openness, according to Rogers) that enriches the single person and the humankind. The relationship takes shape in the minds encounter, that the ability of listening makes possible, in a unity of reason and feelings, as we communicate with our gaze and heart (Adler, 1984; Robertson, 1977), relationship organizes itself, society takes shape, languages express and thoughts divides themselves. The educational path toward otherness twists and turns through dialogue practices, silence exercise and active listening methodologies that facilitate learning. On these guidelines the meeting and the collaborative and dialogical learning could be built and enhanced.

The Question

Our time is characterized by speed, immediacy, usability of knowledge more and more technical and specialized (Morin, 2007). Knowledge is moved into contexts and applied to solve concrete problems. The speed with which knowledge and practice become obsolete and unsuitable shows a deep change in the everyday life and in the culture in response to the evolution of sciences and knowledge. More and more fragmented and sector-based knowledge loses its versatility in the moment when it moves towards a single solution, the most effective, immediate and direct, competitive in terms of time saving, energy and cost. Information flow fast on the monitor, pass through digital channels, follow one another without a break in the web. Pictures prevail over texts, sound on word, product visibility on content. This virtual world makes the distance between space and time shorter, focuses the attention on the present time and distracts from historical continuity. Even the language, the "House of Being" as Heidegger called it, results without aim (Baldini, 1988, p. 8), since, because of the chaos and noise, language is deprived of trenchancy and legitimate meaning. "Everyone talks but nobody listens to" (Baldini, 1988, p. 8); a partisan communication prevails and it betrays the semantic nature of the word: communicating means putting together, sharing. The widespread trend is to listen with only one ear, with distraction and superficiality, so that many statements are expected and ordinary. Passivity and inert acceptance (Baldini, 1988) compromise the authentic listening and reflect themselves in human relationships, in order to reveal a deep sense of the global citizen loneliness (Baumann, 2000, 2009). The citizen of the world,

despite having so many tools and means to communicate (tablet, smartphone, email, etc.) tends to shut in him or herself, to take root on his or her beliefs and ideas, showing in this way a difficulty to establish bonds and interpersonal relationships, that, on the contrary, could satisfy the natural need to be listened. The planetary citizen, while having at their disposal many tools and means to contact (tablet, smartphone, email, etc.) Tends to close itself, to take root on their beliefs and ideas, demonstrating a real difficulty in establishing ties, the interpersonal relationships that, however, could satisfy the natural need to be heard and to be concretely present and involved in the lives of others. The lack of communication, emphasized by solipsism and by indifference to everybody and everything, becomes the main problem and reveals lack of interest, apathy and superficiality that are then reflected in relationships. These ones, which are supported by empathic processes, according to the academics (Goleman, 1996; Rifkin, 2010), lose their attraction and don't seem to have sense but the definition of roles and social responsibilities. The inability to relate, therefore, doesn't become a simple distinctive characteristic or a variable factor of human experiences, but becomes a form of embarrassment and unease. Superficial behaviours come from indifference, as it lacks that attention, that, on the contrary, reveals interest, concern, attention and respect for the others and for themselves (Heidegger, 1969; Rogers, 1970; Mollo, 2005; Mortari, 2006; Palmieri, 2009). The listening crisis, about which scholars discuss, becomes the "sign of the crisis of human relations" (Piana, 2013, p. 72), the sign of the oblivion, and the carelessness of social values from which derives the sense of community (sharing, respect, cooperation and solidarity). That entails the lack of interesting perspectives under the historical, social and cultural profile, as the capacity of individuals and communities are ignored. Education, in this scenario, can become an element of strength and redemption in light of resignation and disinterest, in order to give to everyone the possibility to get and appreciate what right, beautiful and good come from human relationships. Dialogue and meeting, in this perspective, allow to get closer with the others, to establish relationships according to them we can learn, grow up and change. Respect and sensitivity give to everyone the possibility to exchange views with the others, to get out of fears and of worries that can come from prejudice. Education accompanies the person in this path of personal evolution that takes place in the meeting with the other one, in the exploration of unknown reality, a personal world characterised by values, expectations, confirmations and expectations to satisfy. How to move in this dynamic relational twist? How to venture out this context? How to realize an authentic debate? The answers given by the relational pedagogy are to find in the development of dialogue, in the silence as means to discover the other, in the ability of active and critical listening developed in the school. In this perspective it seems that the education prepares to the meeting, promotes empathetic welcome, encourages the acceptance and the reflexive thought. Independence of thought, respect and acceptance, something essential for active inclusion in school, workplace and society, become the targets of a journey of discovery and otherness acceptance.

The contribution of theories and models

The reflections emerged in the previous pages encourage to the meeting promotion. Living together in harmony becomes an aim according to it addressing educational tasks, actions and cultural politics. In support of this thesis, that considers the meeting with the other the cornerstone of the education for the present time, we can recover the centred on the person philosophies that draw from Aristotle's and Thomas Aquinas' thought in primis. Moreover, we cannot forget the postume

contributes of the exponents of the “Dialogic and Word Pedagogy” (Mounier, Buber, Ricouer, Freire, Don Milani) and of the “Pedagogy of Listening” (Ginzburg, 1979; Feurstein, 1980). Social context takes on importance in these scholars and academics thought, with the implications that come from it, as we can observe in Dewey, Kilpatrick, Postic, Bronfenbrenner, Goleman, and Lonergan’s thought (Chiosso, 2012; Mollo, 2016). The common thread that combines these intellectuals, as well as the great passion for the human kind, is the intent to highlight the importance that relationships take on in life contexts and education. We are not educated in loneliness, but we get it in the vitality and dynamicity of human relations. These are the aspects and educational variables that define grow and personal transformation processes, enclosing subjects, knowing, reality and experience on which we build our personality and the meeting with the otherness.

Methodological Observations

Methodology applied by social sciences in an analysis influenced by pedagogical, social, philosophical and anthropological implications allows to understand the phenomenology of a problem such as that of incommunicability, to overcome in support of a productive meeting among subjects that are involved in education. The attention to the subjects can’t exclude a wider cultural analysis that permits to understand the contexts, the ascribed and carried out roles by individuals in this environment and the emerging problems. Phenomenology, narrativity, action-research represent the methodology to endorse in the education. Structural analysis, reflection on experience and autobiography, furthermore, are suited to the structuring of a critical-communicative model (Gómez Alonso, 2014), that is oriented to the study of the social-cultural reality, in that the meanings given to things through the verbal communication derive from interaction between subjects (ib. p. 395). Quantity and quality techniques, represented, for example, also by deep interview and autobiography writing, reading and group discussion paths, allow to activate a process of dialogical and dialectical construction (Fabbri, Melacarne 2015). That is what permits to understand how people build different reality ideas and how problems are perceived, with an awareness that emerges through reflective and critical self-reflective paths. These processes, indeed, commit subjects to a personal transformation, supported by ideas and believes change. New statements and assertions take shape through dialogue, through meanings negotiation that enables personal decision for an active participation to social and cultural life (Xodo Cegolon, 2013, p. 15; Selva, 1988). The theoretical reference in the critical communicational methodology accepts Vigotsky’s thinking, about observations on linguistic processes, on thought and on zone of proximal development. Also Schutz’ phenomenology, deriving from Husserl’s, highlights the effects of “life experience” that are also significant for Berger’s and Luckmann’s Constructivism. The authors valorise the processes of social, linguistic and cultural interaction, processes from which Siemens’ Connectivism learning comes (Selva, 1988; Flecha, 1997; Gómez Alonso, 2014, pp. 397-401; Siemens, 2004; Lave, Wenger, 2006).

Educational Paths

The issues on which to exercise logical-argumentative pragmatic dimension, are those of the dialogue meant as a comparison and research mode, silence and active empathic listening. The choice is justified by the desire to reflect on aspects that should enhance the dialogic and

interpersonal skills of people, but often become problematic factors and separating elements. However, if the communicative and relational competence is a "know how" that is acquired and perfected over time, it is clear that it is up to the education to deal with it, providing primarily to the Pedagogy some contents of investigation and systematic study, in an open confrontation with the other educational sciences (Sociology, Linguistics, History, Anthropology, Psychology, Law, Politics, Education and Neuroscience) to offer new perspectives of reading and intervention to the problems of the present.

Spaces and dialogue practices

Foundation of the Socratic method, the dialogue is the heart of education. Without dialogue, in fact, there can be no relationship and reciprocity, educational care and human development. If in the reflections of philosophers from ancient times until today, the dialogue and the implications arising from that are a constant, this means that their training value is a fact. Most of the scholars, in fact, highlights the educational power of dialogue that allows to overcome the narcissism of self-referential knowledge (Finazzar Flory, 2006, p. 127) in view of a knowledge that is created on the difference and divergence of opinions and knowledge. The "conclusions" to which the dialogue directs the interlocutors, are the result of a change of perspective, the result of an argument that involves the restructuring of the categories of thought and knowledge (Severino, 2012). In the dialogue the change, the transformation of ideas, the enrichment of knowledge, the re-definition of themselves and their ideas are implied, and all that can expand into an overall look, capable of broadening the horizons of life, of thought and experience.

Silence exercises

We can give many interpretations of silence: people say it is tacit consent, but this definition limits the prospects that the silence offers, in the link between language and thought. The break, the suspension of judgment, are not "empty silences", as they reveal a reflective and critical-evaluative attitude, behind the choices and the personal decisions made by experiential and consensual validation (Gendlin, 1961; Robertson, 1997; Habermas, 1984). Silence, in the dialogic relationship, takes on multiple meanings: it is confusion and doubt, can express incomprehension, but it can also be a symptom and expression of refusal and rejection for the other person and for the message content. However it is the silence that allows the opening to the other and to other's speech. For this reason it is "the listening auroral dimension" (Baldini, 1988, p. 15), the phase which prepares and introduces to the dialogue. "There is a silence that is implication of the word (...) and there is a silence (...) before the word" (Sini, 2006, p.13). In this interval between words and thoughts, affirmations and doubts, there is silence, a symptom of a repositioning involving the heart, mind, will and consolidated certainties. The person keeps silent and thinks, reflects on what has been said or done: this folding up inward on their own positions does not deny the value of the statements made but rather enhances the strength, the energy that makes personal change possible. Silence, then, is not the end of the noise, but the beginning of a new thought exercise that fully engages the person.

Listening skills

The present, characterized by the "painful rupture" (Levinas, 2014, p. 12) emphasized by a language that scholars do not hesitate to declare "unemployed", as it has no clear meaning and is often full of ambiguities and pitfalls (Baldini, 1988, p.9; Adler, 1984, p.109), shows a widespread inability to listen to people. Listening actively, to grasp the intent of the message, that is aimed at achieving effect, is an involving task. Listening is a skill that is perfected and acquires over time, as is clear in several studies on the subject (Gordon, 1977, 2005, 2013, 2014.; Robertson, 1977; Adler, 1984; Rogers, 1970; Codina Jiménez, 2004; Dugger, 2006): it requires commitment, desire, physical and intellectual preparation. There is listening, in fact, when there is acceptance, congruence, emotional warmth and openness. Listen means to open up to others, to understand the language, emotions, inclinations and needs. Promoting listening spaces and moments of sharing in educational practice and in company organization, means to offer people the opportunity to freely state their opinions, doubts and concerns that transpire from a non-verbal communication (Danziger, 1982; Goleman 1996, 2007, 2014). Some authors, not surprisingly, highlight the importance of self-understanding and self-assessment of one's ability to listen, that benefits in social, professional and educational relationships ((Hernando Gómez et. All., 2011; Yoyce Choate, Rakes, 2014; Covey, 2009; Kelly, 1975). This means that good communication, structured on active listening, which is trained from people earliest years, facilitates human relations, shortens the distance between people, makes it involves active in finding solutions to problems. Speech and listening exercise also contributes in everyday life to strengthen democratic principles, those on which open societies are based and evolve, which do not deny the values of humanity, but rather encourage them through the equality of opportunity, solidarity principles, authentic communication (Buber, 1959; Reboul, 1995, p.136). The element that promotes proximity of intentions and thoughts, actions and feelings, is empathy. There is much talk in the last decades of empathy. Surely the advantages of an "empathetic feel" are found in educational and professional relationships, as it helps to create harmony, mutual understanding and sharing (Stein, 1998; Goleman, 1996; Rizzolatti, Voza 2008; Rifkin 2009). When there is empathy in the educational relationship, the teacher receives and well includes the expectations and the needs of the students, is sensitive to questions that a cooperative atmosphere of mutual trust encourages, promotes learning and well-being in the classroom. Same remarks can be applied to work context, in which a cooperative climate improves the quality of relationships, encourages interaction and the positive interdependence among individuals (Rogers, 1970; Freire, 1986; Bonino, Lo Coco and Tani, 1998; Bellingreri , 2005, 2013; Boella, 2006; Xodo Cegolon, 2013; Rossi, 2014; Fabbri, Melacarne, 2015).

Conclusion

Recent studies, conducted in the educational and socio-cultural environment, warn about the difficulty of individuals to communicate. To get in touch with others, and give significance to these bonds, it serves to recover the inner dimensions of the person that a world characterized by chaos, immediacy and superficiality, tends to ignore. Getting out from oblivion that invests postmodernity, in a tangible decline of values, means recovering the original sense of the person. Some scholars feel the need to promote a new "culture of being" that has its roots in the dialogue, in the relationship, in empathetic active listening practices and in the recovery of silence, that which is rarely discussed even though a large literature has emphasized its value and function. Through

dialogue people get to other people's worlds, made of words, glances and silences that only a committed listening makes you feel. This is why in the world of educational institutions, as in that of business organizations, we have to privilege "meetings" and create "spaces" of listening that can be helpful, not only to gain empathy and productivity, but, above all, to enhance those natural skills and competencies that the time, the phases of development and competitive production, have led to neglect. The education, in formal contexts such as informal (school, work and society), can help to promote the redemption of a new civilization, able to trust in the power of ideas and the courage of free thought, to resolve conflicts and contradictions in a peaceful and constructive way. The element of social and cultural evolution, moreover, is to be found precisely in this bet, to be enhanced or, by choice, even to neglect, ignoring those knowledge and practices that can be derived instead from a dialogical learning.

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