

## The Struggle of Educating. And of Being “A Grown-up”

Federico Zamengo (University of Turin)

### 1. Still Adults?

Certainly the question "still adults?" may sound differently depending on the reader's age. If, in fact, we referred to a group of young adults or adolescents, the question would probably express some discontent: "Enough with these adults!" or else, "Let's move on." If, on the other hand, our interlocutors were indeed adults, then the question could evoke the particular features of what it means to be an "adult": probably everybody would try to find, almost certainly in themselves, some typical features, both to recognize themselves as such, and possibly to be freed from interpretations deemed too rigid or ideal-typical to truly reflect everyday ways of being.

However, for both adults and young people, after the initial reaction, the empty space left by the question is likely to be crowded with images: not the "adult" category in the abstract, but rather experiences of "adulthood". In short, faces, situations and encounters with real people would arise, perhaps even bringing up some of the different "typologies" of adults with whom they have come into contact.

This simple example aims to highlight a preliminary consideration. Though criticized and opposed, or vice versa respected and acknowledged, the intuitive ideas of what it means to be an "adult" belong to our collective imagination: they take shape in relation to both the cultural context we belong to and our personal experience (Bosma & Kunnen 2000; Côté 1996; Erikson 1967; 1974).

Secondly, although with different declinations, it is commonly acknowledged that there is a difference between adults and minors. This difference is not at all about human dignity, quite the contrary: it is possible to think about the history of pedagogical ideas as a slow, tiring and progressive recognition of the difference between adults and minors. What we now call "evolutionary age" has specific characteristics with an intrinsic value, which results in the consequent respect of the developing periods of every growing subject. As is known, this hasn't always been the case. In this sense, one should consider Rousseau's advice to educators, which was unusual for the time: take your time in educating minors, so as to save it later.

Far from dequalifying the characteristics of growing subjects, therefore, this acknowledgment leaves us an ever-relevant warning: a minor cannot be considered a miniature adult. Hence, as Comenius pointed out, the question of the right-duty of education: every growing subject has the right to receive an

education that respects their potential and, at the same time, it is the adults' responsibility to support the growth of "new borns" (Chiosso 2002).

The difference between adults and minors, then, recognizes equal dignity to both and, on closer inspection, stems from life experience. In other words, the "authority-anteriority" pair as a pedagogical responsibility device embodied by the adult emerges precisely from that "extra" experience from which it draws its legitimacy (Benasayag & Schmit 2004). A postmodern perspective doesn't fail to note the reductionism inherent in this identification: 1960s and 1970s criticism has shown that this principle isn't actually a "given", to use an expression dear to Paulo Freire (Freire 2002), as often this statement hides an ideological construction.

For these reasons, then, the question "still adults?" can only be posed explicitly, becoming an opportunity for reflection in particular for those who, as adults, have an educational role in professional terms (teachers, educators) and, more generally, for those who, as volunteers in non-formal and informal education, are faced every day with those who are growing up.

This question could gather other open questions, such as: what is the role of the adult educator in postmodernity? And again, more radically: in the sphere of education, can we do without an idea - at least intuitive and sufficiently porous - of what it means to "be an adult"? In short, this qualification is certainly able to grasp complex and heterogeneous aspects of adulthood, but it should also maintain an orientative value for growth processes. After all, despite the many models available, when referring to the education of younger generations, "growing up" keeps its own value, which is relatively explicit or shared.

In this sense, what's at stake is clearly not only "being a grown-up" today, but also the processes underlying "becoming a grown-up" tomorrow - that is, becoming subjects that in turn are able to educate those to come. In short, it means considering intergenerational exchange in the broad sense.

Of course, these are open questions that cannot find a definitive answer. However, I believe it is worth reflecting on these questions. In this regard, I would like to briefly dwell on the contemporary pedagogical scene. In fact, if questions of education can be regarded as connatural to the human condition, it is true that the way in which they are asked, and the attempts to respond to them, can only be closely linked to the historical era in which they are formulated.

## **2. Educational Transformations**

From the pedagogical point of view, the last decades have been characterized by a profound transformation that has especially implicated both the meanings associated with the idea of education and the role and

professionalism of the various adult figures involved in the growth processes of younger generations (Chiosso 2009; Biesta 2006).

The origin of this renewed meaning undoubtedly lies in the historical-cultural and social changes that have started in the so-called "short century" and continue to exercise their relevance in the present era, outlining new orientations and routes also in terms of education.

In order to highlight some paradigmatic aspects of contemporary educational scenario, I would like to focus, among other things, on some aspects.

First, the epistemological field: from being the object of pedagogical knowledge with a rooted philosophical vocation, education has become a shared interest between various scientific disciplines, both theoretical and empirical (Baldacci & Colicchi 2016; Chiosso 2015; Contini *et al.* 2014). Secondly, besides the traditional educational agencies (school and family), the training potential of other places (the extensive offer of so-called extracurricular or virtual learning, just to name a few examples) has been consolidated, and therefore today we are confronted with a multitude of training practices and methodologies (Martino, Perlino & Zamengo 2015). Last but not least, the different adult figures involved, in different ways, in educational processes are required to have an increasingly precise training: on the one hand, it envisages an explicit technical and instrumental updating aimed at promoting pedagogical skills and professionalism (Milani, 2000), which is still not recognized enough; on the other hand, the instances of the reflective turn also emphasize the importance, today felt more than ever, of a knowledge that draws on experience, activating an uninterrupted cycle of theory and practice (Alessandrini 2007; Mezirow 2003; Wenger 2006; Argyris & Schön 1998; Schön 1993).

In general terms, one can note an increased attention to education, which is fueling public debate as well as scientific production. And yet, despite the proliferation of interests and debates, those who deal with education every day are still left uncertain by educational processes: like before, today parents, teacher and educators, perhaps with greater awareness than in the past, wonder if and how to intervene.

This statement shouldn't sound surprising: rather, it should be taken as the power point of a problematizing conception of education (Bertin 1995). I think it's healthy that adults today, despite everything, still ask questions (partly the same ones) about educational processes, since this doubting capacity can protect educational processes from the risk of turning into mere training practices, allowing for a "possible unprecedented" (Freire 2008). In other words, the uncertainty of educators is not a datum to be corrected or a flaw to be adjusted, but rather a structural aspect of education itself, with which one should be able to coexist dynamically and constructively.

On the other hand, John Dewey, perhaps the most famous pedagogist of the past century, knew this very well. When he tackled the epistemological

problem of pedagogy, he made sure to qualify education as a science and, at the same time, as "art", warning the reader about the risks of taking easy shortcuts dictated by the temptation to directly transform scientific findings into rules of action. Instead, for Dewey, the scientific approach can allow the educator to develop an intelligent attitude:

At the same time, his practical dealings become more flexible. Seeing more relations he sees more possibilities, more opportunities. He is emancipated from the need of following tradition and special precedents. His ability to judge being enriched, he has a wider range of alternatives to select from in dealing with individual situations. [...] If we retain the word "rule" at all, we must say that scientific results furnish a rule for the conduct of observations and inquiries, not a rule for overt action. They function not directly with respect to practice and its results, but indirectly, through the medium of an altered mental attitude (Dewey 1929, 21, 29).

If, as we have just briefly observed, the boundaries and places of pedagogical discourse have expanded, and there are many potential adults-educators that a young person can encounter in his or her growth path, it is equally true that in educational daily life one has to deal with two other characteristic aspects of our time. First, the subjective focus of growth processes. There is nothing wrong with this: as noted above, respect for individuality can only be considered a conquest of modern pedagogy; however, the aspect that I think it is necessary to highlight is the risk of an overly solipsistic trend in education: So that this process does not flatten onto the profile of the "immediate needs of the customer" (in this case, growing) and maintains its openness to the unprecedented, it is important that, besides the indisputable recognition of their rights, growing individuals are also educated to face their responsibilities of (Mariani 2012; Barber 2010).

Secondly, in connection with the above-mentioned issue, I also consider it important to emphasize the progressive erosion that the term "education" is undergoing, and that the Dutch-born pedagogist G. Biesta defined learnification process (Biesta 2006). Learnification, in fact, risks transforming educational processes in procedures focused solely on "deterministically-oriented" performances (Freire 2014), overshadowing the social and community dimension of education.

### **2.1 The centrality of the subject**

As mentioned above, in the context of contemporary education, it is possible to observe the final outcome of the transition from a commonly shared concept of education, understood above all as an act of intergenerational transmission and participation in a collective identity, to the primacy of individual subjectivity in educational processes. In other words, in the recent past, although in a number of different models and proposals, an educational

dimension seemed to prevail in which "becoming a grown-up" found its orientation and its *raison d'être* in great collective narratives. Instead, today the actions falling under the verb "to educate" seem to have assumed a markedly subjectivist meaning (Chiosso 2009). The guiding criterion of formative processes would mainly lie in focusing on the growing subject and on the individual's self-realization, rather than on the dialectical tension, though problematic and no less insidious, between the personal and the social sides of education.

Of course, as per Dewey's lesson, the centrality of the subject has been conceived as the activation of the pupil and the minor as the protagonist of his or her growth and education. The perspective of constructivism in school, for example, has appropriately highlighted the role of an active subject in the process of building knowledge: not a passive receptor of content, but a "discoverer" or, better, an "inventor" of reality (Bruner 1994).

Without questioning the validity of these positions, everyday educational practices often describe how, alongside interventions in favor of an active and responsible centrality of growing individuals, there is often also an opposite and more homogenizing tendency, focusing on indulgence, signaling the prevalence of subjectivist and privatist instances, both in formal and in non-formal education (Martino, Perlino & Zamengo 2015; Mariani 2014; Giroux 2014).

This is also confirmed in the field of family education: for example, for some years now, Italian research has been describing the ongoing transition from a "normative family" to a "family of affections", highlighting how contemporary parents appear less inclined to provide normative education models, favoring the construction of symmetrical relationships that are more directed at the self-realization of children, also at the expense of the responsabilization of minors (Alfieri, Marta & Celata 2015; Scabini & Marta 2013; Scabini & Cigoli 2012, Pati 2008).

And it is precisely on this level, in relation to the different expectations that parents and teachers have about the growth of younger generations, that it is possible to interpret the current conflict between the various educational agencies; sometimes it remains implicit and is limited to reciprocal delegitimization, in "private" comments between teachers or parents, while in other situations it is explicit, giving rise to a real clash between the parties. On the one hand, parents are more careful to protect their children, while on the other, teachers often complain about the excessive parental zeal that allegedly frustrates any request in cultural terms (Mariani 2012; Zamengo 2012; Tramma 2009).

Beyond the individual situations - which are rarely so polarized and which, in any case, must always be analytically evaluated without surrendering to the momentary sentiment - the subject's centrality in growth processes represents an important step forward in the pedagogic horizon. However, it is important

to acknowledge and remember that education should also be a concrete stimulus, an invitation to face reality, one that cannot become a simple momentary tool - perhaps even protective - that only offers temporary help.

## **2.2 Education as learnification**

Secondly, a further paradigmatic element characterizes the public debate on education today: the strategic role it allegedly plays in relation to economic-productive needs. This is not, of course, an unprecedented link, but new attention is being given to the various forms of learning and, in particular, to self-learning: an element that is well combined with the aforementioned "subjective focus".

In contemporary times, regardless of one's age and needs, anyone approaching a formative process runs the risk of turning into an unnamed learner able to access the supermarket of training offers ranging from leisure time management to the improvement of professional skills (Biesta 2012; Biesta 2004a). This interpretation of education, however, seems rather forced: it is one thing, and certainly appropriate, to study the learning processes; it is another thing to recognize that education is something more than learning; as in a synecdoche, there is a risk of mistaking a part for the whole.

The very identification of education with the concept of formation - often at the disadvantage of the former, considered too obsolete - also raises some perplexity. G. Biesta, for example, referring to the contemporary pedagogical "new language", argues that there is a process of learnification of education going on (Biesta 2006). The author claims that the pedagogical tension constitutively related to the meaning of one's action (and learning), interested in problematically defining what it means to rely on a "good education", is being replaced by a more generic human learning ability, sometimes disconnected from the contents of what is learned, which appears to be much more neutral than traditional educational language, with its ethical and political connotations.

In the society of knowledge, the aforementioned learnification comes from the umbrella concept of lifelong learning (which in turn comes from the wider notion of lifelong education), interpreted as the key to bringing the economy back to acceptable levels in the face of the employment crisis. In this perspective, therefore, the combination of education and formation is closely linked to the production needs of the market, but is likely to play a purely instrumental role (in function of something else), rather than being recognized as a value and an end in itself. Without denying the social and economic function of education, therefore, many perceive the exclusive insistence on this declination as a dangerous flattening of pedagogical perspectives, both in ethical-existential terms and in relation to the field of democratic participation (Giroux 2014; Nussbaum 2011).

### 3. Still Adults: Accepting the Challenge

It is quite obvious that if brought to excess, both the self-construction of the subject with the prevalence of self-made-man models, and the subordination of education to the economic-productive development, which seems to make inadequate everything that you have just learned, end up eroding the interaction between adults and minors. This erosion is realized precisely on the grounds of the abovementioned "extra" experience.

From this point of view, an example might make things clearer. In pedagogical terms, the use of the word "transmission" is rather unpopular in the contemporary age, both in the formal and in the non-formal landscape. This term recalls obsolete pedagogical theories and practices: on the one hand a certain passivity in the recipient, on the other hand a certain presumption in those who express the message. In a postmodern context, the traditional idea of an adult who can transmit something by virtue of his or her experience is certainly being questioned: if what matters is that the subject learns, any "content" proposal may appear like a constriction or limitation of self-learning. In the same way, given the rapid transformation of the knowledge and competences needed in the job market, doesn't the adult's experience quickly lose its relevance?

However, if one sticks to the etymology of the word transmission, it doesn't only mean "passage" but also evokes an act of "giving" the other access to something one owns. Of course, this function doesn't exhaust the growth process of younger generations; also, what is proposed - insofar as it is not imposed - may be rejected or only partly accepted and (which is even more important) in any case has to be reinterpreted, revisited and transformed. Without the recipient's negotiation and activation, there would only be imitation - not education.

In this sense, then, I believe that the initial question "still adults?" can only be answered affirmatively, with some inevitable clarifications.

The above-mentioned transformations, over the last few decades, have changed educational places and practices, although this does not mean that it is automatically more difficult to educate today than in the past. It is certainly different and seems more complex for an adult-educator to manage the different pedagogical spaces. Without doubt, self-education and self-learning are the goal of every formative process: however impressive, the self-made-learner image appears unrealistic. In other words, a "sufficiently good" educator is certainly one who knows - and must know - how to disappear. However, I think it is equally important to note that the uninterrupted process of self-reappropriation supported by education is realized thanks to the intelligent presence of someone else that triggers this process and helps build the subject's autonomous self-direction. As Seneca remarked, in what has become a rather popular social slogan, "you can't save yourself alone".

Of course, supporting the ongoing pedagogical role of adults today doesn't mean overshadowing the formative value of first-hand experience or underestimating the importance of peer education. These modalities are often mistakenly opposed to one another, but being able to rely on an adult doesn't preclude other opportunities to grow. Likewise, self-learning doesn't mean excluding the ability to take an occasional step back and let someone else teach us something. The role of adults – be they teachers or educators – peer education and first-hand experience are not mutually exclusive: rather than reductionists or monochromatic outcomes, the coexistence of these aspects can produce several formative opportunities for younger generations.

So how can the pedagogical role of the adult be re-thought today? Of course, there are no univocal answers. In any critical age – where this expression doesn't necessarily have a negative connotation, but rather indicates a turning point – the “crisis” invites one to rethink what is normally taken for granted. In this case, overcoming the obvious inevitably means rethinking one's role as an adult educator. In an authentically pedagogical key, this means seizing the opportunities coming from everyday experience to build a constant reflective relationship with one's actions. Not only from an “intimistic” or individual perspective, but mainly in the terms of a shared reflection.

For those engaged in adult education, this attitude translates into supporting the emergence and construction of all those opportunities that promote authentic dialogue between the adults involved in the formative processes of younger generations: parents, teachers, volunteers of the extracurricular landscape. This attitude that does not go back to the effort to educate and take no leisurely position, but rather open to the possibility, also seems to be an important message for younger generations in itself. Firstly, because it shows an adult who takes seriously the growth of minors: it leaves a space for their struggle to grow and recognizes the importance of their being in the world. In this way, those who grow are perceived to be considered as an important subject, committed to defining their own identity. Secondly, it is an attitude highlighting a particular “model” of an adult: someone who continues to grow despite being already “grown-up”.

If, as H. Arendt points out, the adults' presentation of the world and to the world seems irreplaceable for minors (Arendt 1991), I think it is important and possible to recover that “extra” life experience of which adults are the representatives: adults can credibly testify, with their daily experience, to a possible generative way of being in the world. After all, this means giving the other access to what one owns, which perhaps is the hardest, but also, technically, the simplest way to educate.

## Literature

- Alessandrini, G. 2007. *Comunità di pratica e società della conoscenza*. Roma: Carocci.
- Alfieri, S., Marta E. & Celata C. 2015. Famiglia e scuola: relazioni che producono benessere. *Psicologia e Scuola*, 35, 19–24.
- Arendt, H. 1961. *Tra passato e futuro*. Milano: Garzanti, 1991.
- Argyris, C. & Schön, D. A. 1996. *Apprendimento organizzativo*. Milano: Guerini.
- Baldacci, M. & Colicchi, E., 2016. *Teoria e prassi in Pedagogia*. Roma: Carocci.
- Barber, B. R. 2010. *Consumati. Da cittadini a clienti*. Torino: Einaudi, 2010.
- Benasayag, M. & Schmit, G. 2004. *L'epoca delle passioni tristi*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Bertin, G. M. 1995. *Educazione alla ragione*. Roma: Armando.
- Biesta, G. J. J. 2004a. Against Learning: Reclaiming a Language for Education in an Age of Learning. *Nordisk Pedagogik*, 1, 70–82.
- Biesta, G. J. J. 2006. *Beyond Learning*. Boulder: Paradigm.
- Biesta, G. J. J. 2010. *Good Education in an Age of Measurement*. Boulder: Paradigm.
- Biesta, G. J. J. 2012. Giving Teaching Back to Education: Responding to the Disappearance of the Teacher. *Phenomenology & Practice*, 2, 35–49.
- Bosma, H. A. & Kunnen, E. S. 2000. Development of Meaning Making: A Dynamic System Approach. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 18, 57–82.
- Bruner, J. 1971. *Il significato dell'educazione*. Roma: Armando, 1994.
- Chiosso, G. 2002. *Elementi di Pedagogia*. Brescia: La Scuola.
- Chiosso, G. 2009. *I significati dell'educazione*. Milano: Mondadori.
- Chiosso, G. 2015. *La pedagogia contemporanea*. Brescia: La Scuola.
- Contini, M. G., Demozzi S., Fabbri, M. & Tolomelli, A. 2014. *Deontologia pedagogica. Riflessività e pratiche di resistenza*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Côte, J. E. 1996. Sociological Perspectives on Identity Formation: The Culture-Identity Link and Identity Capital. *Journal of Adolescence*, 19, 417–428.
- Dewey, J. 1929. *The Sources Of A Science Of Education*. New York: Horace Liveright.
- Erikson, E. H. 1967. *Infanzia e società*. Roma: Armando.
- Erikson, E. H. 1974. *Gioventù e crisi d'identità*. Roma: Armando.
- Freire, P. 2002. *La pedagogia degli oppressi*. Torino: EGA.
- Freire, P. 2008. *Pedagogia della speranza*. Torino: EGA.
- Freire, P. 2014. *Pedagogia dell'autonomia*. Torino: EGA.
- Giroux, H. 2014. *Educazione e crisi dei valori pubblici*. Brescia: La Scuola.
- Mariani, A. M. 2012. *Dal punto di vista dell'educazione*. Torino: Sei.
- Mariani, A. M. 2014. *Diventare adulti*. Milano: Unicopli.
- Martino, S., Perlino, A., & Zamengo, F. 2015. *I ragazzi del Millennio*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Mezirow, J. 2003. *Apprendimento e trasformazione*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore.

- Milani, L. 2000. *Competenza pedagogica e progettualità educativa*. Brescia: La Scuola.
- Nussbaum, M. C. 2011. *Non per profitto. Perché le democrazie hanno bisogno della cultura umanistica*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Pati, L. 2008. *Ripensare l'autorità*. Milano: Guerini.
- Scabini, E. & Cigoli, V. 2012. *Alla ricerca del familiare*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore.
- Scabini, E. & Marta, E. 2013. *Giovani in famiglia: risorsa o rifugio?*, in Ist. Toniolo (ed.) *La condizione giovanile in Italia*. Bologna: Il Mulino, pp. 23-48.
- Schön, D. A. 1993. *Il professionista riflessivo: per una epistemologia della pratica professionale*. Bari: Dedalo.
- Tramma, S. 2009. *Che cos'è l'educazione informale?* Roma: Carocci.
- Wenger, E. 2006. *Comunità di pratica*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore.
- Zamengo, F. 2012. *Affrontare le difficoltà*. Milano: Unicopli.

Federico Zamengo (Turin)

*The Struggles of Educating. And of Being "A Grown-up"*

**Abstract.** In the face of contemporary educational transformations, this contribution aims to analyze the educational role that can still be played by the adult educator. Without restoring old categories of the past, today's adults continue to have a responsibility in the growth of younger generations. Accepting this task means first of all critically and reflectively recognizing one's role and, secondly, accepting the challenges posed by the complexity of today's landscape in terms of credibility and consistency.

**Keywords:** Adult Education, Adult educator

*Ethics in Progress* (ISSN 2084-9257). Vol. 8 (2017). No. 1. 257-268.