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THE EDUCATOR TODAY: A NEW MOMENTUM

Daniele Bruzzone (Università Cattolica, Piacenza)

I am very glad to inaugurate this European congress on education (and I would like to thank Edu-New Humanity for the invitation), as I believe that every complex and difficult situation requires a *shared reflection*. We need to avoid the temptation of try and find quick and easy solutions and have the courage to stop and think it through.

The issue of education has always required this effort - now more than ever: welcoming complexity without reducing it to simple schemes, thinking on a big scale to find new directions (a new "momentum", as you said) and regenerating an educational ethos, which does not simply mean recycling what *once existed*, but inventing something *completely new*.

The psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, founder of existential analysis, used to say that "each age is affected by its own neurosis and needs its psychotherapy". Applying this principle to education, we should say that each age goes through its own "crises" and needs *its own particular* educational response. I would like to briefly focus on this topic: what are the causes of crises today and which are the educational challenges we need to face?

Recently, education has been often considered in a negative way (matching the adjective "educational" to words such as "emergency", "catastrophe" or even "disaster"). Well, I do not subscribe to these apocalyptic perspectives, and I don't like thinking that the actual state of education is that catastrophic. At least, not more than in other periods of our history, even recent.

I would rather like to interpret these very words in a positive and constructive way (as was - I hope - the intention of those introducing them into the cultural debate): *emergency*, therefore, might be seen as something that is "emerging", as something new or unknown we need to reckon with. Even *catastrophe* (if we look at its etymological meaning of "upheaval" and "revolution") suggests a reflection upon which new educational model (maybe *radically new*) should be adopted to face the new educational challenges.

I therefore believe that we might start considering what has *changed* (for example in today's youth and in the society around them) and what *should* be changed (in the way of thinking and of "educating").

Let's talk about young people. I suggest we start from someone who has had a long experience being and working with teenagers, and who can, better than others, help us understand the changes the new generations are going through. I am talking about a psychological analysis (or rather psychoanalytical) which, as we will ascertain, arises a broader reflection upon the fate of our society and of the current civilization.

I am referring, in particular, to the contribution of Gustavo Pietropolli Charmet, who not only claims - as many of us do, by the way - that youth have "changed", but tries to find a *reason for that*.

This change was caused by a social transformation, and especially by the change from an "ethical" family to a "loving" one. In other words from a family whose main goal is passing on *rules and values*, to a family who feels its main task lies in passing on *love and security*.

This transition does not concern only family, but it gradually involved also other educating institutions. Hence the emancipation of women and the end of the father's role as *caregiver*, the struggle against authoritarianism and the adoption of more empathetic and liberal educational styles, as well as the focus of schools on tasks such as protection and care (and not only on education and selection), caused today's society to be more balanced towards "maternal" love codes (care, affection, tenderness), to the detriment of the "paternal" codes (rules, values, autonomy).

This context's change deeply affects the evolution processes.

Since they lack clear rules they can break, today's teenagers embody less and less the so-called "Oedipus" conflict this age traditionally identified with. On the contrary, they tend to resemble more and more some "*narcissuses*": the ideal of the self prevails in them, as opposed to the "super-self". There is a growing devotion to the cult of the self, of beauty and personal success. As a matter of fact, many of them were raised as "golden

puppies", as objects parents invested upon in a narcissistic way, which can only confirm their conviction that there is nobody and nothing more important than *themselves* (and this thought is enhanced by the *media* which propose "emerging" models of handsome, talented and successful young people).

Therefore, they are not a particularly transgressive nor rebel generation. They don't live in opposition to the adult world, they simply have something else to do, which causes and explains their *boldness*, their disrespect towards the authority, their showing off attitude, as well as their indifference towards institutions. Yet, this is also the source of their great *fragility*: their only goal is their self-fulfilment. Thus they find it difficult accepting limits and tolerating frustration. They completely depend on the opinion the world they live in has about them and they have a very weak identity.

The old sense of *guilt*, linked to the Oedipus conflict, gave way to a sense of *shame*, closely related to the fear of failure and of being inadequate. While guilt can be overcome (by purging it), though, shame is a narcissistic wound which might never heal: thus, paradoxically, these youth who grew up with the aim of complete self-fulfilment, run the risk of being profoundly unhappy. Self-fulfilment without self-transcendence, moreover, is simply utopia. Only intention and commitment to something or somebody beyond oneself enables reaching that sense of existential fulfilment which, otherwise, is never to be achieved.

Youth are "fragile and bold", so Charmet. I believe, though, that *fragility* (also in youth) is not necessarily negative nor pathological. On the contrary, it is often connected to beauty, delicacy and preciousness. Fragile items, though, such as a crystal object, may get broken: generally the packing's aim is to protect it and making it less *vulnerable*, preventing it from breaking. Yet if these protections (such as a box) are not there any longer, fragility becomes a *risk*.

Now, I believe that nowadays there are *vulnerability* social factors that increase people's fragility. I'd like to sum up and describe some of these factors through pictures, as sometimes an image conveys a deeper (and more immediate) meaning than words would:

- * this is a *time of complexity*, with an ever growing number of links and connections, but where finding straight and controllable paths is growing more difficult (*Escher*);

- * it is a *time of fragmentation*, where everyone is participating in many different symbolic worlds and universes, but where "holding together" different experiences and contexts to find a definite identity is complicated (*Magritte*);

- * it is a *time of "liquidity"*, to quote an expression by Bauman, where things that change dominate things static, and where finding reliable references is thus more complicated (*Dali*);

- * it is a *time of incommunicability* (a paradox, in the era of mass communication), where intimacy spaces and languages shrink: space and time get smaller, but loneliness grows bigger (*Hopper*);

- * it is a *time of being anonymous*, where people are what they stand for or what they produce, with the risk of losing their true "face" (*Tooker*);

- * it is a *time of individualism*, where everyone is more isolated and more focused on his own personal interests. Where everybody fears the others (also as a consequence of a media-generated, rather than a real, terrorism) (*Tooker*);

- * it is a *time of uncertainty*, where people are more autonomous than in the past, but also more disoriented and unsure as to what is best for them (*Hopper*).

This is an *essential part* of adolescence and youth: while virtually facing infinite possibilities on the one hand, on the other hand this means facing many possible choices - and uncertainty is inevitable. Nowadays, though, there is something else besides uncertainty: youth do not only seem *uncertain* about their future, they also are more disheartened, apathetic, sometimes even *empty*. According to some psychologists this "withdrawal" from investing into external objects is caused by the labour youth need to do *internally*, striving to create their own identity. Therefore this might be considered quite "normal".

At the beginning of the 1950s, the American psychologist Rollo May claimed that people's main problem was *emptiness*, boredom, apathy and indifference. "Many people - he wrote - not only do not know what they *want*, but they don't have the slightest clue about what they *feel*". This might be applied to many young people nowadays. Does this mean that adolescence's typical problem became chronic and unsolved? Does this mean that society itself became "adolescent"?

This might be true in some ways: due to some cultural changes, youth's typical critical attitude seems nowadays to continue and to become a *crisis* affecting *not only youth*, but *the whole society*.

A few years ago the Argentine Miguel Benasayag wrote a very successful book together with Gérard Schmit, entitled *The era of sad passions* (an expression by Spinoza), which states something interesting. Today's psychiatrists are not just coping with an *individual* crisis, but rather with one affecting *society and culture*. "Living with a (nearly) constant feeling of insecurity, precariousness and crisis, certainly generates psychological conflicts and ailments, yet this does *not* mean that the problem's root is just psychological". Once - as stated by

Benasayag and Schmit - the therapist's job consisted in saving one person who was lost in a storm and lead him/her towards a safe harbour. Nowadays this safe harbour doesn't exist any longer! People cannot be saved from the crisis any more: "We have to be happy if we succeed in *stabilizing them within the crisis*."

In other words: we are currently living in a time of permanent crisis. The true challenge therefore is not "to solve" it, but to live in it trying to avoid getting lost.

Is this the reason why so many youth seem to get lost?

In a book published a few years ago, Umberto Galimberti claimed that youth's bewilderment is not caused by some deficit, but rather by a "nihilist" society depriving them of what they would most need to be able to grow: *a horizon of sense*. "If the human being, as claimed by Goethe, is born to construct something making sense, in the desert of sense of our world the discomfort is not *psychological* any longer, but *cultural*".

To my mind, this is a pivotal issue in the debate on youth bewilderment and social intervention policies. If the discomfort is *cultural*, and not *psychological*, what is called for is not a clinical solution, but an *educational one*.

The principles generally used to explain the problems of youth discomfort, though, are way too *psychology-based*, on the one hand, or too *sociology-based*, on the other hand. Discomfort is thus explained as being caused by either psychological and affective dynamics, or by socio-economic conditions. As a consequence, interventions are planned with the aim of improving the emotional or relational well-being, or with that of getting rid of (or at least reducing) economic disadvantages and social marginalization.

Besides these two principles (the psychological and the sociological ones), a new one emerged: the *medical one* (only a few months back I witnessed myself a physician, leading a team responsible for the treatment of youth who had suicidal attitudes, claiming with absolute certainty that "suicide is an illness").

The consequence is what Lou Marinoff, in his famous book *Plato is better than Prozac*, defines as "therapeutic society, or better, society in therapy". What is called for, instead, is recovering the spirit of a society seen as an "educating community" (a good word, which was lost over the last few years).

It is then easily understandable that the choice of coping with school discomfort just by introducing a psychological service or a "counter" for students would be too simplistic (and to some extent an attempt at avoiding responsibility). These means could prove useful, but only if this did not mean that teachers simply delegate everything to so-called specialists. School pressures are not simply something kids bring *to school*, but can (sometimes) be problems *within the school itself*. This calls for a change in the way teachers *make school*. Only in this way can the problem be faced with all its implications.

Over the last few years there has been a lot of talking about *pressures* kids face (not only at school). By pressures we mean a sense of diffuse awkwardness (sometimes unjustified) that in the long run might lead to aggression and bullying, risky behaviours, drug addiction, depression and even suicide.

The Italian word for pressures is *disagio*. It comes from Latin *dis* (negative prefix) and from the verb *ad-iacere* (be close to). It therefore perfectly describes the condition of those feeling marginalized, excluded, far away, isolated, unfamiliar, restless (as they cannot stop in any place).

This condition of restlessness and marginalization takes on many forms: distance from oneself (a term which is spreading is "emotions illiteracy", referred not only to kids); distance from the others (a growing individualism, relations turning more and more virtual, "privatization" of existence and erosion of public *ethos* as well as of social and political commitment). It might also be a distance from the future and its promises of happiness (the sense of uncertainty and lack of trust about their future often forces young people to focus only on the present, without making longer-term plans).

The "discomfort" problem shows a lack of something, a hole, a "distance from" something. Yet at the same time it also shows a tension, a desire, an intention that struggles to reach its goal. A sort of will to reach authenticity, intimacy, future and *sense*. It also shows that young people really want to find a genuine connection to themselves, to the others, to their future and their life.

So: nowadays young people probably need to *struggle* more than past generations to reach these goals. They certainly have a lot *to live with*, yet what is not always clear is *what* they live *for*. Setting long-term objectives, seeing life as a long term project, finding the right direction, finding a "sense" - something which is worth living and suffering for - is very difficult for them.

I have the impression that society answered many of these questions in the past: people's lives were "ruled" a lot more by *tradition* and *authority*. Nowadays some traditional values have simply been overcome and authority is not felt as being so important any longer. Finding an orientation and making personal decisions has become more complicated. If we make a comparison with the young people of the past (who sometimes had to struggle to get the material resources for their future, or to gain the freedom to decide), today's teenagers definitely have *more*

possibilities and *more freedom* to decide. Yet at the same time they are *more alone* and *more worried* when they have to choose.

Since "*external factors*" (family, school, the State, the Church, etc.) have weakened, young people need to count more upon themselves and to be stronger. As a matter of fact, the more freedom they have, the more responsibility and the more risk they need to face.

Educators (parents, teachers, etc.) can choose between two alternatives: either "reinforce" external factors by imposing authority again (and this possibility is currently supported by many people), or invest on the "*inner factor*" - i.e. on people's *conscience*.

The second alternative is of course the only educational one, yet also the most difficult one.

When writing about education, Viktor Frankl chooses this second possibility (in one of the rare points where he explicitly mentions it). In *God in the unconscious* he writes: "We feel we are living in a time where meaning completely lacks. In this time, education's task is not *to transmit knowledge* and ideas; rather it aims to *sharpen conscience* so that people are able to comprehend the actual concerns of any given situation".

I believe this is very important. It points out two relevant features.

The first concerns *method*: education does not mean *to transmit* but *to sharpen*, therefore any unidirectional and merely "instructive" act is not education, per se.

The second feature regards *content*: education's goal is not to convey knowledge or ideas (i.e. the *objects* of knowledge), but to convey conscience (i.e. the *subject* of knowledge).

Chiara Lubich rightly defines education as an itinerary of humanization aiming at fulfilling a *to-be-status*. Yet this to-be-status cannot be separated from the person (unique and sole) walking this path. Education's goal cannot be *external* or different from the person being educated, *this person* being the ultimate goal.

Thus, as stressed by Rollo May, education's goal must be the "growth and deepening of conscience". This objective cannot be reached without considering a whole universe of meanings and values, conscience always implying intention. *Pay attention* though: educating to values does not simply mean describing or "transmitting" them. What is called for, is teaching young people to *ask themselves* what meaning and values are, rather than simply giving them *answers*. Those answers, as a matter of fact, make sense only if they are answering an authentic question. Otherwise they are void. As May claims: "what matters (...) is not that teachers transmit values' contents, but rather that students learn how to evaluate" (and this is obviously true not only for teachers).

This is probably a further challenge we need to face in a time where the *contents* of knowledge and education are potentially infinite: we need to focus on *processes again*.

Of course, if we were to draw extreme consequences from this, we probably should then completely change our education curricula, not only at school level, but also at a social and religious level. But we will have time to reflect upon that later on...

I'd like to add a last thought on relations. Of course there is no education without a relation, yet at the same time education *does not take place exclusively within this relation*. Let us consider the classic model of educational relation: the Socratic dialogue. In this case dialogue is a meeting whose aim *transcends* the meeting itself. Nowadays we worry a lot about the quality of interpersonal relations - which is good, because this is an indispensable requirement of education. Even though this is necessary, it is not enough, otherwise we would risk falling into a "dialogue without *logos*", i.e. not making *sense*. It is a good thing that we feel well with our children, students and young people, of course. But let us not believe that making people grow simply requires make them "feel good". We should never stop looking *beyond* ourselves and indicating this "beyond" to them too.

Rightly (and with great simplicity and clarity) the aim of this meeting is talking about education as "*an act of love*". But what is love? Love is a true "metaphysical", nearly a "prophetic" act. As a matter of fact, love not only welcomes the other for *what he is*, but it is committed to helping him become *what he can be*. This is probably the real essence of an educational act: believe that the other can grow and change, even before he can believe in that. I think that this emerges very clearly from this painting by *Magritte*: as the artist, who sees in the egg what it will once be - and does not paint *the egg* itself, but *the bird* it will become.

I think that this means we should always attempt to look at the others and at the world with a "pedagogic glance", which is very similar to God's glance (who is Father and Mother at the same time) - because there is no doubt that He is the only true educator of humankind.

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