

# WHICH EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY?

Antonio Pavan (University of Padua)

## 1. Educator – education

Being educator nowadays? Maybe we'd better start with a question, rather than rushing to define the word educator. We should ask education itself, to try and understand what it is becoming in our society.

So: what is education? What are its current perceptions, expectation and goals?

## 2. Education's turn in the 20th century

Our perspective on education has profoundly changed since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I am referring especially to the great public international debate, particularly by the UNESCO, that from the beginning of the 1970s (*Faure Report*, 1972) had foreseen that “the core of the educational act, as well as the times and places of education” would change.

The *Delors report* (1996) on education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century pointed out that among the various important future goals for education, the most meaningful would be “learn to live together”.

At the end of the 1990s, finally, there was a major contribution by Federico Major, upon leaving his charge of UNESCO's general director (“*Un monde nouveau*”, 1999). He greatly contributed to making the changes of the globalization process visible, and especially the opportunities and the threats concerning education. He stressed the need for a new “global social contract” where education would play a pivotal role.

The European Community has proved to be increasingly more interested in education and schooling since the 1990s, greatly contributing to the renewal of educational anthropology through its debate on *lifelong learning* in the 1990s and 2000. It sort of granted a political citizenship to the “new learner”, who is not just the traditional pedagogy's “pupil” or “student”, but a complete human being, no matter what age or what role he plays. Starting from this anthropological awareness, the Community wanted to convey the idea, as already mentioned, that in the new era of education “societies are undergoing a lifelong learning”, which gave new momentum to the educational efforts of the member states.

In fact education became a major concern for all the important intergovernmental organizations, interest associations, international NGOs, religions and churches, professional associations as well as for the whole third sector.

Paradoxically, education has never been so much at the centre of attention as it is today, and there have never been so many problems and uncertainties concerning it as now.

As pointed out by the OECD, education often seems to just go with the wind, without following a “philosophy”, while we clearly witness the educational failure of the “mainstream” development model.

You are right: education needs “new momentum” in this new emerging world. But how are we to create, live and make this momentum effective? With love, as suggested by you? Love is the trigger of the *need for transcendence and communion* which is rooted in the human being. Without love, there is going to be very little of “humanly sustainable” on Earth.

The need for love has probably never been more felt than it is in this time, threatened by a pandemic of “not being able to love”, and never was its lack or its reduction to a mere camouflaged feeling more dramatic than it is now.

Let us make an attempt at understanding the new time for education we live in, to try and define the educator's role.

## 3. Entering the new educational situation

The phenomena of this time often appear incomprehensible and too fragmentary. In fact no society has ever witnessed such fragmented and pluralistic phenomena, also and especially as far as education is concerned. Yet an effort can be made for intelligence not to be discouraged by a rationality idea focused upon observation, description and analysis, which seems to be keeping intelligence *cut off from the essence of the facts* we are living in.

I would like to propose three perspectives which might help us understand our condition, thus enabling us to go deeper in the new education's main questions.

First of all I would like to touch upon the theme of *development culture*. In our time, both individuals and the whole humankind ask for development – people claim their right to see their endogenous vocations and free, self-made identities thrive. This right to development, notwithstanding the numerous “reductionisms” (be they economic, ethic or cultural) and all the violations trying to control it, is becoming the ultimate right summing up the progressive universal body of human rights.

Following this line of civilisation, an auspice of a *new culture of the self* can be seen, where people demand the recognition of a new citizenship within our coexistence. What is being asked for is a demand that development be more and more oriented towards the human being and human dignity.

My second point concerns what is normally called *globalisation process*. Humankind is going through a phase of reinvention of coexistence. Being this a major process, it is highly ambivalent. It is apparently led by market interests, by the net, by capital and people mobility – which are undoubtedly powerful means expressing it. In fact, though, its more powerful and more radical engine is humankind’s transcendence instinct. From this perspective, the current globalisation process contains an *auspice of universality*, a sort of interest towards species and a “*simpliciter*” (sic) humanity, which so far has never been experimented by humankind, and never at these levels of integration and communication. History made us part of a tribe and we are now invited (through all the material ways God uses in our lives, such as economy, markets, information...) to become one single human family.

In fact we are the first global generation in human history: as far as our experience is concerned, it is yet the more true that an event happening “in” the world, is an event “for the world”, and that every single human situation has a connection and an effect on the shared community – be it visible or not.

The third perspective I would like to introduce concerns the *democratic ideal* within this new historical phase. Please note that I am talking about a “democratic ideal” and not about democracies or particular democratic ideologies. The democratic ideal carries an evangelical impulse in itself – as Bergson had understood in his “*Deux sources*”, 1932, at the very core of the European tragedy of totalitarianisms. As a matter of fact, the ideal of a shared life tries to reconcile the two pillars of human dignity – equality and freedom – through “*fraternity*”. In the human rights era, there is a clear need for a democratic ideal (notwithstanding the claim of this or that “particular democracy” of having embodied the democratic ideal). If we go deep into this need, we see it contains a question, an auspice of friendship and of love.

These are just three notes, so to say, regarding the new coexistence condition.

These three notes are an invitation to look – with realism and hope, or better still, with hope’s realism – at the three auspices of our world: an auspice of humanity, an auspice of universality, an auspice of friendship and love. I know - there are hundreds of signs which are seemingly against this view of our time. My three auspices are a bet for the future rather than a reality. Yet, who says that future is just a lengthening of the present? Anyway, let us go back to education and educator.

#### **4. About new education**

Education has always been an active practice society used to form individual human beings, so that they can play an active role in their own “reproduction” and “culture”. Education’s most basic feature is being community-based and social. Society reproduces through education, and it produces educated people who contribute to society’s renewal.

Education is thus at the very core of the relations connecting a person to society, which are not, and will never be, pure static and organizational equilibriums, but rather dynamic ones – characterized by opening, transcendence and creativity.

The question is: how can education be structured, so as to overcome the established order and open up, opening human beings, to the three auspices shaking our societies? How can an education with “new momentum” be achieved, as you ask for?

To express this in a modern way, with the so called key-word languages, I would say that it cannot be (for each of the three auspices) but an education that hinges upon *human dignity*; *communion* (not simply communication) among all people; and *friendship/love* within a peaceful coexistence. Education should help every person to go back to himself/herself, so that everyone can share the same humanity. History is accelerating and it is destroying all our “track stands”. The history we are living in requires a new education, which we cannot invent but together, making an effort and using our creativity.

This new education does not have to be invented nor applied in any special place (education systems will remain important, but will not have a monopoly any longer). It is not aimed at just some categories of people any longer, since everyone is now a lifelong learner. There are not going to be any special places for it any more (family, church, school...): the educational space is expanding into a great shared social space.

So, what is new education going to be like in the 21st century's society? It will be every act, no matter how and where it takes place, promoting the three "deep humanity" *auspices* of this time. This will probably be the "new momentum". And who is going to be the new educator? Every person who contributes to opening up the way for the new auspices in his personal, professional, social and religious life.

Love will play a strategic propulsive role: you've perceived this very well already, assigning this role to the "art of loving". Yet this art is to be interpreted in the right way. Love is definitely rooted in our natural essence, as in the essence of everything in the world. In man, though, the "instinct for love" has a dialectics according to which the *primum opus amoris*, the basic effect of human love, is *justice*. And according to which the *perfectum opus amoris*, the full intentionality of this particular feeling, is the *gift*. When not seen within this profound dialectics, human love risks producing substitution effects, human contractions, regression and violence entropies. Violence is nothing but missed love.

Love is not easy: it means spiritually swimming upstream against the instinct; more than something spontaneous it is an effort: it is rooted in the search for justice and it thrives when giving in a disinterested way. In fact the gift – no matter how it turns tangible – hides a secret impulse to "give back" our own selves (which we received as a gift) to the cosmos, to life, to people and to freedom. If only we were able to better understand the *mystery of gratuity* we come from and towards which we go, we would understand better our need for love, which is nothing but an answer and a response to an ancient appeal. Maybe Christians, who hinge upon the Christological mystery, i.e. the mystery of a God who gave himself as a gift, would understand the paradox more effectively, according to which already here and now, amongst us and within our shared existence, "everything is a grace". This means that the appeal is greater and more decisive than our answers, that the power of desire is greater than our small wills. It means that our complete fulfilment is an appealing promise rather than a possession satisfying us. Don't you think that it is quite meaningful that one of the most interesting and discussed chapters of the current philosophical research, in a time which superseded modernism and even post-modernism, is devoted to the issue of giving?

---

Further readings:

- A. Pavan, E. Magno (a cura di), *Antropogenesi. Ricerche sulle origini e sullo sviluppo del fenomeno umano*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2010.
- A. Pavan (a cura di), *Enciclopedia della persona nel XX<sup>o</sup> secolo*, ESI, Napoli 2008.