

“Resilient education”: the schooling system becomes non-formal

“Educazioni resilienti”: il non formale fa scuola

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has inspired local organizations and associations to experiment with new forms of non-formal education, which can be defined as “resilient” because, notwithstanding the critical issues linked to the state of emergency, they have allowed children and teenagers to express themselves and learn, thus integrating, and sometimes substituting the distance activities proposed by scholastic institutions. This paper therefore proposes to reflect upon these forms by analyzing some examples of good practice, so as to direct future educational acts, beyond the context of the emergency, towards a renewed dialectic between formal and non-formal education. Certain themes will hence be brought to the readers’ attention: the relationship between technology and new disparities and poverty, the use of different narrative forms to promote resilience processes and the development of proto-social abilities to construct new, supportive and participatory community models, as the present historical moment requires.

La pandemia di COVID 19 ha indotto la sperimentazione di nuove forme di educazione non formale, promosse da organizzazioni e associazioni attive sui territori, che possiamo definire “resilienti” perché, nonostante le criticità legate allo stato di emergenza, hanno permesso a bambini e ragazzi, di esprimersi e di apprendere, integrando così e, in alcuni contesti, supplendo alle attività a distanza proposte dall’istituzione scolastica. Il presente contributo si propone pertanto di riflettere su quelle forme mediante l’analisi di alcune buone pratiche, al fine di orientare, oltre l’emergenza, il futuro agire pedagogico in una rinnovata dialettica tra educazione formale e non formale. Si porteranno pertanto all’attenzione alcuni temi: il rapporto tra tecnologie e nuove disuguaglianze e povertà, l’utilizzo delle diverse forme narrative per la promozione dei processi di resilienza, la formazione di capacità pro-sociali per la costruzione di nuovi modelli di comunità, solidali e partecipate, così come richiede l’attuale momento storico.

Keywords: Children, Resilience, Disparities, Non-formal education, Community

Parole chiave: Bambini, Resilienza, Disuguaglianze, Educazione non formale, Comunità

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1. Emergency, enduring inequalities and educational tasks

Since the beginning of March 2020 Italy, like the rest of the world, has been involved in a pandemic that has overthrown the pace of life and thus all everyday activities, including education.

Stage one was confinement: the darkest phase has started, also the phase in which the greatest disruptions to our lives were registered. All the engagements that punctuated our days and filled our daily lives were reduced and constricted into the four domestic walls; a dramatic decrease in the quality of life was certified, experimenting on our own skin that health is not only a biological dimension.

From the very first days of lockdown it was clear that reassuring rituals would have been lost and that the identity of each one of us would have been put under duress, redesigning forms and boundaries between I and We. In the suspended time needed to face this new everyday life and to be able for the mutated situations which had a significant impact on professional and family styles, everyone was asked to “learn to be strong” (Annacontini, 2019) and resilient in the face of such an unprecedented event.

On the 5th of March 2020 all in-presence teaching in all schools throughout the country was stopped. This was the beginning of what can be called the traditional “formative lockdown”: following ministerial decisions (a note from the Ministry for education, n. 388 of 17th of March 2020), the scholastic setting changed face: virtuality took the place of physicality.

In this way homes became classrooms and in the succession of days, which were apparently all the same, during which new forms of sociality were being experimented through the use of technology, distance learning became the only viable road; but the signs of unease didn't take long to manifest themselves. School agonized in impromptu training, without any precise references, especially for the younger years. But most of all, what took place was “the removal of children's needs” (Ammaniti, 2020, p. 11), of their necessities, emphasising the contradictions of our globalized world, where childhood is still characterized by deep inequalities, and sadly, also by neglect and violence.

In this regard, the data gathered by UNICEF is interesting: 1.6 billion students saw their schools closed because of health reasons, of these about 1/3 did not have the means to access distance learning, thus raising school drop-out rates. Moreover – as documented by the same organization – in 2/3 of the examined countries the urgency of containing the coronavirus limited or blocked prevention and protection services, with dramatic consequences in families in which forced cohabitation and economic difficulties multiplied the probability of violent behaviour¹.

Save the Children, another of the organizations majorly involved in the defence of minor's rights, estimated the impact of the coronavirus in the Italian context, demonstrating how the educational offer was insufficient, highlighting the map of risks and considering how “sudden poverty, fear of the future and demotivation” have constituted a “mixture of factors” able to represent “a heavy heritage on the shoulders of students, augmenting the already significant learning gap” which has been registered in our country in the last few years (2020, p. 16).

The efforts to reach children and older kids with distance learning have been in fact crippled by the often insufficient digital competency or by complex living conditions: inadequate homes, because of overcrowding, because void of devices such as computers or tablets, or because without a safe Internet connection, especially in the south. Thus, the bearing of the social and cultural capital of families, that in many contexts did not have the resources to deal with the emergency, emerged even in this circumstance.

The Italian section of *Amnesty International*, following the strong educational inequalities, insisted on the development of the activists, organizing a series of webinars and presenting the Government, in September 2020, with a document that held some recommendations believed necessary to start back up in full safety. It asked to fill the “lost learning” caused by distance learning, guaranteeing make-up opportunities for those who had difficulties following lessons during the lockdown; to give special attention to the more vulnerable students, like traveller and migrant students, who in this exceptional situation were the most at risk; to offer psychological support to families and students and to create local solidarity networks, especially in social realities where the risk of school drop-out is high².

1 See UNICEF data at: <<https://www.unicef.org/>> (consulted on: 30 January 2021).

2 Thanks to Chiara Pacifici of *Amnesty International Italia's* Education Office who told me about the work done by the organization during these last few months.

Save the Children expressed itself along the same lines in its report *Rewriting the future*, as well as having asked to invest in education, as leverage for the development of the country, “with the long term objective of passing from the present day 3.8% GDP to a 5% one, thus reaching the European average”, it wished for the diffusion and the systematic experimentation of “community educating”, this way encouraging schools to open up to the local area and support *out-of-school* education, taking advantage of public green and also using spaces like museums or libraries. The suggestion was that of validating even these experiences along the student’s educational path, in this way ensuring an educational continuity between the formal and informal systems (2020, p. 36)³.

Promoting activities in different spaces to offer children and older kids a “way out” (*en plein air*) of their heavy daily life has been a prerogative of associations and organizations that work in various areas and that therefore have had a stronger and more realistic perception of the crisis. Outdoor activities recover an educational tradition that considered open air schooling a way to guarantee an education able to develop several dimensions: thought, the practical-operative dimension and even the socio-relational one “for a constructive and harmonious relationship with the community” and where, in fact, educational practice becomes a “tool of personal and collective growth, of regeneration for the social and economic fabric” (Tomarchio, D’Aprile, 2014, p. 74).

Many of the initiatives started up in these months by educational realities different from school itself have, in this way, tried to overcome the relational aridity imposed by the containment measures and to enrich and better the communication mediated by social networks, which in many circumstances couldn’t measure up to the necessary emotional tone, especially when interacting with younger children.

2. Resilient initiatives for a new geography of education

In the last few months, the country’s intermittent and gradual recovery has rewarded the experiences started up in the suspended time by different area subjects that still today continue to offer valid and sustainable proposals.

These educations can be defined as “resilient” because, as well as supporting minors in the most difficult phase of this pandemic, favouring forms of physical and mental wellbeing, they offered a stimulus to orient post-COVID educational work, initiating the debate regarding the gaps of scholastic education, and drawing up a new geography of education, which suggests a change in paradigm.

The activities promoted can be without a doubt ascribed to what has been defined as “Emergency pedagogy” (Isidori, Vaccarelli, 2013; Vaccarelli, 2018), which studies the feasibility and sustains the construction of educational settings after events that destroy and devastate the lives of individuals and of a community. Among the distinctive actions Alessandro Vaccarelli indicates: promoting network and multi/interdisciplinary work; stimulating children to express their emotions, elaborating negative experiences; focusing on what has happened for a constructive discussion, which encourages proactive behaviours; favouring cooperation, solidarity and the group’s wellbeing, so as to strengthen the community’s resilience, creating connections and contrasting confrontational dynamics; giving value to differences for an intercultural exchange, thus stemming behaviours of intolerance; sustaining forms of tutoring in the educational process; organizing spaces in a creative way, pursuing beauty as an fundamental value, especially in riskier contexts; putting different forms of narration at the centre of educational actions, especially self-narration through different languages (2018, pp. 362-363). Storytelling in fact takes up a reassuring and developmental value and reveals itself as one of the most efficient educational instruments, as it gives people the occasion to deal with and elaborate on pain, putting it into words, but especially to reconstruct their identity, reorienting their gaze and cultivating the category of possibility, thus connecting past present and future (Zizioli 2018a, p. 202). It therefore contributes to increasing the resilience, if with this term we don’t only consider the “ability to go through critical and painful situations in a constructive way, with

3 The Italian section of *Save the Children* has launched a real Manifesto on www.savethechildren.it/riscriviamoilfuturo to ask the Government and Parliament for an extraordinary plan for childhood and adolescence and the creation of a unity mission that will guarantee its concrete realization.

the possibility of reactivating and finding new balanced conditions” (Vaccarelli, 2018, p. 359), but also “an open, non-definitive, contextualized and personal knowledge” that sees in stories the potential to reorient the trajectories of life in a positive way (Garista, 2018, p. 54; p. 96).

During the lockdown, as well as the consolatory approaches, synthesisable in the hashtag #andràtutto-bene (everything will be ok), many of the realities involved in re-discovering the value of an educational community actually helped children through stories so as to promote proactive behaviours even in the face of the adversities created by the emergency. Searching for somewhere else through edifying readings favoured the elaboration of experiences, which were transformed through colours, drawings and words, in the virtuous circularity between writing and reading that is a guarantee of educational care.

Among the most significant experiences that took place in the Italian context we must recall the activities promoted, aside from the school, by a historical reality like the *Movimento di Cooperazione Educativa* (MCE), whose special projects, the so-called extraordinary activities, have been defined “of low digital intensity”, so as to discover and rediscover domestic spaces and sensations through a physical dimension which had been mortified by the implementation of anti-contagion measures. A very rich map was designed (<https://senzascuola.wordpress.com/>) in which narration and self-narration accompanied lots of children, allowing them to express their emotions, put order in their thoughts, but even unveil the desires that the shortages of the time nourished and amplified.

We can recall the activities brought forth by the *Laboratorio d'arte* of Rome's Palazzo delle Esposizioni, which looks after a specialized international youth library comprising of a precious collection of silent books, among the proposals that give value to narration and which are built upon an aesthetic-artistic plan that, as Marco Dallari reminds us, is always important to allow permeate all activities done with children, becoming “an educational methodological style” (2005, p. 17). Other forms of education towards resilience, in other emergency contexts, had already been experimented with the aforementioned collection (Zizioli, 2017; Zizioli, Franchi, 2018) and the pandemic allowed ulterior experiences, and thus reflections of undoubted pedagogic interest, to take place⁴.

The project *Resta a casa ma...lo Scaffale d'arte viene da te! (Stay home but...the Scaffale d'arte come to you!)* suggested a number of readings, videos and ideas for workshops and activities, to be shared long-distance too, thus with a national scope, allowing children to exercise a critical view of the world through art and books and offering teachers the tools to elaborate in educational planning (<https://www.palazzo-esposizioni.it/pagine/proposte-a-distanza>). Specifically, the *Tra Munari e Rodari. Aspettando la mostra (Between Munari and Rodari. Waiting for the exhibition)* project involved illustrators to accompany the children in the experimentation of new artistic techniques so as to bring Gianni Rodari's rhymes to life (<https://www.palazzo-esposizioni.it/pagine/tra-munari-e-rodari-aspettando-la-mostra>). To keep the relationship between museum, families and school alive and have the younger children's work recognized, everything produced was collected on the *Dacci un segno (Give us a sign)* web page, which gives back the force of the children's imagination (<https://www.palazzo-esposizioni.it/pagine/dacci-un-segno>). These experiences connect back to the pedagogy of imagination, which is necessary to cultivate future perspectives, but also to experiment with the research of lightness that is a “reaction to the weight of living” (Calvino, 2016, p. 30), and is so important in this moment in time.

In this brief review one must also give value to the program started up by *Save the Children*, “Non da soli” (“Not alone”), which, as an answer to the social and educational emergency, finalized the actions of the organization's historical local initiatives (Punti Luce, Fuoriclasse, Civico Zero, Spazi Mamme, Fiocchi in Ospedale, etc.) towards a concrete help for children, adolescents and families through the consignment of tablets and connections, with tutoring and specialized psychological support, all of these being initiatives in favour of community resilience. Its realization was made possible thanks to the contributions of 41 local associations. The hands-on intervention was sided by constant advocacy action and networking work, which is considered fundamental for the exchange of practices and the elaboration of common proposals (2020, pp. 38-39).

Children and older kids were also made central again in the activities promoted by the newly formed

4 These reflections stem from a conversation with Giulia Franchi, one of the palazzo's museum educators and who has been among the initiative's promoters during these months.

Rete delle Scuole popolari, which operates in the outskirts of the capital, following in the footsteps taken in the Acquedotto Felice at the end of the Sixties by Don Roberto Sardelli (Sardelli, Fiorucci, 2020).

This is a particularly vivacious association⁵, which reflects the leadership of determined and passionate youths⁶ who have made a militant choice and who, by committing themselves to local realities in riskier areas, every day experiment the sense of collaborating together within a public space, driven by an honest and genuine impulse to change giving up “fallacious rhetoric and exploiting relationships” (Laffi, 2014, p. 173). The goal is to flank the school, almost like a crutch, taking the most dramatic situations upon themselves, arranging forms of tutoring and also offering to develop citizenship for all those children who, for the varied reasons mentioned previously, were not able to keep up with scholastic rhythm. In these months, in fact, as well as activating the different forms of help and study support and a solidarity network to compensate for families’ poverty, providing computers and text books, they worried about organizing safe, free spaces where to still be able to socialize, express ones emotion, use different forms of narrative to give “human comfort” and strengthen the resilience not only of children, but also of their families. These experiences and actions continue to operate now that the emergency is over, in this moment of difficult recovery.

3. The community from refuge to a project for a “regenerated humanism”

A full and complete return to normality is legitimate and strongly desirable, but supposing a return to the status quo without a serious reflection regarding development models reveals a lack of realism and utopia: of realism because it is virtually impossible to imagine that an event like a pandemic will not leave a mark on lifestyles and forms; of utopia because, within this crisis, we renounce on seizing the opportunity of transformation in the sense of new wellbeing conditions.

As Annacontini writes, placing the future as an aim requires an “emotional, interpretative, material and imaginative engagement” to reutilize “the ruins” of one life and repurpose them into “raw material and resource” (Annacontini, 2019, p. 12).

These months have placed us in front of our being vulnerable, in front of a fragility, that if not governed allows fear and irrational impulses to prevail, fuelling the mistrust in others, which are perceived as an enemy.

Our exploration, though brief and un-exhaustive, has demonstrated that in an emergency, behaviours and original practices are activated and that it is possible to look at new models.

Without backing hypotheses regarding the de-schooling of society, like that of Ivan Illic, and obviously trying to avoid the risk of the increasing commodification that did not go missing even in these last few months, the informal dimension of education that now characterizes and qualifies the educational scene should be strengthened. In synthesis, we are talking about promoting experiences that look at areas like “potential or activated educational spaces” (Tramma, 1999, p. 29), giving more attention to the study of proposals regarding “widespread school” (Mottura, Campagnoli, 2016) that aim at an educating city, giving value to realities such as libraries and museums, but also open air spaces, conscious of the fact that this is an important transition, but also a delicate and dangerous one, with no paradigm to guide choices and actions.

And maybe this is one of the most important lessons to learn from this crisis we are living; not forgetting the strength, and at the same time the weakness, of the concept of community itself (Tramma, 2020), and therefore trying to give value to all its abilities for a local development seen as a collective learning process (Caldarini, 2008), connecting back to the tradition that from Dewey to Paolo Freire, to Don Milani, to Danilo Dolci, has insisted on the importance of working *with* not *for*, on the unbreakable rela-

5 The *Rete* was presented on the 5th of December 2020 through a public Facebook event, during which, the realization of a real map representing the areas where the various schools are active was also presented. These areas are in the outskirts, San Basilio, Rebibbia, Tor Bella Monaca, Tufello, Tor Marancia, neighbourhoods where the percentage of school drop-out are higher and where the pandemic has been majorly felt.

6 A particular thank you to Sara Pantoni from the San Basilio School, who equipped me with material and reflections for the reconstruction in this synthesis.

tionship between theory and practice, on an education that becomes politics because it allows the weakest to become active subjects and fights against inequalities.

The community, must thus be perceived not like a refuge for extraordinary moments, when feeling fragile can even make us understand the importance of sharing and of empathically feeling, but more like a project.

Almost like in a prophecy, to truly be of service to the child, for the era of sad passions, as ours has been considered, Miguel Benasayag and Gérard Schmit recommended to rediscover the sense *of* life and *for* life in the ability to elaborate care methods for a multi-dimensional development path, methods to construct and reconstruct bonds, practicing a certain degree of *resistance*, where resistance does not only mean to oppose or confront, but first and foremost to create (2013, pp. 124-125).

One of the first goals should therefore be to allow the solidarity operated in these months to continue and to systematize the experimentations, thus realizing a new educational geography able to trace and connect the experiences. An important role in this operation goes to narration, especially oral, which can travel through and transform public spaces, like our neighbourhood parks or squares, into places for relationships and learning, allowing us to rediscover the sense of the *agorà*, that has today been substituted by myriads of virtual squares that, because mediated by screens and devices, have denied us the possibility of authentic meetings.

In this way it is possible to adjust the role of technology. Instead of assuring progress, and this has been verified, its use has often, when not caged people in new “hierarchies” and “addiction pyramids” (Trasatti, 2020, p. 37), stripped them of their creativity and autonomy. Internet and digital media, though *means*, tend to morph into *ends*, in this way risking to, as Morin has underlined, “dispossess us of ethical, social and political questions that intrinsically belong to our mind” (2020, p. 41). Speaking about the post-COVID era, while inviting us to “change our ways”, he mentioned “regenerated humanism”, which stems from the idea of “*Homo complexus*” and thus, “*sapiens* and *demens*, *faber* and *mythologicus*, *oeconomicus* and *ludens*”. Through gratuity, game and passions, this idea is able to mitigate the hypertrophic economic interest of our societies (Morin, 2020, pp. 65-66). Solidarity and responsibility become, not only political and social imperatives, but also personal, because these months have taught us how much communal wellbeing depends on the diligence of each one of us. And so pedagogic investment on younger generations is more necessary than ever, avoiding hiding in and looking at the past to nurture the hope of a better society. In these last few months, “retrotopia”, as Bauman (2018) defined this tendency, has been more than a temptation, and only with the transformative strength and the utopian impulse of an education that invests and bets on children and their capacities, committing to compensating the enduring inequalities and rediscovering a new way of being a community, rehabilitating emotional exchange, sharing weaknesses and fears, cultivating collective imagination, we will be able to trust the future and face new “life trials” (Vaccarelli, 2016) with courage and resilience.

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