# Insegnanti consapevoli e riflessivi per una nuova idea di fare scuola
## Aware and reflective teachers for a new idea of schooling

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*L'articolo descrive le competenze richieste per far fronte alle sfide dell'insegnamento negli scenari contemporanei globali all'interno di un nuovo framework del fare scuola, che coinvolge una profonda ridefinizione delle funzioni e dei ruoli della scuola e della relazione fra scuola e società.*

*The article describes the competencies required to meet the challenges of teaching in contemporary global scenarios within a new framework of schooling, which involves a deep re-definition of the functions and roles of the school and of the relationship between school and society.*

## 1. THE TEACHER WE ARE LOOKING FOR IN THE GLOBAL SCENARIOS

In the Maastricht Global Education Declaration, the European Community indicates a global educational approach as "essential for strengthening public support for spending on development co-operation. All citizens need knowledge and skills to understand, participate in and interact critically with our global society as empowered global citizens"; on thi basis, the Declaration indicates a general methodology aimed at "supporting active learning and encouraging reflection with active participation of learners and educators" (EC, 2002).

Active participation is indeed considered both a basic condition and a target objective of all educational processes since it refers to a fundamental element for any social advancement and development.

This perspective is also highlighted in the Millennium Goals for education seth forth by the United Nations in 2009 (UN, 2009), on the basis of a complex and articulated process of cultural and social change and development, grounded in a new vision and understanding of global problems and in the role of educational practices (Striano, 2009, 2012b).

Within this framework, the criteria used to select the winner of the Global teacher prize, which was established in 2014, define an ideal profile of the teacher in globalized world scenarios.

In order to win the prestigious prize a professional should prove to have: a) "a public and shared recognition of her/his teaching achievements in the classroom and beyond from pupils, colleagues, head-teachers or members of the

wider community"; the capacity to "employ innovative and effective instructional practices and achieve demonstrable student learning outcomes in the classroom"; c) achievements in "the community beyond the classroom that provide unique and distinguished models of excellence for the teaching profession and others"; d) an attitude of "encouraging others to join the teaching profession and the capacity to contribute to public debates on the teaching profession" and finally e) the capacity of "achieving demonstrable student learning outcomes in the classroom either through the improvement of student grades, or student attendance and behaviour as well as proving her/his students becoming high achievers in the world of work" .

As we can see, student achievements in terms of grades or performances are only the fourth point on the list; moreover they are not focused on academic results, but rather are strictly connected to students' commitment and involvement in the schooling process, as well as in the future successes that the students will have in their personal and professional life.

The schooling process is seen as a part of a broad and long-lasting process of acquisition and development of abilities, competencies and knowledge that sustain individual growth within community and society and not as a separate process of the acquisition of basic knowledge and skills independently from what future citizens and workers will need to accomplish their social and professional tasks. This means that teaching should be conceived as a practice not circumscribed by the classroom or the school setting and focused not only on academic achievements in terms of measurable knowledge and skills but also on having a broader cultural and social impact, providing a model of commitment and thinking that has a wide reach and responds to the educational, cultural, and social needs of the community and of the society in a larger perspective (Baldacci, 2014). Moreover, teaching is acknowledged not as a hidden and silent practice, but as a "public" practice that has public visibility and impact beyond the "community of practice" of the teachers working in a specific school and beyond a specific professional community.

Teachers may and should have a cultural and social impact and have to be actively engaged in educational debates and educational reform; moreover, their voice should be considered to be an important reference for what concerns the future of the new generations and the possibilities of social growth and social change provided by education.

Teachers have a precious and relevant role in promoting cultural and economic advancement and development; their profession, which requires a specific commitment, is acknowledged as a creative, dynamic, innovative one. This implies that teachers become more and more aware of their function and role in society, as well as of the challenges and needs that education has to face.

Accordingly, communities and society have to acknowledge teaching as a model for a new professional epistemology that is functional to social change.

Some years ago Schön proposed an interesting reflection on the construction of professional epistemology within social contexts, focusing on professional roles and their impact on the processes of social development and transformation (Schön, 1973; 1984) .

Historically, some professions (such as medical and technical professions) have been assigned a strong social role is so far as they warrant the health and the security of the community; therefore, these professions have traditionally reached a high level of social visibility, through public acknowledgement and appreciation, the performances reached in these professional fields have been highly celebrated, through the media and other communication and dissemination tools.

Moreover, the professionals representing high levels of performance in those professions have been referred to as opinion makers and asked to disseminate their achievements through different communicative channels, impacting both the scientific community and the broader public.

Traditionally these kind of professionals have been trained according to a model of "strong" rationality, highly regulated by norms and protocols and operationally oriented; furthermore, their knowledge has been based on scientifically grounded evidence, implemented and sustained by experimental studies.

Nonetheless, historical and social changes have shown that the abovementioned professions are not really "strong" because they do not fully control their performances and their professional outcomes due both to contextual limits as well as to the limits of the form of rationality to which they have been referring.

Moreover, evidence-based knowledge has been scientifically proven not to be effective if not complemented with other kinds of data and other forms of knowledge, achieved through qualitative and in-depth studies.

As a matter of fact, within complex and continuing changing scenarios, the most functional and sustainable model of rationality is a "weak" one, because it is the most effective in producing real transformations; therefore, the forms of rationality that have sustained and sustain the so-called "weak" professions result in being the most socially valuable; moreover, evidence-based forms of scientific knowledge grounding professional practice and performances have proven to be in-effective references when considering unique cases and situations.

The most valuable forms of rationality and knowledge we should refer to are the ones implemented by those professionals who constantly work in uncertainty, who are systematically confronted with unexpected situations, and deal with unique cases; these are, indeed, the forms of rationality to be developed within contemporary social texture because they sustain change, growth and development. Within this framework, the teaching profession and the forms of awareness and understanding that may contribute to the broader community and to society acquire new impact and value.

Teachers, indeed, are not trained through a defined protocol, but their professional epistemology develops and unfolds through the exercise of a flexible

way of thinking, which helps them in negotiating, building together new knowledge, de-structuring their practice and critically exploring the contexts they are involved in (Schön, 1984; 1987, 1991).

Teaching is a "weak" profession because it is not focused on the use of some reproducible techniques or of operational protocols that have to be applied similarly to very different situations. The teaching situations are unique, peculiar, very particular, specific and in-determinate. They cannot be predicted or organized in detail and therefore cannot be controlled and manipulated through a rigorous acting referring to consolidated schemes. Moreover, teaching situations constantly pose new problems and therefore require to be reflected upon not individually but with the help of other professionals according to a multi-perspectival approach. In these terms, the teaching profession can be seen as a "model of excellence" because it exemplifies and develops -within the broader social texture- a form of rationality and a way of approaching problems and situations that can be a reference for other professionals and for the community itself. Accordingly, teachers may contribute to research on educational practices providing pieces of knowledge coming from within their professional experience and practice, therefore adding extremely important elements to evidence-based studies.

As a matter of fact, teachers are required to be an active part in the overall debate and research on education as well as to educational research, experimenting new forms of teaching that may respond to contextual and emerging educational needs; moreover, in order to become an active part of social change and social development, teachers are asked to perform a reflective agency within their professional field, to sustain students in the development of abilities and competencies useful to respond to social and occupational requests and in becoming reflective professionals.


## 2. AWARENESS AND REFLECTION AS THE CORE-COMPETENCIES IN THE TEACHING PROFESSION

Awareness is the primary condition in exercising an effective professional agency in education within contemporary scenarios. Educators and teachers should first of all be aware of the educational needs arising from a specific community, helping individuals and groups in acknowledging and identifying those needs, which are strictly interconnected with social needs.

Teachers must also be aware of the resources and potentialities imbedded in a specific educational and social context, focusing simultaneously: on individuals and their characteristics and peculiarities, the funds of knowledge, the cultural and learning tools and learning opportunities contextually distributed and situated, and the specific contextual demands that require tailored educational responses.

Accordingly, teachers should be aware of their role as agents for social growth and social development and as agents of empowerment for individuals and community. They should also be aware of the specificity of their role with reference to the one played by the community, the institutions, and the families, all of whom have to be considered not only as stakeholders, but also as resources and references for educational actions and strategies.

The reference to a reflective epistemology helps the teachers to be situated within a context of practice that uses: a constantly open epistemic position, an heuristic perspective, a rigorous research attitude, sustained by competencies, and methodologies and tools useful to explore educational situations in depth.

Teachers, therefore, are confronted with the problems emerging from those situations, finding new possible courses of action, referring to their professional repertories in an active and flexible way, but also ideating and implementing new educational models and strategies (Rivoltella, Rossi,

Within the teaching practice, reflection unfolds as inquiry, exploration of new possibilities and opportunities to be reached, and also as a device aimed at self-monitoring and evaluating the educational accomplishments and results, failures, or partial successes.

All the fields of educational experience are disseminated with situations within which the actors involved in educational processes are required to solve problems, make decisions, make choices, plan courses of action.

Moreover, all the fields of educational experience are disseminated with ethical dilemmas and ask the actors involved in educational processes to evaluate, take position, become committed and involved culturally, personally and as human beings.

Within educational practices, according to Schön, reflection and action are combined in a transactional process that is undetermined and intrinsically social as they incorporate a continuous co-determination between context and action (Schön 1984, 1987, 1991).

In those practices, teachers will find a recurring presence of conditions requiring an in-depth exploration through multiple perspectives and points of view, in order to define appropriate and meaningful courses of action.

This also requires a continuous revision of intentions, orientations, choices as well as of funds of knowledge together with a systematic clarification of the relationships occurring between knowing and acting, means and ends, theory and practice.

When teachers are asked to answer to unique and undetermined situations-to which it is not possible to apply consolidated protocols and routines sustained by forms of technical rationality- they have to act as reflective epistemic agents. Therefore, they will enter into a "reflective conversation" with those situations and realize interpretative experiments, which help them in constructing new

knowledge and understandings, and in producing change and transformation (Schön, 1987).

Accordingly, only a reflective position can support the teachers in figuring out the complexity of the transactional dynamics structuring the fields of experience in which they are imbedded.

Reflection can be oriented taking into account various focuses on some specific aspects of educational agency. As a matter of fact, educational agency can be understood as: a) a problematic area of research in situation, within which reflection unfolds as a form of inquiry aimed at the clearance or the solution of problems emerging from practical situations, according to a pragmatist-instrumentalist approach; b) a complex area of thinking and knowledge in action, within which reflection unfolds as a process of aware de-structuring and re-structuring of the knowledge and competencies imbedded in the educational practices; c) an articulated field of actions, regulated by socio-culturally determined beliefs, intentions, and orientations, within which reflection unfolds as a normative device, aimed at regulating the educational practices as well as the actions imbedded within them (Striano 2001, 2004).

Through all these forms of reflection we can envisage the emergence of a peculiar epistemology of professional practice (Schön 1984, 1987, 1991) that produces new forms of knowledge that are constructed, shared and negotiated, but also disseminated and transferred outside the contexts of educational practice (Dewey 1929). Reflection provides the educational agency with new sense and meaning, through multiple definitions and a systematic clarification of the relationships occurring among knowing and acting and feeling and thinking. The problematic situations of practice ask teachers to make choices, operate and define courses of action; in this perspective, reflection can be seen as one of the segments of a circular process within which one or more agents are able to understand a situation and to act within it in a rational and meaningful way, as well as to look back, reconstructing the strategies used in the experiences and in the practices and focusing on the intentions, motives, cultural and socio-economical constraints underlying educational agency (Carr, Kemmis 1986; Schön 1984).

Moreover, reflection helps teachers in reconstructing the affective and relational dynamics implied in the experiences and in events lived (Richert 1990), taking into account that the educational activity implies a complex and delicate declination of intentions, norms, regulative hypothesis that have to be negotiated and shared within unique and peculiar contexts and situations (Damiano 1993).

The use of a reflective approach in educational practices offers to teachers the possibility to be active builders of their own knowledge and competencies and aware interpreters of their own experiences and practices. At the same time, it sustains the recovery of and gives value to the cognitive, heuristic, argumentative and dialogic potentialities of all the actors implied in the educational processes, acknowledging them as significant partners (Striano, 2004).

## 3. TEACHERS' EDUCATIONAL AGENCY AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICES

As it is contextually imbedded, educational agency is realized in a variety of practices to be understood as an organized set of activities regulated by a series of conventions, shared and transmitted within a community of agents (Schön, 1987). Within a community, practices are built on the basis of a shared repertory of activities, relationships, objects, reflecting stories of mutual implication and negotiation and involving new and different meaning constructions (Cohen, Siegel 1991); moreover, the members of a community share a peculiar epistemology of practice that includes a variety of taicit agreements regarding cases, codes, deontology, protocols, repertories, strategies and tools.

A specific reference must be given to the agents, languages, memories, aims and scopes and traditions implied in a specific community, intended as the texture within which meanings are co-constructed and shared and therefore fully understood, as far as they become constituents of the contexts within which have a sense and a scope.

Each community must be seen as a dynamic system, continuously re-defined by the actions of its members; therefore, individuals and community have to be understood as situated interactive networks, within which individuals are able to keep the communities alive but also to transform them, as far as they interiorize and master the practices reinterpreting and reinventing them in an innovative and peculiar way (Lemke, 1997; Rogoff,1990).

On their own side, communities are able to confirm, sustain and transform their members providing them with new opportunities to grow and to practice within a system of shared references that involves the appropriation and the construction of new funds of knowledge and the development of new competencies.

The acknowledgment of the agents and roles played within the social and relational texture that composes the context of the community requires to make explicit the intentions, motives, aims and scopes orienting professional practices, and providing them with sense and meaning.

This also demands the recovery of individual and collective memories to which professionals implicitly or explicitly refer and are aware of, since those memories constitute the cultural and semantic coordinates that define professional practices within a community.

Memories, indeed, are essential in feeding and structuring the processes of interpretation, re-interpretation and re-construction of the roles and models of practice sustaining the growth of the community, as they are constantly committed to their own reproduction, even through a continuous renovation (Wenger, 1998).

Communities of practices have to be understood as "systems of learning" within which the dynamic conservation operates, allowing a change of state that does not challenge the essential functions and practices necessary to keep the system alive.

Each community tends to maintain its identity and to sustain the identity of its members, but at the same time each community must be able to transform itself and the practices imbedded within it (Schön 1973). In each community, we can then envisage a constant dialectic interplay between processes of conservation and preservation of existing practices, acknowledged as good practices (and therefore celebrated, sustained and transmitted) and processes of critical revision, modification and transformation of practices, which have proved to be meaningless and ineffective along the way (Striano, 2012a).

As Schön explains, a community of practice learns when it acquires a new capacity to act and to realize new practices; within a community both doing and constructing knowledge are a shared enterprise that creates a relationship of mutual affordance and support, and is the result of a collective process of negotiation defined by the participants while it is achieved (Schön 1984, 1987). As far as communities of practice evolve through shared learning stories, it is important to track the narratives that characterize a community and help it in constructing new stories, which may represent new and different ways to pose, manage and resolve problems and to generate new forms of knowledge through cognitive processes emerging either *in* action, or *ex post* (Wenger, 1998, Striano, 2012).

Within this process, reflection is an extremely effective device to be used by individuals and groups to re-configure their theories and their practices according to the new learning stories developed within a specific community (Schön, 1987, 1991).

Learning can also occur as a direct or indirect form of interaction between different kinds of community that acquire a new capacity to act through a continuous inquiry on the nature of the problems emerging from practice, on their causes and on their resolution.

The learning movement can be generated either from the periphery to the centre or from the centre to the periphery, where the communities may work as learning facilitators for a broader social network, in so far as the social networks may help and sustain the communities in their learning processes (Schön 1973).

Each community functions as an interdependent system in terms of collaborative efforts of its members in relationship with the wider social systems, which provide it with functions, meanings and scopes and within which it is situated; the interdependence between communities and social systems prevents the communities from the risk of becoming self-referring closed worlds (Shaffer,Anundsen 1993).

The practices of participation- including the identification of specific goals, belief systems and funds of knowledge- are always defined and evaluated by the broader social community, which epresents the ultimate reference point.

Through their legitimate participation in social growth, the communities of practice take their own form, develop and contribute to the overall social development. As essential role is played by those forms of agency and practice, re-

sponding to the needs of growth expressed by the social systems that are continuously open to transformation.

Within this framework, professional practices have an important function, as they are generated within an institutional texture aimed at sustaining the overall social structure.

Practices are legitimated as forms of agency that allow and warrant social growth and development at a cultural, economic and social level.

In order to support social growth, practices need to be not excessively close and standardized; instead, they should be constantly cultivated, developed, revised and transformed according to the new emerging needs of the social contexts within which they are imbedded.

Only a careful and continuous cultivation of the practices sustains the activation of real processes of growth within communities, institutions and societies and has a true impact on the social texture, in both the medium and long term in terms of change and transformation.

If, as we have previously shown, the practices may deeply modify the social structures within which they are cultivated (Fabbri, Melacarne, Striano, 1998),

The creation and the implementation of new models of professional practice-on the basis of new interpretative frames of reference-may have an important role in the activation of processes of social development.

This can happen, nonetheless, only within a social texture that legitimates and sustains the creation and development of reflective circuits within the communities of practice; these circuits have to be imbedded within the different ganglia of the social systems, promoting a progressive individual and collective enhancement of the levels of awareness and reflectivity.


4. TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL REFLECTION AS A DEVICE TO SUPPORT EDUCATIONAL REFLECTIVITY

Within the different social systems, reflection has to be understood as a particular case of reflectivity grounded on the self-reference of the organizations imbedded within the societies. Reflectivity must not be referred to as subjective consciousness, but has to be understood as an anthropological structure characterizing the different forms of human knowing and declined in different ways of thinking, representing and acting at the ndividual and collective level (Ravaglioli 1988).

Accordingly, reflectivity has to be conceived as a device functional to the self-regulation of social systems on the basis of the complexity of the interactions and of the retro-actions generated within them, and is realized through reflective processes and practices. It is therefore possible to identify a form of reflectivity of the systemic mechanisms aimed at lowering the pressure of the complexity

and of the consequent selective cogency within a specific social system focusing on different forms of social agency.

This can be achieved through a sequential differentiation of social agency in two acts of different logical level aimed at defining the identity of the system and at sustaining its construction and preservation (Giacomini 1990).

Luhmann and Shorr identify different forms of reflexivity internal to the social systems and to the educational systems inscribed within them and consider reflection as a particular case of reflectivity, as well as a particular case of self reference that expresses its self-reflective potential within educational contexts and practices.

Reflection works as an "active force" inside educational processes and its function consists in choosing the situations that highlight the complexity of sense making within educational contexts both for teachers and their communities of reference. This approach prevents educational practices from becoming routines and rituals and valorizes their creative and knowing potential (Luhmann, Schorr 1988).

Within each educational system, reflection acquires a regulative function as it guides the system towards the construction and maintenance of a peculiar identity referring the contingent experiences to the unity of the system and, again, categorizing and specifying those experiences, according to a unitary frame of reference (Luhmann,Schorr,1988).

In these terms, the self-regulation of educational systems is carried on through both *reflection* intended as a function of self observation of the educational system, which requires special resources and professionals, and *reflexivity*, intended as a function that interconnects educational actions, providing them clearness and control (Ravaglioli, 1988).

According to its function, reflection helps the system in developing self-reflective procedures that can be realized through different intra-subjective and inter-subjective practices within a community of agents actively and responsibly implicated in a constant and systematic process of critical inquiry on the conditions of their acting and knowing.

Within this framework, teachers can become committed to reflection as an activity focused on the conditions of teaching as a profession, as well as on the institutional demands and commitments required from teachers by the educational systems and on the social demands posed to hem by community and society.

Moreover, reflection can work as a process of critical identification and revision of beliefs, theories and methodology orienting educational practices; it can be therefore connect to a process of reflectivity on the roles and the power relationships imbedded in those practices, and, in particular, in the practice of teaching (as it is deployed in specific forms of discourse) and the rhetoric of teaching in official documents, media and so on.

The interconnection and interweaving of the processes of *reflection* and *reflectivity* can be used in a deep redefinition of the role of the teachers in nowadays' scenarios, highlighting the competing social representations that -in different socio-cultural contexts- orient the teaching practice and work out new professional models that could be more effectively respondent to the challenges and demands posed by the contemporary globalized world.

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