

RICERCHE

Well-being, resilience and prosociality at school: new frontiers for teachers' professional development.

Benessere, resilienza e prosocialità a scuola: nuove frontiere per lo sviluppo professionale degli insegnanti.

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ABSTRACT ITALIANO

L'unicità dell'individuo e la fragilità delle attuali condizioni di vita ci inducono a riflettere sull'essenza dell'educazione. Nelle scuole emerge sempre più diffusamente una crescente insoddisfazione, soprattutto per quanto concerne l'aspetto relazionale del complesso rapporto insegnante-studente. Tale rapporto sta diventando sempre più problematico. Emerge, pertanto, una nuova necessità: quella di rinnovare la professionalità degli insegnanti attuali e futuri, in modo che siano in grado di rispondere alle nuove sfide della formazione. Vi è anche la necessità, per la pedagogia, di orientarsi verso nuove scelte teoretiche e verso strategie didattiche più idonee al miglioramento della qualità dell'istruzione obbligatoria. I cambiamenti cui si auspica possono essere sintetizzati nella formula di transizione da una concezione della formazione, intesa come "tecnicismo" e "nozionismo", a una concezione dell'educazione intesa, invece, come formazione integrale degli alunni. Tale transizione appare idonea alla promozione del benessere e resilienza nella scuola. E' questo l'approdo della riflessione presentata. Essa è supportata da un'indagine esplorativa condotta in Italia su un gruppo di 250 insegnanti, afferenti a scuole di ogni ordine e grado.

ENGLISH ABSTRACT

The uniqueness of the individual, the fragile conditions in which nowadays he/she lives, lead us to reflect on the essence of education. A growing dissatisfaction is emerging in schools, especially with regard to the complex teacher-student relationship, which is becoming increasingly problematic. There is therefore a need to renew the professionalism of current and future teachers so that they are able to meet the new challenges of education. There is also a need for pedagogy to move towards new theoretical choices and teaching strategies capable of improving the quality of compulsory education. These changes are epitomized by the necessity of a transition from a conception of education as 'technicality' and 'notionism' to a conception of education as integral formation of students and promotion of well-being and resilience. This is the conclusion of our reflection, supported by an exploratory survey conducted in Italy with 250 teachers of all school levels.

Introduction

The starting point of this reflection on the issues of the new frontiers of training needs for teachers in service is the consideration of some limits and implementation gaps of contemporary education. Such gaps, rather than referring to "external" factors, seem to be attributable instead to "internal" and "implicit" factors.

The "external" factors are the disparity of resources between different schools, the adequate provision of digital devices and compensatory instruments at the time of COVID-19, the accompaniment of professional educators, and the adequate amount of support that managers and territorial steering committees can give to a subject, which all certainly have a heavy impact on the quality of education. However, they do not explain the deep educational crisis that roots far beyond the present time and precedes the pandemic.

The current educational crisis evokes rather the psycho-pedagogical and epistemic universe of the human being and, at the same time, the existence phenomenology. This presupposes philosophical-theoretical, affective-relational and ethical-behavioral knowledge, which, at present, is little known and little investigated by pedagogy.

Currently, pedagogical knowledge does not always consider this knowledge and remains behind, still proposing an idea of training intended as a mere "transmission of information and increasingly specialized notions". At the most, pedagogy is then limited to denouncing some drifts of contemporary education and to listing some negative behavioral traits of today's students (for instance, aggression, individualism, immaturity, inability to dialogue with adults, etc.), without investigating the cause of all this, nor seeking possible "remedies" through school and education. For this reason, we can affirm that we are very far from the possibility of concretely promoting health and well-being inside and outside school.

Recently, Hoggan-Kloubert and Hoggan (2022) reflected on the current epistemic crisis and the need to renew education by promoting rationality, autonomy and pluralism. With regard to adult education, the authors affirm the need to develop epistemologically responsible learners and the usefulness of promoting public spaces open to dialogue and learning (agora) (Hoggan-Kloubert & Hoggan, 2022).

Our opinion is that it is very necessary to deepen these issues and that some negative behavioral traits of today's students depend on the idea that the training in school is still separated from concrete life. This is because of the cultural stereotype, which continues to prevail in the pedagogical field. This stereotype is related to the positivistic vision of the human, reducing man to a "rational animal" to be "filled" as much as possible with hyperspecialistic knowledge.

However, the life sciences, in particular phenomenology and philosophical hermeneutics describe man in a different way: as a multidimensional compendium of 'nature and culture', of 'spirit and body', of 'intelligence, will, affectivity and rationality'. A plurality of dimensions, therefore, that require to be formed, in the course of life, in a continuous, complete and unitary way, without omitting any of them (Guardini, 1953; Ricoeur, 2016; De Angelis et al., 2017; De Angelis, 2018).

Due to this cultural stereotype, school curricula are still unbalanced on the development of the cognitive dimension at the expense of the affective, volitive, ethical, and relational dimensions of the individual. The consequences of this are evident, and the mass media are increasingly reporting on the general malaise in schools.

After all, thinking of the present or the more recent past, who could deny in their teacher experience to have listened to complaints and narratives of experiences of

"dissatisfaction" from their colleagues concerning "misunderstandings", "defects in interpersonal communication", "individualism", or even "solipsistic closures"? Who could then deny having witnessed or having been the protagonist himself in the school of events in which he felt a sort of "limit", or "impotence" in the educational relationship? We refer to experiences that do not necessarily depend on the "lack of notions", "education" or "tools" suitable for the implementation of an inclusive and efficient teaching. We are thinking about events related to the need for a deeper knowledge of the human being, its "ontology", "axiology" and the "universe of motivations" and "psychological and affective relational meanings" that give impulse to action.

These are issues which in recent decades have been sidelined and which pedagogy has relegated to the margins of knowledge. This happened because the discipline that studies education and training processes has pursued a rapid "rise" to the peaks of the life sciences' pyramid. To do this, it has emptied itself of theoretical content and value references (so useful for the integral formation of the human being). It has declined towards a "sterile notionism" that the scenarios offered by new technologies have been made more "beautiful" and "poetic", but this seems inadequate with respect to the formation of a being, the man, who even according to the definitions of neuroscience is a compendium of body and spirit (Eccles, 1994).

How many times teachers have been left alone and experienced a deep impasse when called to face complex relational dynamics, which may involve the primary relationship with the pupils to follow or interaction with the class. How often the comparison with colleagues, families, psychologists, professional educators, and other socio-health figures, because of many misunderstandings, does not translate into a concrete didactic action for the benefit of the pupils. How often the roles of "mediator", "facilitator of communications", "interpreter", and "motivational speaker", of "father and mother", of "teacher", and "model" must be completely improvised and badly sketched at best by the most hardworking teachers, attentive and sensitive? How often, instead, teachers prefer living educational relationships that are not significant but superficial and formal, that make them unable to enter into the trusting and transforming climate of "empathic relationships, true and humane" (Calvani, 2011; Elia, 2021; De Angelis, 2018; De Angelis, 2021).

In the last decades, the educational relationship has been reduced to a mere transmission of information, notions, and specialist knowledge that does not affect the lives of students, nor their potential of perfectibility (De Angelis, 2018).

The Subject of the Research: Training Gaps for Educational Professions

The starting point of the exploratory research conducted on 250 teachers at Italian schools was the consideration of a sort of "discomfort" that they often felt in professional everyday life regarding knowledge, skills and competences not adequately contemplated in the ministerial training courses of the educational professions.

The research hypothesis was the presence of training gaps in the ministerial path of those who prepare to work as teachers. This hypothesis arose from the reflection of the story of some critical issues that teachers often manifest to their colleagues in the

workplace, to school managers, and to pupils' families, which in recent years have seemed to multiply, discrediting schools and teachers. The "discomfort" experienced by some teachers is often confirmed by a "reflected discomfort", that of the pupils, whose complaints often reach their families. The complaints of pupils and families often affect the interpersonal relational sphere of teachers and the method of teaching and assessment. Many teachers still appear to be "deficient" in these respects, and their professional performances are affected by the inability to arouse pupils' interest in their own discipline. The inability to create a profitable educational relationship also drastically reduces the positive impact that the training action can have on the development of the pupils' potential for perfectibility. The authority of teachers also appears to be in decline lately, and often teachers who fail to win the esteem and respect of their pupils resort to punitive and coercive means, i.e. the "threat of a note" or the "negative mark". The common mentality and the scientific pedagogical literature implicitly refer to these and other frequent experiences of 'educational distress' and speak of school and education in terms of a 'general crisis in progress'.

The loss of authority on the part of teachers and the growing difficulty in class management prevent pupils from having constructive experiences and from achieving an important learning objective that is useful both for the strengthening of social skills and the acquisition of soft skills, and for the development of neuro-cognitive competences linked to the ability to learn. We are referring in particular to the difficulty that current teachers have in proposing to the pupils entrusted to them important experiences such as argumentation and dialogical interactions in classroom contexts. Argumentation is one of the most important skills valued by educators of different subjects around the world as a means and objective of learning (e.g., Asterhan and Schwarz, 2016). Dialogic interactions in which different ideas are considered in connection with each other are also considered indispensable for pupils' intellectual growth. Recent studies, e.g. Mercer, 1996; O'Connor and Michaels, 2007; Wells, 2007; Mercer and Howe, 2021, have provided evidence of the benefits of such interactions.

The article entitled: "Students' dialogic and justifying moves during dialogic argumentation in mathematics and physics", recently published in the journal *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, is an important scientific reference for further investigation of these issues (Hähkiöniemi et al, 2022).

In order not to leave the teachers, the pupils, and the families alone to face the complexity of the educational crisis, we have decided to conduct an exploratory survey of the training needs of teachers in service. Exploratory research was conducted through a multimethod approach: a qualitative-quantitative analysis of the collected data.

Materials and Methods

We believe the positivistic paradigm is inadequate to investigate some areas of education. Much of the essence of the educational phenomenon is as a unique and unrepeatable epistemic device that cannot be easily seen through the positivist lens. Epistemic ecological paradigm-related guidelines are best suited to investigate the world of education. That is why we chose to use tools with quantitative-qualitative standards to

investigate the particular scope of educational research represented by the ethical education of values within a framework of full welfare and health promotion. There were several epistemic ecological paradigm-related underpinnings, which included a phenomenological approach, a critical approach, and a participatory approach. These approaches express different philosophies, which are not mutually exclusive. In this research work, in particular, we favored a phenomenological-hermeneutic interpretive approach, which takes account of empirical data.

The phenomenological hermeneutic paradigm aims at the elaboration of scientific reports defined "interpretative descriptions" of interpretation. It is mostly this paradigm, which developed theories of phenomenological research as it applies to education. The starting point was the experience to investigate networks and meanings that participants identified. The phenomenological methodology excludes generalizations.

The essence of the phenomenological orientation is to be faithful to the phenomenon itself; the epistemic imperative is to "go to the things themselves". Things are not perceived as factual but as elements of consciousness, objects of intuition, the essence of things revealed to the consciousness. The researcher should, according to this paradigm, study things in their setting, knowing however that they can manifest themselves in different ways according to the ways of accessing them. In order to be faithful to the phenomenon, researchers should refer to the principle of evidence; and the authors adhered to this principle. They also recognized that phenomena do not always appear to be completely transparent to one's gaze but rather that everything has its own specific way of transcending appearance. This makes the researcher humble and modest in the results obtained and motivates further research that can identify and promote empowering strategies that can contribute to new improvements for the human person.

The Exploratory Survey of 250 Italian Teachers

The exploratory survey that we conducted in 2020 on a group of two hundred and fifty teachers in service at schools of all levels in Puglia (Italy) and that we present in this paragraph highlights some training needs, mostly "implicit", which in the educational report emerge in the form of unresolved or seemingly "unsolvable" criticalities.

We conducted a first exploration of the "implicit training needs" of teachers, inviting the sample of two hundred and fifty interviewees to answer the questions of a semi-structured questionnaire, including a large number of open questions.

Question: What is your academic discipline?

Figure 1 shows the academic disciplines of the interviewed subjects. This is a varied sample of users, all teachers in service for more than two years, who have also been asked an open question about their positive/negative experiences of inclusion in the school where they perform their service. Of the respondents, 0.40% have medical sciences as their discipline, and another 0.40% comes from agricultural and veterinary sciences.

One percent of respondents belong to the area of physical sciences; another 1% belongs to the earth sciences, 12% to chemical sciences, and 19% to the biological sciences. Another percentage of respondents said they have as their discipline mathematical and computer sciences (19%) and, finally, 48% said they belong to the area of religious sciences (Fig.1).

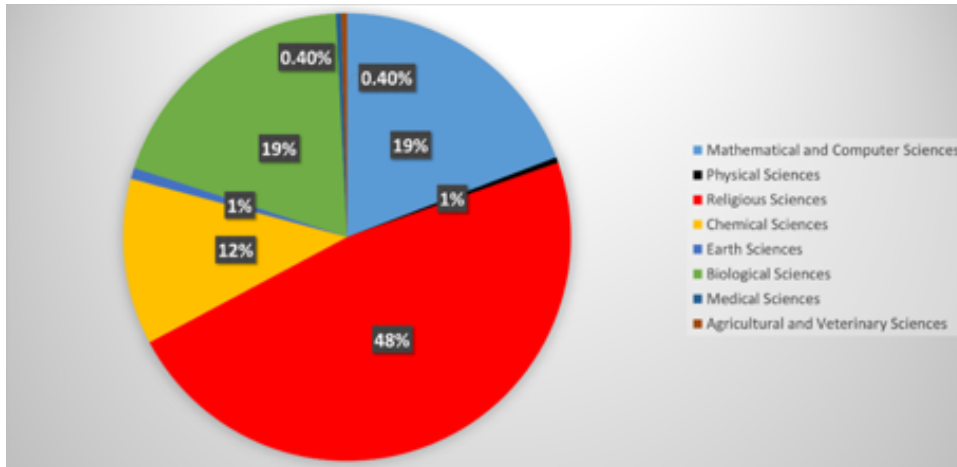


FIG. 1 - ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES OF RESPONDENTS

Question: At what type of school do you work?

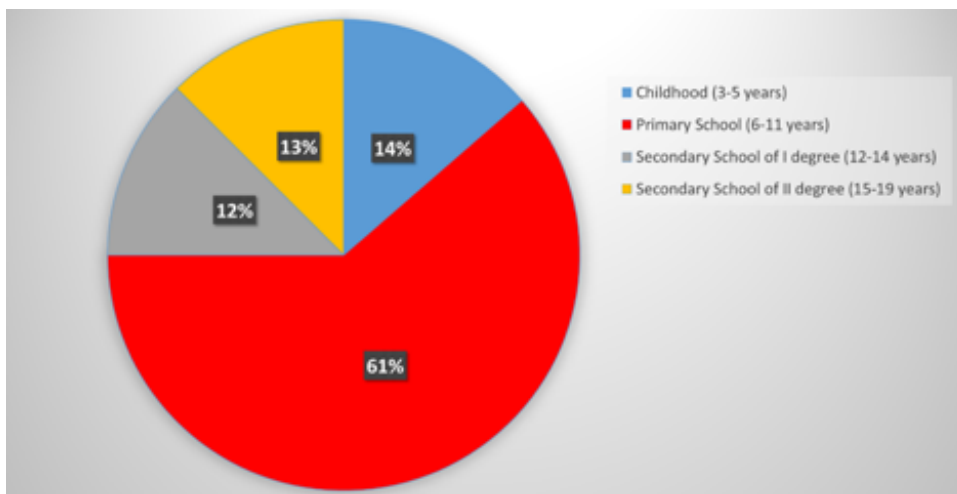


FIG. 2 - TYPE OF SCHOOL AT WHICH TEACHING IS CARRIED OUT

The graph shown in Figure 2 expresses the scholastic origins of the sample submitted to the interview. The group consists of 73% teachers of the first cycle of education (“Primary school”, 6–11 years and “Secondary School of first Degree”, 12-14 years); 13% consists of teachers of the Secondary School of second Degree, and the remaining part of the respondents (14%) teach in the school of Childhood (Figure 2).

The most interesting elements that emerged during this first exploratory survey of the teachers in service were some relational problems that teachers were unable to cope with given the current knowledge and skills they possessed. The survey also revealed a dichotomy between theory and practice in previous training, which translates into “difficulties in translating knowledge into appropriate and effective teaching practices” as (1) some of them expressly stated. This training gap in the Italian school system had

already emerged during the participatory and dialogic processes that were developed in the training course. In particular, the idea of the need to develop a new collective wisdom (Isaacs, 1999) capable of promoting integral, inclusive, intercultural, equitable and effective education emerged from the rigorous reflective confrontation between the training experts and the trainee teachers (2).

To simplify the graphic representation of these kinds of gaps, we used a single large category, called "Unforeseen Professional Skills" (3), which included both relational problems and the fracture felt between theories and training in their past formative paths.

The graph in Figure 3 expresses in percentage the answers given by the interviewees to the open question in which we asked the respondents to express the discomforts and the gaps felt in the last working period. No reply was given by 18% of the respondent; 82% of the teachers in service said they had experienced as gaps the unforeseen professional skills (Figure 3).

Unforeseen Professional Skills?

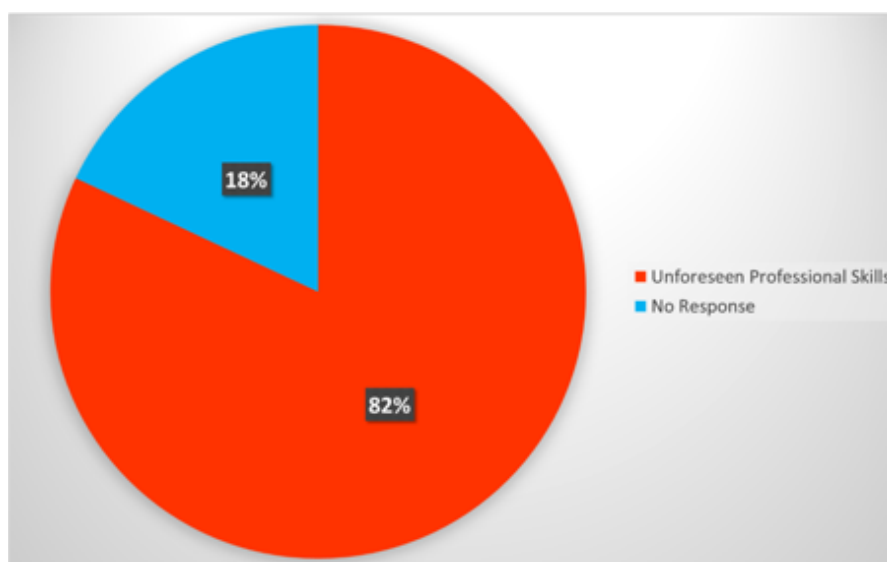


FIG. 3 - TRAINING GAPS CONCERNING THE USE OF "UNEXPECTED" HUMAN AND PROFESSIONAL SKILLS, WHICH CONCERN THE SPHERE OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND THE APPLICATION OF KNOWLEDGE (250 RESPONSES)

Some of the teachers who stated that they felt relational and application deficiencies in their daily routine (82% of those interviewed) tried to explain these deficiencies. A recurring expression among respondents was the "need to reconnect theory and practice".

Another recurring expression among respondents was the "need to identify strategies to overcome critical issues and frequent misunderstandings with colleagues and students" and the "need to make the school environment more serene, welcoming, and suitable for learning".

These statements call for training needs of an even greater depth. Trying to interpret and codify the needs expressed by teachers and, in particular, opening the curtain of human misunderstandings experienced in working environments, we realize that we move within a gnoseological field still little frequented by pedagogy and yet so crucial to

the understanding and remodeling of human actions. It is the field of human ontology and axiology, of the mechanisms of development and action of interpersonal motivational systems and complex behavioral and relational dynamics. These are issues that are not yet adequately addressed by the current ministerial programs, by the university and post-graduate courses in which the rule of "do it yourself" prevails for those few wise people who, having had a certain sense of this generalized curriculum gap, try to run for cover through laborious and labyrinthine "self-educational" work.

This is the daily concrete experience of many teachers who put so much of their own time into improving the school, according to what was also noted by Massimo Recalcati (2014).

Discussion: The Need To Rediscover the Focus of Education in Order To Implement Inclusion and Wellness for Every Individual

We understand how necessary it is at this point in the analysis to rediscover today and to rediscover the focus of education, which in our opinion consists of teaching "the art of being human" through an assiduous and credible witness, the teacher. This evidence, which for us represents the first provisional outcome of a longitudinal exploratory survey conducted (in two years of observation) on a sample of 250 teachers serving in Italian schools, using a qualitative-quantitative methodology, appears to be in line with what has recently been reported in contemporary pedagogical literature.

In fact, nationally and internationally, a broad debate has looked at ethical competence as an integral and fundamental part of a professor's professionalism. This debate underlines the dual task of teachers as moral agents: they must behave morally, and at the same time, they must morally train the students (Elia, 2021). For this reason, it is important that teachers become fully aware of how their decisions—for example, communication with students, the organization of the lesson, and the choice of contents—could influence the completely teaching action.

Teaching is one of those professions that is not easy to learn to exercise. It is necessary first to be disciples of good teachers, and then, in turn, teachers in order to become teachers. Like all aid professions, teaching causes emotional dynamics that often result in feelings of inadequacy, affect the level of self-esteem, and trigger defensive mechanisms of various kinds. For this reason, all teachers should be helped to do constant work on themselves, which begins before entering the school, to identify their areas of strength and weakness and to try to orchestrate them so to build an integrated and unitary professional profile (Elia, 2021). In order for a teacher to activate a good educational process, it is not enough to possess certain cultural and disciplinary skills, but it is necessary to develop socio-ethical-affective skills that, from time to time, help to know how to teach.

The teacher must be able to organize learning context, set up good communication, and build a training curriculum that favors learning. They must also be able to plan and evaluate and often recognize situations of discomfort or manage conflicts within the class.

This whole series of multiskills, implicit in teaching professionalism, recalls the urgent need to improve ministerial training curricula to train new teachers to be well prepared in everything, able to face the new emergencies and challenges of contemporary education.

In light of this, the recovery of the focus of education appears to be very necessary so that the experiences of didactic virtuosity, such as the one narrated before, are considered to be possible and within the reach of all teachers.

The urgency to relocate the center of gravity of the educational process to the human person and its potential for perfectibility is now clear. It is also necessary to recognize that the human being, ontologically structured in the form of an embodied spirit, which, according to the existentialism of the Danish philosopher Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813–1855), continually has to make indelible and nontransferable choices for his own existence.

These choices go far beyond a bureaucratization of teaching and concern the intimate and personal sphere of the individual, calling into question the freedom of each one. However, reaching such a profound awareness of the preciousness of the educational mission (which can leave an indelible mark on the conscience of the pupils) is not an automatic or foregone conclusion. Teachers need to be trained by others for this introspective and metacognitive path.

Currently it is widely believed that the teacher has just to contribute to the formation of "well-made brains", and so many critical issues in the school appear incomprehensible and unsolvable. We insist on directing all disciplinary curricular teaching on the cognitive development of pupils and on the acquisition of notions, more and more specialized, scrupulously evaluated and certified by schools. However, perhaps we do not realize that this way to conceive of school and teaching, together with a cognitive overhead, increases the individual's fracture between mind and body, intelligence and will, spirit and nature, knowledge and life, with unpredictable repercussions on the behavioral choices that the subject person is called on to accomplish.

Dissatisfaction and aggression, individualism and insensitivity, together with incommunicability are some of the most widespread character traits among young people in postmodernity, which appear inexplicable to parents and teachers, who are increasingly dismayed and disoriented (Bellingeri, 2005; Booth & Ainscow, 2008; Mortari, 2014; Lucivero & Petracca, 2015; Lucivero, 2020). We ask ourselves, then if the fact that the ministerial programs currently focus only on the acquisition of abstract, purely intellectual knowledge and certifiable skills, suitable for educating human reason and the visible, "external" dimension of the human being, just to become a "performing machine" called upon to continually manifest its production efficiency, could this affect negative situation of society.

We wonder if it should perhaps not be the case to also "include" in the ministerial programs the other ontological dimensions of the individual, the ones concerning the sphere of feelings, and the will that in order to be activated require special didactic projects. We ask ourselves whether the human growth of individuals in these fields is the responsibility of schools and teachers or rather of fortuitous life circumstances, which actually discriminate against individuals and make them unequal in terms of learning and education. Finally, we ask ourselves if the current political choices, which neglect the ethical-affective and volitional-intentional dimensions in the formation of individuals, are perhaps not depriving the students of the possibility of being prepared to live a life that is "good", "happy", "human", and "successful" in civil society.

In light of the considerations presented and supported by empirical research, it appears mandatory to invite pedagogy to reflect on its role and on the possibilities; it actually has to stem these drifts of contemporary education.

Conclusion

In response to these questions raised by the hermeneutical reflection on the empirical data that we have presented in the previous paragraph, the idea that we support is the idea of the necessity of renewing education, starting from an ontological understanding of the human being. This conclusion is the provisional outcome of the qualitative-quantitative research conducted among teachers in service at Italian schools to explore the implicit training needs of teachers.

What seems more reasonable to us to affirm, in light of the data collected, is that in Italian schools, it is no longer enough to train "well-made heads", that is, minds filled with specialized knowledge and notions. To fulfill the educational mission, much more is needed, and specifically it is indispensable to aim at the complete development of the human person. This involves the cognitive, psychological, social, ethical, affective, and more broadly spiritual dimensions of the individual.

The complete formation of individuals, moreover, cannot be separated from a personalized accompaniment in the growth processes, from an existential planning, from the acquisition of virtuous and sustainable behavioral postures. It cannot be separated from an effective and constant action capable of soliciting the potential of human perfectibility, orienting it towards the achievement of personal excellence and the common good, in a civic sense.

Education and school, at a time of fragility and in a global health crisis and in the current international crisis, cannot fail to have the happiness of the pupils and the common good at heart. This is the global challenge of education in our contemporary world, that is "teaching the art of being human", and teachers cannot be left alone to face it. This is the result of our qualitative and quantitative research.

After all, it is well known that there are countless stories everywhere in the world of intelligent and cultured pupils but "deviant" in their behavior and dissatisfied because their training was not inserted into existential scenarios with meaning and values. There is a compelling need to train "well-made people" in schools, individuals who are complete and fully realized, capable of carrying out every good and virtuous work towards themselves and towards the social community.

Moreover, due to the particular role that pedagogy has in the context of the human sciences, it should begin to dare much more, we would say downstream, in penetrating with its values, with its specific idea of *paideia*, into the institutional and legislative mechanism to mark with the teacher's imprint the regulatory framework within which they are placed. Even in the United States, pedagogy is beginning to reflect upon these crucial issues concerning the educational universe and its evolution in the near future. At one of the most prestigious and oldest universities in the world, Yale University in the United States, a course on happiness has been running for almost a year and has become the most popular in the history of the university. The "Psychology and the Good Life"

seminar was inaugurated on January 12th and immediately achieved enormous success. Not surprisingly, according to the rector of the university, it is the most popular in the last 317 years.

To understand the fame of Laurie Santos' course, just think that as soon as the registrations were opened, three hundred people were enrolled. In just three days, the number doubled, and in one week, it had already tripled. Today, a third of the students enrolled at Yale in the three years want to take part in Professor Santos's study, and the requests have not stopped yet.

Laurie Santos tackles many issues in her happiness course. In particular, it teaches students how to change behavior to also change the course of their existence. "Students want to change—revealed the psychologist in an interview with the New York Times, talking about the success of the course—they want to be happy and change the mentality of the campus and of education" (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/26/nyregion/at-yale-class-on-happiness-draws-huge-crowd-laurie-santos.html>).

Are these, perhaps together with others, the most obvious signs of the need to rethink school and education with a view to promoting a "flourishing inclusion" inside and outside the human person?

Note

- (1) Recurring expressions found in respondents' responses (more than a third of respondents referred to this gap).
- (2) On the subject of educating by drawing on collective wisdom, please, read Arvanitis, 2021.
- (3) Unforeseen human and professional skills.

Authors' Contribution

Conceptualization: VDA
Fund search: VDA, PR
Source search: VDA
Methodology: VDA
Digital Resources: VDA
Data Analysis: VDA
Visualization: VD, PR
Writing, proofreading and editing VDA (pp. 100-112)

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