

## School and family: values and relations

Antonietta Censi<sup>1</sup>

---

*Abstract:* Relations between family and school have become quite problematic for several decades, owing to the complex tensions concerning the specific inner characters of both contexts where an increasing sense of inadequacy, as to the recent educational challenges set by the new generations, is experienced. Neither of these two institutions is able to separately achieve results in terms of quantity and quality. The consequence is the definition of a cooperation/collaboration between parents and school as a work relation characterized by common targets, mutual respect and tendency to negotiate. In order to re-establish a “pact” between school and family towards a proper *care*, the achievement of a *joint responsibility* involves the need for educational policies capable of providing a continuity of the socializable paths, thus allowing the individuals involved to find out an identity of shared values in the respect of the differences.

*Keywords:* Family/school relation, the young, socializable process, educational relation, educational pact, joint responsibility.

---

Relations between family and school - the two basic educational agencies - have become quite problematic for several decades, owing to the complex tensions concerning the specific inner characters of both contexts where an increasing sense of inadequacy, as to the recent educational challenges set by the new generations, is experienced. Such tensions result also into a possible connection between the respective intentions and means aiming at outlining a rich, formative path also consistent with the peculiarities of each actor. Once got definitely rid of the obstacles set by a

---

<sup>1</sup> Dipartimento Sociologia e Comunicazione, La Sapienza, Università di Roma, Via salaria 113 - 00198 Roma - Italia. Tel: +39 0649918399; email: antonietta.censi@uniroma1.it

consistent and unitary socialization, the research for new intersection methods between school and family looks more and more like a “sight sailing” to which many fragmentary educational reforms have proved incapable to provide any reliable compass.

In the last fifty years, in developed Western societies the integration of the various poles of the socializable/educational process (school, family, the young) has undergone deep changes owing to the parallel effect of the various policies aiming at widening the educational process towards egalitarianism, as well as the development of new family models (Zanatta, 1997) and the spreading of new cultures and experiences connected to the autonomy of the young (Buzzi, Cavalli, de Lillo, 2007).

The continuous spreading of an egalitarian school and the increasing extension of compulsory education in Europe – due to the progressive establishing of Welfare after the Second World War – brought about the transformation of the basis of the educational institutions. The traditional school system (based on class and elitist prejudice), weighed with the task of reproducing a ruling class, was endowed with authority as well as an undisputed social function. When the educational process turned into an egalitarian public utility institution, the role of the educators weakened. They are no more the austere judges deciding the admittance into a social leadership, they are rather utility dispensers aiming at strengthening equality and equal opportunities (Benadusi, Bottani, 2006). Due to the transformation of the school system into egalitarian terms, the pole of educators has been overloaded with increasing educational demands and, at the same time, has been denied the necessary authority and means to meet them.

Moreover mass education has gone along with a big process of transformation of the family structure and the youth culture together with a change in the gender roles and – drastically - of the relations between generations as well. Just as it happens in the educational field, even in this field the adults undergo a redefinition of the classical models of authority in favour of a more uncertain statute. Moreover to the teachers’ authority crisis has added the parents’ crisis. The shift from an ethic towards an affective family (Pietropolli Charmet, 2000; Censi, 2008) has involved the delegitimization of those traditional figures who embody the educational and socializable authority in terms of knowledge and capacity to handle the new means of knowledge. There is a crisis in the present separation

between school and family's tasks. There is a crisis in the educational models.

At present, parents and teachers' educational tasks take place in a context in which the character of "naturalness" of their roles has failed. The job of parents, professors and teachers must be learned. The "soundness" of the educational relations between generations and family has failed and the school class has turned into a group of friends where sociability and pleasure of being together are prevailing. The old continuity between school and family, marked by their different roles in performing their tasks and by a complementary but common system of rules and values, has also broken off (De Nicola, Landuzzi, Masotto, 2006). As to the educative pact between school and family, the straight line teacher/parent has been replaced by a geometrical figure having the student at its very centre (Perrenoud, 1987) whereas the other two poles are in a precarious connection.

The demand coming from students has changed owing to the Welfare crisis, to the subtractive public policies, to the incapacity to meet the new fields of needs.

There is a demand for an innovative education system capable to promote the entry into the labour market, which is getting harder and harder as well as oriented that is modified according to criteria of social justice. There is a demand for facing jointly the difficult relation with an often inhospitable society (Benasayag, Schmit, 2004). Not just technological and cognitive means are needed, but also a help in order to face a social path which appears hard in our selective and often repelling world. The educational needs tend to take on the characteristics of a vehicle for identification, relation and conscious citizenship.

A number of researches have pointed out that there is a strong demand addressed by the students to the teaching world (Cavalli, Argentin, 2007; Garelli, Palmonari, Sciolla, 2006; Buzzi, Cavalli, de Lillo, 2007). The relational aspect is the nerve centre of what students perceive as their school context. The importance they give to their relations to teachers and schoolmates is positively and transversally characterized on the basis of the type of school and family background – elements that, as we known, are significant mediators in the young/school relations – (Argentin, 2007). The same authoritative attitude, largely recognised to parents, thanks also to a feeling of prevalent dialogue, appears rather weak in the case of teachers

who are the protagonists of a more uncertain style in balance between extreme laxity and authoritarianism (Garelli, Palmonari, Sciolla, 2006). This last datum is a confirmation of the problems that the young experience in relation to the areas belonging to their *public life*, in contrast with a better control of their private life.

In the process of relations settling among the various agencies performed by the young, a research carried out by Garelli, Palmonari, Sciolla, (2006) has outlined a tendency towards adaptability rather than individualization meant as the capacity of autonomous and responsible choices.

The imbalance between integration and individualization can be read consistently with the datum concerning a greater identification with parental models compared to school models. In fact, the present admitted weakness of the school management may lead to a lower “acquisition” of the school experiences which may more easily foster the areas of discontinuity and thoughtfulness of the socialization path by an original revision of the normative content transmitted by parents. The dialogue between the adults and the young is affected by the weakness of the educational actors – their role and means in their possession – as well as by the sketching out of a generation profile working out new expectations and hopes – often combined in an ambivalent way between instrumentality and expressiveness - as to the educational experience (Cavalli, Argentin, 2007).

Then, the most tangible outcome of such processes results from the inadequacy by which each actor is represented - and represents him/herself - as to his/her tasks as well as to the activity of integration/continuity among educational and value approaches which is more and more recognised as the necessary answer to the fragmentation of the contemporary socialization paths (Giddens, 1999).

Although such uncertainty of roles is due to the problems laying within the peculiarities of school, family and the young, it shouldn't be ignored the role played by some systemic factors connected to the deep changes that our society has gone through and its transformation from an industrial into a post-industrial model. As to such process, it is especially the re-establishing of the culture and the knowledge of the social structure, in a broad and widespread sense, as well as the continuous interpenetration among knowledge, individuals, groups and institutions (*learning society*) which require an adjustment of the relations models among the agencies of

socialization which are granted, together with new elements of knowledge, also with new chances for conflicts (Benadusi, Censi, Fabretti, 2004).

The relation between generations and knowledge has to be redefined according to new skills and new asymmetries which require availability to reciprocate the learning. Let's consider how the de-institutionalization of some educational areas (for instance in the field of computer science) involves a more efficient transmission of skills in an horizontal rather than in a vertical way, as it comes from equals rather than from teachers. School must follow the knowledge the young are capable to build up by themselves through a direct access to the web. As to the new virtual experience which particularly marks the world of the young, the family is often unsuited to manage those skills the young have autonomously acquired. Then, the new skills of the world of the young ask also the families to measure with their own skills as to the educational, communicative path which are more efficient and respectful of the differences in relation among them. Parenthood is today a true problem, as it is well testified by structures and services realized in this area of action thanks to the support and transmission of *skills*.

A few years ago, in one of my researches I described a "no man's land" where school and family charge each other with responsibilities, as well as of not being on the run and of giving up a traditional or/and necessary role (Censi, 2000). This land is not empty but it is steadily filled with often inappropriate interventions producing paralyzing consequences. In such space each one of the educational agencies (the institutional one, the family and on the background the informal one made of peer group) try to compensate either real or presumed lacks from the other participants in the educational process, with the consequences of double messages, confusion of models and a sort of Babel of languages and behaviours.

On the other hand, the traditional channel of democratic participation, as it has been interpreted since the 70s and 80s<sup>1</sup>, seems to be able to less and less attract parents' attention and commitment<sup>2</sup>. In contrast with the process

---

<sup>1</sup> It is common knowledge that the "formal" entry of parents into the educational area is ratified by the "Decreti Delegati" of 1974 which define the participation of families to the activities carried out by the educational system on the basis of a participation model centred on representation.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, it can be estimated that from 1990-1992 to 2001-2002 the percentage of the participation of parents to the election of the Organi Collegiali has decreased from 41,7 to

concerning the nature of contexts and demands rising from the various actors, that we have outlined, the methods of dialogue still refer to some stereotyped patterns.

The uncertain path of the various policies marks a lack as to the institutionalization of any innovative participation– both in favour of the equality between parents and teachers’ faculties and in terms of an asymmetry of roles in favour either of parents or teachers’ professionalism –. Actually, this path supports the persisting of a sort of family-school indefiniteness, which is mostly outlined through a generic demand for cooperation between these two agencies as a *tout-court* value, as well as through a certain imbalance in favour of the acknowledgment of the validity of the family choices that the school is bound to gratify by its own resources. Nevertheless no solution can be suggested even by assigning any responsibility to the public sectors alone.

A necessary and sufficient strategy aiming at assigning back their roles to the two different poles of the educational/socializable process should be able to involve both of them by working out the demands as to the various expectations, and also by asking to give up the useless and counterproductive “invasion of the pitch ” that the overlapping of competences between agencies might bring about.

In particular the most widespread perspectives as to the debate on this subject are two: the first one assigns the teachers a function which is only professional and the parents the role of supporting the school initiatives; the second one reaffirms the main role of parents as educators and assigns the school the role of completing and bringing to perfection the process through knowledge and specialized competences (Nava Mambretti, 2004).

It should be pointed out that in a research, *Les Parents partenaires de l'école* (1997) carried out by the OCSE, is clearly established the principle of an equal distribution between school and family of the educational responsibility. Neither of these two institutions is able to separately achieve results in terms of quantity and quality. The consequence is the definition of a cooperation/collaboration of parents with school as a work relation characterized by common targets, mutual respect and tendency to negotiate.

---

33,5 in the primary school, from 30,6 to 29,0 in the secondary school and from 15,7 to 12,0 in the high school. This downward trend concerns the northern as well as the southern and the central areas of our country (Miur, 2003).

Then, we should aim at a real educational *joint responsibility* (Portois, Desmet, 1997).

The channel of families organization into representative associations can appear, in this respect, as a positive dynamic element. A Parent National Association Forum at the MIUR has been established by n. 14, D. M. of the 18<sup>th</sup> February 2002. It is a consulting permanent table concerning the educational problems of the Ministry towards family associations. It is well known that the experience of the associations proves quite satisfactory thanks to its greater social significance due to its capacity to meet its social needs (Rossi, 2002). On the contrary the chance to overcome the particularistic limits of its needs in order to act according to a larger point of view is quite poor. All this reveals the basically instrumental character of the associations and the participation in them. Moreover the movement of interests aggregation having purpose of acting as interlocutors with the institutions, supports particularly the associations which are more capable to organize themselves at a national and territorial level as well as to move on the political scene (Saraceno, 2003). In other words, it shouldn't be left out the hypothesis that a participation conceived through a logic process and a mechanism of families aggregation is itself a means to express the freedom of choice rather than a guarantee of democracy and cooperation in the school/ family relation.

The complex structure of the social process requires to turn to the idea of a better constructed relation, able to combine continuity, complementarity and contradictoriness as for those areas that are from time to time involved in the educational process.

In order to involve the young in family/school educational relation, some well constructed means of communication, mediation and care are required. In particular, care is an aspect of relations that manifests itself through the worry for the others in the practice of listening, attention, tenderness, empathy and following. Care, in particular, is an aspect of the answer to a subject's neediness (Nussbaum, 2004) who is open to be contaminated by the others (Pulcini, 2003). It is a practice of reciprocity, a common building of knowledge, a urging to make comparisons, an exchange of narrations. Taking care results from the capacity to expose oneself, to be present.

Hanna Arendt (1991) outlines that school is a place of encounter for generations where the building of knowledge takes place according to a

sense and a meaning. The principles of relationality, exchange and responsibility are in force in schools. «A teacher is authoritative as long as he/she takes the responsibility of the school upon him/herself» (*ibidem*, p. 247). In order to practice the authority a teacher turns into a mediator between the old and the new knowledge. He/she can't be neutral just because the world is plural and has a complexity where a guidance is essential. In fact, the educational action will be successful only when the student is in touch with the teacher and the teacher is available to carry on a common work (Morcellini, Cortoni, 2007). A work that is an intersubjective encounter, relation, learning and elaboration of emotions and affections.

If univocal rules and specialisms are lacking, if the limits of operativeness of the various institutional, social, informal subjects involved in the educational action are not clearly defined, which path leading to an *educational relation* is the still available?

It seems that a first answer should go through time and space of adults' education. As to the family, we generally deal with this matter by considering the difficulties connected to physical disabilities. But it is necessary to face the problem of an education system capable of filling the original gap (due to family's socio-cultural condition) which a kid who enters the school mechanism is weighed by. The new educational needs, rising not only from physical problems but also from social environmental and geographic problems should be emphasised by a new concept of community strategy. Several researches concerning school/family relations (Censis, 2003; Kellerhas, Montadon, 1991; Lombardi, 2006; Versari, 2006) have pointed out that those families that are the most economically and socially disadvantaged are the farthest from the school world: they ignore its expectations and rules. They know about school from their children who turn into either messengers or interpreters. In order to reduce the distance and find out a chance to communicate, Dubet (1997) points out that school should be a common ground where a dialogue with those parents who are not culturally and socially close to the teachers, could be carried out, so that they can be acquainted with the mechanisms within the school system and learn how it works.

A second level concerns the mechanisms of the educational continuity and the recovery of a boundary line among the single agencies. The formula for a communitarian management (the *councils* that integrate the



actions of the single subjects involved) can be successful. But strong adjustments of the classical models (the North-American one and the Italian one) are necessary. The scheme is not always capable of working out projects that can suit a differentiated educational demand.

A third problem concerns the identification of some specific areas of action. On this subject a new “pact” system who recognizes differentiated tasks to the two education agencies is required. School can’t replace the family as to the learning of emotions and the strong structures of socialization, whereas the family cannot interfere in a system which provide education. The habit of charging the failure of the single agencies to some faults always belonging to the interfacing agency should be avoided: a school which ignores its own faults by charging the family with lack of relation and emotional availability; a family which solves its own deficiency in terms of relations by complaining the lack of professionalism of the school.

Any sectorial view of the typical functionalist roles should be avoided and what has been outlined above leads to emphasizing the idea of *joint responsibility* as to the education tasks transmitted by the educational relations. In order to re-establish a “pact” between school and family towards a proper *care*, the achievement of joint responsibilities about education involves the need for policies capable of providing a continuity of the socializable paths, thus allowing the individuals involved to find out an identity of shared values in the respect of the differences (Ribolzi, Maccarini, 2003).

In order to overcome “le malentendu”, Dubet (1997) refers to, each school should be able to modify its relation methods with families by adjusting them to families’ cultural specificities. The autonomy requires the management of the necessary renewal of relation methods between school and family: whereas such relation could previously be conceived within a given context, it is now chosen on the basis of those specific targets the educational projects aim at, given the peculiarities of the young that such targets are addressed to.

A fourth problem concerns the idea of including this relation within a larger network which is the essence of that *social capital* (Coleman, 2005; Putman, 2004) which has a basic role in mediating the relation between the individual and the system within a society of knowledge (Ribolzi, 2003). The institutions involved in the socialization process should identify new

methods of communication that don't enter into collision course with a number of educational agencies which are today fully operational and also able to involve the recipients more often (and longer) than the traditional and institutional ones. The web is not only a space for information transmitting, it is also a space where emotions and knowledge mingle. It is from this space that the capacity of the young who approach the web to learn very quickly comes from. The realization of a steady educational process should go together not only with a revision of the roles played by school and family but also with a new consideration for the role played by peer group that has been involved in an epochal transformation. The peer group that in the past was only concerned either with their school, their quarter, their neighbourhood, Middletown or their meeting and play spaces, has now acquired such dimensions as to structure the same paths in order to build their identity. There is a peer group which is potentially made of hundred millions young; they are not only able to use a common syntax (and a common lingua franca) but can also interconnect with an image or a voice and is even able to perform a meaningful role in the educational process. That is why it should be understood in order to be followed and, only when necessary, guided.

Then functions of school have become more complex and addressed to «service providing» (Sciolla, 2008, p. 262), a service which should answer individualized questions without getting into conflict with the targets of education to citizenship. In a system of a variety of offers in terms of education as well as newer and newer job training, an ethic education is no longer just something which is in addition to the educational system, it is rather an integral part of it. School supports the ethic aspect of the educational process when it emphasizes the responsibility of action and allows the young to build up a conscious intentionality. The school ethics, as Berger and Berger (1984, p. 157) suggest, should produce «men of conscience». School is entrusted with the task of achieving an ethics of responsibility, an ethics of change and an ethics of subjectivity.

## References

- AA.VV., (1975). *La nuova scuola della partecipazione*. Milano; Vita e Pensiero.
- Arendt H. (1991). *La crisi dell'istruzione*, in *Tra passato e futuro*. Milano: Garzanti.
- Argentin G. (2007). *Come funziona la scuola oggi: esperienze e opinioni dei giovani italiani*. In: Buzzi C., Cavalli A. e de Lillo A, a cura di, *Rapporto giovani. Sesta indagine dell'Istituto IARD sulla condizione giovanile in Italia*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Benadusi L., Bottani N. (2006), (a cura di). *Uguaglianza ed equità nella scuola*. Trento: Erickson.
- Benadusi L., Censi A. e Fabretti V. (2004). *Educazione e socializzazione*. Milano; FrancoAngeli.
- Benasayag M., Schmit G. (2004). *L'epoca delle passioni tristi*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- Berger P. L., Berger B. (1984). *In difesa della famiglia borghese*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Buzzi C., Cavalli A., de Lillo A. (2007), (a cura di). *Rapporto giovani. Sesta indagine dell'Istituto IARD sulla condizione giovanile in Italia*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Cavalli A., Argentin G. (2007). *Giovani e scuola. Un'indagine della Fondazione per la scuola realizzata dall'Istituto Iard.*, Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Censi A. (2000). *Modelli di socializzazione*. Roma: Eucos.
- Censi A. (2008). *Famiglie e giovani. Esperienze, immagini e memoria*. Milano; FrancoAngeli.
- CENSIS (2003). *Pochi rischi, siamo genitori. Opinioni e comportamenti delle famiglie italiane sul futuro dei figli*. Roma.
- Coleman J. S. (2005). *Fondamenti di teoria sociale*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- de Lillo A. (2007). *I valori e l'atteggiamento verso la vita*. In: Buzzi C., Cavalli A., de Lillo A, a cura di, *Rapporto giovani. Sesta indagine dell'Istituto IARD sulla condizione giovanile in Italia*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Di Nicola P., Landuzzi M. G., Masotto M. (2006). *Famiglia e scuola: quando la complementarità svanisce, Sociologia e politiche sociali*, 3.
- Dubet F. (1997), (a cura di). *Ecole, familles: le malentendu*. Paris: Textuel.
- Garelli F., Palmonari A., Sciolla L. (2006). *La socializzazione flessibile. Identità e trasmissione dei valori tra i giovani*. Bologna; Il Mulino.
- Giddens A.(1999). *Identità e società moderna*. Napoli: Ipermedium libri.
- Lombardi A. (2006), (a cura di). *Opinioni comportamenti ed aspettative delle famiglie sul sistema scolastico italiano*. Roma, Anicia: Istituto Regionale di Ricerca Educativa per il Lazio.
- Miur (2003). *Servizio per l'automazione informatica e l'innovazione tecnologica*, Ufficio Sistan.
- Morcellini M., Cortoni I. (2007). *Provaci ancora, scuola*. Trento; Erickson.
- Nava Mambretti A. (2004). *La partecipazione dei genitori*. In: Cerini G., Spinosi M., a cura di, *Voci della scuola*. Napoli: Tecnodid,
- Nussbaum M. C. (2004). *L'intelligenza delle emozioni*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- OCSE (1997). *Les parents partenaires de l'école*. Paris
- Perrenoud P. (1987). *Le "go-between": entre la famille et l'école, l'enfant messenger et message*, In; Montandon C., Perrenoud P., *Entre parent et enseignants: un dialogue*

- impossible? Vers l'analyse sociologique des interactions entre la famille et l'école.*  
Berne: Lang.
- Pietropaoli Charmet G. (2000). *I nuovi adolescenti*. Milano: Cortina.
- Portois J.P., Desmet H. (1997). *Les relations famille-école: un point de vue partenarial*. In: Tochon F.V., a cura di, *Eduquer avant l'école*. Bruxelles: De Boeck University.
- Pulcini E. (2003). *Il potere di unire. Femminile, desiderio, cura*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri.
- Putnam R.D. (2004). *Capitale sociale e individualismo*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Ribolzi L. (2003). *Famiglia, scuola e capitale sociale*. In: Donati P., a cura di, *Famiglia e capitale sociale nella società italiana*, Ottavo Rapporto CISF sulla famiglia in Italia. Milano: San Paolo
- Ribolzi L., Maccarini M. (2003), (a cura di), Scelta familiare e autonomia scolastica in Europa, *Sociologia e politiche sociali*, 6, 3.
- Rossi G. (2002). *L'associazionismo familiare*. In: Osservatorio nazionale sulle famiglie e le politiche locali di sostegno alle responsabilità familiari, *Famiglie: mutamenti e politiche sociali*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Saraceno C. (2003). *Mutamenti della famiglia e politiche sociali in Italia*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Sciolla L. (2008). *La classe senza regole*, in "Il Mulino", n.2, pp. 259-266.
- Versari S. (2006), (a cura di). *Genitori nella scuola e nella società civile*, Quaderni dell'USR per l'Emilia Romagna. Napoli: Tecnodid.
- Zanatta L. (1997). *Le nuove famiglie*. Bologna: Il Mulino.