

Changes in the meaning of schooling

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Abstract: The current third educational revolution realizes universal schooling. Such transformation has not been sufficiently understood nor accepted yet. The massification of secondary schooling radically modifies the very meaning of the educational systems. We are facing an apparent paradox: education is experiencing a deep crisis just when it is reaching its greatest expansion and thus, its greatest success.

The third educational revolution requires new characteristics from teachers. In fact, also secondary school demands for capacities which are more similar to those within primary school: fundamental task consists in serving the learning needs of their pupils.

The new task for the sociology of school is ample and partly new, both for the mutated structural conditions of society and educational systems, and for the transformations in meaning that have taken place. The objective is to build a sociological analysis of the scholastic system which may overcoming the limits of both micro and macro formulations, analyze the multifaceted aspects of scholastic socialization in depth.

Keywords: third educational revolution, changes in the meaning of schooling, teacher metacognitive mediator, opposition to relativism, overcoming micro-macro.

The third educational revolution

Recently it has been stated that we are now facing the “third educational revolution” (Esteve, 2003). The first can actually be identified with the beginning of the educational processes addressed to the groups of chosen few in ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome, whilst the second consists in the

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rise and development of what can be defined as school in the modern sense, which however (at least in its first phase) was restricted to the massification of the learning of “reading, writing and elementary mathematics”. The modern “scholastic form” is based in fact, on several elements which were absent before: “the invention of childhood”, foundation of the pedagogical relationship between teacher and pupil, which leads to learning through decoding symbols (words) and the mental reconstruction of their meaning representing reality. Reading is a specific scholastic “symbolic-reconstructive” learning tool, which outpaces the traditional one, based on imitation and which could be widely spread only thanks to the invention of mobile typeface printing (Vincent, 1980). The second educational revolution, characterized by the fundamental state intervention at the beginning of the nineteenth century, continued until the aftermath of the second world war, when it was decided to make upper school compulsory in the United States. This is where, from our point of view, the third educational revolution can be found, which has now spread to all developed countries. This fact explains the early rise, in the USA, of some of the problematic issues such as the importance of the peer group in school and the violence within educational institutions.

The current third educational revolution, therefore, realizes universal schooling, not only within lower secondary school, but also in the upper secondary school, which now tends to be considered in terms of a right for all, having extended compulsory schooling to ages 16-18. In Italy, as far as lower secondary school is concerned, the attendance rate which started with a mere 20% in 1945, got to a 59% in 1962 (at the time of the approval of the reform of a single lower secondary school), reaching 100% in 1975 only (Checchi, 1997). The upper secondary schooling rate, presents the following progression: 10% in 1951, 21% in 1961, 43% in 1971, 51% in 1981, 70% in 1991, 86% in 2001 and 91% in 2003; furthermore in 2002, 82% of the nineteen-year-olds obtained an educational qualification above lower secondary level, albeit not always quinquennial (Censis, 1984; 1992; 2003). These figures prove a strong development in schooling in our country as well, which likewise in upper secondary school, now reaches levels similar to those observed in the more developed European countries.

Such transformation has not been sufficiently understood nor accepted yet: the massification of secondary schooling radically modifies the very meaning of the educational systems. It is thus possible to talk about a third educational revolution because, for the first time, not only do students with

good learning abilities enter secondary instruction, but also those who were once kept at a distance or did not even try to access do. A great contribution to this situation's occurrence derived from the overturning of the difference in gender in scholastic attendance and success: women's contribution to the third "educational revolution" proves decisive (Moore, 2004). It represents a fundamental example of "silent revolution", particularly effective and lasting as it proceeds in the population's mentality with no possibility to establish a precise starting point in time, modifying however, values and behaviors irreversibly. Around mid-nineteen hundred, some still tried to impede female access to higher education, by the end of the century, in almost all developed countries, the majority of those attending university were women (Esteve, 2003).

In this new situation, the "collapse of the old certainties concerning education" takes place: trust in a certain relation between schooling and working position fails (so much that more than a few claim the uselessness of studying in a situation of unemployment and loss of job qualification, when a plumber earns more than a university graduate) as it does in the consistency between social and scholastic values (as teaching solidarity and cohabitation in an individualist and aggressively competitive society may seem absurd). It is certainly possible to underline opposite argumentations: the needs of an information and knowledge based economy, the realization of a more democratic society, because better educated and thus conscious, the request of the many families increasingly worried about their children's rise in education, the educational policies aiming towards a development in schooling; unfortunately however, the well established fact is a widespread anxiety (Fernandez Enguita, 2001). Therefore, we are facing an apparent paradox: education is experiencing a deep crisis just when it is reaching its greatest expansion and thus, its greatest success.

The third educational revolution transforms the very meaning of school, and it is not easy for the actors involved to take cognizance of this, although it is evident that the same objectives which applied to the elites cannot be maintained within a standardized mass institution. Undoubtedly, there are those who simplistically answer claiming that the only possible solution consists in returning to the educational system of the middle of the last century. They do not realize however «the social and economic costs that would derive from rebuilding a selective and exclusionary educational system in a technological society such as the present one, based on knowledge and the continuous demand for higher levels of education»

(Esteve, 2003, pp. 63-64).

An OECD and UNESCO report, recommends an improvement in the access to education, and a reduction in scholastic dispersion. The rise in the level of education, once passed a critical point, plays an increasingly important role in the growth of economy, especially when high levels of secondary and graduate education are reached (OECD-UNESCO, 2003). The last decades' figures prove that in order to promote the growth of a nation, a high level of education is far more profitable than the persisting of ignorance, although a better educational qualification does not always correspond to an adequate job. It is from this viewpoint that the European Council of Lisbon (2002) set the objective to make our continent "the economy of the most competitive and dynamic knowledge in the world" (Reding, 2002).

In a globalized information-based society, workers can be divided into two big categories: the generic ones and the "auto-programmable" ones; the latter (about a third of the workforce), are characterized by a higher level of instruction and by the ability to continue incorporating knowledge, generating value for businesses. In this way, a fracture in the unity of interests between the two types of workers is produced (Castells, 1997). The outcome is a need for a deep change in school, whose major task thus consists in providing the methodological tools to requalify its knowledge and competences in a world which changes at the speed of the Internet. As a matter of fact, if the educational system's main task consisted in the transmission of knowledge once, it is no longer possible now, as knowledge grows at such speed as to make the traditional educational model unfeasible. It is now time to 'learn to learn', more than just storing information, in other words to become autonomous in searching and organizing useful knowledge for one's goals: this is particularly important for lifetime learning. Another major issue must be considered: the importance of values in education. In fact, in order to bear a constantly changing and flexible situation, individuals, at work as well as in their private life, must be gifted with solid and well-balanced personalities, able to develop personal judgment criteria, as it is no longer possible to make reference to well-established role models (Castells, 2002). These circumstances re-bring traditional education into question: scholastic systems are experiencing great difficulty in changing in tune with these transformations, this is however a necessary challenge. The relevance of instruction has never been as great as it is in the present world, both for

single individuals as for society as a whole. We are living in the third industrial revolution which is precisely based on information and knowledge, whereas the first revolution could be identified with the steam-powered machine and the second with taylorism-fordism. The scholastic system plays a more and more essential role in job qualification which can be considered at three levels. In terms of: a) applying specific routines to certain chores, in other words an “operational knowledge”; b) diagnosing every situation in order to establish the best procedure, which is “professional knowledge”; c) identifying new problems and creating original methods to solve them, or to face the old ones with different approaches, that is, “scientific knowledge” (Fernandez Enguita, 2001). Demand for operational knowledge decreases, whilst the professional and the scientific ones increase; the first more abstract as it is aimed at framing particular cases in a general vision and the second, not only even more abstract, but also more active and critical, as it has to call all existing knowledge into question. The speed of technological changes implies an all-purpose type of training, that is, suitable to continuous and rapid adjustments, with new attitudes such as the development of personal initiative and the ability to work in a group. The importance of the traditional professional training and value is conferred to an educational qualification no longer considered as a credential, but as an indicator of a strong learning capacity. The traditional separation between academic and professional teaching is now losing meaning, suggesting a consequent change in curricula: as one must now continue learning throughout their entire lifetime, the methodological aspects are far more important than specific notions (Young, 1993).

Although trust in education as a means of transformation towards a more egalitarian society has weakened, still, a large international consensus in considering it the foundation of future wealth has persisted in the last decades (joining Left and Right). In the frame of economic globalization, it is through education that “the rich become richer and the poor poorer” (Reich, 1997), meaning with this that the growth of human capital for individuals and nations, increases the polarization of the distribution of incomes, favored by the opening of national work markets. The vision of instruction as an essential factor for economic growth and international competitiveness regains strength, albeit in a more qualitative than quantitative view, compared with the old vision of the human capital theory.

Thus, the relationship between education and economy now stands in partly new terms: education is not a universal panacea, it remains however, a decisive factor for economic growth (Levin and Kelley, 1994). Economy develops value, generates productivity and increases competitiveness starting from knowledge, especially thanks to the possibility of accessing information and processing it in real time; furthermore, it is globalized in the sense that the most important and strategic activities function as a whole on a planetary scale in real time, along with all that this implies for the free global flow of people and goods in terms of technological capacity, organization and deregulation (Castells, 2002).

Several models of response to globalization have been realized, both for the overall organization of society and for the educational systems: it is not just a matter of choosing between State and market, but also different possibilities, which seem to make the hypothesis of an organizational convergence of both economy and education suffer a crisis. (Dale, 1997). In fact, two remarkably different models have developed, a “neo-fordist” one and a “post-fordist” one: the first characterized by a wide market flexibility, a reduction of social expenses and of union power, privatization of public services and exaltation of competitive individualism; the second assigns crucial steering power to the State, thanks to investments in strategic sectors of economy and in particular in education, maintaining the fundamental workforce rights (Braun and Lauder, 1997). As far as educational systems are concerned, it suffices to remind that four different models persist in Europe (Scandinavian, Anglo-Saxon, German and Latin-Mediterranean), with a considerable differentiation, also in terms of results, concerning secondary school especially; only in higher education the attempt at a harmonization imposed by European agreements can be witnessed.

It proves impossible to clarify future relations between globalization, State, education and social change completely, consequently, this issue will remain one of the essential preoccupations in understanding the meaning of education in the next few years.

The main difficulty in the present day secondary school consists in its being considered according to the selective viewpoint of the past, based on the “exclusion pedagogy” (Esteve, 2003) and not on widespread learning, essential for a compulsory school. In this new situation, a lowering in learning levels seems to be taking place, whereas in reality, there is not only a rise in the average level of education of the population as a whole, but

also in that of the best pupils, more numerous today than in the sixties anyway (Baudelot and Establet, 1989). Those who fear a leveling towards the bottom, should be reassured by the fact that if it is necessary for all pupils to reach a minimum level, this does not hinder more talented pupils from obtaining higher results through a diversification of pedagogies. Unfortunately, in the French *collège* for instance, the nature and vocation typical of a compulsory school hasn't been clarified, thus many teachers perceive it in terms of an “uninterrupted crisis.. long decline... sequence of renunciations and drop-outs” yielding to the nostalgia of the past when confronted with the attitude of some intellectuals who claim that “democratization is a plot against culture and civilization” (Dubet and Duru-Bellat, 2000).

If the single teacher can evaluate this situation as a “total disaster”, for society as a whole it represents an improvement, especially for the less talented students, as their learning did not exist, when they were kept away from secondary school (Esteve, 2003). It is evident that teaching to a homogeneous class of students, because previously selected, is quite different from teaching to a heterogeneous one which represents a sample of the entire population of students. To face this altered situation, a reorganization of the teachers' work and a transformation of the formative profile are necessary: the traditional learning model of the secondary school, based on contents which are appropriate to prepare pupils for university, must be drastically modified (Helsby, 1999).

Future role of teachers

School cannot avoid reflecting society and its contradictions: the new difficulty consists in the unusual speed of the present transformations, that is why the scholastic institution, more than ever relevant in a “knowledge society” which sends new generations to school for a longer time and in a more generalized way, becomes a much more difficult workplace for teachers.

In particular, it must be underlined, that the pace of change shifts from inter-generational to intra-generational: a life-lasting continuous education is required for each individual, with a consequent change in the meaning of initial education (Fernández Enguita, 2001).

The “third educational revolution” requires new characteristics from

teachers, in fact, also secondary school demands for capacities which are more similar to those within primary school and far from traditional academic tasks: this fact constitutes a serious problem for teachers who are unprepared for this event (Esteve, 2003). It is possible this way, to understand why the scholastic institution appears to be facing crisis at the time of its becoming generalized, and especially, the causes of “teacher uneasiness” can be highlighted: many teachers find adjusting to such rapid and drastic changes difficult. As we have seen, the meaning itself of the scholastic institutions has changed, which can no longer guarantee job opportunities corresponding to the educational qualifications reached: it is necessary for pupils, parents and the professors themselves to realize that education no longer ensures social privileges.

In the present-day Italian school, the impulse deriving from the norms on autonomy and the long-time processes in existence, due to a more complex society and mass secondary schooling, have produced a wide diversification of teaching professionalism. This is not obviously a specificity of our country, in France, for over a decade, an analysis of the teaching profession based on three normative models has been suggested for which the following three titles are proposed: “magister”, “pedagogue” and “organizer” (Hirschhorn, 1993). The *magister*, the most ancient and traditional, is centered on knowledge, which represents an absolute value in itself: the teacher's task is to convey this to the pupils, his/her fundamental competence thus consists in mastering and developing a high intellectual quality, with the university professor as a reference point. This model does not necessarily imply a refusal of pedagogy, but it is certainly considered a tool which is subordinate to the knowledge of disciplines. From this almost sacred viewpoint, the holder of knowledge asks for respect for his function, an adequate social prestige and absolute freedom of teaching. There are however, two different versions of this model: the first, elitist, which refuses or at the least deplors mass schooling, and the second, democratic, which considers the development in schooling a progress.

The pedagogue emerges when, thanks to the students' generalized access to secondary school, it becomes more and more difficult for teachers to identify themselves with the *magister*: this model is centered on the student and instruction proves subordinate to education. Fundamental task becomes that of taking charge of the pupil's needs; in this case the teacher asks to be respected as well, not for his/her role however, but as a someone who wants the respect he/she credits his/her students with, first. In this case, the

pedagogical relationship is essential, but the teacher can adopt a multiplicity of educational methodologies according to the different situations. Furthermore, to make their educational action more effective, these teachers are ready to cooperate with their colleagues (unlike the previous). This model too can be interpreted in two different ways: the first aims at developing the capacities, motivations and interests of each pupil; the second tries to best adapt the individual to society, so as to make them capable of social success.

These first two models have been re-analyzed by sociological research considering their diverse effectiveness, highlighting the fact that the pedagogical relation in class generates specific effects on learning. Pupils provided with analogous characteristics (abilities at the beginning of the school-year, age, gender and social class) if schooled with different teachers can reach considerably unequal results during the school year (Felouzis, 1997).

The teachers' effectiveness seems to depend upon their teaching concept and their attitude towards their pupils: the massification of secondary schooling makes the "*magister*" and the "pedagogue" differently effective. The first (at least from an elitist point of view) with its educational concept entirely based on the discipline to be taught, in some sort of "academic ritualism", proves modestly effective precisely because the *magister* considers pupils incapable of reaching a knowledge which he/she sets very high. This model of teacher expects nothing from them and considers any effort to improve their learning substantially useless, thus making the negative self-fulfilling prophecy come true. The second, relying on a "pedagogical pragmatism", focuses on the real and concrete pupil, not as it should ideally be or once was: the pedagogue thus expresses positive expectations towards his students, which develop into a greater effectiveness, considering them capable of making progress, with a positive prophecy.

The passage from *magister* to pedagogue definitely represents a real "Copernican revolution": unfortunately many are still fascinated by the "image of the teacher as the only source of information who radiates knowledge to the students who orbit around him" (Fried 2001). This Ptolemaic vision finds its emotional roots in the memory of a classroom "centered on the teacher".

In France, for a longer period and in a more explicit way than what has occurred in our country, (probably due to a greater interest in the scholastic

institution demonstrated by politics and public opinion), a strong criticism towards pedagogy and more generally towards educational sciences has developed, accused of taking “school to destruction”. The cliché in these positions consists in stating that the lessening of the level required by school produces “thought's defeat” (Finkielkraut, 1989). This very transition from the *magister* model to the pedagogue one, favored by school reforms which require teachers to pass from the transmission of culture to helping their pupils to “learn to learn”, would be the cause of the scholastic institution's decline. Italy as well, does not lack followers of the *magister* model: “ We Arts teachers had two certainties: that our métier was to transmit something to someone, and that that particular something to be transmitted was a certain and indisputable heritage which derived from tradition” (Mastrocola, 2004, p. 48).

These critics don't seem to realize that the ideal student of the “good old times” free from affective and social conditioning, only made sense when the great majority of youths of a certain age group remained, precisely, outside the school institution. Furthermore, in a rapidly changing world, in which single contents soon become obsolete, as UNESCO claims, one cannot commence from a discipline-focused education, but should instead realize a teaching centered on the individual; the OECD's PISA project tests also, derive from a schooling vision based on the development of each pupil's capacity of thinking autonomously and building their own knowledge.

From this view, the metacognitive perspective (which is the ability to know and control ones own cognitive functioning) which has been developing for over a quarter of a century within educational sciences, can represent an essential element in helping individuals master the proper capacities to promote what has now become an indispensable continuous learning. A French scholar has suggested an interesting portrait of the future teacher, regarded as an expert of learning: this teacher will have to help pupils to develop their learning abilities, with a metacognitive type of process. He/she will have to be “able to externalize what is usually implicit, in other words the process used when learning” (Cros, 2001). The teachers' training (initial and of those already working), will thus consist in the preparation of an expert in metacognitive learning: this will allow the regrettably topical dispute between those who view future teachers' preparation based on the discipline to be taught and those who mainly aim at the professional aspects required to form an educator, to be surpassed.

The essential aspect will actually consist in the capacity of making the modalities used to learn and to build knowledge explicit, utilizing both rational and emotional intelligence.

The main supporters of the “*magister*” can be especially found in the literary and philosophical area: in France, as in Italy, they consider themselves the only repositories of Culture, showing an ill-concealed contempt for other forms of knowledge. Instead, scientific and social subjects teachers, appear to be more willing to adopt a school perspective which can aid their pupils to “learn to learn”.

The organizer represents the third model, now in a developing phase: in this case the fundamental value which determines his/her action is the scholastic institution. “The good teacher is no longer the one who devotes him/herself entirely to the transmission of knowledge, nor the one who takes his/her pupils in charge, but the one who participates to the functioning, promotion and development of the school” (Hirschhorn, 1993). This author, at the beginning of the nineties, had already highlighted how the increased autonomy of scholastic institutions favored teachers' support to such model. This type of teacher's attention is centered on the institution on its whole, and from his/her commitment, he/she expects responsibilities which denote the importance of the role performed. In this latter case, two variants can be identified as well: in the first case the objective consists in transforming school into an authentic educational community, in the second, the goal is to make one's institution more productive and competitive. This model, unlike the others, does not directly derive from within the scholastic institution, but from the transposition of organizational modalities initially developed within businesses, into the scholastic domain. The teachers who incline towards this typology, widely invest in activities which go beyond their duties, and mainly with no remuneration and rather weak gratifications: concerning this aspect, we cross-refer the reader to the wide quantitative research recently published by us (Fischer et al., 2006).

Having cleared the need to abandon the first model, entirely inadequate for a secondary school, a problem concerning basic training and training for those already teaching emerges. The professionalization of teaching requires a formative model capable of giving ample space to reflective practitioners, that is to school teachers, who possess the competences, knowledge and abilities, just as useful as those held by university professors, as far as teachers' training is concerned. The professional

knowledge must be clearly distinguished from academic cognizance: research of the last decades, proves the existence of a remarkable distance between them. In fact, professional practice never is, a mere application of university knowledge: in the best case, a process of transformation according to the needs of the scholastic practice takes place; it is thus necessary to integrate the university formative approach with the knowledge that springs from professional practice (Tardif, 2004).

Four crucial components are required in teachers' training, also and especially as far as secondary school is concerned: mastery in the subjects taught, which however represents a necessary but entirely insufficient prerequisite, where an excessive specialization would even be counter-productive; epistemology, the history and the didactics of disciplines especially; educational sciences, amongst which sociology of education should have a particularly relevant role; apprenticeship supervised by school-expert teachers so as to realize a reflective professionalism. In order to make future teachers effective, avoiding the present malaise, four objectives must be achieved: help them build their own professional identity considering the fact that secondary school teachers generally have a far less clear vocation than primary school teachers, they must therefore be aided in understanding that the essence of their task consists in serving the learning needs of their pupils; supply them with the tools to control the group communication techniques so as to mediate between scientific knowledge and students; prepare them to manage class discipline, obtaining students' respect; teaching those who are still being trained to adapt scientific knowledge to their students' level of knowledge, stimulating their learning motivations (Esteve, 2003).

New tasks for the sociology of school

The traditional secondary school, based on the transmission of indisputable truths to a restricted circle of privileged youths in a frame of loyalty to dominant values, is profoundly different from the present one, which being extended to almost the entirety of every age group, requires the promotion of an autonomous ethic, and, especially, to learn how to learn. However anachronistic and obsolete may the old objectives be, substituting them however is not simple: the transformation has been too rapid and radical to be easily managed. There must be awareness

concerning the fact that the process of change cannot be but long, avoiding illusions on the rapid effectiveness of reforms. It is especially essential to go beyond the functionalist optimism and the conflictualist pessimism, both incapable of grasping the complexity of the school-society relationship. It is necessary to carefully consider “limits and possibilities of the schooling process” (Hurn, 1993), and thus to avoid considering this institution as a panacea for social difficulties, as well as considering it responsible for problems it cannot solve. The overestimation of the school's role in relation to social stratification, in terms of production of equality or reproduction of inequalities, represents an error committed by the sociologists of education over a long period of time.

Differences (social, gender and ethno-cultural), influence but do not determine the scholastic success of individuals: thus, school carries out a reproduction and at the same time transformation task, that must be analyzed in its full complexity. After all, research proves that social class, ethnic group and gender intersect in relation to scholastic success, but the first of these variables is the one which maintains the greatest weight. Equality in opportunities and equality in results, are incompatible one with another, unless a huge control apparatus is used to avoid those who have greater resources from succeeding more than others: what must thus be attempted, is to guarantee a good grounding in competences and learnings, so as to live in present society completely. The concept of freedom implies that of responsibility, therefore the «egalitarian-meritocratic approach to social order, which combines equality and equity, is, in its general terms, common to many different social models, as different as liberalism and socialism (including Marxism)» (Fernandez Enguita, 2001, pp. 84-85).

Many researchers claim that in general, the differences in scholastic success are very similar in developed countries and tend to decrease only when there is a reduction the economic disparities, as the Swedish and Dutch situation seem to prove (Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993). This is however the result of the methodological perspective used, which bases the analysis of the probability of success on its relation with the social origin: furthermore, these researches have not been able to take the results of feminine educational surpass into account yet. The limit of this approach consists in the underestimation of the transformation of the educational systems, with the consequent denial of the effects produced by the opening of school to the entirety of the citizens. In fact, even if the statistic association between social origin and scholastic career remained relatively

stable, the opening of the system makes the distribution of education less unequal, all but irrelevant fact, if not only an instrumental utility but an intrinsic value is ascribed to it as well. It is therefore insufficient to observe the permanence of differences in scholastic success since the overall level of instruction rises (Durut-Bellat, 2002). It is undoubtedly true that the extension of upper secondary school education drives the process of differentiation higher, but underestimating the importance of the phenomenon which modifies its social meaning appears to be incorrect, as we have previously stated.

It seems now appropriate, especially after females' surpass in scholastic success which appears particularly relevant for subordinate classes, to question not only the theory of reproduction (Bourdieu), but also the theory of perverse effects (Boudon), both being excessively deterministic. If this statement of ours is almost obvious for the first of these authors, it is far less so for the second. It must be reminded that in the latter case, the rational actor is not free at all, since his/her behavior is determined by the logic of the situation, and his/her actions, as long as rational, inevitably take to a result which is frequently not even wanted (Favre, 1980). Furthermore, also «the most rational decisions incorporate 'suffered' inequalities... or attitudes formed in contexts that weren't chosen» (Durut-Bellat, 2006, p. 51). It is thus clear that both theories are unable to explain greater feminine scholastic success, which yet represents a highly relevant phenomenon in developed countries in the last fourth of the century. It must be underlined that the scholastic success of particular social groups (such as black girls in Great Britain), risks remaining “invisible” (Moore, 2007), if one stays within a view which considers school as a race and gender reproduction tool: there is an essential discrepancy between the description of cases of discriminatory practices and the overall reality which testifies a strong rise in the success of these groups.

The traditional sociological perspectives all consider school as a “black box”, considerations already criticized by the “new sociology of education” at the time, which however had its major limit in restricting the analysis to face-to-face relationships within the classroom. This view thus naively believed that the knowledge of the processes that take place within the school class, can only be achieved inside this small structure (Archer, 1995). We agree with this scholar however, who claims that to understand what happens in school completely, a multi-leveled conception of social reality is required, based on a reciprocal interaction relation between

structure and action. In fact, social structures influence, but do not determine individual's actions, who in their turn produce the very social structures, although not in the immediacy of the interactions. The objective is to build a sociological analysis of the scholastic system which may, overcoming the limits of both micro and macro formulations, analyze the multifaceted aspects of scholastic socialization in depth. It is advisable to start from the consideration that we know too little about what actually happens in school, far less than what pedagogists and sociologists seem to believe.

The "new sociology of education" also had an important constituent role in the sociology of the curriculum, which however, Young himself considers now inadequate in the formulation of the time. In fact, it was exclusively based on the attempt at unmasking the ideological assumptions of the official curriculum, slipping into a relativist cul-de-sac; caused by the unsustainable stance which reduces all knowledge to the positions and viewpoints of the individuals who know. Thus, sociology's present tasks would consist in: exploring the conditions for the production of different types of knowledge, in particular those which aim at objectivity; identifying the necessary conditions for the acquisition and transmission of knowledge reformulating a sociology of curriculum and of pedagogy; questioning the existing curricula in the light of the conditions which sociological analysis has identified as necessary for the acquisition of knowledge, from a critical sociological viewpoint (Young, 2005).

The curriculum theme must thus be analyzed thoroughly, investigating on the existing relations between the sociology of curriculum and the sociology of teachers. There must be an awareness that identifying a non-relativistic sociology of knowledge is necessary as what is taught at school must possess a scientific foundation, without which, it would be impossible to provide youths with the indispensable understanding both for the preservation and transformation of society. Framing a curriculum necessarily means making choices, and this presupposes the problem of their justification, as what is taught is required to be worth teaching. This justification implies two levels: opportunity and foundation. The issue of choosing amongst a variety of learnings is posed on the first level; on the second, the question of values is raised, as what is taught must have, in the eyes of the teacher, a formative value, thus the legitimation issue becomes an ethical one (Forquin, 1989).

It is essential to oppose the inclination to relativism, widely spread in

social sciences, which considers values exclusively as social products, determined by interests and prejudices of particular human groups. There are two types of relativism: a hyper-subjectivist and hyper-constructivist one which considers truth as a convention, and a hyper-objectivist and hyper-determinist one which considers every representation as a mere reflection of the social structure one is located in (Forquin, 1989).

These positions, albeit moving from different premises, agree in considering every teaching activity as an arbitrary inculcation of values, contents and meanings, thus causing complete demotivation in teachers. We claim that on a pragmatic level this is a strong critical argument; furthermore, as every radical relativism, it contradicts itself according to a confutation already known in ancient times. In fact, relativists assert that every truth is a relative one, however, in this case, there should be one at least which isn't, that is, the truth according to which all truths are relative. It is thus not true that every truth is relative, as, to affirm its viewpoint, relativism must incoherently exempt itself from the general principle (Moore, 2004).

An in-depth reflection concerning what occurs in school, the contents of the courses and the actual didactic activity, highlights the existence of a specific scholastic culture, which can be set in a rational and universal perspective, and thus beyond single social groups' cultural will, as it derives from a multiplicity of reorganized cultural traditions that serve the purpose of teaching (Forquin, 1989). It must be realized that at the end of the sixties of the last century, a composite trend developed in the sociology of education (from Bourdieu's "symbolic violence" to Althusser's inculcation of the dominant ideology), which overturned Gramsci's formulation which claimed the importance of school (in the workers' movement tradition), in emancipating subordinate classes, due to a substantial cultural relativism perhaps induced by the Maoist climate of the time.

A position one must confront with in the sociology of education, given its wide diffusion and considerable success obtained in the last three decades, is the "post-modern" one, with its Nietzschean and Foucaultian premises. If there are no facts but only interpretations (Nietzsche) and if every knowledge is just a will for power (Foucault), the postmodern viewpoint appears as suspect as any other. Statements regarding the world must have some non-discursive reference, if one wishes reasoning to be comprehensible: it is not clear what post-moderns intend to argue about, when they use words which, as they claim, have no relation with anything

which goes beyond their own speech (Beyer and Liston, 1996). This attitude is evidently not suited to the purpose of building the basis of a scholastic curriculum, however, in order to effectively confute it, the sociology of curriculum and the sociology of knowledge must face the issue, avoiding the ever-present risks of relativism: an appropriate path appears to be that of the 'critical realism', which however cannot be dwelled on in this ambit.

These annotations should clear that the work that needs to be done concerning school is ample and partly new, both for the mutated structural conditions of society and educational systems, and for the transformations in meaning that have taken place. In particular «it is better for the sociology of education to support schools in doing most effectively the things they can do best, rather than endorse positions constructed as ideologically significant *within* the professional field, but of limited material effect on the classroom or beyond» (Moore, 2007, p. 178). This does not imply underestimating for instance, the meaning of feminism for females' scholastic success, however, it is evident how changes in occupational ambition, job market conditions and family structures, have played a far more important role in the feminine surpass in education than equal opportunity practices.

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