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Rethinking Education and its Professionalism in a “Flipped” System

Stefania Capogna*

[Review of the book: *Flip the System. Changing Education from the Ground Up*, by Jelmer Evers & René Kneyber. Routledge, 2016. ISBN: 1138929980]¹

Flip the system. Changing Education from the Ground Up is one of the most interesting books which explores the significant changes that the education system is crossing in the last years. It has been written by teachers and other educational experts around the world, such as Andy Hargreaves, Ann Lieberman, Stephen Ball, Gert Biesta, Tom Bennet. The authors articulate a lucid and real attack to the GERM (Global Education Reform Movement) explaining how the Education systems have been erupted from international benchmark rankings such as PISA, TIMMS, and PIRI, causing inequity, narrowing curricula and fostering teacher de-professionalization on global scale. The authors provide a critical and passionate appeal to teachers and educational experts around the world to move away from the dominant economic approach and embrace a more humane path to a better education system, more focused on people. *Flip the system* can be an useful instrument to inform educational policies in the world, because it faces four fundamental questions of all educational debates through a global perspective. The first one is the evaluation issue, analyzed by the lens of accountability, privatization and control. The second one regards the new paradigm known as “flip the system” that recalls teachers to recover the proud of teaching, moving the change from

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the ground. It's an invitation to a new professionalization and a new responsibility in teaching in order to foster a major attention to distributed leadership, self-efficacy and teacher agency. The third one is the idea of collective autonomy founded on the principle of collaborative teaching. The last one refers to a new mindset, i.e. how supporting and activating teachers in a "flipped" system. Contributions offer a new proposal to think teachers' leadership as a professional development by peer review and the role of school-community partnership.

The work alternates relevant theoretical speculations and examples of good practices and testimonies that are characterized by their global approach. Part one includes three chapters and a vignette focusing the attention, with different perspectives, around the global issues of: accountability, privatization and control. Visser in his chapter *Testing towards Utopia* explores the question of performativity of teaching beginning with the following assertion: "education is costly". He explains how in most OECD countries, education is among the three expenses burdening to the public household. For these reasons, all over the world, families, stakeholders and governments express significant expectations on it and the need to monitor money spending. Through scientific literature (Hargreaves, 2013; Meyer et. al., 2014), he observes different solutions adopted to satisfy this need. Visser underlines that under the rhetoric of quality of education a set of variables can be identified, as outcome of a defined and controllable process, which can be optimized infinitely (Nida & Rumelin, 2011). In this way, a wide number of politicians and managers steer schools from distance, manipulating and monitoring Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). This trend in education policies is part of the same paradigm that since the 1980s has favored deregulation and privatization under the so-called "neoliberalism". But it is not easy to adapt concepts and principles used by market policies to complex social contexts such as education, health, care. The paradox are:

- How can we educate children to become free individuals within the edge of a rule-governed system?
- How can people become themselves, acquiring a critical thinking, in the hands of others?
- How can we build student centered schools within a persistent and more and more rigid system?

He asserts the myth of measurability 'eat itself', numerous players in the field are busy beating or literally cheating the system; inflation of grades,

test scores and diplomas, concealed and outright fraud, are not incidental, but endemic in a system that seems to force administrators to focus on quantity of the output rather than on the quality of the process (Koretz, 2008). The concept of transparency in this process is of high importance, through which the entire system is rationalized as a form of social engineering. Transparency legitimizes hierarchies and fosters individual responsibility. But transparency does not avoid the risk to transform the whole system in a bureaucratic machine. Professional teachers shape quality in interaction with their students, while educating learners within their individual potential as moral subjects, citizen, human resources and so on. So, it is difficult to say if the market policies of the last years have succeeded or failed. It's a matter of perspective. As Sangiovanni (1998) and Bruggencate (2012) say schools might not only become more efficient and effective by focusing on the outside world – with achievements, products, profiles, or whatever but also turning the focus inwards.

In their essay, Van Der Wateren and Amrein-Beardsley explain “The nonsense and the sense of testing and accountability”. They start reflecting on the usefulness of test scores and the reliability of VAMs (Value Added Models) based on the book edited by Daniel Koretz (2008), which shows the misunderstandings related to standardized tests. Testing is an essential activity in education but, as they underline, VAM-based accountability has produced the culture of “measure and punish”. Standardized tests generally are small samples of the large domains of knowledge and skills that students have mastered. Tests do not assess student's knowledge in depth. Further, test results depend strongly on out-of-school factors which are outside teacher's influence and school. Therefore, all sophisticated VAM statistics do not explain learning processes.

Also Biesta argues that the culture of measuring and accountability misses the point of what education is. Qualification is the primary focus of the current education system founded on measurement and accountability by VAMs, controlling the quality of learning outcomes. But, as learning is not a linear process and any education relationship is a risk, than the author suggests to abandon the illusion of total control of the educational process. VAMs is an economic translation of the learning process that measures, as a cause-and-effect process, the relationship between input (teaching) and output (learning). He remembers that education has three dimensions: *qualification* (teaching students, knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to become qualified to do things); *socialization* (educating students to become

part of society); *subjectification* (refers to the process of becoming an autonomous subject). Education is an instrument to empower people in order to become responsible and critical adults. In his opinion VAMs are: unreliable, invalid, biased, unfair, fraught, with measurement errors, inappropriate for formative use, used inappropriately to make decisions, causing unintended consequences. On the basis of these considerations, the authors propose an alternative model, simpler and more reliable than VAMs. It is based on trust, transparency and fair, combining quantitative data, involving teachers and schools in the evaluation process. The alternative model comprises two elements: “a comprehensive curriculum that leaves plenty of freedom for schools and teachers to adapt to local needs and circumstances. [...] a teacher assessment system that is supported by research and has proven itself in other professions. One cannot exist without the other” (p. 35).

In his chapter Kneyber explores the issue of neoliberalism and how it travels interviewing Stephen Ball. Neoliberalism has had an important impact on the relationships between people in the public domain, reshaping sense of purpose and notion of excellence and good practice through the promotion of a new language that has transformed our way of thinking the Education system as such. Among the new words we can remember: targets, accountability, competition, choice, leadership, entrepreneurship, performance, and so on. Gradually a new set of roles and positions have changed the educational relationships, within the new neoliberalism paradigm, by the idea of “client/consumer; competitor; manager/managed; contractor; appraiser/inspector/monitor” (p. 40). So, an education policy started like an intervention in favor of devolution and deregulation, it has become a process of re-regulation. This involves an increased emotional pressure and stress related to work, the displacement of the teaching control functions to an external “educational management” through an external invasive and expensive evaluation by the adoption of a set of methods, ideals and instruments by the private sector. All at once, we have observed the decline in the sociability of school life and the change of social relationships. The effects for students are discernible in the spread of the logic of lifelong learning for which each adult has to develop a personal learning plan, where learning takes place infinitely to respond to the demands of the labor market, more and more competitive and flexible. A second effect of the personalization of educational pathways, hidden behind

the idea of increasing opportunities for everyone, according to Ball's opinion is the risk of an hyperbolic differentiation and social cleavage.

The second section focuses on the new paradigm "flip the system", introducing five provocative essays. Biesta argues that three trends have been established as development of teaching: the idea of student as customers; the logic of accountability and the replacement of subjective judgements with scientific evidence. In his opinion, these tendencies undermine opportunities for teacher's professionalism, rather than enhancing them. He explains that over the past decade a new language of learning on education is affirmed in the rhetoric discourse, redefining students as learners; teaching as facilitating learning; schools as learning environment and so on. Doing so several tasks that in the past were under the responsibility of the Government and State (though teaching) become burdens on individuals. With the idea of learning, we put away a key education question related to content, purpose and relationship concepts. Biesta argues that we need theories of education and educating. As we put too much emphasis on the achievements in the domain of qualifications (by the excessive use of tests), ignoring the negative impact in the domain of subjectification and socialization. This situation entails important implications for teacher's work and professionalism. In relation to the judgment about multi-dimensional domains (considering their balance and trade-offs), teachers need to make a judgment about the educational appropriateness of the ways in which they teach and organize the education setting. "Judgement have to be made in always new, unique and concrete situations rather than with the application of protocols" (p. 85).

Bangs and Frost face the issue of distributed leadership and self-efficacy for teachers. The OECD's *Improving School Leadership* report (Pont, Nusche & Moorman, 2008) advises schools to adopt distributed leadership avoiding managerial strategies, such as organizational structures, and incentivizing career structures and more rigorous accountability mechanism which denies the entitlement of all teachers. Hallinger and Heck's (2010) underline positive links between collaborative forms of leadership and students' learning outcomes. The TALIS Report 2013 (OECD, 2014) found correlations between high levels of teacher self-efficacy, job satisfaction and students' performances. For this reason, school principals should share decision making whilst policy makers should provide guidance on how to cultivate distributed leadership. Leadership does not have to be related to a position but is an essential dimension of teacher professionalism. Frost

(2011) refers to a non-positional teacher leadership, able to create a self-sustaining school provided by experienced teachers rather than by external experts. In the opinion of the authors, the non-positional teacher model is the best way to follow because it goes to the heart of the question focusing on the issue of teachers' moral purpose and commitment; it is low cost because it is able to activate internal resources by the adoption of collective responsibility.

In coherence with this perspective Stevenson and Gilliland's essay explores the teacher's voice and the role of teacher union for a new democratic professionalism, based on the value of social justice and professional agency. Their vision of a new democratic professionalism is based on three essential principles: teaching is a process of social transformation, so it is linked with values of social justice and democracy; teaching is a complex process in which teachers need to draw on professional knowledge, pedagogical theory and personal experience; teachers' professional agency must be considered as both individual and collective. The authors argue that a democratic professionalism emphasizes teachers' control and influences three domains of teachers' professional agency: shaping learning and teaching conditions; developing and enacting policy and enhancing pedagogical knowledge and professional learning. Teachers need, in other words, to "reclaim their teaching".

In his essay Hargreaves faces the reason of school autonomy and professional transparency. After years of standardization and prescription, school autonomy opens new perspectives. In the author's opinion, schools remain constrained by the centralized curriculum, national testing systems and the spread of standardized rubrics of teacher performance. So teachers and their principals "become de-professionalized by the seductive strategy of school autonomy" (p. 123). For Fullan (2011), the best use of transparency is not associated to hierarchical supervisory relationships but in a peer relationship where teachers meet their peers to identify and examine together learning and achievement data. Transparency would be used to foster individual and shared responsibility for improving openness and better communication. Nevertheless, nowadays, data-driven transparency is being used as a bureaucratic tool to watch over the professional practice of teachers. So, the good idea of transparency is today threatened by three problems: mistrust; hierarchy; privacy. Transparency is not an end in itself. The vision of the author is inspired by the collective paradigm. Autonomy is founded on four principles: commitment to a

common vision; collective responsibility for success; circulation of insights and ideas and incessant communication about values, priorities, practices, problem and results. With Priestley, Biesta and Robinson, we face the issue of teacher agency to understand the concept and the condition in which it is achieved. Agency is not something that people can have but it is something that people do, something they achieve (Biesta & Tedder, 2006). Emirbayer and Mische (1998) theorised the agency as a configuration of influence of the past, orientations towards the future and engagement with the present. Therefore, the agency includes three dimensions as international, projective and practical-evaluative. In the authors' opinion, we can understand teacher agency through this ecological model. Agency is "always a dialogical process by and through which actors, immersed in temporal passage, engage with others within collectively organized contexts of action" (Mische, 1998, p. 974). Agency may be shaped and enhanced by policy that specifies goals and processes, enhancing the capability of teachers to manoeuvre between repertoires, to make decisions and to frame future actions.

The third section shows some international case studies referred to Singapore and Finland as examples of "collective autonomy" implementation. Ng, introducing the section, explains the four basic values of these policies: professional capital, human capital, social capital and decision capital. Professional Capital (PC) is considered a crucial element to successful education reform. It is treated as a set of assets derived from the potential professional capacity in human resources in order to turnout growth and improvement. Professional Capital is a function of the interplay of Human Capital (HC) (personal skills and competencies), Social Capital (SC) (interpersonal or inter-organizational relationships) and Decisional Capital (DC) (the ability to make discretionary judgment to suit the local context). Singapore has assigned a great importance to teacher's Human Capital, realizing an excellent recruiting system, followed by different forms of support and mentoring for new teachers and vary forms of continuing professional development. Also leadership skills receive significant attention through the Leader in Education Program which is specially designed to prepare vice principals and ministry officials. Social Capital is the second asset of this educational policy. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012, p. 90) refer to SC as "how the quantity and quality of interactions and social relationships among people can increase their knowledge and expand their network to access one another's Human

Capital". On this basis, in Singapore schools don't compete one with another, but they support each other, generously, sharing and collaborating. By the Professional Learning Communities teachers and school leaders can learn from one other through continuous professional dialogue and feedbacks. Singapore foster a school cluster system approach to encourage sharing of resources and best practices, at the same time it encourages teachers from different schools to strengthen their collaboration across schools.

As for the Finnish situation, Sahlberg explains the difference between schools and Global Education Reform Movement (GERM). The first difference is the high confidence in teachers and principals regarding curricula, assessment, organizations of teaching and evaluation. The Finnish model encourages creativity and inspiring places to teach and learn. Teaching is based on a combination of research, practice and reflection. In Finland, a teaching curriculum ensures that teachers possess balanced knowledge and skills in both theory and practice. Sahlberg remembers that PISA data provide interesting evidence to judge the results of GERM policies.

a) Education systems that give schools autonomy over their own curricula and student assessments often perform better than school that do not (OECD, 2013/a).

b) This denies the essential principle of GERM which assumes that externally set teaching standards and aligned standardized testing are preconditions for success.

c) Good average learning outcomes and system-wide equity are often interrelated (OECD, 2013/b); school choice and competition among schools do not improve the performance of education systems.

Despite their significant differences, the two educational models (Finland and Singapore) have in common investment in teaching and a relationship of trust between teachers, school and society in general. The fourth section of the publication looks as a proposal of a new perspective to reinvent teaching profession; to foster peer review and policy makers' education; to promote professional development for and by teachers and support empowering teachers. Top performing nations like Finland and Singapore have built their success on teacher development and leadership creating policies and programs so that classroom practitioners can learn from each other and spread their expertise in teaching. In their opinion, it's time for teachers to tell their stories. There are numerous organizations that

begin to support teachers in telling their stories. The authors affirm public school everywhere face a future of rapid change, intensifying complexity, and growing uncertainty. It is time for us to connect, learn, and lead together. This is the aim of “Teacher Learning and Leadership Program” (TLLP) realized in Ontario (see the chapter by Lieberman, Campbell and Yashkina), a sample of the power of trusting, supporting and making possible professional development led by teachers for teachers. Another important teachers network is “Research Leads Network” to lead teacher with educational Research in events based in networking and self-training. Then teaching is not an evidence-based profession, never should it ever be. For a professionalized teacher this means to be aware of where intuition intersects with evidence distinguishing their meaning and their implementation. ResearchED is a Wiki-style community of teachers who refused to be passive recipients of a top-down education system. Malone and Jacobson focus their attention on the interaction of schools and community partner, as the primary vehicle for rethinking the conditions for effective teaching and empowered teachers. But partnerships cannot be considered a *panacea* for removing teaching and learning barriers. Research shows by the ecological environments that when schools work to build partnerships with external stakeholders, both students and teachers benefit from it (Blank & Shah, 2004). For Friendlaender (2014), positive school culture and climate influences the process of teaching and learning. A collaborative school culture, where teachers are respected, their voices accepted and their professional development needs met, is essential for success.

To end with Evers and Kneyber’s words, the textbook moves a critique to neo-liberalism and managerial perspectives. They offer a guideline based on six key words to “flip the system” and get back voices to teachers: trust, professional honour, finding purpose, collaboration, support and time. If we agree with the principle that Education is an instrument of empowerment, we can share some critical reflections. All over the globe, we are witnesses to an educational emergency due to a crisis both of values and of the institutional mandate that has set the pact between school and society throughout modern times. Also in Italy, the reforms of the last decades have introduced a new space for school autonomy . After a long period without public investment, we have recently observed a small change thanks to investments in digital and human resources, in-service teacher education, and new models which favour innovation. Surely, we can note

the spread of good practices throughout the territory but, generally, we notice a significant resistance to change from the schools themselves. The empowerment of teachers requires giving them more responsibilities in defining career development and competency profiles, in relation also to a digital transition. In the 'digital era', where teaching relationship become more and more embedded, liquid, atemporal and non-spatial, thanks to digital technologies, the capacity to act upon socio-emotional, communicative and methodological competences is an important challenge for teachers, which are deprived of power resulting from the superiority of the knowledge and the institutional role. The process of internalization of norms and values then seems to be less and less carried out by mediating agents (i.e., teachers, educators, and adults), rather it is advanced by the learner him or herself. It is also less connected to the concept of the "exemplary", that bases its strength on command or imitation approval but rather it depends upon the ability to offer "instructions" for personal growth. The educational project that appears considers knowledge not as a transmission of cultural heritage or models but as a "personal growth tool". In this sense, we observe the crisis of teaching and the necessity to design a new schooling profile and skill set able to face the challenges of the 21st century. But the de-professionalization of teachers is also linked to the difficulty of planning an improved teaching model and educational relationship in an organizational perspective in which school become able to organize and check their internal Quality Assurance processes. This means rethinking professionalization of teachers and offering them new tools and spaces to re-establish the meaning of the educational mission and this cannot take place without a complete overhaul of the system and a review of inclusion, evaluation and enhancement personnel policies. But a revision of the *status quo* is not possible in an education system where resistance is very widespread. School autonomy offered new perspectives but the necessary paradigm change is a lofty goal to reach, because it requires a cultural change in the way from interpreting and acting the teacher role and to imagine and design the school in terms of organization acting in a system of systems.

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