

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS

Education in Italy: A School That Needs True Reforms

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Just when you arrive in a new school, as a teacher, the colleagues themselves and the headmaster say to consider that your new class is rather “lively” and consequently it's necessary to tame them (the pupils) from the beginning. Yes, this is *the system*.

It seems the first impact must be just a little shocking for the students, this is what in the near future will guarantee you peace and quiet in the classroom. It is effectively so: just a little psychological terrorism and then the teens become dumb; if they have to talk, they whisper and they even fear to hand each other things.

I must admit that this never happens to me. I never apply prevention terror and afterwards I suffer the consequences, because this is *the system*. But I often get different results, for example: shy children acquire the courage to come forward or the students at the bottom of the class change their attitude and people that never considered studying, begin to do so.

With the terror system instead, everything is more static: clever students are clever, average students are average and the last continue to remain the last. Nothing changes, except that, little by little, problems come out, problems which were covered by the blanket of silence.

It happens also that children misbehave when experts come to speak in class, regarding abuse of drugs, recycling, alcohol and smoking addiction or with the affective-sexual psychologist, or also in front of the school, in the school bus, or in the toilet.

The teachers' group constantly grumbles collectively because the children don't behave well and the expert staff is very expensive. The second complaint is always that they don't study or study too little, the least they can.

As soon as the frightening teacher turns the corner, the student tries to be clever, to break the hard and fast rule.

When my daughter was attending middle school, after the experts' lessons against the use and abuse of smoke and alcohol, as a challenge, some schoolmates were smoking and drinking from a bottle during the break behind a wall. The guilty ones tried to hide from teachers, but they set a model for their classmates. And it can get worse, occurrences of bullying, intolerance, exclusion, racism are not uncommon and occasionally the use of psychotropic substances and drugs.

A few years ago in my town, not a high delinquency area, the police raided a school looking for drugs.

What I have observed is that when a boy or a girl has got some home problem, in the school this becomes amplified. If the parents divorce or fight, if a father or a mother is not present, if you come from abroad, if you have had a trauma, the school doesn't try to understand, or it understands only up to a certain point, but rather judges. The school is an institution based on judgment, on evaluation and on silence.

Apart from the fact that the human being has got only a few tools to judge in an impartial manner and objective way, and though it is a science studying how to evaluate better, fallacy is the main problem to express synthetically, with one word or with a number, quality and defects of a pupil learning a subject. Even a linesman or a football referee can't always understand if the ball is in or out, in fact our perceptions are often mistaken. Can you imagine how precise we are when we're judging people or even worse, children?

Based on what we think, is the start of this race the same for everyone? Someone breaks away, someone is a step before the others, someone is a step behind the others, some other is starting from much farther from the virtual line we think we see before the feet of the majority.

Besides, when you must give judgments every day and assessment as part of your job, maybe you get affected with a professional bias which leads you to appraise not only the performances, but also people, families, their habits, attitudes, the way they dress and so on. At minimum, you gossip and spread rumors

influencing the team of teachers which has to value the students performances and not their private lives.

My headmaster once began to denigrate the father of a girl and her family during the assignment of marks by the teachers' team, conditioning the results.

The troubles of students

I often think the teachers aren't inside the situations. Even though they consider themselves expert educators, they often don't see the expressions of discomfort which is multiform and normally masked by misbehaving. When instead they recognize the psychological malaise, most of the times they don't know which way to turn. But usually a teacher prefers letting it go and act as if nothing had happened. And sometimes this nonchalance turns into cynicism.

I recall with dismay laughter at a boy who seemed slow, but maybe he was just lethargic, and also laughing at his sister, a former student at the same school, even though a young Italian teacher had brought a particular composition of this child. In that composition the boy told of his personal, ambiguous relationship with an adult neighbor. The neighbor invited him home to play with toys and eat sweets and sometimes the child remained to sleep at his house with the consent of the illiterate parents. That boy was left back and one year later, with the support of a new teacher, he began to make up for lost time.

A case that has kept me on tenterhooks for a long time is about a little boy, 11-12 years old, who, not at all giving us to understand that he was ill, suddenly disappeared from the lessons. He was anorexic and laid in the hospital in bad condition. When at last he came back to

school, he took on a strange behavior. But all this within the silence of the listening created in class, didn't allow it to reveal itself; nobody gave importance to the situation, no one had seen or studied his needs. On the part of officials, the only important thing was achieving academic goals and not exceeding the maximum of absences expected to pass him to the next class. I remember how the primary school teachers had presented him to us of the secondary school. "He's arrogant" they said "acts like a wise guy, wants to learn at home and protests against school methods."

I also remember his ability to draw ironic comics: a speaking duck's beak, a beak with no body, like a mouth without a body. I thought then that he should get reacquainted with that "forgotten" body.

Once, while waiting for the bell to ring, before entering the class, he asked me, along with a companion, if he could climb on an annexed building, located behind the school. I wanted to say yes, but it certainly was not allowed. Then I concocted a plan to try to put him back in touch with that child's body which couldn't climb. So a gym teacher of another class and I decided to let him make a climbing path up and down inside the gym, so that he could not only climb, but also overcome obstacles, jumping, etc.. I made sure that he didn't go alone to the appointment with the teacher but with other companions, not to feel upon himself the responsibility for having set in motion a process.

That first time he returned enthusiastic and he came up to me to tell me about the new experience. It seemed he came back down to earth. I have to say that his gratitude made me particularly happy because while noting in him traits of great

sensitivity and intelligence, he appeared to me as a depressed person, often divorced from reality, sometimes almost incoherent.

But then I found it difficult to teach in the usual way and it appeared to be clear that none of the teachers were really interested in his physical health, except, of course, the parents.

Another of his needs, which seemed to me obvious, was that he had to maintain contact with his comrades and not only verbal, but also physical, with the meaning that the boys give with their desire to touch each other. I mean the sublimation of the struggle: when they meet, you can see a clash of fawns that leads them to embrace the arms or the shoulders or the neck of the friend, to wrestle, to box, etc.. even rolling on the ground, but never getting hurt. All this at school is absolutely prohibited. Woe, if someone finds you letting them do it!

So I tried the technique of the support of two people puppets: one who moves his arms and the other shows his face, while a third person gives the voice. In this way the body of one also gets to be the body of others and is allowed contact between the hands of a boy and the head and the torso of another. The following year, however, I changed my school and my experiment ended also. I'm convinced that the school could have done much in that situation, but everything went on as if nothing had been there, with the only problem of producing assessments, notions and silence.

Someone in the midst of a "theory of silence" disappears, is cancelled, overwhelmed, somehow killed.

Teachers who had to report on how our new students had been in primary school said about a girl with contempt: "Ah, that's

a nullity, non-existent.” I knew the girl, she was just shy.

It's however painful to notice every day that families and students themselves agree with the manipulators and eventually they expressly require to be repressed.

Even brilliant guys sometimes in class are not among the most respectful people and manifest their inability to restrain themselves, saying: “you have to hold us back.” In other words they want the “macho” teacher, ruling with a iron rod.

Many colleagues vaunt their ability to be strong and strict and base their ideal of school on these parameters. My opinion is that the climate generated by continuous pressure, is always justified both at home and at school by the false belief “so it is and so it shall remain forever.” It acts in the students as a kind of brainwashing and lets them think they aren't able to provide for themselves.

Therefore I speak about a “system,” or rather about a “wrong system” from its roots.

Michael (not his real name) was a schoolboy of Croatian origin, with a difficult story, a drug addicted brother, a (maybe) dead father, a stepfather, a single mother unable to manage the family. He was arrogant, provocative, refused to perform the exercises and handed in blank tests. I took him out during support hours. When he went out with me he worked a bit, but, of course, didn't study at home. He went on behaving in this way throughout the year and he seemed hopeless. He, a young schoolboy, lingered in the night at bars. It was time to run the latest assessment of the year in the classroom. He hadn't studied and then, he thought, “I don't know”. He handed me the paper immediately after writing only his name. I

urged him to work: even though he hadn't studied those topics.

We had just dealt with those issues together so he had to know something. He was convinced, he wanted to go out and sit at a table outside, where perhaps, he could concentrate better. I gave him some tools, but no more than his classmates and so he went to work. He handed me at last the only test that he had really developed throughout the school year and it was fully adequate.

I felt that for him this had been a jump: he finally realized he could do it and didn't need to divert attention from his performances never in line with the trend of the class. Homework had always been a problem for him, obviously at home he didn't have the necessary ease to do it. But now he could do something, he had passed a barrier, he began to have confidence in himself.

What to do however, at the end of the year, when all his trials resulted to be strongly insufficient? He also had large gaps in other subjects. He had never studied and much less produced something in class. His report card proved to be more below standard than above; he was rejected, just as he began to realize that maybe he could have the same results as the others.

These are just some of the many school stories that I experienced from the inside. But both negative and positive experiences are many more.

As for the downside there is to say for example that foreign students almost always go ahead amidst great difficulties in school: parents don't understand and they pay the consequences in person, because it is a shared opinion among the teachers that we need for parents to

understand in the light of the facts, perhaps a rejection, that the children need help.

Then they suffer acts of intolerance that almost nobody notices and even when these are known, one passes over, maybe because they have to learn to fend for themselves, and sometimes they overwhelm the “weak ones”; sometimes they are caught between two fires: abusive parents and school that does not understand them, housework and children and/or elderly people to care for at home and schoolwork to be executed at home; real work and school.

Positive experiences are those of the “word”. Positive experiences do not arise from silence, but are when the student becomes an individual and can finally express him or herself.

A school with traditional methods based on taboos and which needs scapegoats

School in Italy does not take account of psychology, or the latest discoveries in neuroscience. It often relies on, so called, experts (not always living up to their titles or, depending on the assignment and the contract, not endowed with the full power to act) as psychiatrists, psychologists or experts of some specific topic, but mostly it relies on the ancient tradition of the commonplace, to the detriment of the scientific method.

According to the school cliché, to give just a few examples: the marks have to be increasing, it isn't good to put the max grade, 10 or excellent, just from the first quarter of the school term; teachers have to test students in the early days of the school, during which we make the acquaintance of the new schoolchildren; then, a pupil can't go from a mark below standard to a better mark without

sweating; pupils have to work at home, I heard teachers theorize: from two to three hours per day at middle school; the students have to dress with decency and the teacher must show them who's in charge; parents at home should take the time to watch over the children while performing the tasks; etc..

There are parents who, after all, understand the problems of school and know that we might act differently, however they consider some taboos insurmountable.

They ask, among other things: “what will happen in a society as tough as ours, to a child who has studied effortlessly?” “It's a good thing”, they say, “they learn early that life is painful.” In reality then, there are some fathers and mothers who actually make life harder for the children and train them in all respects as machines for school study, for competitive sport, for music lessons but not really prepare them for life.

Just a few days ago one of my children's teachers advised me to let my youngest son go the same way his own daughter was already going: exams at the Conservatory of Music and at the same time to study at university and maybe a sport at a competitive level, because those who lead their lives so (and there are many) can be very good to move forward on all fronts and learn to manage their time in the best way. They certainly do not have spare time.

I don't understand why educators and psychologists insist on saying that the problem nowadays is that parents protect their children too much and don't want them to do hard work.

Actually most of the time, it seems to me that parents protect themselves from

external criticism and proudly entrust their children to society and to external educators in return for an education tailored to their ideas.

Often scrolling through the newspapers one can read of young people, who always have been good at everything, that voluntarily decide to leave this world (through suicide). And how many mental illnesses! I had a student and also a schoolmate in the old days, both very industrious students, with no other purpose in life than study and pleasing their parents.

Well, they haven't been able to deal with adversity better than others, but they lost themselves in the maze of life.

Sure, a few examples here and there is no number for statistics. But from the data provided on the occasion of the world day for suicide prevention (World Race for Life) in our country, the figures are alarming, given that 8% of all deaths among children in the age group 10-24, is determined by the choice to take their own life. In general, the phenomenon of suicide is more common among men, especially with a high degree of education, although suicide attempts are more numerous among women.

But it's the uneasiness among young people that is the most worrying: in the 10-24 range 5 cases of suicide per 100 thousand inhabitants were recorded in 2006 (from 1971 till 2008, 374 young people were under 14 years). And, according to WHO, 40% of students who failed in the first attempt, repeat the action.

Children should be happy and are not always so. To make the impact with their future lives less hard, some parents decide to make their children's lives difficult from the start. Does all this make sense?

I think the feeling of having failed the fundamental objective, which determines a destiny, can lead to a hard life of heavy or unstable family situations, which, unfortunately, often cannot be avoided.

As for example, those who invest everything in being always first, or at most second, in every area, and expect to receive, only according to their performances, recognition and the love of parents.

A boy or a girl always in competition with others cannot bear not to qualify, not to get on the podium, because he/she was "built" for this. And even always being competitive, eventually can be detrimental to a healthy social life. It can make a person aggressive, perhaps leading to success and to establishing himself/herself as a leader in a group, but if this doesn't happen, it leads to depression.

By now we know that the mother-tiger has failed, the woman who orientated the education of their daughters on total control of their actions and of their time. But you can still see articles and hear speakers that highlight precisely this type of control. They believe that in our age parents require less from children and more from those who educate them. They think that parents neglect education and are convinced that young people need to be corrected, blocked, held and kept under control.

According to them, parents give too much, and then, once again, as grandparents said, they spoil the children. From what I understand if I look around, that's not exactly the case: seemingly arrogant attitudes of young people are often (perhaps not always) skirmishes that hide deep insecurities, relationship difficulties, fears, anguish, neglect or even

simple needs to grow as the ones represented by the adolescence jump.

Parents, who often satisfy the request for affection only when they are gratified with a good level of results from their children, become more and more parent-managers. When they send a child to a school it's as if they make an investment, carrying their belongings in the bank, hoping their capital will increase after a few years, and this is not always possible.

The idea is that if with continuous training, both at home and at school, a child fulfils the objectives, the investment has yielded, thus making the parents feel complete in their own lives. If, for some reason, this does not happen, the fault can't be other than the school and teachers, because the capital provided, so believe a father or a mother, was of excellent quality. And a child didn't gain from these situations, indeed, he/she is the victim. A parent-manager is often not even a good parent from the emotional point of view, because for him/her the child-adult relational exchange is not on an emotional level, but on a productive level.

Dissent: an opponent to fight

Italian schools are very old-fashioned in their system of assumptions that become prejudices and favour the proliferation of not easy social relationships, first of all among the various people that are the basic component: students, parents, teaching staff and leaders, secretaries, headmasters and janitors. Each of these components form a category that frequently takes a stand against the others.

And then the school environment needs scapegoats and these can very well be represented by newcomers or those who occupy subordinate positions compared to

the scale of the internal values, or they are people that don't accept the system as a whole.

These are people that are not defended by their group membership and, as the herd of wildebeest, if they remain at the margin, they end up in the jaws of lions. This unfortunately affects everyone, and also the kids tend to categorize and prioritize their group, excluding those who don't submit to the law of the strongest or of the herd.

In any case, their way of thinking is the same as for adults. If you ask them why they don't respect the rules, they argue that we teachers have to force them to abide by the rules and they cannot choose for themselves to behave in a way appropriate to the situation, therefore require the constant presence of a strong person that represses them.

This matter is interpreted by adults as a necessity and as an argument in support of the many who believe that it is necessary to keep them under constant control. They want it themselves, so they need it, they say.

I believe instead that it is a kind of scholar bias: after being told so often that they must be restrained, they convince themselves of it, losing the ability to self-regulate and deemed no longer capable of managing their own behaviour.

But at school very often relations between individuals are dominated by fear: fear of complaints, fear of rebellion, fear of punishment, fear that you come to know what must remain a secret ...

Sometimes between proponents of a different school we reflect whether to import elements of democracy within the public system. Even small changes could eventually turn the traditional trend in a

radical way. It seems to me, although this could be made possible and virtually take place in the near future, the risk is that you blow up the structure, which could collapse under the weight of novelty.

When it is clear that in a classroom of a school there is a problem due to the fact that the mechanism by which it works is clearly outdated and therefore now widely jammed and battered, many colleagues say they agree that some piece should be replaced, but then they startle with horror at the idea that the whole car will work with a new engine and not just with a different car body.

When something doesn't work we always think there must be a person who has made an error: for parents it's the fault of the teachers and possibly of the headmaster, for the teaching staff it's the fault of the parents, for the headmaster it's the fault of the "less important" teacher and of the parents and so on.

It's a perfect conflict system which doesn't require changes, because it locates by itself its scapegoats. Inside of this system a pupil is nothing more than an object, exempt from liability and without needs, which is entrusted by parents to teachers and by teachers to parents and cannot make decisions.

The structure is strongly pyramidal under an appearance of upsetting democracy.

For all intents and purposes voting, elections and ballots are held, but the decisions are not taken by mutual agreement although it seems that this happens.

For each issue and for every request, even for those that don't involve economic costs, you have to resort to arbitration by your superiors. Everything is subject to

permits, everything has to go through the most vapid production of paperwork. In the end you don't decide anything about your own destiny, which is entrusted only, not to God, but, once again, to your superiors or, alternatively, to your ability to fight and be able to achieve with overbearing behaviour what you consider indispensable.

Key competences for lifelong learning

For a few months I thought it was a dream. Hearing about competences rather than knowledge or skills needed, I felt like it was the best way to break free from the heavy school structure and let nature take its course; namely that the students would learn from the environment and learn not knowledge but skills necessary for survival in a society that is increasingly devoted to lifelong learning, learning for life.

The European strategy which attributed a key role to education, was created in order to prepare students for the new world of work, in an increasingly globalized area; it was a completely new concept in schools, although developed gradually over the years.

With the approval of the Lisbon Strategy, learning was assigned a key role in pursuing the socio-economic objectives that the European Union had imposed.

The values in school training began to be common compared to all member countries and some Recommendations, through which the community institutions invited states to behave appropriately according to the new objectives, shifted the focus from the process of teaching to that of learning and from the formal paths to results, regardless of the manner in which the skills are acquired.

Starting also from surveys and tests that had to detect the needs of the European student model, a working group has defined eight domains of key competences, as identified:

- communication in the mother tongue
- communication in foreign languages
- mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology
- digital competence
- learning to learn
- social and civic competences
- sense of initiative and entrepreneurship
- cultural awareness and expression

Key competences for lifelong learning are a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes appropriate to the context. They are particularly necessary for personal fulfilment and development, social inclusion, active citizenship and employment.

The occasion could be unique, depending on the goals of competences, which are laid down in guidelines, but in reality so undefined, the revolutionary potential of informal learning seemed to be formalized.

The idea of evaluation, even if present in the official documents, could be wiped out; which role ought to have been taken in a context like this? The same professors at the University of Essen who taught us, a group of Italian teachers following a seminar there, to pursue the competences, agreed that it makes no sense to measure them. It is sufficient to create a stimulating environment and the students achieve their

goals by themselves. There are many methods that can help in making an hour in a classroom pleasant and many tools for fun: games, curiosity, experimentation, music, dynamism and movement, together or separated, creating motivation. The basis to build self-government, independence, autonomy.

But no: the skills have now become, at school, simple schemas to evaluate, once again, the achievement of knowledge and, perhaps, the behaviour through numbers becoming letters: A, B or C instead of 5,6,7,8,9,10.

The headmaster of the school where I'm working this year told us that things have to change saying that last school year we were caught unprepared and so we had to evaluate without actually practicing with the students in advance, so that they would develop competences. Hence he called an expert trainer to coordinate teachers.

The trainer, in summary, during the first meeting, a week ago said that the activities done in schools are already enough so we don't need to search for others. The expert then explained that the important thing is to evaluate one activity among all the others from all points of view of competences.

The disappointment is great. I conclude that school is unable, because of its structure, to become truly and not only formally, a healthy environment in which one grows up with a sense of responsibility, enjoying individual freedom, developing social, positive-critical thinking skills and the ability to manage emotions and feelings, learning the democratic way, finding by themselves the tools for their own training.

We must also say that the economic crisis and the policies aimed at nothing to improve the situation, have also prevented the individual institutions to allocate some money that could somehow support the changes.

It seems to me that we are in a period of stalemate, with diminished resources, including human resources and

managers who are looking for some way to plug the leaks.

Of course in a formal way, here and there small changes are made which affect the development of the lessons, but it is still like “changing his coat and go naked.” [the emperors’ new clothes]. The structure doesn’t change substantially.

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