

Editorial

Pedagogy as a science between theory and empiricism

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Although experimentation undergirds inquiry across the human, social, and natural sciences, the Italian pedagogical tradition preserves a sharp boundary between *pedagogia generale* – a predominantly theoretical enterprise – and *pedagogia sperimentale*, its empirically oriented counterpart. The origins of this bifurcation are chiefly epistemological. Historically, pedagogy emerged as an ancillary branch of philosophy and was therefore framed by speculative reflection on the cardinal coordinates of existence – society, ethics, politics, kinship, life, and eschatology. Within that philosophically saturated matrix, education was relegated to a transmissive, élite-oriented didactic practice; it was treated as content to be handed down, not as a domain susceptible to systematic experimentation.

Before the Italian field consolidated as the “educational sciences” (Visalberghi’s canonical diagram remains emblematic of that consolidation), pedagogy underwent a series of conceptual migrations. From a “minor philosophy” it progressively engaged – though unevenly – with psychology and sociology, often internalising cognitive paradigms at the expense of dialectical-organic ones. Tellingly, psychology did not systematically theorise the role of emotion until the 1970s, nor did sociology fully acknowledge the “naturalness” of the social system before the 1960s. Pedagogy oscillated between these disciplines, alternating its epistemic allegiances.

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Metelli Di Lallo therefore called for a *properly* pedagogical scientific lexicon, unencumbered by the more highly systematised languages of adjacent fields, and focused instead on the intentional, educative event that recognises the Other as a subject entitled to full existential dignity. The metaphor of the pendulum aptly captures how pedagogical discourse has swung between psychologistic reductions (education as conditioning) and sociologistic conflation (education as mere socialisation), thereby risking confusion between, for example, authority and authoritarianism or civility and mannerism.

The quest for a distinctive pedagogical language constituted an intellectual revolution. It emancipated the discipline from its servile historical position – recalling that the *paidagōgós* in antiquity was literally a slave – and enabled a dialogical engagement with the “sister sciences,” whose methodological apparatus appeared better suited to probing educational reality. By appropriating control over contextual and procedural variables, pedagogy could at last generate evidence – however provisional – of the efficacy of its own interventions.

Having transcended its earlier oscillations, pedagogy adopted at times a decisive, even polemical stance, forging alliances not only with philosophy, psychology, and sociology but also with politics, economics, and the arts. Scholarly production began to map the isomorphisms linking pedagogy to these broader knowledge systems: notions such as *citizenship* and *polis* were re-inscribed as explicit ends of democratic education, while the economic metaphor of *value* illuminated the normative weight of educational aims. Early forays likewise explored the intersections of education and performance, as in Cattanei’s work.

By the 1990s, pedagogy had acquired full disciplinary status and re-entered the larger constellation of the educational sciences, increasingly guided less by speculative frameworks than by the “evidence-based” paradigm that gained prominence after 2000. Elsewhere in Europe, the field coalesced under the single rubric of *Education*. In Italy that move provoked intense debate: some scholars advocated further fragmentation into specialised domains, whereas others – championing interdisciplinary convergence – welcomed the aggregation of the Italian scientific-disciplinary sectors (from General and Social Pedagogy to Didactics and Special Pedagogy, and Experimental Pedagogy) into a unified *Education* sector as a step toward a more integrated European research space.

Italian chairs of Pedagogy were once relatively holistic: a single professor commonly taught the Theory of Education, the History of Schools and Institutions, Didactics, Inclusion, and, to a degree, Experimentation. The term *sperimentazione*, however, spawned scepticism. Purists preferred *esperienza*, contending that a pedagogical “laboratory” cannot be assimilated to the natural-

scientific model; others insisted that, etymologically, *laboratorium* emphasises *labor* – productive praxis – and thus legitimises the testing of ideas in concrete contexts. This debate has gradually shifted the self-conception of pedagogy from a theory-practice dyad toward a praxis-oriented, design-based science that nonetheless honours its philosophical lineage.

The present issue of *Education Sciences & Society* arises from the need to clarify what experimental pedagogy, *qua* pedagogy, contributes to theory, and vice versa. The Call for Papers – “Pedagogy as a Science between Theory and Empiricism” – marks the ninetieth anniversary of Raymond Buyse’s *L’expérimentation en pédagogie* (1935). Buyse, Professor at the Université Catholique de Louvain and founder of its Laboratory of Experimental Pedagogy, catalysed the empirical turn in educational discourse, famously urging scholars to “Taylorise instruction in order to enhance education”. This anniversary invites renewed scrutiny of the theory-empiricism nexus and of the methodological and ethical implications of experimentation in educational settings.

Although the erstwhile antithesis between pedagogy and experimentation is largely obsolete, unresolved questions persist concerning the applicability of empirical-experimental methods to educational phenomena, the nature of admissible evidence, and the policy relevance of pedagogical data. The recent proliferation of field research demands critical reflection on the potentials and limits of data collection, as well as on the epistemic, heuristic, thematic, and methodological realignments that have reshaped Italian pedagogy over the past nine decades.

This issue thus assembles contributions that position pedagogy as a science whose object is the *educational fact* in all its situated specificity. The articles navigate the constitutive tensions between *is* and *ought*, quantitative and qualitative paradigms, synchronic and diachronic perspectives, methodological rigour and respect for persons. Acknowledging that no single approach – be it theoretical, historical-comparative, or empirical-experimental – can exhaust the complexity of education in an inclusive “Society 5.0”, the contributors interrogate the suitability of diverse methods and tools while remaining faithful to pedagogical epistemology and its axiological commitments.

Renata Viganò (President, SIRD) reconceptualises education as a complex system and traces Buyse’s influence on the epistemic duty to construct shareable research instruments.

Katia Montalbetti revisits Buyse’s *oeuvre* – often regarded as the genesis of Italian experimental pedagogy – and appraises its contemporary relevance.

Tiziana Chiapelli argues that impact evaluation can anchor pedagogy in robust empirical evidence, thereby equipping it to meet contemporary challenges.

Luca Girotti offers a critical examination of educational research methodologies, highlighting their role in shaping the field's epistemic evolution.

Valeria Di Martino advocates interventions built around well-defined yet adaptable core components, reconciling rigour with contextual responsiveness. Rosa Vegliante, Alfonso Pellecchia, and Sergio Miranda investigate the determinants of school dropout in Campania from both student and teacher perspectives.

Raffaella Biagioli, Antonella Grilli, Maria Grazia Proli, and Fabrizio Rozzi present a pedagogical framework aimed at preventing dropout within the Italian school system.

Sandra Chistolini and Bernd Wagner report on an Italian–German project analysing how primary pupils engage with history learning in museum settings.

Valentina Grion and Irene Gianceselli explore the emancipatory potential of distance learning for women enrolled at Italy's largest online university.

Fabrizio d'Aniello examines how artificial intelligence, smart machines, and robotics are reconfiguring production and labour organisation.

Ilaria D'Angelo charts life-course transitions among individuals with complex disabilities through a Quality-of-Life lens.

Angela Arsena balances methodological precision with ethical sensitivity in her critique of educational research methods.

Tommaso Farina (Article 1) links participatory pedagogy with urban regeneration via situated civic-learning experiences.

Valerio Ferro Allodola and Maria Buccolo discuss a research-training initiative that employs picture books to enhance early-childhood educator preparation.

Alessia Ale* Santambrogio proposes a trans-affirmative, trans-positional methodological model transferable to research involving trans* participants.

Paolo Sorzio presents a case study of university-community engagement, analysing an after-school programme as a unit of educational evidence.

Valentina Pastorelli scrutinises the methodological-ethical dialectic of empirical pedagogy within the emerging paradigm of Society 5.0.

Alice Femminini, Anna Salerni, and Irene Stanzione adapt systematic-review techniques to the idiosyncrasies of pedagogical research.

Nicole Murrone, Silvia Cau, and Marta Pellegrini introduce the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) as a continuum of graduated interventions.

Giorgia Rita De Franches and Elif Gulbay show how active breaks and serious games enhance both well-being and learning in contemporary classrooms.

Maria Vincenza Raso reports a qualitative study of early-childhood and primary teachers, foregrounding the complexity of pedagogical practice.

Ferdinando Cereda interrogates the epistemic foundations of physical education in the context of Society 5.0, juxtaposing empirical and holistic models.

Zoran Lapov demonstrates how observational methods bridge participatory field research and qualitative inquiry in intercultural contexts.

Daniela Marzano critiques teacher preparation for ICT integration, with particular attention to generative AI.

Michele Zedda reassesses the contemporary salience of comparative methods in education.

Angela Arsena, Giada Prisco, and Grazia Romanazzi employ Reflexive Thematic Analysis to examine trainee-teacher perspectives envisaged by the 2023 Italian decree (DPCM 04.08.2023, Art. 13).

Tommaso Farina (Article 2, “Alia” section) analyses adolescence, street education, and detached youth work through Franc Roddam’s film *Quadrophenia*.

Davide Cartuccia (“Alia” section) advances a “triadic” epistemological paradigm for interpreting educational phenomena across distinct epistemic orientations.

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