Changing the school through emotions. The role of reflective teachers' training

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Abstract

The theme of emotions and relationships at school in recent years is acquiring a growing space in pedagogical literature. Their centrality for the purposes of successful teaching and learning is ascertained by numerous studies and research of different disciplinary fields. From the point of view of teacher behavior, the emotional dimension is no longer linked to character aspects but to specific skills that all teachers should possess. First of all, it is fundamental to know how to recognize one's own and others' emotions and to be able to manage them within the educational and didactic relationship. Teaching is a profession of high emotional intensity and, therefore, it is essential to train teachers to become aware of the emotional exchanges that take place within the classroom and to be able to direct them towards conditions of well-being for the students and for themselves. The goal of teachers education is to provide teachers with a reflexive habit that can act as a *fulcrum* for their constant personal and professional development and to establish a subjective space for «thoughtfulness», which represents a space for reflection and creativity.

Keywords: reflective training, emotional growth, educational relationship, professional development.

1. Criticality and perspectives of teachers' education

The topic of emotions and relationships at school has taken up an increasing amount of space in pedagogical literature in recent years (Baldacci, 2008; Riva, 2015; Salzberger-Wittemberg, Osborne e Williams, 2004). This is because, on one hand, problematic behaviours are spreading among children and teenagers and, on the other hand, educators and teachers find it difficult to tackle such behaviours. School, which is a right and a duty for everyone, mirrors the social unrest that is linked to a

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growing emotional indifference towards others, a future crisis that affects both young people and adults and the minor importance attributed to education and the value of reason (Bauman, 2000; 2011; Galimberti, 2007; Morin, 2014, trad. it 2015). Catchment do not necessarily require knowledge, or to have their self-esteem or esteem reinforced, but instead are helped in constructing a personal and work-based project in which everyone can recognise and nurture their individual uniqueness, their own resources and their expectations. School work, then, is method-based rather than content-based, because it should ensure that everyone becomes capable of continuing to learn throughout their lives, possessing both cognitive skills and an inner drive, that is, the disposition and motivation to learn. What type of teaching is needed to teach someone how to learn, which has now been recognised as one of the key skills of our generation at the European level? We can identify some fundamental characteristics of the kind of teaching that allows people to successfully learn in this respect. 1) Teaching must be plural, in the sense that using different didactic situations allows students to experiment with different ways to learn and to become competent in them. In addition to face-to-face lectures, these plural forms include workgroups, individual studies, laboratories, internships, etc. and should be composed in a functional manner that matches the learning objectives, the training process that one intends to perform and the verification of this process, by alternating between the various forms of learning and teaching. The teacher, then, is primarily there to record and the didactics are *artificium* (Comenio, 1657, trad. it. 1993), not in the sense of fiction but rather a progressive creative process. If we limited this, or tend to favour a transmissive model of teaching, repetition is encouraged rather than reflection and elaboration. This favours the individual and not the group, ignores social forms of learning, gives no value to discussion and comparison and neglects what the individuals can do in collaboration with others, rather than what they can do alone (Resnick, 1987; 1989; Resnick, Levine e Teasley, 1991). A primarily face-to-face teaching set-up, with one person teaching many, encourages competition more than cooperation and does not give any value to the resources that each can provide to help others to learn and reciprocal growth to occur. Learning to learn in different contexts and settings involves acquiring a variety of skills that expand a person's ability to learn. 2) Teaching must allow significant space for research and, as a result, to learning that starts with problems. These

cause doubts and leads to understanding and attempting to come up with solutions. Considering knowledge as perspectives opens up a line of critical thinking that relates ideas to epistemological concepts, to historical-evolutionary aspects and to pragmatic consequences; if there are no valid positions in absolute terms, and these must be validated and eventually accepted until they have been debunked, these do not, in principle, then lead to incorrect conceptions. The perspective is to teach people to favour comparison and discussion of one's own ideas, as well as the ideas of others, according to an approach that both clarifies and relativizes. This is also very important on an affective level, because it encourages the centrality of the person learning, making them feel like an active part of the learning process. Only a teaching process that also embraces research trains the subject to be independent, to know how to make decisions and to know how to think for oneself. In addition to encouraging critical senses and the examination of perspectives, doing research also values the interpretation of the students, which can also be discussed, of course, from a cultural and scientific point of view. 3) Focusing on the quality of relationships. A school is a place where people learn in conjunction with others, with the support and guidance of teachers. Far from being an obstacle to learning, peers represent a vital component, since learning is a social process, situated in a place that is full of cultural artefacts and distributed among them (Salomon, 1993). Therefore, we always learn in a primarily relational situation, which is the basis for the quality of learning. In terms of the relationship between students and teachers, what are the components that need to be supported in order to achieve a relationship that allows both the capacity and desire to learn to flourish, both at school and outside of it? The professional identity of the teacher has historically been based on disciplinary knowledge, which today is considered to be the fundamental element that facilitates this role and this function. The contents to be taught and learned represent an anchoring point, in a historical situation in which the education and training of young people in cultural institutions have become a complex and difficult challenge. The social expectations around the teacher figure, therefore, include ensuring that the students achieve more than simply successive educational objectives. In addition to this, there is the presence of affective education, which is a crucial dimension in the preparation of students to become conscientious citizens, who are able to contribute, in

conjunction with others, to communal well-being. These two requirements are often seen as irreconcilable, as though moving towards the student (affective education) contradicts the strictness and discipline that study requires (cognitive education). In many cases, the problem is that we still continue to separate what can be attributed to emotion from what is instead attributed to reason. A significant turning point, which has been undertaken by many researchers, involves reconstructing the complexity of the learning process and the relationship between the teacher and the learner (Sroufe, 1995).

Cultural learning and training occupy a specific place in personal and social identity. What one knows how to do, what one knows and being appreciated as pupils and students also has major social significance; the positive response to this kind of expectation allows people to feel accepted and to play a role within their community (Dallari, 2000). Doing well in school and being seen as a good student confirms social expectations, which means that, in spite of the widespread lack of motivation towards study and disaffection in schools, the goal of educational success is generally shared and failure to achieve it is a source of frustration. In addition to being a natural and biological phenomenon, learning is also spontaneous, in the sense that it is founded on the drive to discover and research that characterises our species. We tend to learn what we like, and the enjoyability of learning should be supported and nurtured so that students develop a positive attitude towards culture and their own education. In fact, each of us develops a type of cultural ego during the development phase (Cunti, 2014), which refers to the way we see ourselves as individuals capable of learning throughout life and the attitude that we develop towards culture and knowledge. This dimension represents the priority for school education and teachers are required to create a positive space so that students consider themselves capable of continuing to learn successfully, supported by a suitable desire and motivation. The cognitive component, then, cannot be disconnected from the emotional aspect. Learning new things requires a leap into unknown territory, knowing how to handle the risk of failure as well as doubts and uncertainties. During the developmental phase, the concept of the self and esteem for one's abilities are linked more than ever to relationships with important people. These people offer an image not only of how the subject is learning at that moment but, more importantly, of what they could become, their faith in their ability to mature and to become something

more. This is what Keats (Keats, 1817) and Bion (1970) called "negative capacity", which allows us to handle expectations without feeling lost. One of the main tasks of teachers is supporting and reinforcing the acquisition of this negative capacity.

2. Emotions in learning and teaching

The central importance of emotions in successful teaching and learning has been confirmed by various studies and research projects across a variety of disciplinary fields (Damasio, 2000; 2007). From the point of view of the teacher's behaviour, the emotional dimension is no longer linked to aspects of their character, but rather to specific skills that all teachers should have. Above all, it is fundamental to know how to recognise one's own emotions, as well as those of others, and to understand how to manage them with the educational and didactic relationship. Teaching is a profession that comes with a high level of emotional intensity and it is, therefore, essential to train teachers to be aware of the emotional exchanges that occur in classrooms and how to direct them to ensure the well-being of students and themselves (Hargreaves, 1998). Knowing how to interact with students and the class group, how to understand their own emotions and the emotions of others and using this to encourage the students' cultural and personal growth and more translates into a set of skills, which then becomes the subject of education and continued refinement.

Generally speaking, how are emotions approached in education and how is the exchange between teachers and students initiated?

Emotions are seen as reactions – both positive and negative – and are primarily a way of interpreting and experiencing external stimuli. On rarer occasions, they may be strictly linked to the feeling students have about staying in school; this can be amended. They are not considered to be very contextual and are linked to a way of living that is fundamentally removed from the school experience.

Teachers' emotions and the influence they can have on their classroom behaviour and teaching practices are rarely analysed (Crawford, 2011; Schutz e Pekrun, 2007).

Teaching has been defined as an emotional endeavour (Sutton, Mudrey-Camino e Knight, 2009). This highlights the possibility of leveraging socio-emotional aspects, firstly by reflecting on them and integrating them into a hypothetical approach that the teacher can experiment with. This is done using co-participation and emotional support methods that can be adjusted to be increasingly effective. To this end, teachers' primary goal may be achieving a meeting of the mind, in the sense of considering other people's emotions, managing their own and comparing them with those of the students.

If this does not occur, this could encourage the growth of frustrations, disapproval and deviant behaviours. Other authors note the importance of «the reciprocal relationship between teachers' emotions, teaching practices and teaching goals» (Frenzel, Götz e Pekrun 2008, p. 198; Sutton, 2004; Witcher, Onwuegbuzie e Minor, 2001), wherein students' successful experiences of being supported with their problems during the learning process represent a resource for the positive emotional well-being of teachers (Hargreaves, 1998).

Given that it is impossible, and not particularly useful, to consider the emotions of the two parties separately for our study, it is important to note the emotions that teachers attribute to themselves; many researchers (Butler, 1994; Graham e Weiner, 1986; Rustemeyer, 1984) highlight that these refer to the emotional reactions that teachers experience towards pleasant/unpleasant situations in their classes or towards students' responses to the forms of education employed. If students show that they do not appreciate the regular process established by the teacher, and are placed outside of it, the teacher can inform them of the obstacles that may impede them, help them to find coping mechanisms and encourage them to compare with their classmates, etc. It has been noted that teachers who aim to achieve optimal learning often neglect the role of emotions, which remain largely unexamined, suppressed and minimised (Fitzsimmons e Lanphar, 2011; Smith *et al.*, 2009). Teachers are typically afraid of entering the emotional arena, believing that this is too personal. For many of them, school is essentially about *rationality* and emotions are simply not part of the prevailing school system (Halstead, 2005). In summary, a frequently used approach involves encouraging students to ignore emotions and concentrate on activities (Williams-Johnson *et al.*, 2008).

The important thing to note for educational purposes is the cognitive aspect of emotions; analysing this can offer indications for methods of managing one's own emotions and the emotions of others. All emotions are linked to a belief, particularly those that persist and translate into a relatively stable feeling that sustains our existence (Baldacci, 2008; Nussbaum, 2004). Beliefs concern social representations and conceptions of ourselves; these have been learned in what we might call an *in-depth* manner, that is, through predominantly family-based conditioning that informs us about ourselves, others, reality and our relationship with these elements. From the point of view of the way in which emotions are interpreted, teachers have points of reference that relate to the socially prescribed methods on how to deal with students. All of these aspects form the background from which emotions emerge. The limitations of the teacher-student relationship are subsequently negotiated during classroom transactions and tend to reflect the way in which teachers approach students' emotions in class, starting from cultural and social norms (Williams-Johnson *et al.*, 2008).

The clearest and most extreme reactions generally refer to the most intransigent positions; more rigid and unflinching ways of seeing things and an unwillingness to accept an interpretive space more readily provoke clear reactions – both in agreement and disagreement. This is different from more contextual and flexible perspectives, which require a more in-depth sense of understanding. Examining the merits of other people's motivations pauses immediate response and reactive behaviours and allows people to shift from reacting to acting in the first person, all without forgetting that teachers are viewed by students as significant "interpreters of reality" (Eccles *et al.*,1993).

In this sense, it is pointed out that teachers should avoid expressing emotions that are too strong or too weak (Greenleaf, 2002; Linnenbrink e Pintrich, 2002; Zembylas, 2003; 2005). Teachers' negative emotions contribute to the negative emotions of students and diminish the likelihood of students using cognitive strategies to express more detailed and elaborate information (Linnenbrink e Pintrich, 2002); emotions generally shape cognition (Mesquita, Frijda e Scherer, 1997) and, as a result, this can have a significant impact on motivation (Pekrun *et al.*, 2002), beliefs and efficiency goals (Kaplan, Gheen e Midgley, 2002).

These reflections underscore the importance of reason as a skill, where the ability to recognise and experience one's emotions with a

greater sense of awareness, as well as to observe and understand the emotions of others and, most importantly, direct them towards an improved sense of well-being, requires the development of hypothetical and situational thinking.

The attitude towards probabilistic logic is another part of the approach to complex learning. Three basic dimensions of quality education have been proposed (Klieme, Pauli e Reusser, 2009): cognitive activation, supportive environment and appropriate class management (p. 13). Activating people's minds encourages the cognitive and meta-cognitive process, which are closely linked to the emotional dimensions of learning. Among the various teaching patterns (styles, methods) that are able to significantly influence the emotional and motivational aspects of learning, Hugener *et al.* (2009) pinpoint discovery, which, by promoting the independence of the student, limits negative emotions and any sense of removal from the context; learning is not just an experience based on well-being, but «a psycho-socio-emotional glue» that is able to help students discover new reflective and practical skills (Fitzsimmons e Lanphar, 2011, p. 39). The research data, therefore, show that students will only want to be independent if they believe they are capable of learning successfully.

The aim of educational systems, therefore, is primarily methodological, based not only on the ability to tackle critical episodes and contain negative emotions for the sake of survival, but rather to intervene in a "flourishing" manner, in the sense of being able to implement processes that modify emotions, changing beliefs that allow people to experience positive emotions (Schutz, 2014).

A common error in the school environment is reporting students', parents' and teachers' feeling and relationships about the school rather than the quality of teaching and learning. This is due to the wealth of projects in Italy in recent decades that have tried to express students' emotions, with the idea of redirecting negative emotions and nourishing positive emotions. The aim of these was to more easily encourage behaviour that was appropriate to the educational aims. The illusion that the positive environment found in extracurricular education could be transferred to ordinary education rests on the lack of awareness regarding the situational nature of learning, and the value that students, teachers and communities assign to classroom education, that is, subjects, questions,

homework and grades. This is the type of education that people are evaluated on and which helps to define roles and self-image, such as being a good student or teacher or not.

In ordinary education, teachers' strong attraction to techniques still prevails, in the sense that disciplinary tools, most often the textbook, are extensively used in professional settings. In some ways, this could be considered as an antidote to the danger of *getting lost*, in the sense of one's identity as a teacher becoming unclear. This role, today more than ever, seems to be under particular fire. It is in these contexts, where the human variable seems less controllable and more susceptible to unforeseen changes that impact the former, that references to data and techniques seem to be particularly reassuring, while also contributing greatly to the definition of one's identity. The contents of these disciplines, and the pedagogical-didactic skills, offer a set of knowledge and a collection of technical tools that are given far more importance than the relational components, the knowledge of oneself and others and the awareness of the organisational and cultural nature of the system (Geerink, Masschelein e Simons, 2010; Gonçalves, Azevedo e Alves, 2013).

It is for this reason that the contents of teachers' knowledge, alongside with the communication techniques that they are familiar with – which may have already been experienced by students – may represent protection against risky or hollow situations, as well as the path to being recognised and appreciated on a social level. Negative capacity, therefore, seems to also impact teaching in at least two different ways: not only does it constitute an accompaniment to the lack of experience by those who are learning, as we have already seen, but it also serves as a reference for how much teachers and professionals are willing to risk, how much they are willing to put into educational and didactic relationships and how they are willing to open up brand-new paths.

3. Reflexivity in teacher training

Continuing from this, another question is posed: what is the relationship between the personal and professional dimensions of the teacher? The idea that teaching will reveal a way of living, as well as thinking and relating to people, is obviously not new; the belief that pedagogy could

probably continue to take advantage of this instead pertains to the potential evolutionary nature of the relationship between teachers and students. The question that is posed is under what conditions can the relationship be evolutionary for both parties and if the relationships becoming a source of non-superficial changes may be the result of specific learning and transformational processes (Mezirow, 1991, trad. it. 2003; Mezirow e Taylor, 2009). Part of the research into teacher training in recent decades has been focused on this area; these centre on the fact that researchers and experts accompany teachers through reflexive processes that begin with professional practices. Among these, it is important to highlight the contextual situations, including institutional situations, relationship dynamics and the teachers' thoughts, emotions and behaviours in the communicative setting, in accordance with a systematic perspective that favours the link between everything that occurs. An essential point of departure is a shift in perspective, one in which the teacher is not limited to introducing their disciplinary training into the relationship, with the aim of conditioning their students' learning, but in which they personally become part of the uninterrupted communication and get involved like everyone else; the willingness of everyone, in particular, teachers, to do this defines the fluidity of the system, the transformative value of said relationships and the transformative value of the subjects who play central roles in them. Learning to experience contexts, particularly working contexts, in an "ecological" manner means knowing how to trace events, behaviours and situations back to processes rather than individual causes, thus avoiding blaming forms. These, referred to both teachers and students, often represent a dead-end, especially when they engage in personal dimensions that can very rarely be changed. This is what happens whenever we try to explain behaviour with emotions («I reacted badly because I was angry»), as this fails to reflect the emotional, cognitive and motor complexity of our relationships on one hand, and, on the other, the dynamic and unpredictable way in which we process situations.

Exercising skills at a sustained level requires that the level of skill acquired in specialist subject matters does not lead to rote repetition of working practices that have become familiar. Instead, it should allow teachers to establish a subjective space for "thoughtfulness", which represents a space for reflection and creativity and for configuring original, possibly brand-new, practices (Mortari, 2009; 2011; Schön, 1983).

As we initially noted, a relatively clear image emerges of two types of issues that teachers feel particularly passionate about: the first concerns needs of a social nature, that are necessary for performing their job and working successfully to create the ideal conditions in which students can achieve performance goals; the second concerns the need to listen to students, to establish a positive relationship with them and to meet their needs. This is, in the eyes of Baldacci, a type of «double limitation», which can only be escaped using a «logical and creative leap» (Baldacci, 2008, p. 8). In this respect, the most difficult challenge to understand and overcome is probably combing the effectiveness of doing with the knowledge of how to sustain relationships, and, before that, taking a reflexive stance, analysing oneself as a teacher within a professional setting, including the concept of being present and acting in a professional manner. This means being able to do something, not as an extension of a methodological or technical commitment, but as a construction of methods that are suited to the environment, relational and communicative accompaniment methods and methods for intentionally modifying dynamics.

Teachers have a widespread feeling of powerlessness and the sense of being torn between «educational standards, relating to teaching and continued professional development, which, in many countries, encourages teachers to become reflexive professionals and, at the same time, the growing pressure to be responsible for students' performance, which imposes performance standards that increase the likelihood of teachers using teaching strategies that prioritise efficiency» (Larrivee, 2010, p. 138).

In the context of reflective methodologies (Schön, 1987) and the theoretical approach of Transformative Learning, the goal of training is not to assimilate knowledge but to achieve a change of perspective. As we have previously mentioned, if teachers tend to focus on emotional and relational aspects, especially in cases where it is difficult to follow the expected education process (Larrivee, 2008; 2010), and, more importantly, negative emotions and relational difficulties are considered as obstacles to achieving goals, the next step, then, consists in viewing these as important components in the educational and didactic processes, and also fundamental tools to be able to foster in students a positive approach towards study and towards themselves as cultural subjects who are able to learn in a continued manner. In order to create this kind of change in

the way teachers think and act, it is essential to start with their professional practices and to investigate them from the perspective of the thoughts and emotions that accompany them and the behaviours they express (Cunti e Priore, 2014). To this end, a special training circle between practice/theory/practice is implemented. This initially linked the practices used with the theory that suggested them and the emotions that accompanied them. Training endeavours, then, consider both self-reflection, which calls into question thoughts, emotions and actions, and analysis of the theoretical aspects these actions are based on, as well as the consequences of the latter from an educational and didactic point of view, as well as on the professional growth of the teacher. Linking practices with the underlying theory allows us to reconsider the interpretations that suggested certain behaviours (even in ways that we are not aware of), to change them if they are believed to be insufficient and, as a result, to hypothesise new practices, which are probably more effective, that can be verified in the field. The goal of the training is primarily to make teachers aware that, behind every action, there are one or more interpretations of the situation in which they find themselves. This interpretation is revealed during training and clarified. It may correspond to a well-known theory that is generally shared by the teachers, or to a latent, unexplained theory that the teacher may not be aware of, or both (Nonaka e Takeuchi, 1995, trad. it. 1997; Wenger, 1998, trad. it. 2006). The teacher may, in fact, return to behaviours based on well-known and shared perspectives, and then find that examining their motivations reveals other, more hidden thoughts that have been at the core of the actions taken. In this sense, as confirmed in the research in this sector, certain specific tools are revealed to be particularly well-suited to unveiling the unsaid, such as, for example, metaphors, a tool that was, in fact, used in the Erasmus+ R.E.C. training. Secondly, it is important to verify during training whether the action undertaken was consistent with the interpretation and, thirdly, if the action had the desired results compared to expectations. When one examines what drives people to act in a certain manner, our thoughts are naturally mixed with beliefs and feelings. This means that the emotional dimension, which relates to feelings, cannot be ignored, but must be considered as irrevocably linked to the cognitive dimension. Once this revision-based work has been completed, we must try to conceive new didactic processes and new professional practices

that are consistent with the levels of understanding and new interpretations that we have uncovered through the training. These should obviously be hypotheses that have a strong possibility of success, but they will have to be tested and subsequently subjected to a new reflexive investigation, returning to the endless circle between theory and practice we mentioned earlier. The goal is to provide teachers with a reflexive habit that can act as a *fulcrum* for their constant personal and professional development.

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