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Freedom and citizenship in the image of thinking. A teacher multiple interaction team education project

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Abstract

The paper presents an experiment performed with in-service primary school teachers. Assuming the theoretical perspective of reflective thinking (Dewey) and symbolic interactionism (Blumer, Mead), the teachers were able to reflect on the relationship of concepts of citizenship and freedom and had to search for a social representation of their personal concepts. In our society citizenship tends to be a concept, which includes the standardization of citizens, but excludes freedom. The challenge was to: a) create positive thinking b) discuss how to be free and active citizens c) represent thinking and discussion within cultural aspects. Symbols, as concrete forms of our culture, express values and meanings. Teachers in teams analyzed their ideas and found images, which represented the positive link between citizenship and freedom.

Construction of the training theory

Freedom and citizenship are two concepts about which teachers in training think. This paper reflects on practice in teacher training that seeks to transform thoughts around freedom and citizenship into images found in everyday life. The path towards concretely converting what we think into images we can see, analyse and talk about has meant bringing to life the theory of the laboratory where scientific methods are exercised and practical theories are constructed.

Let us continue by examining the passage from a particular practice to the construction of a theory, i.e. the procedure indicated by Peirce (1971): deduction, induction, abduction and construction of a hypothesis. Peirce (1971) was considered a philosopher educated in a laboratory, in which he worked out the theory of truth and meaning, turning to a world in which scientific methods led to the dignity of the person and civilisation. In the laboratory, thoughts and beliefs are dynamic; from the exchange of things, persons and environments new ideas are born; ideas that were non-existent before shared thinking. It is difficult to change environments. They are too big and immovable. However, things and persons can be changed in the laboratory, with the *before* differing from the *after* and the *now* differing from the *previous*.

Teaching involves talking, relating, expressing, representing, citing, looking, orienting, creating, reproducing, transforming and many other actions, all meant to establish interpersonal relations between teachers/students/parents and others in the learning environment, to highlight their explicit educational intentionality.

Our work with teachers encourages reflecting on the theme: freedom, citizenship and mutual relations. We set down a *technique*: photography. We orient towards a *process*: planning. This triggers a picture of a person moving towards possible co-existences, expressed first in words, then represented by pictures. A picture is a thought that produces an experience as much as an experience produces a thought, both represented and communicated. The picture is the mirror of the realisation of a person's human rights. The picture provides a means to explore how much of what we deem right is actually being realised and how many of our human rights of freedom and citizenship are being confirmed in daily life.

The creativity of the teachers bursts into language that dictates a photograph. The digital picture paints the city with its inhabitants and objects. We do not wish to merely reproduce, we are trying to name our ideas and communicate them by having them seen by means of an immediate snapshot, kept for discussion in mutual interaction. The cultural process at the origin of our little venture is an act of liberation from paradoxical conventions that make the mind grow lazy and leave no space for the creativity of the person and groups. We leave the structure imposed from outside in order to define our own personal organisational structure, thus becoming the key figures in what we are doing. The creativity of the teachers builds up the theory with the mind and hand, with the heart and interaction. Intellectual and manual work, feelings and actions, are formed together with vital energy and, from this dynamism, coexistence issues forth. This is the meaning of worldwide cultural citizenship, an ideal passport that

opens up the frontiers the person places before him/her and others as borders that interrupt human communication essential to the life of the individual and the community. Freedom upholds citizenship. The person decides to belong to a society, which affirms the human rights of freedom of speech, thought and expression.

The person produces culture in the society

In this study, we resume the approach of symbolic interactionism (Dewey, 1933; Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969) that summarises the sense of the person educated according to the culture in specific societies, in order to permit the production of organised meanings in a new cognition, as a result of the combination of personal beliefs, cultural values and social norms. In this perspective, the person is seen as the one who produces culture in the society and the two critiques of interactionism and cultural paradigm are overcome. The first critique to be overcome is the one that considers interactionism too subjective and, hence, inattentive to the formal structures of human organisation. The interactionism that is attentive to the interpretative literature written by the person, even that which opposes formal organisation, assesses the experience positively. The second critique to be overcome is that of cultural control carried out by persons managing, orienting and leading the processes, whether explicitly or implicitly, by disseminating symbols and values defined by the local administrative organisation. The risk of manipulation crops up when members of the organisation impose their cultural views and refuse other viewpoints of the world, consequently affirming a monocultural climate that dominates over minority cultures.

Symbolic interactionism gives balance between the person and society, required for giving education a perspective of development and change. The value of the person and attention to the elements of his/her growth becomes a cultural operation of recognising belonging to the community. Furthermore, a society governed by structures, rules and conditioning gains sense in the commitment of schools offering an education oriented towards the knowledge and exercise of the human rights of freedom and citizenship.

The constant in the analysis is education as thinking about values that become human rights to be proposed in schools, to be lived and in which to believe. As a whole, education is also variable, dependent and independent in the interaction of the person, society and culture. Dependent when it understands being in the world and submitting to the influence of society and culture. Independent when it diverges from the *status quo* and from the conservation of the existing order, hereby affirming values not compromised by mass consumerism and conformism. The situation of equilibrium between the given and non-given, the already defined and the not yet defined, is what lies at the heart of educational practices.

Schools and other educational institutions are given the task of educating young people according to values and rights; they are also asked to know how to distinguish between positive values and negative values, respect and disrespect of human rights. Honesty, legality, respect, freedom, democracy and responsibility are values of the person that society formalises when defining human rights. Negative values, such as dishonesty, illegality, disrespect, irresponsibility are the opposite of positive teaching. Between values and disvalues arises a *game* that places human relations weakened by a corrupt culture, with no critical sense, into a situation of risk. Starting again from human relations, on which the society we choose to construct is founded, means promoting the culture of recognition, attention to the other person and social solidarity.

We communicate the meanings in which we believe through images

We communicate in many ways and use different means to do so. Communicative relations are at the heart of every teaching and learning activity. Education is employed until the process of humanisation leads every person, free to choose their own way to work, to the status of citizenship (Kerschensteiner, 1930). The multiplicity of methods and means combine well with the many meanings at our disposal, and the processes of thinking about our convictions, maybe even through *cooperative thinking*, and treasuring our experience of life and work, are productive.

Parallel to this, in the 20th century, the critique was developed of the image that contributed to generating, maintaining and magnifying stereotypes and detrimental ideas of beauty, masculinity and femininity. Stressing an image produced the contrary result: the stronger the male stereotype of strength and virility was as a synonym of beauty, the greater the feminist reaction became. The dynamics to be pointed out are, in fact, the affirmation and refutation resorted to. The image defines and holds an idea, and

disseminates it, but simultaneously produces its opposite and flees from it. Asserting freedom in the movement of the child is also denying that freedom is possible under conditions that hinder both physical and intellectual movement.

When we wish communication to be effective, we resort to pictures that bring memories to mind. This functions better if the memories are mutual, so as to help us construct bridges and contacts to people and things, our past history and the foreshadowing of our future. According to Ropars-Wuilleumier (1995), the picture idea encompasses three significances: the technical mechanism for recovering the mental picture; the equivalence between exact reproduction and analogical representation; and mental representation with perceptible origins. The perceptible picture is when it is seen and, through it, knowledge is touched. Within the issues of knowledge from a neo-Kantian perspective, Cassirer (1923-1931) observes the fall of the concept of substance to the benefit of the concept of function. In the flow of life, the objects we look at escape our understanding; to stop them and make them ours, we need to acquire the symbol that makes us aware of them. Reproducing the content of something requires free, autonomous consciousness; it does not mean repeating something that one already possesses, but, rather, applying ourselves to new reflection as a medium for formulation and understanding.

Images, or pictures, are part of human culture and we are joined to it since time began. The evangelical parable uses simple words, able to induce understanding of a precise meaning in our minds. In even earlier times, the graffito of the human figure in caves and paintings on rocks is proof of the artistic creations of *Homo sapiens sapiens* that, as far as 30 or 40 thousand years ago began to engrave and sketch. This humanisation process demonstrates that culture is not identified with civilisation. In the Atlas of Pedagogy, Volume I, organised by Laeng, the history of education is illustrated by Manacorda (1990) through figurative evidence that shows how pictures can talk, even when the narrative record of the educational factor and school is missing. The link that unites memories to pictures was examined by Ricoeur in terms of cognitive validity of the memory that draws our history.

Taking up Husserl, Ricoeur (2000) talks about the phenomenology of known memory, poised between memory and image, and a phenomenology to be done that manoeuvres among the perception of form, fantasy and things. Consulting *Matière et mémoire* by Bergson and *L'imaginaire* by Sartre, Ricoeur's interest for these themes revolves around the problem of the relationship that can be established between what we call memory and what we call image. Bergson distinguishes between 'pure memory' and memory-image; if it is true that not all memories build up images, it is also true that recognition of the memory places the 'pure memory' into an image. Sartre goes a step further and distinguishes between imaginative knowledge and accomplishing knowledge; the object imagined differs from the real object, however, we recall what we can imagine and, thanks to this magical operation, we see the memory represented in an image. The phenomenology of memory and image tries to give a convincing reply to questions never completely replied to: is memory an image? Is the image a memory of the past? Is the image independent of the memory? Can I remember without an image representation of the object imprinted in my memory? The correspondence and difference between the two terms, memory and image, are not only linguistic, but have something to do with true dimension, experience of reality and exercise of memory. The memory is seen through the image, but the image itself is perception of a past we are trying to represent, according to an idea of the reality we learned from history.

Inter-subjective understanding

To possess the memory of something is a condition for communicating the contents of our memory to another person. Nonetheless, knowledge is a cultural heritage that we enrich over time; in communication, we find infinite possibilities of it being placed at our attention. The wisdom we acquire through experience within our families and at school has a dynamic structure, subject to rules of fluidity of form. We know something about something else in a precise, clear moment of our personal and social history. Time sets the boundaries of our knowledge, shifting these limits ahead or behind. I know what I know until experience teaches me that reality requires space for manifesting itself. I know the rights a person has to freedom of expression, but I also know that life offers precious occasions for effectively rendering this right valid. Real life, not imaginative life, is the concrete representation of theoretical knowledge, comprised of education, culture, memory and remembrance.

Theoretical knowledge is solid; it is rendered by school and teachers, amendable to sensible restructuring, meaning it is organised to the utmost to so that the fruit it bears is the social success of the person. What

makes up and shapes our knowledge is not cancelled out nor is it thwarted by daily contradictions. Pedagogy has always repeated the maxim of consistency; it recognises how elusive theory is, but that is not why it renounces it, but, instead, grasps it with force and credibility. By doing this, one opens new paths to knowledge. In fact, pedagogy chooses the best paths to educate towards arriving at concepts that valorise the dignity of the person. Freedom and citizenship are among these concepts. The first concept, freedom, represents the peak of the person's growth, whereas the second, citizenship, represents a growth that does not vanish, but rather amalgamates into a precise shape, to which we give the name citizenship, and which is built up socially into democracy, rights and duties. Freedom, the abstract concept, unites with citizenship, the concrete one, to create new knowledge from which the person's skills are drawn. The knowledge we start out with, which is certainly the beginning of our reasoning and thinking, produces something that cannot be completely, but only partially assumed and that we need in order to set up bridges of communication between people.

Communication gives rise to understanding what the other person is thinking, expressing and producing and a field of inter-subjectivity is established in which each one means something to him/herself and others that has never been deduced from previous perception or scientific regulations. Perception makes me understand that the other person has a verbal and meta-verbal language, communicated through gestures, movements, glances and images, most of which must be deciphered. Scientific regulations proceed without doctrines and require proof, trials and even errors. In our hypothesis, the mind works through knowledge and structures it into communicable meanings, so as to produce comprehension realised in a photographic image, which is a result of our thinking described verbally.

Citizenship skills

Citizenship skills are developed in practice, by working on the idea that each person has something of his/her own and, then, building a new hypothesis out of it. This deals with creating and putting into operation a product of thought and action that teachers first learn to use and then use to teach at school. The generating idea of specific learning is to reconstruct the productive process of the message. To understand the sense of what the person has generated in his/her mind, for the purpose of communication, and valorise the work carried out together are two actions that permit the message to be grasped. A photograph is a tool for linking the initial idea and the final product. Following the process places the person under the condition of conveying the contents of the thought into the machine that transforms them and thus offers new images of reality to be transferred, read, discussed, interpreted, written and disseminated.

Both general and specific objectives identified during this process of teaching and learning are noted below.

General objectives:

- a) Educate towards flexible thinking;
- b) Develop the creativity of the person;
- c) Encourage the passage of the abstract idea of freedom and citizenship to a concrete design;
- d) Investigate and understand the importance of the volition to agree with and share something.

Specific objectives of knowing how to:

- a) Use technical means for translating the project into a significant image;
- b) Interpret what the senses see, smell, hear and say;
- d) Capture the means sought from a photograph;
- c) Communicate the meanings implied in the picture.

Multiple interaction

Practice with in-service teachers opened debate and some teachers noted that this experience led to reflecting on their own work and educating themselves to exercises of democracy at school. Self-criticism as a teacher implies recognising the ethical value of one's role, which is not resolved by applying lifeless techniques. The training was tested in a small group situation, in which the work concerning freedom required experiencing conditions of non-coercion and external obligation. When freedom is joined to creativity about freedom, it renders tangible the attaining of the right to self-expression through the use of photographs, images, thinking, classifying and communicating the text. Concretely, prior to taking a photograph, each subgroup discussed what is to be done and photographed and why, with respect to the

subject of freedom of the person in society. A photograph, agreed to in the classroom, was taken of an object in the street, if possible. This photograph was then used to stimulate discussion about around social freedom within the subgroup. The photograph does not show the point-by-point route of sharing and consensus, but for those in the group, looking at the photograph means calling to mind the work conducted.

After conducting this drill in the classroom, the teachers make a plan for proposing it in school, by jointly structuring a classroom project. One teacher describes the process like this:

We know very well that the alumni experience an atmosphere of tension and authoritarianism every day that clashes with sizeable differences regarding tolerance, mutual respect and freedom. Instead, our experience was carried out in an atmosphere of authentic democracy, which helped us more clearly and simply develop the importance of values, such as 'freedom and citizenship', which are essential to teachers like us. The practical approach (photography) helped us understand that values cannot be taught without truly believing them and without being living examples of them; the school must be total proof of the values it upholds. (Chistolini, 2008, p 87).

Traditionally used in schools, photography is functional to the teaching methodology using images as well as educating towards images through the transfer of what one sees into photographic writing. Educational actions are rendered concrete in the search for what lies behind the image, a reality to be uncovered layer by layer. In the teaching proposition conducted with in-service teachers, the confirmed purpose was to add an element to educating toward images, hereby opening the way to an intellectual and practical operation of broader proportions, allowed by digital devices and technology.

An image can be interpreted and, from it, we can trace back to the thought of whoever produced it. But an image can also be sought in the experience of our daily lives in order to show the closeness to, and also the distance from, concepts we think about. Finally, we can construct the image, starting from our idea and indulge ourselves in composing layers and levels of interpretation of reality. In all cases the image, a photograph in this case, is the means for representing our thoughts, acquiring awareness of our belonging to a context, changing from a group to a community to society. Specifically, the three paths described may be summarised as follows:

- From the existing photograph to the worked out idea (the photo tells me...);
- From the idea to the existing photograph (what I am thinking I find in this photograph...);
- From the built-up idea to the created image (we agree that we are thinking something and look for the photograph that best expresses what we are thinking)....

At school, teachers often use the paths described above; that is why they immediately found fertile land for applying the tool. However, more complex was filling up the contents of the various paths, giving them space for a particular meaning, according to the general phrase we called: freedom and citizenship. If we wanted to measure the degrees of creativity among the three paths, we would probably find ourselves faced with a problem difficult to solve, since they were all valid. Sometimes one of the subgroups of teachers worked without excluding any.

Culture of a small group

Multiple interaction among persons, objects, environments and technology creates teaching and learning. That is why the experience was concluded by creating the acronym MITE, *Multiple Interaction Team Education, given a theme; the group learns and teaches through multiple interaction*. The composition of the group is an important element: the less the people know about each other the more possibility exists for agreeing. In some groups, previous relations probably constitute a factor of delegation and scant involvement and makes talks useless between people who already know, or think they know, what a colleague thinks about the subject.

The easier path appears to be to search for a photograph already produced by other people and borrow it, having judged it appropriate for the conversation. Joining the thought to the photograph is aimed at rendering the object malleable, fitting it to the starting interpretation, then looking for it and producing it. It is clear that the sense of the path must be reinforced: *thought photographed represented planned*; just as clear is the reflected awareness of an interaction useful in building up new knowledge. Social interaction expresses the freedom to create the person and exercise the right to speech and thought so as to construct new meanings and, thus, cultural citizenship.

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