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The meaning behind studying and the value of teaching in higher secondary school: A new commitment against early school-leaving

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Abstract

This research carried out in some higher secondary school classes highlights the gap between the way students understand studying and the value the teachers ascribe to teaching. According to the students, teachers are not capable of arousing young people's interest in studying and culture; they do not update their teaching methods and are more concerned with the study programmes than dealing with human relations and the experiences of living of the class. On the other hand, teachers judge themselves positively; they find they know how to do their job well, know how to give all of the necessary explanations and know how to appreciate the specificities of each student. Comparative analysis of the data on a European level opens the debate about the similarities of the study experience perceived by young people and differences of the educational proposals thought out by teachers.

Key words: *Secondary school, Comparative research, Competences, Study experience*

Introduction

The general aspects of the survey carried out in secondary schools were presented at the CiCe Conference 2010 in Barcelona, the Symposium 'The dilemma of competences in secondary schools. Comparative research in Five European countries: Cyprus, Germany, Italy, Portugal and, Romania'. The contribution from Italy was published under the title 'A glimpse of secondary school. Competences and performance from a sample of teachers and students in Italy' (Chistolini, 2010, p 247-256).

In 2011, a further analysis of the data collected allows for scrutinising the relationship between the students' feelings about studying and the value teachers attribute to teaching. According to the theoretical outlook of symbolic interaction, improvements in schools arise when a positive communication of teaching-learning situations is set in motion. Students know what work is to be done and teachers present the programme to be carried out. For a joint work effort, students and teachers have to communicate with each other and establish points of contact.

The survey revealed the judgement of the students, who find teachers prepared, but incapable of interesting them in studies and culture; teachers do not update their teaching methods and are more concerned with the programmes than caring about human relations and the experiences of life of the class.

On the other hand, teachers evaluate themselves positively and find that they know how to do their work well, know how to give all of the necessary explanations and valorise

the specificities of each student.

The comparative analysis of the data opens the debate about the perceptions of both students and teachers and lends itself to the promotion of new moments of education, during which increased communication between students and teachers is foreseen.

Symbolic interactionism and culture of recognition

The improvement of schools is based on widely accepted and shared educational models as well as the commitment to redefining an own way of teaching, which takes three fundamental concepts of pedagogy into consideration: the person, culture and society. These three concepts concern the historic, social and cultural process that a person implements when interacting in society. The paradigm prevalently used in this study is symbolic interactionist and refers to the studies of Cooley (1915), Mead (1934), Dewey (1938), Blumer (1969) and Denzin (1992). Reference is made to the Bruner theory (2006) for definition of pedagogy and the value of narration is revived through educating about social meaning.

Symbolic interactionism examines knowledge as a totality of meanings interpreted by the persons who live through them and critically communicate them through symbols, regulations and values that are found in a particular social environment. The more the living situation is defined, the more it is possible to act to reach increasingly higher development goals.

The continuity between the classics of modern humanistic thought and the current phase of theoretical-conceptual interpretation is given by the close interdependence between the value of the person and attention to the phenomena of his/her psycho-social growth. Education is the dependent and independent variable in the interaction midst person, society and culture. It is a dependent variable when it encompasses bearing the influence of society and culture. It is an independent variable when it diverges from the *status quo* and the preservation of the existing order, and avoids compromises affected by consumerism and mass conformism. The situation of balance between fact and non-fact and the already defined and the not yet defined is what concerns pedagogy.

To educate is the promise of continuity of values and the commitment to generate new prospects of social development. In order to promote the culture of recognition, it is necessary to give sense to the ethics of human relationship, on which we build the society, in which teachers take care of the pupils and pupils show solidarity towards the teachers.

Comparison between students and teachers concerning competences at school

In higher secondary schools in Rome, 3572 students aged 14, 16 and 18 from the first, third and fifth years, respectively replied to the questionnaire and evaluated their teachers with regard to competences in social, ethical, subject-matter, methodological and assessment interaction. In the same secondary schools, 219 teachers examined their

own capacity to teach, hereby indirectly evaluating the competences mentioned above.

Each question concerning these five competences on the Students' Questionnaire is placed alongside the question on the Teachers' Questionnaire and the most relevant percentages are reported. The three most significant questions for both sample groups are selected for each competence.

Comments are made about the quantitative results, by also reporting some of the teachers' observations, in response to the open question on the questionnaire. The qualitative data completes the statistical reading of the results. Each narrative quotation of the teachers is identified by three numbers that indicated the number of the school contacted, teaching category (grade one, three, five) and number on the questionnaire. For instance in 04-3-69, the 04 stands for the school number on the researcher's list of schools, 3 stands for third year of higher secondary school and 69 stands for the progressive number of the questionnaire.

Competences in social interaction

The results of the comparison between students and teachers concerning competences in social interaction point out the considerable gap between the two sample groups. Students find that their teachers are open to dialogue: 'They let students express their own opinions in discussions and do not impose their own points of view' (72.6%), but distance themselves from the families: 'They are receptive towards the students' families' (67.6%) and are incapable of putting themselves in the place of the student 'They try to put themselves in the place of the student' (46.3%).

Teachers almost totally confirm dialogue with the students 'When a student mentions an experience, I manage to accept it without judging him/her' (91.7%); the encounter with the families 'I find the relation-ship with my pupils' families important and am actively committed in this regard' (85.4%) and the anthropological sensitivity of putting themselves in the place of the student 'I always try to make persons with whom I speak feel at ease' (90.8) are given higher evaluations than the students.

In fact, the teachers' overall positive perception of their own competences in social interaction is reiterated in the open questions on the questionnaire, in which teachers better express their professionalism:

concerning daily life, relations with the students and the educational function practiced with them (04-3-69); in establishing significant relations with the students; affectivity is the channel through which it is easiest to convey educational and teaching programmes (09-3-178)

in teaching and interpersonal relations with most of the students in an attempt to have them grow culturally in peace. Unfortunately, I am not successful in this with all of them and the ones who feel excluded sometimes suffer quite a bit; I try to increase the involvement of students who seem more passive (01-5-17).

In the area of social interaction, the survey also highlighted competences regarding the social prestige of teachers in a society, in which institutions pay little attention to the problems of the work and qualification of this important role in educating young people:

since teaching is a free choice, school is the ideal environment, but in our times, the figure of the teacher is undervalued and we do not feel adequately recognised, despite our doing so much work every day, which is not appreciated (05-1-75)

in choosing conduct to be transmitted with a watchful eye to the overall education of the personality (01-5-22).

Ethical competences

As for ethical competences the students mainly notice that teachers have difficulties in calmly discussing their own mistakes: ‘They admit when they are wrong and do not get angry when a student points out a mistake’ (67.4%); ‘They do not shout or lose their tempers during lessons’ (68.8%); ‘Their attitude towards the students is respectful’ (51.6%) whereas the teachers believe they are careful about dealing with the students and appreciating their specificities: ‘If I am criticised in class, I accept it and ask myself about the students’ reasons for it’ (84.5%); ‘I manage to keep my emotional distance from the students and the relational dynamics that involve me’ (67.5%); ‘I take great care in treating each one equally and appreciate his/her specificities’ (90.8%). The gap can probably be attributed to the different expectations of the two sample groups. Students expect understanding and justice, while teachers expect exactly the same thing, but at another level; this means at a level in which discretion seems to be very important so as not to invade the private sphere. Some teachers find that professionalism is expressed

definitely in teaching, to which the utmost care and attention is paid, particularly as regards supplying the students with the right tools for learning satisfactorily. In addition, a great deal of care is taken in attempting to understand the capacities and problems of each student (07-1-116)

in a calm relationship established with the class, which allows for communicating contents and experiences in such a way as to gain the interest of the pupils in the topics treated. In addition, discretion when facing their emotional problems (08-3-155);

Subject competences

The first of the three subject competences examined show how the students’ perception of the teachers’ knowledge of their subjects is relatively higher than the teachers’ perception of knowing how to develop scientific research so as to increase knowledge on the subject.

Students judge teachers as ‘They are very knowledgeable about the subjects they teach?’ (79.7%); ‘They connect the topics to each other’ (67.6%); ‘They introduce learning events through activities and cultural proposals outside the school’ (49.7%).

Teachers judge their ability to link the subject-matter to the students more positively than the students judge it. But there is a certain agreement about the difficulty in relating school to society in such a way as to also use the subject-matter in extracurricular activities. Teachers say ‘I manage to develop the subjects I teach through research and increase the overall intellectual wealth of knowledge’ (60.7%); ‘I manage to relate the teaching programme to the personalised incentives of the students, through flexible organisation’ (78.9%); ‘I link the subject-matter to extra-curricular activities and participate in planning them’ (54.7%).

One understands that teachers would like to do more, but cannot due to time and the organisation of the curricular programme. With respect to improving their professionalism, teachers replied:

I would like to have more space for planning interdisciplinary activities with other colleagues and to better plan teaching oriented towards students becoming more responsible for their learning paths (04-3-65)

it is appropriate in rendering the various topics more up-to-date and appealing from the students’ point of view, in order to increase their interest and motivate them to participate more actively (04-1-62).

Methodological competences

From the standpoint of vocabulary, students find that not all teachers express themselves correctly and from a methodological standpoint they believe they should receive more help: ‘They use words of speech adjusted to the individual student’ (66.4%); ‘They allow for the improvement of our performance, by suggesting reading matter, useful materials and web sites’ (49.1%); ‘They use suitable support materials that differ from the written text’ (50.8%).

Contrarily, teachers tend not to blame themselves for their use of inadequate vocabulary, while they criticise themselves more with regard to the use of updated materials: ‘It can happen that I do not explain myself well and listeners do not understand’ (5.9%); ‘I manage to mobilise the best resources and aptitudes of the students, by encouraging the independent development of the students’ (68.5%); ‘I generally use different teaching methods with regard to contexts and situations’ (60.2%).

Teachers believe that constituting part of their professionalism are:

the search for educational and teaching strategies able to elevate the resources of the students (02-1-28)

to establish a daily relationship with the students so as to build up a climate of

equanimity, trust and mutual respect. They are always ready to clarify explanations and examine, in-depth, the data within the subject-matter (02-5-43).

Assessment competences

In general, students find teachers able to use suitable assessment tools for checking the preparation of the subject-matter, whereas the communication of the criteria for assessment tests is rather weak and there is sometimes a delay in returning the corrected tests. Students say: 'They use assessment tools that are suitable and effective for testing our preparation' (78.5%); 'They inform us about the assessment criteria before each test' (60.7%); 'They do not let too much time pass between the test and its correction, clarify the assessment criteria, explain and comment on the assessments' (64.8%).

Teachers state the necessity of better assessment tools: 'I use assessment criteria in line with the aims of my teaching' (67.1%); 'For assessing what has been learned, I use transparent criteria and inform the students beforehand' (88.1%); 'I promptly correct and return the assessment tests' (81.6%).

Professionalism is expressed:

in the improvement of teaching activities through the use of new tools to increase involvement and interest, as well as more in-depth examination in order to face 'new' unease and problems of the adolescents (05-5-94)

in the necessity to reach better objectivity in the assessments, by putting aside any impressions that may affect calm judgement (02-5-43).

The European outlook and prevention of early school leaving

The two questionnaires, for students and teachers, were set up with a thought to the situation in Italy more than that in Europe. The questions are chiefly of a psychological nature and tend to favour the judgement of the students as regards the competences of the teachers. No inquiries were made about the competences of the teachers with regard to a reference deemed valid and to be generalised. This was the way chosen to give more space to what young people live through and the professional experience of the teachers, without superimposing a model for comparison beforehand.

Knowledge in retrospect, reached through a survey, opens the debate about the issue of what is important to introduce into secondary schools in order to prepare young people for society. This requires the constant updating of know-how jointly with the capacity to relate to other persons. Teachers show their having taken care and examined in-depth the discipline of teaching and their weakness in using new, up-to-date methods. Both students and teachers agree on and are aware of this.

More difficult to achieve are competences of social interaction, proven by the problems

of intergenerational relationships and the real impossibilities of teachers to practice these abilities while teaching at school. This area must be strengthened, since this is where education towards citizenship and human rights are found. The fragility of the competences of social interaction is demonstrated by the contradiction between assessing the students that judge the teachers as being distant from their world and the perception of teachers who believe they know how to understand their students. We can also say that the generation gap is an organic factor that inevitably separates adolescents from adults. The job of teacher remains characterised by the requirement of students being committed, actively participating, serious and respectful of the rules. The survey shows how education towards social responsibility unquestionably requires more emphasis in secondary schools.

As regards the objective of a successful life, with reference to the key competences indicated by the European Union, the survey outlines a secondary school that is still behind in the most up-to-date teachers' training. Measures must be introduced that are suitable for reaching goals useful in knowing how to meet the challenges of the knowledge society with quality and courage. Italy is among the EU countries (MEMO/11/52, 2011) that tirelessly tries to reduce early school leaving; a path is already being paved towards the new aim of reducing the current school leaving rate of 14.4% to below 10% by no later than 2020. The raising of the school population will produce a new training requirement of secondary school teachers. This is a task that requires vast preparation and qualified professional competence.

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