



Scuola Democratica

Manifesto of the New Edition

Scuola Democratica has long represented a lively and original ‘voice’ among the Italian educational journals. It was born in Venice in the ‘60s from a project of a group of politically-minded and professional teachers committed to the democratic reform of the Italian school (which explains its name); at the end of the ‘70s, it became a national journal with a wide scientific background without losing, however, the initial ideal and political inspiration. In 2002, *Scuola Democratica* was forced to close after 20 years, because of a general crisis of the Italian educational journals. Some years later, a group – composed of earlier editors and new members – re-launched the journal by devising an editorial and cultural project that was in line with past experience, but also aimed at widening and updating the journal perspective.

Some features of the past project still appear up-to-date since they are either lacking or are too weakly considered in the Italian public debate on educational issues. In particular, we would like to draw attention on three aspects. First, the tight link between educational issues – with their specific languages – and more general social issues, in particular those concerning the future of democracy in Italy and in the larger geopolitical area to which the country belongs (to begin with, the EU member set). At the time of its foundation in the 1960s, the journal was clearly in opposition to the then-dominant authoritarianism (still widespread in Italian schools). Nowadays, from that point of view, the situation is completely different, so we decided to put a new title in English next to the historical title: *Learning for Democracy*. The nexus between educational processes and a general political scenario of consolidation and development of democracy is becoming critical. In this respect, although John Dewey’s critical contribution continues to be of topical interest, it might be necessary to integrate it with the recent philosophical debates on justice, from Rawls onward. If we look at the question of justice and the meanings attributed to it inside the professional and political arena of school, and in some respect also in university, by trying to trace the dynamics of what some policy scholars called ‘war of discourses’, we may note that the egalitarian discourse has been prevalent for a long time. The consequence of this was a too-simplified representation and reductionist meaning of what was considered a ‘just school’, along with a weakening of the focus on the not less important issue of the efficiency and efficacy of the educational agency. In spite of the advent of mass schooling, social inequalities in education remained monumental in comparison with other European countries; the discourse of egalitarianism failed to address the need of contrasting the tendency to lower the quality of education, and had increasing difficulties in achieving the results it tended to fulfil. Following this, we have now entered a new phase where the growing penetration of neo-liberal ideology attributes a major role to the meritocratic principle, and meritocracy becomes the dominant axiology by filling a gap that was and remains particularly significant; yet at the same time bringing with it another form of ethical reductionism that might have the effect of obscuring, or at least strongly weakening, the perception of the nexus between democracy and education. As a matter of fact, if we assume that nexus not only in the sense of a meritocratic legitimate selection of elites (the professional carriers open to ‘competent and worthy’ people), but in the wider sense attributed by Dewey (which is also possible to read between the lines of the Italian Constitution Act), we should agree that only the idea of ‘justice as equity’ may allow an appropriate understanding and substantive respect. This is indeed an idea that is at the core of the work of many and that garners an international debate.

The second characteristic we refer to is the choice to favor innovation. The journal supports interesting cultural projects and political campaigns that concern not only the fields of cultural and pedagogical innovations, but also

social, organizational and institutional ones. Suffice to say, the anticipatory attention addresses equity, competence, school autonomy, centralization and evaluation. We think it is particularly timely to reconfirm this basic choice, since we are witnessing a notable revival of conservatism in debate on school, university and training – a conservatism full of contradictions. To highlight an example: on one hand, there is the celebration of the virtue of school of the past, when what you taught counted more than how you learnt, and the subject was more important than the discredited educational sciences; at the same time, teachers and authority figures ruled with “an iron fist” and undisciplined, unruly behavior in the classroom was not permitted, while attempting to eliminate indolence and incompetency of students and no excuses made for external interferences. On the other hand, some critics who hope for a drastic yet impossible return back to this past are often contradictorily supporters of radical modernistically-minded reforms clearly inspired by neo-liberalism and market ideology.

We are not denying that the conservatory tendency (albeit in general terms it has, in our view, a lack of realism and is socially and culturally backward) has in some respect some merit. During past years, the innovation of Italian schools had been carried out according to a top-down approach with a panoply of legislative reform, unfortunately often only promised and not implemented effectively, with the effect of producing among those working in that institution uncertainty, skepticism and passivity. Moreover, the innovation has been confused with improvised and poor educational novelties; democratization of school has been conflated with approaches of ‘flat’ assessment and *laissez faire*; secularism (see the debate on the question of *laïcité*) has been interpreted as the renunciation of making sense of educational experience to be perceived by students and those same teachers. In terms of the long-immobilized university, the recent frantic reforms over the last years have produced an inflationary increase of educational provisions lacking the conditions of sustainability both for human and financial aspects, along with the governance model, organizational structures and educational practices being basically untouched by the announced reforms. The challenge from ‘laudatores tempore acti’ suggests the need: a) to take stock of what we may consider the first phase of the academic and educational reform of the Italian Republic, and b) to carefully rethink and revise their own strategies so to make them more balanced, strict and effective. We prefer to talk of innovation instead of reformism since we maintain that reform represents only one of the ways, and sometimes not the most important, to develop the innovation. The fundamental lever is the availability of committed and well-prepared teachers, educators, and head teachers inclined to experiment novel ways to achieve better results.

The choice for innovation – that is for a sharp-witted innovation capable of reflecting on errors – signals a watershed inside the Italian debate on the educational policy that does not coincide with the two traditional divisions historically shaping the cultural and political fields: the one between Left and Right, and the one between Catholic and Laic. As a matter of fact, the conservatory resistance (even the reactionary insights) often crosses that watershed as well as the innovative orientations. For that reason *Scuola Democratica* will continue to present in its pages and editorial board a notable pluralism of ideas and belonging, while at the same time trying to offer an arena of confrontation with not only those not sharing our choice for innovation, but who raise objections and problems that are useful to confront.

Finally, and consistent with that already stated, it is relevant to reprise and strengthen a third historical characteristic of *Scuola Democratica* that is quite rare in the Italian educational debate and policies: the pragmatic underpinning in the choice for innovation. This orientation does not underestimate the importance of good theories (analytical or normative), or overestimate naive technical insights. However, *Scuola Democratica* has never hidden a clear preference for public policies and professional practices that were, in some respect, “evidence-based” (as is commonly labeled) and possibly supported by results of empirical research and experimentation. This orientation appears particularly meaningful in a country where, to a large extent, pedagogical reflection is still linked to a legacy that privileges normative philosophical, if not ideological, orientation, while at the same time diminishing the analytical and descriptive approach drawing on social and human sciences and scientifically oriented practice approach. This implies a commitment to interdisciplinarity, a remarkable interest for the international scenario, and the frequent recourse to comparative education. Sadly, this is too rarely adopted by Italian researchers, whom politicians often distinguish for their parochialism or ideological and ready-to-use claims to indisputable or alleged foreign models.

However, although we maintain all the historical and embedded characteristics, the new edition of *Scuola Democratica* aims to introduce an important update and enlargement of view. This novelty was already implicit in

the past editions, yet it is now important to bring it to the forefront in a more radical and systematic way. As a matter of fact, we are in an epochal time we may perhaps call 'post-schooling'. Traditional instruction institutions of school and university still have an important role to play, yet the processes of education and learning unfold and differentiate spatio-temporally in such accelerated, multifarious and extended ways to delineate a completely different scenario from what we have witnessed for more than a century, if not in more than a millennium. By this we mean, from the constitution of the national educational system, when school was formed and acquired a central role as a specialized institution first for the elite and then for the entire socio-cultural society. The double formula of lifelong learning and life-wide learning included in the recent EU Memorandum of Permanent Education is appropriate to summarize a revolutionary scenario, where learning – in its triple meaning of formal, non-formal and informal – comes to substitute the traditional terms of education, instruction, training and school. We are now seeing new instructional agencies emerging from the standpoint of new media, which are different from those traditionally identified by the family- and peer-based Sociology of Education. These include mass media, the recent development of ICT with its sharp impact on learning, and the Internet full of e-learning and virtual environments.

Further, the new conceptualization of Welfare, which emerged after the crisis of its traditional forms, the active policies of work, and the initial and continuous professional learning are acquiring a crucial role. Also emerging as strategic assets (and possibly more important than material ones) are knowledge, competence and motivations for companies and various types of organizations and their stakeholders. This explains the increasing value attributed to training and development, and generally to organizational and individual learning. Work and, more in general, social and personal experience – because of the new emphasis on practical versus theoretical knowledge are now acknowledged as crucial sources of learning.

The transformations we have mentioned so far bring about two kinds of problems for a journal focused most exclusively on school and instruction in the past. The first concerns the detection of the effects of the advent of learning society on the institutions of schooling, and needs to be put on the agenda as one of the crucial research and policy themes. Suffice to say, a few examples would be the interchange of school/work, the provision of what OECD calls Open Educational Resources and, probably even more important, the emergence of competence as a key link between instruction/training/work. Along with this is the perspective of employability for youth as a criterion for access, permanence and mobility (horizontal and vertical) on the labor market. The second, more difficult, issue regards the persistent gap between soft, traditional knowledge and discourse socialization institutions, and the new emerging sources and forms of lifelong learning. This interweaving is not easily realized since the respective fields, sub-fields and disciplines are different. However, the journal will try to overcome those distances and will consider this 'bridging the gap' as a challenge to give reality to a title that emphasizes the relationship between school and society, instruction and democracy.

Therefore, the new edition of *Scuola Democratica* intends to widen the horizon to include all these forms of learning. While this expansion may suggest a new perspective, we preferred to maintain continuity by retaining the journal's title and, instead, evoking the novelty by introducing the subtitle (*Learning for Democracy*). We intend it to be a sign of a strong commitment to internationalization by maintaining the term 'scuola' (*school*) in the Italian title – here considered as a synecdoche, the rhetorical device by which the part is taken to represent the whole. This choice is for two reasons.

First, we would not like to convey a diminishing interest in school and university, two institutions that guide initial learning and where societies continue to invest the majority of resources. Public policies maintain high levels of interest in early-, continuing- and lifelong-learning.

Secondly, the issue of learning and the question of the future of the institution of democracy are clearly connected – albeit with a new restricted sense – with what has been the main focus of the journal. Moreover, lifelong learning seems to play a major role in knowledge societies (probably in a more effective way than before), and there are good reasons to confirm and rethink the original focus. Lifelong and life-wide learning may be fundamental to consolidate and develop a democratic society, extending the free choice of subjects in constructing their identities and life projects. In other words, they may contribute to a new and enlarging form of democratic school, or may renounce it. They may favor the advent of a more equitable world where social inequalities are more restrained, and more legitimated in terms of merit, or fail to contribute to it. They may help



Scuola Democratica
learning for democracy

www.scuolademocratica.it/en/

the passage to a more balanced economy that will assure at the same time the flexibility and security of occupation, the competitiveness of companies, territories and systems as well as the improvement of the quality of life and environment, or fail to do so.

While the disagreement remains among those who remain anchored to a now outdated reality and refuse to change – even though change is inescapable or already and irreversibly happened – it is clear that the ridge dividing those who propose diverse versions of change appears somehow thinner and less visible at first sight, emerging only at some later point; regardless, what remains is a partial share of languages, analysis, orientations. It is on this thinner, more complex latter ridge, as well as on the usual opposition between conservatism and innovation, that the new edition of *Scuola Democratica* is aimed at working by offering itself to scholars, policy-makers, civil servants, and professionals of these fields as an open space of information, reflection, and debate.