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Some critical reflections on the World Bank report “Achieving gender equality in education: examining progress and constraints” to promote democratic citizenship

Alcune riflessioni critiche sul rapporto World Bank “Achieving gender equality in education: examining progress and constraints” per promuovere la cittadinanza democratica

di

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Abstract:

Today’s sociocultural complexity urges pedagogical research to reflect on new educational and training needs to support the education of new generations, to *make humanity flourish*. Specifically, a contribution to the critical examination comes from the World Bank report “Achieving gender equality in education: examining progress and constraints”, published in november 2023. It underlines the fundamental role assumed by schools in serving young people in development of individual potential, for *active participation* in the building of societies in the perspective of the common good. This contribution questions, by investigating some theoretical assumptions of the report, the need to rethink educational practices to improve the quality of education, combat the different forms of social inequalities and promote gender equality in a *renewed human cohesion and social*. The affirmation of different individualities, with a view to equal opportunities, challenges the epistemological discourse of pedagogy in redefining new horizons of thought and action to govern the educational emergencies of contemporary times. An educational challenge that takes the form of designing training courses, paths of humanity and social justice for the construction of *democratic*

citizenship which has its foundations in respect for the rights of others, in the culture of dialogue and solidarity.

Keywords: human development, school, participation, gender equality, democratic citizenship.

Abstract:

La complessità socioculturale odierna sollecita la ricerca pedagogica a riflettere sui nuovi bisogni educativi e formativi a sostegno dell'istruzione delle nuove generazioni, per *far fiorire l'umano*. Nello specifico, un contributo alla disamina critica proviene dal rapporto della World Bank "Achieving gender equality in education: examining progress and constraints", pubblicato nel novembre del 2023. Esso sottolinea il ruolo fondamentale assunto dalla scuola a servizio dei giovani nello sviluppo di potenzialità individuali, per una *partecipazione attiva* in ordine all'edificazione delle società nella prospettiva del bene comune. Il presente contributo si interroga, indagando alcuni presupposti teorici del rapporto, sulla necessità di ripensare le pratiche educative per migliorare la qualità dell'istruzione, contrastare le diverse forme di disuguaglianze sociali e promuovere l'uguaglianza di genere in una *rinnovata coesione umana e sociale*. L'affermarsi delle diverse individualità, in un'ottica di pari opportunità, interpella il discorso epistemologico della pedagogia nel ridefinire nuovi orizzonti di pensiero e azione per governare le emergenze educative della contemporaneità. Una sfida educativa che si sostanzia nel progettare percorsi formativi, sentieri di umanità e di giustizia sociale per la costruzione della *cittadinanza democratica* che ha le proprie fondamenta nel rispetto dei diritti altrui, nella cultura del dialogo e della solidarietà.

Parole chiave: sviluppo umano, scuola, partecipazione, uguaglianza di genere, cittadinanza democratica.

1. Introduction

The socio-cultural and economic transitions, which mark the complexity of our times, urge pedagogical research to reflect on the new educational and training needs that emerge in support of the education of the new generations, with regard to the human being and his individual and social becoming. It is a matter of identifying adequate responses with ever greater adherence to the reality that is emerging through the elaboration of pathways and operational protocols. In the context of the fragmentary nature of life experiences, is unavoidable the search for an *authentic sense of educating*. It is understood as the ability to care for, nurture and nourish the growth of the human being in the dynamic development, during which he is formed as a human person (Maritain, 1960) in his uniqueness to develop all his dimensions and infinite potential.

Our way of approaching education cannot be reduced to something to be proposed externally to the subject as the object of intervention, but as attention to that educability that each person is able to bring out within himself, as an a 'piori' form of man. "Education is a mode of being-with-us, an inter-human, intentional, asymmetrical relationship; it is planning reciprocity, projected into the future and aimed at modifying the present situation (on a cultural and existential level). This relationship is acted out and understood on the basis of being-in-the-world (conditioned by the factuality of existence) and is made possible by the a priori existential structure 'being-for-education'" (Iori, 1988, p. 179).

The educational phenomenon, as an event characterised by the relationship with others and with the world, declines and specifies itself, in a peculiar way, in the characteristics of being an inter-

human relationship comprehensible in the dimension of the human, intentional in that it is oriented towards transcendence and the possibility of realisation and dynamic in its temporal collocation of a change in the present leaning towards the future through a projectual realisation. Educating in a conscious manner is articulated in the identification of the ends to which to turn the commitment in the relationship and in the search for the most suitable methodologies, so that the inter-human relationship becomes a support to the desired transformation.

Education is connoted as a personal commitment, a duty and an inescapable task to the full and harmonious development of the person, considering the hierarchy of values, the knowledge of the “civil heritage of mankind, the culture of reference, the consideration of man as an actor and subject of knowledge and history, of civil values” (Agazzi, 1958, p. 12). Pedagogy, a critical reflection on the educational experience, has the task of promoting authentic projects, spaces for intergenerational dialogue to understand and know the world, above all how it is possible to think about the education of today and of the future called to help the new generations to use the tools for constructing reality, so that they can better adapt to the world in which they find themselves and, if necessary, change it (Bruner, 1974). Interpreting the issues of the times in which we live in their immanence and contingency implies developing a pedagogical thinking that is in a kind of open and constructive dialogue with reality. It is necessary to rethink one’s educational actions in order to make the *human flourish* (Malavasi, 2020) in the various contexts of life through the promotion of processes of exploration and interpretation of what happens, generating significant progress capable of bringing with it values of equity and solidarity.

2. Promoting gender equality in education

The project dimension of education, oriented towards the future, requires taking on the subject of education in its multifaceted nature, referring “mainly to the meaning of transmitting, inserting, bringing in [...] and therefore mainly refers to the processes of acquiring and organising knowledge, knowledge and skills” (Loiodice, 2019, p. 33). Education, in setting literacy as its objective, constitutes a set of activities oriented towards the acquisition of useful knowledge, through training processes appropriate to the age of life, for social integration, as a human right that is due to each individual. Education must not be understood as an ‘accessory moment’ or ‘side dish’ of the constitution of the self, but rather represents a founding structure, since it is through it that the individual takes shape and defines his own being in the community to which he belongs: “the foundation of man is his formation, his essence is that of a spiritual being that takes shape from himself” (Gennari, 2001, p. 742). Education is an active process that encompasses not only structured learning situations, but also everything that makes authentic an action aimed at the creation of new value-oriented knowledge textures in which everyone is continually being formed and transformed.

In today’s societies marked by strong changes, in order to form citizens prepared to be able to face new situations, to be able to cope with problems, to be enterprising and flexible for the creation of a fairer and more sustainable world, as stated in Goal 4 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015) in *Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*, a paradigm shift is needed to help develop innovative processes that, starting from schools, are geared towards pursuing education for democracy and citizenship (Corsi, 2011). A paradigm based on dynamic and open processes to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to promote education for human rights, to the achievement of gender equality and self-determination for all women and girls (Goal 5), the promotion of a peaceful and non-violent

culture, global citizenship and the appreciation of cultural diversity and the role of culture in supporting sustainable development.

3. The World Bank report “Achieving gender equality in education: examining progress and constraints”

A contribution to the critical examination comes from the World Bank report *Achieving gender equality in education: examining progress and constraints* (World Bank, 2023), published in November 2023, in order to become aware, through transformative actions and concrete social commitment, of the need for a significant socio-cultural change in promoting gender equality in education under the sign of a democracy of education (Gramigna, 2010) as an inalienable value in guaranteeing everyone the same rights, in a *renewed human and social cohesion*. The report highlights a number of interventions to support the education of young women through programmes aimed at teaching and learning to try to reduce gender prejudices in schools and enable them to achieve and fully develop their *capabilities* (Nussbaum, 1997). The task of education is to revisit pedagogical paths and, in a peculiar way, it is a matter of reflecting on the ways and places of female education, the choice of reference values to educate for the valorisation of gender differences and guarantee equal opportunities in school contexts (Ulivieri, 2007). Thoughtful education, enriching for all, urges models of human and social coexistence, recognition and respect for diversity and the peculiarities of each in the construction of a human civilisation. This requires the need for an epistemological, methodological and content rethinking on the theme of gender differences, educational paths are hypothesised to encourage the potential of young women and lead them to move from the passivity of denied knowledge to the adventures of human knowledge (Borruso, Gallelli, Seveso, 2022), to intellectual creativity and to becoming protagonists of their own knowledge. The school connotes itself as a context for understanding how through education it is possible to transmit or deconstruct the feminine imaginary that binds culture and women's destiny, an imaginary that is steeped in stereotypes that must first be identified, considering the genders to be in a positive relationship with alterity (Lopez, 2017).

Within this framework, the World Bank document focuses on four broad areas of support, reflecting four specific 'barriers', through 11 indicators relating to interventions and activities for women's education: *Getting and Keeping Girls in School by Removing Barriers to School Access* (School Distance and Transport, Scholarships and Cash Transfers, Advocacy Campaigns and Changing Social Norms); *Creating Safe and Inclusive Schools* (Safer and More Inclusive Schools, Addressing School-Related Gender-Based Violence, Menstrual Health and Hygiene Management and Improving Water, Sanitation and Health Facilities); *Making Sure Girls are Learning Well by Improving the Quality of Education* (Teacher Professional Development and Training on Gender Norms, Gender-Sensitive Curriculum and Textbooks, Girls' Clubs); *Supporting Girls and Young Women in the Transition to the Labor Market* (Skills Development Programs, Tackling Gender Norms and Assisting in the Transition from School to the Labor Market) (World Bank, 2023).

The report emphasises the fundamental role played by schools in creating the conditions for each individual's potential to be expressed to the full and manifested in the right to have access to lifelong learning opportunities for all in acquiring the necessary tools and knowledge to achieve a dignified life and complete one's life project. A school that places itself at the service of young people, of their desires and expectations as well as their problems in the development of individual potential, to promote *active and conscious participation* in the civic, cultural and social life of the community,

respecting the rules, rights and duties, in order to build societies in the perspective of the common good. Becoming responsible protagonists becomes “a fundamental condition for the life of modern democracies that are necessarily founded on an idea of an educating society, which presupposes co-citizenship, shared responsibility, mutual understanding, cooperation and participation in deliberative processes” (Parricchi, 2019, p. 27).

What responsibilities does the school of our time have in proposing educational ideals and not only in the transmission of knowledge and understanding? “The school today is at a *crossroads*: on the one hand the *market*, with its competitive mechanisms and its imperatives of social efficiency; on the other hand *democracy*, with its project of human emancipation. [...] It must choose which principle to follow, which path to take. [...] Choose whether to form a one-dimensional man, the competent but politically indifferent producer, disengaged or conformist, or the *complete man*: a participative and reflective citizen, and producer at the same time” (Baldacci, 2019, pp. 9-11) of renewal action in the sign of sharing and solidarity commitment for a better humanity.

Some of the emblematic issues of the report, starting from the four areas of intervention outlined above, highlight the need to rethink educational practices, within and beyond reality, through the discernment of the relationship between what we try to do and what happens as a result (Dewey, 1926) in order to improve the quality of education and build a participatory social fabric that recognises the right of gender citizenship. It is more urgent than ever to take up the challenge of designing interpretative paths capable of redefining and constructing new keys to access reality in order to combat the various forms of social inequalities through the formation of critical thinking at the basis of a correct interaction with others, of a responsible and democratically grounded action in local and global dimensions.

4. Equal opportunities for democratic citizenship

The affirmation of different individualities, with a view to equal opportunities, challenges the epistemological discourse of pedagogy in redefining new horizons of thought and action to govern the educational emergencies of the contemporary world. Relevant is the philosophical reference to hermeneutics as a look at the complexity that characterises the worlds of education, between the theoretical and the praxical, as a real commitment that characterises pedagogy in accepting the real instances of educational experiences in action. “The specifically hermeneutic contribution to pedagogical discourse must correspond, through interpretative flexibility, as much to the need for a critical and dynamic epistemology as to the problematic nature of ethical-existential intentionality. The category of research as a theoretical horizon and at the same time an activity and practical instrument of incessant interpretation thus becomes the key qualification of the phenomenological-hermeneutic becoming of the pedagogical discourse” (Malavasi, 1992, p. 4).

Redefining the training methods and goals towards which to direct action urges pedagogical research to rediscover the sense of a training that restores emancipatory perspective to practices, that knows how to be open to dialogic relations in educational action to promote the use of devices that respond to the needs of a school called to look beyond diversity for an *appreciation of gender differences*, so that it can contribute to building models of coexistence in which everyone can feel recognized (Burgio, Lopez, 2023).

An educational challenge that is substantiated in designing educational paths suited to social contexts, in outlining *paths of humanity* (Parricchi, Vaccarelli, 2023) and social justice to counter the structural injustices of education systems. A perspective that aims to restore centrality to the theme

of equality, of equal educational opportunities, of educational equity for an improvement in the living conditions of the subject, for access to the highest levels of education for all and all to counter the inequalities present in the social, economic, political, educational and cultural system. Thinking of education within the horizon of social justice, understood as a process and direction of development that enhances quality education, is connoted as an itinerary of meaning towards which to strive for the ethical and moral formation of the new generations.

An authentic citizenship education capable of forming a “critical, argumentative and dialogical” (Cambi, 2021, p. 8) political consciousness based on community and convivial models of belonging to a common project for the construction of social cohesion. A way of inhabiting the places where human communities give themselves the norms and customs necessary to guarantee peaceful coexistence with a global democratic ideal at its centre, oriented towards the protection of the Earth and the development of societies and their inhabitants. In this perspective, “a model of cognitive civilisation is developed that places democracy as a value that must always be reconquered and internalised, but which stands as a criterion-guide of a civil conscience educated in the understanding and affiliation of subjects and exercised in the dialectic that connects and problematises, that dialogues with otherness” (Ulivieri, 2018, p. 18).

Rethinking the very idea of citizenship, linking it to a welcoming and dialogic democracy, focused in its principles and values, making it an educational commitment, implies fostering the development of a democratic conscience, in line with the values of freedom, civil coexistence, solidarity and respect for the human person. Education represents the very meaning of democracy understood as ‘a way of life’, a fundamental aspect of human life, as the only possibility to allow the development of each person's individuality, within a context characterised by social rules, considered as an authentically educational experience (Spadafora, 2018).

5. Conclusions

From the reading of the report *Achieving gender equality in education: examining progress and constraints*, the school context emerges as a place for building knowledge and ethical-social values (Elia, Polenghi, Rossini, 2019) with a view to building a more equitable and fair human society on a planetary scale. The school has the task of training people, providing “the skills to practise democratic and active citizenship education in a complex and pluralistic society, giving them the words, knowledge and thinking skills to do so. Education for the citizenship of the future consequently includes the moral dimension and incorporates the intercultural perspective necessary in a plural society” (Santerini, 2010, p. 50).

Educating for democratic citizenship means promoting the participation of each individual, training them in critical thinking and reflection in a democratic community, “where it does not become something concrete through an educational process, the prospect of citizenship would remain empty of primarily political meaning and therefore of no value to man” (Bertolini, 2003, p. 131). Placing citizenship within a framework of democratic education implies considering democracy as something more than just a form of social organisation, it must be understood as a form of emancipation of human and socio-political coexistence: It is an instance interpreter of a concrete action that draws and finds its lifeblood in solidarity practices and in the exercise of cooperation, in which reciprocity becomes a connotative and substantial feature in view of the recognition of equal rights and equal dignity for everyone.

The construction of *democratic citizenship* finds its foundations in the culture of dialogue as a

means of coexistence that integrates differences and disposes them to recognise each other with respect through “a dialectic interweaving of exchanges necessary for mutual recognition” (Pinto Minerva, 2002, p. 67). A coexistence to activate a confrontation on an equal footing, in which each person feels free to express his or her own way of thinking, being and living in respect not only of the other but also of himself or herself in order to build a world worth living in, with people who are able to see other human beings as persons, with their own thoughts and feelings that deserve respect and consideration (Nussbaum, 1998).

A focus that leads to rediscovering the value of solidarity, intra- and intergenerational, as a fundamental anthropological category characterised by an original openness towards the other, capable of sharing and commonality between different subjects, giving rise to bonds of universal reciprocity. A spirit of social cohesion and solidarity that calls for education in knowing how to develop strategies to learn to live together, fostering the ability to put oneself ‘in the shoes of others’ for a coexistence that is welcoming and attentive to the needs of others (Fiorucci, 2020).

Being in solidarity implies the dimension of proximity in an attentive and caring sharing of an existential project that asks to be protected and safeguarded, in a configuration of meaning within which a new humanity is generated in interdependence. Assuming solidarity as a constitutive dimension of the human condition connotes a way to face the challenge of complexity, with respect to the new transformative instances of contemporaneity, in the perspective of a new planetary humanism. “A concrete humanism, which responds precisely to the need to fraternise in the face of global dangers and planetary crises. It does not oppose diversity to unity, the singular to the general. It is founded on the recognition of unity in human diversity, and of diversity in human unity” (Ceruti, Bellusci, 2023, p. 96).

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