

SUSTAINABILITY: TODAY'S EDUCATION CHALLENGE

SOSTENIBILITÀ: LA SFIDA ODIERNA DELL'EDUCAZIONE

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Abstract

The urgency today to rethink education involves a broad comparison with the notion of sustainability. It, assumed as an interpretative-regulatory prerequisite of every educational reality and especially of the school institution, can guide the educational and training action towards the promotion of a culture of sustainability. It is therefore a question of creating a new partnership between man and the environment, which does not neglect to qualify human relations in the name of care and solidarity. We are all called to deliberate for the common good, with commitment and responsibility, to complete the project of development of a community. Pedagogical reflection and educational designing welcome, for their part, the challenge of change to rethink new ways of understanding human relationships and with the environment.

L'urgenza oggi di ripensare l'educazione impegna un ampio confronto con la nozione di sostenibilità. Essa, assunta come presupposto interpretativo-regolativo di ogni realtà educativa e in special modo dell'istituzione scolastica, può orientare l'agire educativo e formativo alla promozione di una cultura della sostenibilità. Si tratta, allora, di creare un nuovo sodalizio tra l'uomo e l'ambiente, che non trascura di qualificare le relazioni umane nel segno della cura e della solidarietà. Siamo tutti chiamati a scegliere e deliberare per il bene comune, nell'impegno e nella responsabilità, per portare a compimento il progetto di sviluppo di una comunità. La riflessione pedagogica e la progettualità educativa accolgono, da parte loro, la sfida del cambiamento per ripensare nuove modalità di intendere i rapporti umani e con l'ambiente.

Keywords

Sustainability; education; new partnership; cultural change; designing.
Sostenibilità; educazione; nuovo sodalizio; cambiamento culturale; progettazione.

1. Man and the environment: a new partnership

To outline a change towards a sustainable development model, it is essential that a renewed partnership is established between man, the environment and his territory.



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It is a question of creating an alliance that allows man to adopt lifestyles in conformity to his own integral development and in balance with natural ecosystems, and which, at the same time, favors civic and social participation and orientation towards the common good. This new pact must also reconsider how man intends to inhabit the territory and the urban context in the future and, more generally, how to weave relationships with people and with the environment, since it is precisely in the intertwining of relationships, nature and culture that the sense of belonging and responsible participation is generated (Malavasi, 2003b).

This new line of thought makes it possible not to conceive ecosystems and territories in exclusively manipulative terms, as unlimited resources to be exploited, or even as an exclusive opportunity at the service of human needs, but projects to precisely protect the entire planet (Malavasi, 2020), thus promoting "in all peoples a new feeling of global interdependence and shared responsibility for the well-being of the whole human family, of the great community of life and of future generations" (The Earth Charter, auth. trans.).

Pedagogical reflection, among the many visions that investigate the relationship between man and the environment, is called to a critical reading of them and to anchor the new perspective according to an ethical foundation that acts in search of a new balance between "conservation of physical and biological resources exhaustible of nature, responsible and sustainable management of the necessary adaptation processes and a new conception of human development in the light of needs and values compatible with the environmental context" (Ballarin Denti, 2011, p. 53, auth. trans.).

However, such a transformation requires a widespread consensus aimed at simultaneously promoting and supporting the new heuristic results of scientific communities, technological innovations, oriented governance choices, between local and global, and the availability of financial resources. A clear legislative orientation can certainly be generative of concrete actions both locally and globally, but on condition that they are combined with the increase of participatory processes of citizenship in the sustainable management of territories. In fact, authentic development is not only based on macro-initiatives and projects of an economic and political type, but also requires the free and creative individual initiative to interpret one's own life in personal development and in the service of interdependent action and collaboration with the others (Beretta, 2008). As also recalled by the seventeenth objective of the UN 2030 Agenda, *Strengthen the means of implementation and renew the global partnership for sustainable development*, partnerships between governments, civil society and the public and private sectors must be further promoted and developed.

When approaching the design of educational paths to a new 'global citizenship', it is necessary to consider the objective of generating in people a sense of belonging that

goes beyond geographical and territorial borders and which aims to found a common identity. Education for democratic participation has to promote dialogue between cultures, knowledge and encounter with the life and places of each territory, to generate, in commitment and responsibility, new and fruitful ways of experiencing citizenship (Iori, 2003). In the willingness to dialogue, it is possible to meet the other by enhancing their peculiarities and, jointly, by seeking those common and shared references necessary *to design living together* in a democratic and supportive way (Fiorucci, 2017; Santerini, 2018).

In this orientation, the environmental heritage constitutes an authentic opportunity to direct humanity on a path towards the generation of a 'global humanism'. The pedagogy of the environment, supported by a solid ethical-educational orientation, can significantly contribute to designing the necessary balances to consolidate a peaceful and supportive coexistence between men and between man and his own territory. As Iavarone (2008, p. 116, auth. trans.) states, «the environment always takes on a double connotation: it is a physical place but it is also, and above all, a social space, a territory of obligatory confrontation for the growth and development of the identity of the single individual and of the community to which he belongs».

Within their own territory, understood not only as a physical-cultural space, but also as an intentionally formative space, each person is called to conceive and implement their own human development project with commitment, responsibility and care for others. Promotion of the personal and common good, of participatory democracy in the governance of one's own territory and of the care of human relations and with the environment, constitute primary guidelines for educational interventions in favor of equitable and sustainable development. And it is precisely in the care of human relationships and towards the environment that it becomes possible to interpret human relationships and with the entire ecosystem in unprecedented ways, that it is possible to design educational paths of sustainable development that can foster "a new wisdom [for] to live the earth with measure" (Mortari, 2020, p. VII, auth. Trans.).

2. For a cultural transformation towards sustainability

In questioning the particular contribution that education is called to offer today in the face of the need for an ecological transition, two substantial evidences emerge: that of deepening training on the issue of sustainability and the need to define organizational models that allow as a priority a shared inter and multidisciplinary educational designing.

The incisive strength of the educational discourse based on solid pedagogical principles and effective networks of schools and with the territory, according to

governance regulated by the interpretative assumption of the notion of sustainability, today constitute the essential combination to undertake this change. At the same time, legislative provisions also constitute a significant element of support for the training environment in order to generate a "culture of sustainability". In fact, in all areas, even in international debates, reference is made to a common orientation towards a shared political-pedagogical planning, to outline valid and effective solutions to the relevant problems of living together, in the perspective of the common good and human promotion (Malavasi, 2012; Bertolini, 2003). However, while emphasizing the need for it, we agree with the belief that it begins with personal accountability of each person to plan their own lifestyles and life choices that solid foundations can be laid towards sustainable development. Therefore, we understand the crucial role that education and training can offer in this sense.

In the interdisciplinary confrontation between pedagogy and politics, education to enhance the natural and cultural heritage, as an essential and constitutive moment of human formation, joins the actions of participation and civic commitment for a democratic, supportive and sustainable coexistence, a fundamental prerequisite for the political project of "wanting to live together". In promoting encounters, the exchange of memories and intergenerational and intercultural dialogue, shared orientations define and nourish a sense of place and community. As Mortari (2008, p. 43, auth. trans.) argues, often «our living is reduced to an indifferent transit where people are almost not seen and not heard». And it is precisely the education to the sense of place, to the creation of feelings of plurality of belonging to the territories, which can contribute, in the dynamic between local and global, to support the participatory commitment to the life of one's own social context and to cultivate a desire for community (Santerini, 2001). In the exploration of the environment and the surrounding places, gradually, systematicity and formative intentionality, it is possible to strengthen critical thinking and acquire new awareness.

In pursuing the objective of encouraging the emergence of a culture of sustainability, education can contribute to reviewing the usual ways of thinking and weaving human relationships and relationships with the environment, often marked by individualism and the pursuit of *self-interest*. In the perspective of a renewed awareness, respectful of environmental ecosystems and characterized by caring relationships towards each other, it is possible to deliberate in favor of the common good and to acquire lifestyles aimed at the full fulfillment of one's personal way of living.

To put the promotion of the culture of sustainability at the centre, it is therefore necessary to change education itself - even in formal learning contexts - recognizing, however, its crucial role. It is a question of making a profound transformative change of the educational systems themselves, in an attempt to modify the way of weaving the

links between man and the world of people, things, natural resources, meanings, in the horizon of solidarity, responsibility and caring for each other.

A primary aspect to consider consists in assuming the notion of sustainability as that interpretative-regulatory presupposition at the foundation of every educational action, in living the whole daily life of the school and involving both the plans of the educational offer, as well as the organizational and governance aspects school. In a certain way, as Sterling (2013, p. 13, auth. trans.) states, «the overall vision still seems that of a sustainability that adds to and does not transform existing education systems». The desired orientation should not be that of introducing new disciplines or placing the perspective of sustainability side by side with the various scientific subjects, but rather a shared and focused plan is needed to generate, over time, an ecological thought that makes it possible to act responsibly for the enhancement of territories, to make cities more livable and to generate greater social cohesion. In other words, education to a culture of sustainability cannot be appended to the educational discourse, but, central to the school experience, has to consider, in a more profound way, the care towards the other and the environment, in the commitment to the realization of one's personal project of life, for responsible citizenship and in the perspective of human development capable of generating well-being and prosperity for all, social equity and environmental protection.

The central nucleus of the whole discourse is "knowing how to take care of the other", the creation of meaningful and supportive relationships in an educational alliance promoted not only by the school, but also by local educational agencies, families and universities. We speak of that care, which "preserves the vital force" and which "makes the being flourish", which responsibly commits to "having regard" for oneself, for the other and for the living environments (Mortari, 2017, pp. 97 -102, auth. trans.). *Responsibility* and *care*, towards the *common home* and towards the *humanun*, are therefore the key issues for implementing the expected change. As argued by Iori (2020, p. 18, auth. trans.), "calling attention to the relevance of *care* means placing it at the center of theory and political action, and at the same time considering it the heart of education".

Therefore, we intend to envisage an idea of education that promotes educational realities to be active and closely connected with the territory and with the life of the community, who know how to work in synergy and according to an educational co-responsibility with all the operational skills involved. Educational realities that know how to network with their own territory and are structured according to governance choices based on the notion of sustainability and a training nourished by valid pedagogical references trace possible trajectories to generate the founding conditions for the desired change.

3. Designing sustainable education

The rediscovery of that intrinsic bond that unites man to the earth in an inter-dependent way constitutes that basic prerequisite for the delineation of the *new* and *harmonious pact* (Malavasi, 2019) which has been discussed. Pedagogical reflection and educational planning must know how to live up to the challenges that characterize the contemporary world in view of this change. In fact, «the lack of sense of responsibility as a cause of dispersion and escape from oneself, as a refusal to be oneself» (Iori, 2016, p. 27, auth. trans.) constitutes the starting point for a careful analysis of the complexity of the phenomena in game and to develop a new project, a «being able to be different» (ibidem), in the desire to transcend the present situation.

In the pedagogical critical examination, from a phenomenological perspective, there is an inherent tension that interprets educational phenomena and issues by seeking their meaning and essence. In this horizon, education is considered as an open endeavour in which «that original intentional direction that distinguishes educational action in its possibilities [...], an interpretative field constantly available to release new meanings and planning potential» (Malavasi, 1998, p. 39, auth. trans.). The educational action, therefore, is never constituted by a single and immediate event, since the old meanings are always developed, intertwined and reinterpreted with the new emerging ones, in places, contexts, temporalities and people that vary continuously. Education, understood as an endeavour, is the co-presence of elements of the past, present and future in which memory is constituted as a living direction which, by revealing the past and bringing with it the possible, builds the present of meaning (pp. 39-42).

However, a conscious and intentional educational action requires a basic ontological choice which must be supported by the commitment and testimony of personal life, certifying the fidelity of the decisions taken. If this action is supported by this, it takes place, in its occurrence, oriented towards the future, «towards the construction of possibilities that are not already guaranteed and founded, but require [...] to be thought out and witnessed» (p. 144, auth. trans.).

Starting with a critical examination of the methods of exploitation operated by man towards the environment and of the prejudicial conceptions most widespread in the common opinion about nature, the designing, in focusing on educational sustainability, has to favor the convergence of training needs with governance processes for the protection of the earth, according to the assumptions of integral human development. Environmental knowledge alone, as already stated, is not enough to generate a cultural change towards sustainability. Sustainability, in fact, «rather than a content, is configured as a strategy with which an educational model must be impregnated, in which environmental, economic, social knowledge is to be combined

with the relationships in which behaviors are structured» (Birbes, 2011, p. 13, auth. trans.).

Sustainability education projects start with a critical reflection on the current model of civilization, attesting to the extreme fragility and endangerment of the earth and bringing out aware perspectives aimed at generating common guidelines. A first tension needs to consider that respect for the environment must not come only following reactions to sensationalist events of environmental degradation, but must emerge as an intrinsic value in consciences who voluntarily live according to their own personal and specific ways of being in the world. A second horizon of commitment has to consider the earth, in its constitutively intrinsic and interdependent bond with human society, as a subject of juridical rights, in order to be able to initiate environmental education policies combined with fair and sustainable development models. Finally, as a third perspective, we have to propose the basic ethical-educational goals for outlining common environmental protection projects, as an alternative to the current socio-economic market models of development (Malavasi, 2003a).

However, the notion of educational sustainability cannot be limited or subordinated solely to the principles of economic and environmental sustainability, but its regulatory heuristic tension must be the expression of a culture suitable for operating in the construction of a civil society. This also implies that the designing contributions of sustainability are directed towards training for competent and responsible citizenship (Malavasi, 2008). In the dynamic and generative relationship, between theoretical reflection and practice, the resources and skills made available by every citizen to build the community together are fundamental.

Designing sustainable education means creating relationships between people and between peoples under the banner of fraternity, solidarity, reciprocity and justice, aimed at increasing the concrete collective commitment to build a new civilization with a more human face, in the awareness that the civil and moral aspects of democratic coexistence are learned. Also, the formation of dialogue and inclusion skills help to nourish the sense of belonging to the places of everyday life, which is essential for achieving a common identity.

Responsible commitment for the good of the community and participatory democracy in the management and governance of territories is an indispensable perspective for educational action that intends to promote a culture of sustainability today.

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