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Table of contents – Indice

Enricomaria Corbi
Editorial
A 'Just Released' Classic: Reflections on the Centenary of *Democracy and Education* 7
Editoriale
Un classico come 'novità editoriale': riflessioni sul centenario di *Democracy and Education* 11

SYMPOSIUM
Can We Really Educate for Democracy?

Elisa Frauenfelder, Maura Striano
Introduzione 17

Maura Striano
The challenge of democratic education for educational research. An overview 29

Rosa Maria Calcaterra
Ri-descrivere la democrazia: un compito filosofico ed educativo 47

David Kennedy
La Scuola Nuova 67

Masamichi Ueno
Educazione democratica e riforma della scuola in Giappone nell'era della globalizzazione: coltivare la speranza nell'apprendimento al di là del cinismo 89

Stefano Oliverio
La democrazia come educazione e l'epoca della post-verità 107

ESSAYS – SAGGI

Lucia Ariemma
Un modello di educazione ambientale in età romana.
Lucrezio e Virgilio 129

Marinella Attinà, Paola Martino
Lo spazio pedagogico del 'come se'. Morfologia narrativa tra oralità e digitalità 145

Mario Gennari
Tommaso e lo sfondo gnoseologico del *De Magistro* 155

Claudio Melacarne
La ricerca educativa come indagine riflessiva. Logiche non lineari 171

Margherita Musello
Il difficile ingresso del metodo froebeliano in Italia.
Una corrispondenza tra Julie Salis Schwabe e Adelaide Pignatelli del Balzo principessa di Strongoli 189

BOOK REVIEWS – RECENSIONI

Antonio Cosentino
Striano, M., Oliverio, S., & Santarelli, M., (a cura di),
Nuovi usi di vecchi concetti, Milano: Mimesis, 2015 215

Maura Striano
Spadafora, G., *L'educazione per la democrazia*, Roma: Anicia, 2015 223

The challenge of democratic education for educational research. An overview

Maura Striano*

Abstract

Both the United Nation and the Council of Europe acknowledge the necessity to "educate for democracy" and encourage research in implementing models and good practice in public education. As a matter of fact, this appears as an emerging narrative, which runs parallel to the narrative of "democratic education" developed during the 20th century through a series of experiences and practices mainly external to the public school system of that century, both in Europe and in other countries. Both narratives are situated within a complex economic and socio-political scenario as well as a context featuring an intense cultural debate on the nature and meaning of democracy in times of "anxiety," "disaffection, and "distress." Moreover, the educational discourse unfolds through the highlighting of a series of problematic issues that must be explored in all their interconnections, engaging academic research with a cultural, political and social challenge: "Securing democracy through education." This implies the interconnection of different forms of discourse and different narratives which are currently unfolding separately, as well as of different dimensions (cultural, political, practical), according to an interdisciplinary frame of reference which goes beyond the epistemological barriers still existing among different "academic tribes and territories."

Keywords**:** *democratic education; models; theories; practices.*

Riassunto

Sia le Nazioni Unite sia il Consiglio d'Europa riconoscono la necessità di "educare alla democrazia" e incoraggiano la ricerca a implementare modelli e buone pratiche nella educazione pubblica. Di fatto questa sembra una narrazione emergente che corre parallela a quella della "educazione democratica" sviluppata nel XX sec., attraverso una serie di esperienze e pratiche situate soprattutto al di fuori del sistema scolastico pubblico, sia in Europa sia in altre aree. Entrambe le narrazioni sono collocate all'interno di uno scenario economico e socio-politico complesso e di un contesto che presenta un intenso dibattito culturale sulla natura e il significato della democrazia in tempi di 'ansia', 'disaffezione' e 'angoscia'.

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Inoltre, il discorso pedagogico si svolge attraverso la sottolineatura di una serie di questioni problematiche, che si debbono esplorare in tutte le loro interconnessioni e che impegnano la ricerca accademica in una sfida politica e sociale, ossia 'assicurare la democrazia attraverso l'educazione'. Ciò implica l'interconnessione di diverse forme di discorso e differenti narrazioni che si dipanano, al momento, separatamente, come anche di differenti dimensioni (culturali, politiche, pratiche), secondo una cornice di riferimento interdisciplinare che va oltre le barriere che ancora esistono fra le diverse "tribù e territori accademici".

***Parole-chiave*:** *educazione democratica; modelli; teorie; pratiche.*

1. The cultural and socio-political background

In the last twenty years theoretical research in the field of political and social studies has highlighted the expansion of a "post democratic" system for Western Europe and North American democracies, caused by processes of deregulation, erosion of collective organizations and loss of collective organizational capacity, globalization, (neo-)liberalization, and privatization, which have eroded democracy from within (Rancière, 1995, 2002; Crouch, 2004).

At the moment, according to the latest edition of The Economist Intelligence Unit's *Democracy Index 2015*, which provides a snapshot of the state of democracy worldwide, almost one-half of the world's countries can be considered to be democracies, but, indeed, the number of "full democracies" is low and pertains only to 20 countries. Moreover, the "age of anxiety" in which we live shows how democracy is constantly tested in the face of war, terrorism, mass migration and other crises, which in some cases have led to serious setbacks of democratic political and social systems (TEIU, 2015).

Freedom House's *Freedom in the World 2016* survey also offers a portrait of "democracies in distress" and highlights the fact that "whatever the underlying strength of their institutions, leading democracies betrayed a worrying lack of self-confidence and conviction during 2015" (Freedom House, 2016: 1).

Finally, the *State of Civil Society Report 2016* prepared by Civicus detects the risk throughout the world of a restriction of methods of participation in political choices and governance due to a restriction of civil society rights, which implies that in many contexts and respects processes of political participation are more formal than real, which gives rise to a serious menace to the advancement of democracy in contemporary societies (Civicus, 2016).

Even in the countries where democracy seems to be a consolidated cultural and political experience a combination of disappointed citizens' expectations, a decreasing trust in political life (Dalton, 2008), negative media reports, individual and collective perception of a somewhat weak

performance of democratic governments, which causes a "disaffection" towards politics and democratic institutions (Pharr & Putnam, 2000), have produced significant "fluctuations" of "system support" (Norris, 2011: 241; Merkel, 2015).

Moreover, three 'counter-narratives', which mutually reinforce each other, are currently contesting the Western neo-liberal democratic narrative: the first one (clearly visible, for example, in Turkey and Iran) emphasizes an alleged trade-off between state security and individual liberty, sacrificing the rights of citizens in order to ensure their protection and the maintenance of the state; the second one, mainly supported by China, emphasizes the 'incompatibility' of some cultures with liberal democracy's universalistic vision on the basis of recognition and respect for cultural differences, and opposes the dissemination of a democratic model, affirming the principle of sovereignty and non-interference among the states; the third, mainly maintained by Russia, claims that the Western democratic system has produced moral decay and promotes the return to local and 'traditional' heritage and values opposed to the Western model of development and governance (Habets, 2015).

The evaluation of the conditions and state of the art of democracy is a complex task, as it requires the identification of criteria, indicators, and standards (which offer a portrait of a complex and continuously changing process). Accordingly, the efforts to attain a broad and sound understanding of the contemporary political and social situation by tracking the development and change of democratic institutions, through the construction of data sets and indicators (Rånge & Sandberg, 2014) or by combining global standards with local forms of practicing and understanding democracy (see, for example, the work of research networks like V-Dem [*Varieties of Democracy*]), are extremely challenging.

These research efforts, developed on the basis of an empirical perspective, have been accompanied by a re-conceptualization of the notion of democracy, according to different frameworks and from different disciplinary perspectives, taking into account a variety of elements, which compose a multifaceted picture, and highlighting the risk for democracy to lose its internal core, while being celebrated as an ideal (Gauchet, 2002).

The rise of the globalization processes has led to the theorization of a 'cosmopolitan' or 'transnational' version of democracy, involving the construction of a new global constitutional order based on a 'double democratisation' of political life between and across states with the aim of constructing "a political order of democratic associations, cities and nations as well as of regions and global networks" (Held, 1995: 234); nonetheless, this theorization has been strongly criticized by political communitarian and political realists (Gorg & Hirsch, 1998; Dahl, 1999; Kymlicka & Marin, 1999; Saward, 2000), and these critics have opened up an intense debate on the risks of globalization and the role of transnational institutions in the advancement of a democratic understanding.

The call for a 'deliberative' version of democracy (Habermas, 1979; Bessette, 1980; Bohman & Rehg, 1997; Cohen, 1997; Guttman & Thompson, 2002*),* which aims at supporting the construction of a rationally regulated communication and consensus which will organize the public sphere, has been criticized by those advocating a "radical" and "agonistic" version of democracy (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985), based on the idea that the process of construction of a democratic social order implies a continuous challenging of the oppressive power relations existing in societies, and the acknowledgment of the role of difference and dissent; furthermore, the necessity to include a variety of perspectives and voices in the democratic discourse implies the reference to a "dialogic" (Giddens, 1994, 1998) and "inclusive" idea of democracy (Young, 2002) as well as a shift towards "listening" procedures to support processes of "recognition," "representation," and "reconciliation" (Dobson, 2014).

Finally, a complex exploration of the role of 'civil society' in the promotion and development of democracy (Barber, 1998; Diamond, 1994) has contributed to articulating and defining the features of a democratic social order within which citizens are educated for political engagement and participation not only by the educational institutions, but by the civil society as a whole (Bahmueller & Patrick, 1999).

2. Challenges for educational research and practice within the EU research area

Over time the EU has developed a strategy to promote and support the processes of democratization which includes providing membership related assistance and running assistance programs in many developing democracies of the world. On its side, in the *Guidance Note of the Secretary-General on Democracy* delivered in 2009, the United Nations has worked out a framework for giving support to the development, maintenance and implementation of democracy throughout the world, inspiring an "organization-wide strategy" that defines the "UN approach to supporting democracy," anchored to the three pillars of peace and security, development, and human rights (UN, 2009: 1).

Within this framework the UN acknowledges that particularly in emerging democracies, the development of a culture of democracy is essential and maintains that "the gradual embedding of democratic principles into the broader social fabric, while taking into account existing societal norms, practices and traditions, should be nurtured and strengthened" (United Nations, 2009: 6). As a consequence, one of the main contemporary challenges is the development of a project of "Education for democracy" which can help to "inculcate democratic values and principles in a society, encouraging citizens to be informed of their rights and the existing laws and policies designed to protect them, as well as training individuals to become democratic leaders in their societies"; this can be done through "an ar-

ray of support activities, including civic and voter education, training, and technical and other support for media and political outreach initiatives, all of which are necessary to strengthen democratic citizenship and ensure effective popular participation" (*Ibidem*).

A cross-country study supported by the UNESCO highlights, indeed, a positive relationship between education and pro-democracy attitudes in developed countries but evidence for transition societies is more limited. In any case data show that the higher the level of education in society, the better the democratic institutions; they also shed light on three possible mechanisms through which education can exert an impact on democratic processes: acting through individual beliefs and values; providing tools to participate in democratic processes, including protest politics, which deepen the roots of democracy; and offering a better understanding of the essential characteristics of democracy (Chzehen, 2013).

In February 2015 the United Nations General Assembly adopted the resolution *Educating for Democracy*, within which all the Member States have been encouraged

> to integrate education for democracy, along with civic education and human rights education, into their education standards and to develop and strengthen programmes, curricula and curricular and extracurricular educational activities aimed at the promotion and consolidation of democratic values and democratic governance and human rights, taking into account innovative approaches and best practices in the field, in order to facilitate citizens' empowerment and participation in political life and policymaking at all levels [as well as to] provide appropriate expertise and resources for the development of relevant educational programmes and materials for democracy. (UN, 2015: 3)

Accordingly, international, regional and other intergovernmental organizations, within their respective mandates, are strongly invited "to share their best practices and experiences in the field of education for democracy" (*Ibidem*).

At the European level, in 2010 the Committee of Ministers to member states of the Council of Europe delivered *The Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education* which points out that

> member states should initiate and promote research on education for democratic citizenship and human rights education to take stock of the current situation in the area and to provide stakeholders including policy makers, educational institutions, school leaders, teachers, learners, non-governmental organizations and youth organizations with comparative information to help them measure and increase their effectiveness and efficiency and improve their practices. (CE, 2010)

The Charter suggests the following lines of research: "[R]esearch on curricula, innovative practices, teaching methods and development of evaluation systems, including evaluation criteria and indicators" and encourages the Member states to "share the results of their research with other member states and stakeholders where appropriate" (*Ibidem*).

In 2012 the European Council acknowledged the role of civil society in advancing democracy and encouraged the implementation of democratic practices:

> [A]n empowered civil society, in all its diversity, represents a crucial and integral component of any democracy and constitutes an asset in itself. Civil society actors can foster pluralism and contribute to more effective policies, equitable development and inclusive growth. Civil society organisations (CSOs) have the capacity to empower, represent, defend and reach out to vulnerable and socially excluded groups, including minorities. They can also foster economic and human development, as well as social cohesion and innovation. Moreover, CSOs often engage in initiatives to advance participatory democracy for transparent, accountable and legitimate governance, also in fragile situations. (CE, 2012)

Accordingly, the advancement and promotion of a democratic culture can be effectively supported by civil society organizations, to which a primary educational role should be acknowledged and assigned (Bahmueller & Patrick, 1999).

In 2014 the Council of Europe supported the starting up of a project to be developed and implemented between 2014 and 2017, aimed at the construction of a *Reference framework of competences for democratic culture,* divided into four phases: 1) development of a conceptual model of the competences which citizens require to participate effectively in a culture of democracy; 2) development of descriptors; 3) assignment of the descriptors to levels of proficiency; 4) production and dissemination of supporting documentation to be addressed to educational practitioners and policy makers (CE, 2016).

The development of a *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture* was the main focus of the Council of Europe Standing Conference of Ministers of Education held in April 2016 in Brussels and entitled "Securing Democracy through Education". The Council acknowledged the importance of education in "promoting democracy, intercultural understanding and tolerance, and in the fight against radicalisation, discrimination and extremist violence based on ideological, religious and racist pretexts" and presented the 2016-2017 programme on "Education for Democratic Citizenship" divided into short and long terms outcomes, intended as concrete outputs for member States in terms of educational research and practices.

Against this backdrop, educational research has been strongly challenged by the call for the development of a democratic culture and a democratic citizenship.

In defining its agenda constructed within the Horizon 2020 European research framework, the European Educational Research Association indicates as one of the key issues to be explored at an empirical and theoretical level the "complex transformations of education systems and policies," acknowledging the need "to research how education policies may support the development of innovative, inclusive and reflexive societies" (EERA, 2015). The EERA points out that "policies, including education policies, must target the basic needs of citizens" and "educational and knowledge-creating institutions, which are often closed off from the lifeworld, must provide leadership and research evidence" (*Ibidem*) therefore supporting the development in citizens of a 'know how' to act and how to participate in informed decision-making within structures of democratic governance and leadership. Moreover, the EERA suggests a re-orientation of educational research towards a focus on "making institutionalized education more efficient and a simultaneous shift towards learning in new and diverse contexts" (*Ibidem*), which requires the involvement of educational research in a wider range of spaces and collaborations within and between the various European research communities with the aim to "understand what circuits of knowledge and policy could best support the development of the European space of education" (*Ibidem*) within a European research space that requires crossing the boundaries between different fields of research and carrying out advances in interdisciplinary research.

3. The current educational debate on democratic education

In the 20th century the debate on the role of education to support the development of a democratic society has been particularly intense and has become challenging in times of crisis, war and renewal as happened at the end of the first and the second world wars, through different forms of discourse and narratives articulated along *institutional, academic* and *practical* discursive paths.

The debate has been accompanied by a series of experiences, some of which have produced models still followed and replicated in different cultural and territorial contexts. These experiences and practices have grown out of particular educational and social needs, such as the need to host and educate homeless and disadvantaged children and adolescents (we can refer, for example, to the experiences of Lev Tolstoj in Russia or those of the Little Commonwealth and the Summerhill School in England, as well as the republic of Bemposta in Spain) or to hide and protect Jewish children from the concentration camps (see, for example, the work of Janusz Korczak in Poland and the experiences of La Guette and Moulin Vieux in France: see Avet & Mialet, 2012). Other similar experiences were created later in other cultural and historical contexts (see, for example, the Republic of the Youth in Civitavecchia, Italy). Developed in very different cultural, political and territorial contexts, these experiences

share a series of common features: they address particular reparative and reconstructive educational and social needs, they are aimed at constructing a model of an 'ideal' social order that contrasts with the current one or prefigures the reconstruction of a new one in the future, they emerge mainly outside the framework of public education. Many of them have had strong relationships with the movement of the 'new schools' developed during the second half of the XX century, but each one has indeed been a special case.

Because of their uniqueness, they cannot be classified and circumscribed within a pedagogical theory or framework even if some of them share common references to the educational ideas of Jean Piaget, John Dewey and Célestin Freinet, and to Paulo Freire as well to psychoanalysis; indeed, they are rich in pedagogical ideas and understandings but rarely provide a scientific elaboration of models and theories.

A central theme is the acknowledgment of the freedom of choice and the capacity of self-government of children and adolescents, who are asked to share the educational and governmental responsibility with the adults. Educational contexts are therefore conceived of as small communities and micro-societies which have an autonomous and self-consistent life but are at the same time examples of democratic engagement in the life of the community and the society.

Some of these experiences (such as Summerhill School in England) are models which are being replicated in several contexts.

In the last forty years many other experiences have been developed as responses to challenging educational and social needs and have contributed to the construction of a common frame of reference that is acknowledged as 'democratic education' and that has supported the development of a particular narrative.

Some of them have become a model that has inspired the development of analogous experiences in other countries, such as, for example, Sudbury School in the USA. The ideas, the activities, and the practices that characterize these educational experiences are documented and shared within international networks such as IDEC at a worldwide level and EUDEC, with reference to the European context. These networks engage a vibrant educational community of practice involving either 'free' and private or semi-private and public schools (such as, for example, the Mission Hill School in the USA, the Lycée expérimental de Saint-Nazaire in France or the Escola da Ponte in Portugal), which provide a very interesting perspective on the possibility to re-construct the public school system according to a democratic and inclusive vision.

This educational narrative is often associated with narratives of 'alternative' or 'libertarian' schooling practices and to some 'unschooling' narratives, all of which share a critical vision of the public school system, which is seen as requiring a deep transformation in order to honor its democratic task. Another interesting narrative is the 'local' institutional narrative of the 'councils' of children and youth held in many municipalities in coun-

tries such France and Italy, which highlight the educational role of informal contexts in promoting civic education (De Masi & Santi, 2016).

Indeed, the public school system is challenged by a series of contrasting tensions, which have to be addressed and resolved in order to meet the educational demand for democracy.

Compared to the mainstream neo-liberal and market oriented narrative that has governed and still governs the educational agenda both inside and outside of Europe, the call for democratic education has been and still can be seen as part of a secondary narrative, which is nonetheless becoming more and more influential due to the current economic and political tensions (Hoskins, 2008). Moreover, it has significant points of contact with other emerging narratives of inclusive education (Booth & Ainscow, 2002; Oliver, 1990, 1996) and intercultural education (Faas, Hajsoteriou, & Angelides, 2013) with interesting implications in cultural, political and practical terms.

Within this new narrative regarding public schools (which, as mentioned before, runs parallel to the narrative of the 'democratic education' community and unfolds alongside the lifelong-lifewide learning approach) a complex debate has emerged, highlighting different interrelated issues within different cultural areas:

a) the social function of public school in relation to the challenge of offering to each and every student equal opportunities and possibilities of growth and advancement in the social realm and of opposing the risk of the reproduction and perpetuation of social inequalities; this issue is strictly connected to issues of power, cultural dominance, silenced expressions and voices that are not recognized and included in the educational processes that are carried out;

b) the role played by the public school in the cultivation of democratic values and in the portraying of a democratic society according to a model of democracy, which must be constantly re-defined in order to prove its usefulness in contemporary cultural and political scenarios (the discussion regarding the veil in France is just a small example of the complexity of this issue: see Benhabib, 2009); this encounters the necessity to 'decolonize' the educational discourse regarding democratic education by respecting and building on local structures and understandings of diverse and different civic communities, taking into account the different and unique platforms and relationships of learning, which respond to specific forms of understandings, survival, sustainability and intergenerational growth (Abdi & Richardson, 2008).

c) the prominent role assigned to the schools in the construction of a democratic citizenship with a strong focus on knowledge and competences to be acquired and measured in order to detect the individual level of performance in democratic citizenship (intended as an individual task) and on the development of dedicated curricula;

d) the strong tension existing between a performance and test-oriented vision of the school system, which characterizes the mainstream narrative

of public school both in Europe and in the United States and a student centred, inclusive vision of the school;

e) the difference of approaches to the educational task that can be highlighted in the alternative positions of the advocates of an "education for democracy" as opposed to an "education through democracy" (Biesta, 2007). These alternative positions are strictly connected to different visions of the educative function of the public school but also of the democratic ideal. Therefore in opposition to a vision of democracy intended as a procedural and political form of civic life and government based on specific norms and rules, following a neo-liberal frame of reference, a 'moral' and educational vision of democracy is proposed, intended as a form of associated life and as a collective practice (with reference to a Deweyan legacy). An interesting example of this contrast is clearly visible, for example, within the German debate between the *politische Bildung* and *Demokratiepädagogik* approaches (Himmelman, 2002; Sutor, 2002; Fauser, 2007), the latter highlighting the necessity of a pedagogical framework supporting the educational processes aimed at promoting a democratic awareness as well as democratic mindsets, forms of civic agency and social interaction. The current debate shows also the comparison between an idea of democratic education mainly connected to civic education and an idea of democratic education emerging from a collaborative inquiry, at multiple levels, into issues of social justice and social development within school contexts; this idea is connected to a vision of the public school as a dialogical and deliberative arena strongly engaged in community life and participating in a lively way in the construction of public discourses. As a matter of fact, deliberative and dialogical visions of democracy (Guttman, 1998, 1999; Young, 2000) call for the acquisition and development of communicative and deliberative attitudes and competences, while 'radical' visions of democracy call for the opportunity to build spaces for discussion and debate and to foster critical engagement and participation (Carr & Lund, 2011; Todd, 2015) but also for "listening" and "recognition" (Dobson, 2014, Honneth, 1994); moreover, as it mainly deals with ethical and political issues, democratic education can effectively benefit from the introduction and use within the educational context of philosophical, conceptual and linguistic tools (Brosio, 2000; Echeverria & Hannam, 2013).

f) the role played by the public school in the proposal of an educational discourse in dialogue and discussion with other legitimate stakeholders such as the communities, the families, and the students within a tripolar frame that can be understood as the tension among a "family state," a "state of families" and a "state of individuals" (Guttman, 1999). This calls for a reflection on the levels and procedures of democratization of the school governance and management based upon participatory democracy critically compared to the bureaucratic model of school governance and current school-based management plans, which imply the participation of the community in its decisions through collegial institutions and auxiliary institutions of teaching, not only in the administrative processes but

also in the pedagogical processes, as pointed out in the debate occurring in Latin America (Gadotti, 1988; Snauwaert, 1993). In this direction, for example, the development of guidelines for the democratization of school organization and management such as those implemented by the Council of Europe (Bäckman & Trafford, 2007) can be seen as a leading indicator, which contrasts with internal organizational cultures and tensions from an organizational perspective. On the other hand, from an economic, political and social perspective, the challenge of participation of the community in administrative and educational choices poses a series of problems connected to the risk of control and direction from economically and politically powerful forces, which have to be carefully explored;

g) the relationship between school and civil society in the promotion and advancement of a democratic culture that is seen as a challenging opportunity of growth by both sides. An interesting example of this relationship can be seen in the program *Demokratie Leben*, launched and funded by the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth in Germany which operates on various levels, setting out to support projects with not only local, but also regional and super-regional missions and involving schools, associations and committed citizens. Schools and civil society come to share a common goal, and the schools become a catalyst of interests, activities, and practices aimed at supporting the development of a democratic understanding of associate life and of civic agency and engagement.

h) the extent to which democratic education – either in the forms of civic education, or in promoting social justice and human rights – may be a challenge for disadvantaged and marginalized individuals and communities (see, for example, the EU funded project *My opinion, my vote* [www.myopinionmyvote.eu] aimed at supporting people with Down syndrome in the voting process).

i) the relationship between current innovative educational best practices emerging within the contexts of public and non public education (see, for example, the candidates for the Global Teacher Prize) and democratic education intended as the outcome of an overall educational process.

k) the relationship with other informal experiences, such as the 'councils' of children and youth, which highlight the educational role of informal contexts, a role that is connected to the necessity to implement democratic education within both formal as well as non formal and informal educational contexts.

4. Developing a multilevel approach in educational research on democratic education

As we have seen, the current educational debate on democratic education is fuelled by different visions of democracy and of education based on different cultural models, educational theories, and experiences.

As a matter of fact, this debate is constructed through three parallel discourses (with a meaning which follows Foucault's notion of discourse) on democratic education (Foucault, 1971) which, indeed, represent three different perspectives on the role of education in the development of a democratic citizenship and a democratic society. These discourses and narratives are motivated by three different research interests and epistemic positions, according to a framework referred to Habermas (1973). Moreover, each discourse is constructed through the use of a specific vocabulary and produces a distinctive narrative.

A first perspective can be identified as an 'institutional and political discourse' which unfolds at a transnational and national level through official declarations, charters, notes, and guidelines; a second one can be identified as an 'academic discourse' which unfolds through articles, books, talks, and public discussion; a third one can be defined as a 'practitioner' discourse which unfolds through documentation and dissemination materials, forums, the web, journals and newspapers, and public discussion.

These three forms of discourse are connected to different scientific approaches that produce different forms of knowledge, according to different epistemic positions and different research aims:

The 'institutional and political discourse' is mainly oriented by what Habermas (1973) calls a "technical interest", therefore refers to an "empirical-analytical" position, and moves towards the creation of descriptive and linear forms of knowledge (such as conceptual models, descriptors, indicators, frameworks, and taxonomies) aimed at orienting and supporting both scientific research and political and institutional actions, as well as the agency of practitioners.

The 'academic' discourse is mainly oriented by a "practical" interest, therefore refers to an 'hermeneutic and phenomenological' position and is oriented towards the creation of interpretative forms of knowledge aimed at producing new understandings and new visions both at an empirical as well at a theoretical level; it unfolds through conceptual reframing, theory building, and discussion, and produces funds of knowledge aimed at supporting the advancement of scientific research but also at engaging political and institutional actors and practitioners, as well as a broader audience, in reframing the beliefs and ideas that orient policies and practices.

The 'practitioner' discourse is mainly oriented by an "emancipatory" interest, therefore refers to a 'critical' position and is oriented towards the creation of forms of knowledge mainly embedded in forms of agency, experiences and practices which are reflectively supported by those forms of knowledge, but are also stimuli and sources for new inquiry and the production of new knowledge and understandings.

Within this framework, educational research is required to develop a multilevel approach to democratic education in order to:

a) define a meta-level theoretical frame of reference that can work as a sort of research "hub" aimed at channelling, directing, and interconnecting

ideas, models and theories and that can support the interweaving of different discourses and narratives.

b) define multilevel and interdisciplinary working models to explore the issues highlighted, by interconnecting anthropological, economic, historical, linguistic, philosophical, political, organizational, sociological and pedagogical explorations in order to respond to specific research questions, to be addressed at an empirical as well as at a theoretical level;

c) explore and interconnect different discourses and different narratives through the voices of multiple actors, in order to build up cross-fertilization processes and contamination areas;

d) identify sustainable models and theories that can be used as the backdrop for promising educational projects, taking into account cultural, historical, social and territorial differences;

e) explore the potentialities of existing practices and support the development of innovative practices to be reflectively analysed, documented, and implemented;

f) define tools aimed at detecting and monitoring the educational advancements in the field of democratic education through the identification and implementation of indicators consistent with the indices and datasets currently used to evaluate the conditions of democratic life.

These research paths require an interdisciplinary frame of reference, overcoming the epistemological barriers still existing among different "academic tribes and territories" (Becker & Trowler, 2001).

Moreover, they call for the use of research procedures included within a democratic and deliberative frame of reference (such as, for example, grounded theory and participatory action research) that will be implemented with other non conventional inquiry approaches (such as, for example, 'philosophical inquiry'), whereas some issues will require exploration at a meta-level of analysis.

Accordingly, educational research is challenged to interconnect analytical, hermeneutic and critical perspectives as well as theoretical and empirical approaches and methodologies in order to have a multilevel impact at: a cultural level (impact on the current discourses and narratives; impact on the current research approaches); a political level (impact on policies and action plans at a local level); an institutional level (impact on organization and leadership patterns); a practical level (impact on the practices).

On these bases, a multilevel research approach to democratic education can concretely create spaces of cross-fertilization and contamination of ideas, practices, and theories through the engagement of multiple agents and stakeholders (taking into account the necessity to involve local communities, according to a democratic approach), and would effectively result in the definition and implementation of new forms of engagement in public education and the creation of new organizational models for public school development.

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