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SOCIO-ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO EDUCATIONAL ISSUES: GROUNDS, METHODS AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Editorial

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The educational ideas and methods that developed and spread between the 19th and 20th centuries, shaping global education systems, followed, *mutatis mutandis*, a common prototype, the Western one, considered as a universal axiom. Classical thinking on education has historically been characterised by a relative lack of interest in the education 'of others': the ideas, beliefs, principles, and dogmas that have built Western and modern knowledge on education have been exposed to intercultural confrontation and dialogical reflection only rarely. Robert LeVine and Rebecca New (2009) have shown that, until the first half of the 20th century, research on education was mainly concerned with European and North American educational models and that most of the scientific publications produced in this field concerned urban contexts in industrialised countries: examples of this are the now classic studies by Emile Durkheim (1922) or Pierre Bourdieu and Jean Claude Passeron (1972). The observation made by LeVine and New should not come as a surprise for at least two reasons: first, for most of their history, the human and social sciences have traditionally preferred the world of adults to the world of children¹ (and in the rare cases in which they have deviated from this principle, they have in any case privileged pedagogical speculation over fieldwork and didactic experimentation); secondly, because researchers interested in these inherent to education and training have privileged geographically close contexts because of the logistical (and financial) constraints that weigh on research devoted to teaching and learning processes (LeVine, 2007).

The advent of post-colonial studies has contributed to broadening research perspectives by highlighting the limitations of the prototypical educational model (Eurocentric and ill-suited to the specificities of certain peripheral or marginal contexts) and by highlighting the variety of cultural scenarios that, until the very recent past, had not been considered by either researchers or specialists in the field. A more critical approach to Western modernity has motivated a growing number of

¹ Lawrence Hirshfeld (2002) analysed this problem in an article with the deliberately polemical title: *Why don't anthropologists like children?* After Hirshfeld, other researchers have continued to debate the reasons that have made education an avoided field of study for social scientists. According to David Lancy, for example, the difficulties stem from the fact that it is a field subject to the 'veto power' of certain disciplines, such as psychology or the educational sciences, which consider themselves the true repositories of education research (Lancy, 2008. See also Robert LeVine and Karin Norman, 2001).





researchers from the demo-ethno-socio-anthropological disciplines to adopt a transdisciplinary perspective and to take an interest in child development, parenting, educational habits and routines, social norms, educational interactions, and communities, giving us the opportunity to discover educational models other than our own and that these heterodox strategies can prove effective (Goldstein, 1998).

Today, the socio-anthropology of education and comparative education constitute an emerging disciplinary field that allows us to understand and interpret more objectively not only local forms of kinship, caring and socialisation but also, and above all, the relationship that certain human groups have with knowledge and the different possible conceptions associated with the notion of education (Claes *et al.*, 2008; Ali & Ailincai, 2016; Ali, 2021). The research carried out in recent years has enabled us to learn about the organisational models that govern local family and community structures, to understand the mechanisms that give them a certain pedagogical validity and, finally, to understand that each human group uses cultural transmission strategies shaped by the (natural and socio-cultural) context.

This scientific production has highlighted the different roles played by parents, families, teachers and communities, contributing to the understanding of this typically human experience that is education.

The socio-anthropological approach to educational issues, unlike the cognitive one, has been primarily concerned with comparisons and comparisons, in order to systematically describe and analyse the strategies through which, in the different cultures and subcultures that make up our global village, networks, groups and social institutions pursue the universal goal of educating the members of their communities (Dortier, 2004). The methods at our disposal - ethnography, systematic observation or enquiry, for example - facilitate 'contamination' between disciplines, allow us to access both formal educational contexts (teaching and the everyday life of the school community) and informal ones (the transmission of ethical norms, socialisation, language learning, games, intergenerational relations and even household chores) and, above all, allow us to overcome the sterile opposition between qualitative and quantitative methods, as demonstrated by the now paradigmatic work of Melford and Audrey Spiro (1958), Sara Harkness and Charles Super (1977), Melvin Konner (1977), Barry Hewlett and Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza (1986), Edward Tronick, Gilda Morelli and Steve Winn (1987), Rebecca New (1994) or, more recently, those of Pierre-Olivier Weiss and his team at the Caribbean School Climate Observatory (2020a and 2020b) and Matairea Cadousteau and her colleagues at the University of French Polynesia (2021). Their research has helped lay the foundations of a conceptual universe in which the notions of identity, inequality, injustice, performance, exclusion, and marginalisation have found a new field of application (educational dynamics) and new terrain for research (educational contexts, both physical and virtual).

In a world that has become multidimensional, in which institutional systems and forms of social organisation at local, national, and supranational levels are juxtaposed, it has become difficult to find common criteria. The coexistence of people with specific needs and from different cultural backgrounds in the same educational environments represents another challenge to the dogmatism - often implicit - that guide educational action (in the family, at school, or in other spheres) and that





every culture tends to assume as absolute and universal. In a planetary context in which walls and barriers seem to rise as normality, the point of view proposed by the socio-anthropology of education therefore has the considerable advantage (but also the responsibility) of confronting us with diversity, with the ethnographic elsewhere, with the margins of our humanity (Weiss & Ali, 2022).

This special issue of the Italian Journal of Health Education, Sport and Inclusive Didactics brings together thirteen contributions based on this perspective, following disciplinary or transdisciplinary approaches, and offering to our readers the widest and most up-to-date panorama of research. The articles we selected critically discuss a series of fundamental issues:

1. The role of the research terrain (understood as a geographical context, as a human and natural ecosystem or as interactive dynamics);
2. The validity of socio-anthropological research methods for studying educational dynamics;
3. The epistemological reflections inherent to the possibility of proposing didactic solutions that are contextualised, inclusive and capable of considering our humanity in all its diversity.

We are confident that, in this post-pandemic era (so charged with tensions and critical conditions) a more human-centred approach to educational issues would offer food for thoughts (and for action) and that our readers will appreciate our willingness to show, with some optimism, that another world is possible.

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