



**Proceedings of the 2nd International
Conference**

of the Journal Scuola Democratica

REINVENTING EDUCATION

VOLUME III

**Pandemic and Post-Pandemic
Space and Time**

**ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA
DEMOCRATICA"**

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**Pandemic and Post-
Pandemic Space and
Time**

Via Francesco Satoli, 30 – 00165 - Rome, Italy

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***Title* Proceedings of the Second International Conference of the Journal “Scuola Democratica” – Reinventing Education VOLUME III Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Space and Time**

This volume contains papers presented in the 2nd International Conference of the Journal “Scuola Democratica” which took place online on 2-5 June 2021. The Conference was devoted to the needs and prospects of Reinventing Education.

The challenges posed by the contemporary world have long required a rethinking of educational concepts, policies and practices. The question about education ‘for what’ as well as ‘how’ and ‘for whom’ has become unavoidable and yet it largely

remained elusive due to a tenacious attachment to the ideas and routines of the past which are now far off the radical transformations required of educational systems.

Scenarios, reflections and practices fostering the possibility of change towards the reinvention of the educational field as a driver of more general and global changes have been centerstage topics at the Conference. Multidisciplinary approach from experts from different disciplinary communities, including sociology, pedagogy, psychology, economics, architecture, political science has brought together researchers, decision makers and educators from all around the world to investigate constraints and opportunities for reinventing education.

The Conference has been an opportunity to present and discuss empirical and theoretical works from a variety of disciplines and fields covering education and thus promoting a trans- and inter-disciplinary discussion on urgent topics; to foster debates among experts and professionals; to diffuse research findings all over international scientific networks and practitioners’ mainstreams; to launch further strategies and networking alliances on local, national and international scale; to provide a new space for debate and evidences to educational policies. In this framework, more than 800 participants, including academics, educators, university students, had the opportunity to engage in a productive and fruitful dialogue based on research, analyses and critics, most of which have been published in this volume in their full version.

Pandemic and Post-Pandemic Space and Time

A Premise

Papers in this third volume deals with the Covid-19 pandemic which is having an enormous impact on education systems worldwide. Policy makers, teachers, school managers, parents and students have been called to the reinvent their way of 'doing school'. At the same time, the governance of the education system and schools' organizations have been exposed to unprecedented tensions.

Within a short period of time, radical changes had to be introduced, simultaneously, at various levels of the school system. At national and regional level, there has been the need to rethink the way in which teachers are recruited, engaged and managed. National assessment and evaluation systems have been suspended or redefined in their uses by school actors. The ways through which institutes were managed and organized had to be rethought, passing in a very short time through an on and off of dematerialization and hyper-normativity of time and space. Within schools, managers and teachers have been called to redefine the role of digital technologies in their didactic, as well as in their relationships with families and students. In some cases, these set of changes led to experience novel and unexpected daily proximities, in other prevailed a context characterized by distance and unsatisfactory relationships. Managers and teachers have been asked to re-invent their professionalism to rethink their organizational, didactic and relational competences. Students and families, on their side, have been called to rebuild and reimagine new way of being at school, re-inventing the spaces and time of schooling and the way in which they relate among each other and with teachers.

The pandemic emergency has been a lens revealing intersections and structural tensions among various level and actors of the education system, but also allowing opportunities of changes thanks to the exogenous shock. At the same time, it must be considered that the emergency is interacting on pre-existing inequalities and contradictions. The pandemic clearly revealed the deep disparities of educational opportunities associated to students' life and housing conditions, beyond their access and uses of technological devices. Remote teaching and the enactment of an 'emergency didactic' has exacerbated learning difficulties for underprivileged students (children facing material deprivation, students with migratory background, students with special needs or disable, etc.). The interaction between the pandemic and pre-existing inequalities created different contextual conditions for actors' agency, orienting

toward different directions the pandemic's transformational potential.

Higher education systems have been affected too: in constant evolution due to constant transformations of society and changed functions of knowledge, universities have undergone a structural change along with pandemic times. Simultaneously, the growing relevance of knowledge for the economic development of the capitalistic system has profoundly affected higher education systems, characterized by the neo-liberal approach which has subject of increasing critical analysis.

However, Higher education systems are starting to be affected by other somewhat inevitable changing processes due to the evolution of knowledge and the consequent forms of its transmission. These forms have to be necessarily new both because of the availability of new instruments and the increased need to develop interpretative models of a constant and often unpredictable change. In this juncture the university might assume a renewed central role. At Higher Education System level, the growing use of digital instruments is envisaged in order to cope with the rising of the management rates of the training offer as well as to answer to the growing differentiation of user categories. A feasible consequence could be the increasing of the already pressure for the differentiation among the universities, with the related social implications.

At individual university level, it is foreseeable the demand for university involvement in tackling the problems of society and the economy will increase. And this at global, national and local level. From an organizational point of view the most significant feature is represented by the accumulation of traditional and new tasks that do not seem to be possible to manage. Whatever form the higher education systems will come to take, it remains that a central point to be clarified concerns the management of change. It will be the market that will impose its rules and the universities will organize themselves individually within the invisible enclosures that will guide their policies (with predictable growing social and territorial differences), or instead the State will choose incentive policies to direct its training system. It remains that in a condition of uncertainty and constant change the university's roles multiply and become – at least potentially – more and more central. It can therefore be argued that the university is not only called upon to respond to the demands of society but by elaborating answers and solutions to the problems it progressively affects the functioning of society.

We are fully aware that each educational experience produces specific results and definitions of teaching-learning practices. The well-established model of the magister teacher, based on a one-to-many transmission of knowledge, is complemented by new configurations of teaching-learning practices. There are

teaching practices that cultivate the ambition to combine the technological innovation with the psychological and pedagogical issues. Educational technologies, such as the Interactive Whiteboard, incorporate a new grammar and pragmatic in which the emphasis is placed on the involvement and the participation of the student, as well as on a “reverse teaching”, compared to the traditional one. The diffusion of online educational platforms, based on algorithmic architectures and data-driven approaches, also draws attention to a personalized way of learning and a datafication of teaching. Digital technologies are therefore stimulating a series of transformations in the socio-material order of the class affecting the spatial and temporal configuration of teaching. At the same time, they are embedded in the complexity of the educational contexts that rework their practical and symbolic value.

In the European framework of strengthening the relations between the labour market and education, we also witness the implementation of teaching practices associated with the idea of knowledge as an economic and social investment. Recently, a large field of critical investigation has highlighted how teaching aimed at improving the employment prospects of students is deeply affecting public values in education. At the same time, different points of view in the educational field claim to postpone the transmission of skills related to the labour market to broader educational objectives of social inclusion and civic participation.

The new proxemics imposed by the current pandemic challenge traditional spatial configuration, from the arrangement of desks to the mobile use of chairs, from the forms of communication in virtual environments to the interaction in the classroom. Therefore, this is to register the need to re-elaborate the ecology of the educational practices, starting from the socio-material space of learning.

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Ethnography of a Relationship Between Social Workers and Homeless People: The Educational Function of the Research and the Mediation Role of the Researcher

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ABSTRACT: *This contribution focuses on two themes: the role of the ethnographer as a mediator between academic world and social world; the educational function of the research expressed in the interactions between social workers, homeless people, and researcher. The paper refers to a doctoral research project (2018-2019) that has as main objective the exploration of the relationship between homeless people and social workers in a city in Southern Italy. This relationship can be defined as structural, in terms of a persistent pattern between social positions, because it represents an asymmetrical power relationship aimed at promoting change. The relative-relational approach to the study of poverty considers its symbolic-relational element as a determining dimension: the definition of the poor depends on the social and cultural context of reference and, consequently, changes with the frames that policies and social workers have. According to the theory of gift, inequality of position is a necessary condition for achieving the exchange that makes relations between people burn and grow. However, what constitutes inequality is the absence of reciprocity. The main questions guiding the research are: how policies are influencing the context and the organisation of services at a street level; how actors perceive and describe themselves and their relationship; whether there is reciprocity and how this affects their lives and the construction of knowledge around the issue of social work and homelessness. Thus, the research looks at the organisation of the network and the places where this relationship takes shape, the stories of the actors involved, their experiences of the relationship and the meaning they attribute to it. A mixed-methods approach is adopted to combine urban and organisational ethnography and the study of networks. The subjects involved are voluntary and professional street social workers, homeless people, and city dwellers. The ethnography (February 2019 – February 2020) integrates four types of tools: participant observations, ethnographic conversation, in-depth interviews, and oral histories. The main findings we found concern: the stratification among homeless people that the tiered model of the service system tends to create; the tension between role and self that social workers and homeless people deal with differently; the presence of reciprocity at a micro level of interaction and the absence of reciprocity at a macro level of interaction.*

KEYWORDS: *Homelessness, Social Work, Ethnography, Reciprocity*

Introduction

The research can become a receptor pool of what subjects would like or could give and communicate. This is particularly true for those considered vulnerable, the homeless, but also for those who have some form of power, such as operators, which however depends on someone else superior to whom they are in turn accountable and more generally of the level of regulation to which they are in turn required to conform. In relation to this aspect, the research can have a function of political expression, i.e. relating to the administration of the city and the policies adopted for marginality – and not only – that concern the population involved as homeless, which however also has other characteristics that concern it and which could be considered beyond homelessness.

Although the research does not fall within the scope of engaged ethnography (Casas-Cortes *et al.*, 2013) and therefore does not have direct objectives to stimulate a change in public policy regarding the phenomenon, themes inherent to the public-political dimension emerge from the research. In the context of the analysis carried out, these themes refer to what the homeless and social workers would like to give back in turn, after having received at a micro level, and to the demand inherent in what they would like to give in return, thus realising the passage from the micro-relational dimension to the macro-relational one, that is, relating to the phenomenon of homelessness and to social work understood as a public institution.

1. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Since the modern age, homelessness has been seen as a social problem (Anderson, 1923) and the welfare system its solution (Dominelli, 2015). However, the production of a change in homeless people's lives and in the homelessness as phenomenon is still far from a political satisfying solution (O'Sullivan, 2020).

Exploring the relationship between homelessness and social worker in a metropolitan city of Southern Italy has been the main objective of the PhD research project.

This relationship can be defined as structural, in terms of persistent model between social positions (Trobia, Milia, 2011): it represents an asymmetrical relationship of power framed in a Mediterranean model of Welfare State. According to the theory of gift (Mauss, 2002), the inequality of the position is a necessary condition to realize the exchange while inequality is the absence of reciprocity (Weber, 1922). The relative-relational approach to the study of poverty considers its symbolic-interactive element as the determining dimension: the definition of the poor depends on the social and cultural context, and it changes as stated in the policies and the social workers' views (Simmel, 1908).

The research has aimed to explore this relationship looking at the network organization and at the places where it takes shape, at the stories of actors who take part in it, at their experience of relations and at the meaning they attribute to them. The main questions have regarded how policies are implemented at the street level (Lipsky, 1980); how the actors perceive and describe themselves and their relationship (Moscovici, 2005; Durkheim, Mauss, 2009); if there is reciprocity and how it influences their life and the construction of the knowledge around social work and homelessness topic (Berger, Luckman, 1996).

A mixed-methods approach (Amaturo, Punziano, 2016) has been adopted to combine urban and organizational ethnography (Park, Burgess, 1925) and the study of nets (Scott, 1997). The subjects involved have been voluntary and professional social street workers, homeless people, inhabitants of the city. Ethnography (February 2019- February 2020) had integrated four kinds of tools: participant observations, ethnographic conversations, in-deep interviews, oral histories.

I have been allowed to do participant observations in n. 6 low threshold services – a public shelter, a street mobile unit, a soup kitchen, a charity shop, a volunteer legal centre and a mobile medical centre. These are mostly volunteer services, while the public and private ones (n. 7) have been let involved through in-deep interviews and ethnographic conversations (a daytime centre, a mobile street unit, a social emergency mobile unit, three residential accommodations community based, the professional social work). Then I have also met homeless people and citizens moving in the places where they have used to live. Therefore, the sample consists of n. 58 homeless people, n. 42 social workers, n. 13 citizens: n. 113 people in total. Tools were used with all the people involved transversally and progressively, for a total of n. 54 ethnographic conversations, n. 22 in-deep interviews, 37 oral histories.

2. Main Findings

Based on the objectives of the project, the following are the main results.

- I. To describe the context of the relationship we looked at the services network and we have found:
 - a progressive decentralisation of the residential accommodations and the shelters in the peripheral areas of the city and a centralisation of the services aimed to satisfy the basic needs in the central areas (Thomas, Znaniecki, 1918-20; 1968)
 - a high centrality of the private sector organisation and a higher density of ties between public sector and private sector organisations rather than between the volunteer sector and the private ones (Emirbayer, Goodwind, 1994)

These movements seem to produce:

- a concentration of homeless people in the central areas despite the increasing number of accommodations in the peripheral areas, which can mean that their centre of interest is closer to the socialisation needs rather than the basic ones
 - a progressive stratification of homelessness based on which type of services people are users of, which can mean that the more 'capable' homeless people spend their lives in the accommodations while the fewer ones still stay on the street or around the volunteer services. This can produce competition, conflict, and discrimination between homeless people
- II. To describe social representations that actors have of each other, we have found:
- Regarding social workers, a tension between the professional or volunteer role and the personal beliefs (Goffman, 1959)
 - Concerning homeless people, a tension between the label of 'homeless' that people have in the present time, the memory of their Self they have in the past time and the wish of the Self they can make for the future (Mead, 1966)

In this case, social workers manage the tension differently, depending on: the consciousness they have about the distance between the role and the Self; the decision to be closer to the first one instead of the Self during the interaction with homeless people. We provided a typology.

In the second case, homeless people deal with their inner tension according to: the personal consciousness they can be different from the label 'homeless', the recognition other people show about this real possibility, the choice they can make to be included in the social work system to be helped. Also in this case, we provided a typology.

- III. Lastly, looking for reciprocity in the social work-homelessness relationship, we have found: the presence of a symbolic reciprocity at the micro-level of homeless people – social workers interaction (Collins, 1998; Goffman, 1983); the absence of reciprocity at the macro level of homelessness- social work relation (Agodi et al. 2001; Gui, 1996).

At a micro level, it seems to be easier communicating and exchanging symbolical and material goods between homeless and social workers, who sometimes both discover to be able to see the complexity of the person under the label they have as social actors. On the other hand, at a macro level, reciprocity can mean conforming to the rules of the welfare system and trying to become autonomous going through the step model system addressed to homeless people. However, not anybody can deal with this alone and no tools nor moments are dedicated to collect what social workers and homeless people have to say in return to the system, so at a macro level of interaction, where reciprocity seems not to be.

3. The Educational Role of the Research and the Mediating Role of the Researcher

The fourth actor of the research, on which we focus in this contribution, is the researcher herself: choosing to use an ethnographic approach means being aware of becoming in turn a 'researched person' from the moment in which she becomes part of the spatial, physical and organisational field, with which she wishes to become familiar and in which she intends to immerse herself (Ferrarotti, 2003).

The researcher's access to the field, in an uncovered and participatory way, and his positioning in it, recognised by the other participants, generated a reflection on two aspects:

- the mediating role of the researcher between the academic world, the social world, and the worlds of the participants
- the educational function of the research which becomes part of the participants' knowledge – especially if it is totally new to them – and which stimulates in them an awareness of themselves and of the phenomenon with which they are theoretically associated.

It was necessary, during the fieldwork, to explain the research and the role of the researcher to make their own behaviour predictable, observable, knowable by the other.

This implied, on the one hand, the ascertainment that not everyone knew in the same way who a social researcher was, what it consisted of to carry out a research, what methods were adopted, what the aims were and why one should participate in it; on the other hand, the identification of the motivations that pushed everyone to choose to take part in it or not and the different uses that everyone could make of the research and of the relationship with the researcher, explicitly or implicitly.

Therefore, first, it was necessary to reflect on how to construct one's own presence in the field, how to communicate with different languages and at the appropriate times to the different participants the reasons, the duration, the motivations, the characteristics, and the meaning of one's own presence. The progressive use of information gathering techniques and the adaptation of languages for each participant was fundamental for this, trying each time to calibrate it according to the known characteristics of the interlocutor.

Second, the gaze with which the analysis was carried out had to understand the expectations and motivations of the participants and defined a research objective that did not coincide with those set by the researcher in the research plan but with what the participants manifested with their collaboration and in their narratives.

There are three levels that the role of the researcher and the function of the research bring to our attention, and they concern the ethical, emotional, and political dimensions.

1. The ethical dimension, closely linked to the educational function of research, is expressed in terms of liminality and duplexity (Parker, 2007):
 - on the one hand, the researcher is called upon to inform and negotiate consent to participation, setting the boundaries of the research context in which the relationship between researcher and researched is realised, moving in this sense along a threshold between the research context and the life context of the participants in which she asks to enter
 - on the other hand, she is called upon to ensure respect for the confidentiality of the other while always keeping in mind the objectives of the research to which she is called to account. She therefore finds herself having to deal with the duplicity of the referents and having to understand from time to time how it is right to act and whether to act.
2. The emotional dimension straddles the educational function of research and the mediating role of the researcher. Reflections by other authors (Tillmann-Healey, Kiesinger, 2000; Gould, Nelson, 2005; Perry *et al.*, 2004; Sword, 1999) who have used qualitative research in sensitive fields of investigation and in contact with vulnerable populations dedicate space to reflect on emotionality as a legitimate dimension to be part of the research itself, because it concerns all the actors involved, including the researcher.

At various times during the fieldwork, the recognition of emotional states determined by certain events led, for example, to making certain decisions rather than others. In the initial and final phases, for example, for different reasons, levels of intrusiveness were avoided that might have been excessive or unsustainable, either because they were premature or because the necessary time could not be devoted to them. The fact that the researcher was female, young, Italian, a social worker and alone, i.e. not part of a research team, should be taken into account.
3. Finally, the political dimension, which is closely linked to the mediating role of the researcher, concerns the communication of the research and the objective that participants can add to it. In other words, the research can also become a political expression, i.e. relating to the administration of the city and the policies adopted for marginality that concern the population involved as homeless and as social workers.

Although it does not fall within the scope of engaged ethnography (Casas-Cortes *et al.*, 2013) and therefore does not have direct objectives to stimulate a change in public policy regarding the phenomenon, themes inherent to the political-public dimension emerge from the research.

In the context of the analysis carried out, these themes refer to what the homeless and social workers would like to give back in turn, making that transition from the micro-relational dimension to

the macro-relational one, that is, relating to the phenomenon of homelessness and social work understood as a public institution. What both populations require is expressed in the themes of 'recognition' and 'participation' in the planning of individual interventions and in the political programming that concerns them as beneficiaries and street-level operators.

Conclusion

Research can have a formative-educational function if it can be explained to participants. The moment it is presented, information is given, the limits and boundaries of the context in which one wishes to move are indicated and reflection and awareness are stimulated in those being questioned.

The moment of dialogue is when subjects think about what to say, what to answer, what to present. The selection they inevitably make is never completely controllable by the researcher – who may try to bring the participants back into the defined boundaries of the research – but it reflects their choice and their desire to share some aspects and not to share others.

In these first two points the ethical dimension of research is expressed, in terms of liminality and duplexity (Parker, 2007): on the one hand, the researcher is called upon to inform and negotiate consent to participation, setting the boundaries of the research context in which the relationship between researcher and researched is realised, moving in this sense along a threshold between the research context and the life context of the participants in which she asks to enter; on the other hand, she is called upon to ensure respect for the confidentiality of the other while always keeping in mind the objectives of the research to which she is called to account, she therefore finds herself having to deal with the duplicity of the referents and having to understand from time to time how it is right to act and whether to act.

Explaining the research and gaining consensus varies according to a crucial character that concerns the participants – their level of education, understanding, trust – but also concerns the researcher, regarding his ability to explain, to make himself as understood as possible and to inspire trust. In this case, these elements took time, pushed the researcher to clarify and express himself in a way that was as comprehensible as possible to all the different subjects, guaranteeing each time adherence and transparency with respect to the actual intentions that the research brought with it.

This becomes a formative-educational moment when the interlocutor does not have the slightest idea of what research is and what a researcher does, but it is also the moment in which the ethical value of research is expressed and in which the methods and techniques chosen to become the instruments to be used to act.

It is inevitable, however, that the field of ethnographic relationship in a research context that coincides with that of life leads to confusion. Again, research techniques become fundamental to observe this confusion, analyse it and design subsequent actions. The moment of the researcher's reflection – expressed in the field diary – represents the moment in which the researcher also tries to become aware of himself. However, one cannot deny the existence of an emotional dimension, which concerns the researcher even beyond the role she plays in the field, which is not absent, it cannot be eliminated as much as trying to keep it under control but being aware of its existence.

The reflection that we want to bring with this contribution concerns the recognition of the importance of University and Research in the local territories that we inhabit. We are not only researchers but also educators and mediators between the world of theories and choices of intervention practices, in this case concerning social policies. But we are above all collaborators of the participants in research, vulnerable people, professionals, politicians. We need to place at the centre of our action its ethical premise and its political significance, without forgetting or underestimating the emotional dimension that affects us all as human beings.

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