A new model for community care: the role of the teacher and of the socio-pedagogical educator in networking

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Riassunto – *Oggi appare estremamente importante riferirsi e valorizzare il lavoro sociale educativo come elemento efficace di possibile rinascita e rieducazione in una società che sembra aver completamente perso le coordinate del vivere umano. La logica dell'aiuto educativo si pone quindi la finalità di sostenere il processo di costruzione del benessere dello studente-persona attraverso una prospettiva fenomenologico-costruttivista tesa a definire un welfare generativo che superi anche l'attuale crisi comunicazionale e metta in relazione i diversi sistemi con cui la persona si rapporta, che la modificano e che essa stessa modifica. Anche la scuola deve consapevolizzare l'importanza di operare sul piano educativo e formativo mediante un approccio di rete di tipo socio-relazionale e per l'edificazione responsabile della comunità educante e lo sviluppo del progetto personale di vita autentica. Appare necessario, di conseguenza, pensare in termini di progetti educativi e formativi non più come erogazione di singole prestazioni da parte di singoli esperti, ma come attivazione di percorsi relazionali di reciprocità con soluzione condivisa dei problemi. Rispetto a tale scenario, si intende analizzare, in particolare, come l'apporto dell'educatore socio-pedagogico si riveli fondamentale per attivare una "cura reticolare" in una educazione scolastica "allargata", aprendo anche a possibilità di dialogo rispetto al modo di sviluppare tale approccio relazionale di rete in contesti educativo-scolastici internazionali.*

Abstract – *It seems extremely important today that educational social work should be recognised and valorised as an effectual element of possible rebirth and re-education, in a society that seems to have completely lost the coordinates for human living. The goal underlying the logic of educational aid is therefore to support the process of shaping the growth and progress of the student-person through a phenomenological-constructivist perspective aimed at defining a generative welfare such as can also overcome the current crisis of communication and link the different systems with which the person relates, which change the person in question, and which are themselves changed by that same person. Schools likewise must be aware of the importance of operating in the sphere of education and training through a social-relational network approach, and of the need for the educational community to be built up responsible, and an authentic life plan developed for every individual. Accordingly, it seems that education and training plans can no longer be thought of simply as the delivery of single services by individual experts, but rather, as the activation of relational pathways allowing mutual interaction and shared problem-solving. Given this scenario, the intention is, in particular, to examine the contribution of the socio-pedagogical educator and its fundamental role in activating "networked care", across a "broader" school education, looking also at possibilities for dialogue with regard to how such a networked relational approach might be developed in international education and school settings.*

Parole chiave – educatore socio-pedagogico, insegnante, rete educativa relazionale, community care, modello ecologico.

Keywords – socio-pedagogical educator, teacher, relational educational network, community care, ecological model.

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1. Community care and generative welfare

There is insistence from various quarters on the need for schools – the formal education system – to engage more actively with their local area, and with the non-formal and informal educational settings established there. Connection with the surrounding environment makes it possible to identify and make the most of the various educational and training opportunities that students can take up in building their identities as citizens who achieve their life plans embracing the values of sustainability, respect and community. The educational offering is therefore to be understood as integrated and personalised, based on the bio-psycho-social paradigm described extensively by Bronfenbrenner[1]. In taking this approach, teachers can no longer see themselves as self-referential educational figures who deliver a service in a stand-alone and fragmented mode, separately from the rest of the world. Conversely, they are instrumental in activating an educational social network designed to support the growth of the student, which is particularly important especially in these current times of educational emergency and youth unease. Times which, moreover, mark a historical period in which education itself is apparently failing to eliminate social distances, as is the case with educational activities conducted in non-formal and informal settings.

If there is still sense in believing that education affords possibilities for human regeneration, then it is worth rethinking the methods by which it is designed and delivered. Above all, it seems that one of the worst evils afflicting society comes from inordinate individualism, from pandering to a false concept of public-spirited participation that in reality serves only to strengthen the hand of socio-political hegemonies. So perhaps there is a need to start afresh precisely by rethinking community care, turning to a model that will democratically restore value to the notion of universal education, according to a criterion of social justice.

It is a matter of agreeing on a principle that would allow persons/citizens of every rank and station to use resources in such a way that they can express and achieve their particular life plan, within a kind of "high pedagogy", or "radical pedagogy", like that of Paulo Freire, or Alberto Manzi, or Mario Lodi, or Don Lorenzo Milani. In essence, a pedagogy capable of putting forward proposals that still appear revolutionary today, in the sense of wanting to give central importance to the development of the person, of every person, regardless of the economic and political

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[1] Cf. U. Bronfenbrenner, *Ecologia dello sviluppo umano*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1986.

weight he or she may wield in society[2]. The point of all this being that pedagogy, if it wishes responsibly to be incisive in overcoming the current social crisis, needs to concentrate on presiding over multiple aspects of that crisis, concerning the process of humanisation, with regard first and foremost:

— to the adoption of an ecological model that sees the person as an integral part of the environment he or she influences and is influenced by;

— to the becoming of the person, in and with the community of people, in a spirit of reciprocity;

— to building a network of complementary, connected and coordinated educational services.

The idea of using the *relational network approach*[3] in an educational context can be a trump card in addressing the complex issues presented by society. The relational network approach also represents a challenge for the various educational professionals, first and foremost educators and teachers. Taking on the idea of network-driven generative welfare, in effect, enables them to highlight the decisive role of education, and consequently of the work done by socio-pedagogical professionals, who would play a leading role in stimulating interaction between educands and educational facilitators. Creating new educational settings based on the principle of community care means being able to activate young people — especially (but not only) those in difficulty —, to identify new resources and forms of existential planning, in a democratic vision of social redemption and human regeneration.

These paths must be traced, not in an abstract way, but experienced and shared by the local community to which the educand belongs, within which services and their interaction must be rethought with the end in view of putting in place a "diffuse" and customised educational support plan. Within this framework, educational responsibility will be taken on, in different ways and to varying degrees, by formal and non-formal agencies, public and private operators, the tertiary sector, and informal caregivers.

An approach of this kind is undoubtedly far from straightforward, and requires changes in the welfare state to which both schools and non-formal educational settings must give thought:

— School, as a fundamental conduit of education, since it must take charge of the renewed instructional and educational needs of its students, so that the knowledge it conveys does not remain mere information, detached from reality, but is converted into skills for personal and social life, authentic learning tasks. And this means engaging with the world in which it is embedded, helping students to acquire knowledge in depth and with critical awareness, to read and interpret reality as they discover and interpret their own selves.

— Educational services, which must avoid wastage and fragmentation in the performance of multiple activities, plentiful in number but not always clearly targeted at contributing to the coherent life plan of the educand.

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[2] Cf. M. Caligiuri, *La cruna dell'ago. Educazione e diseguaglianze tra giustizia sociale, democrazia e individualismo all'inizio del XXI secolo*, in "Formazione & Insegnamento", XVI, 3, 2018, pp. 39-48.

[3] Cf. L. Sanicola, *Dinamiche di rete e lavoro sociale. Un metodo relazionale*, Naples, Liguori, 2009; F. Folgheraiter, *La logica sociale dell'aiuto. Fondamenti per una teoria relazionale del welfare*, Trento, Erickson, 2007.

Teachers and educators alike find themselves having to come to terms with economic and business paradigms and requirements of a bureaucratic, assessment and formal nature, strait-jacketing them with intervention protocols that are somewhat static and minimally conducive to facilitating engagement with other parties and establishing a constructive interaction[4].

Being clear about one's professional identity, both as teachers and as socio-pedagogical educators — in other words, the two figures we are concerned with in this discussion — allows one to think of the educational work undertaken by each category no longer as a predictable and mechanical practice, but as a veritable opportunity to take charge. Concern and care for the educand is also manifested through network planning and *diffuse education*, which are seen as affording mutual support among citizens, creating partnerships and resource networks of which everyone is provider and user at one and the same time. In effect,

> one of the pillars of diffuse education is that it should not be a revolution limited to the class-room and concerning only schoolchildren, but a genuine shake-up on the social level, affecting all of the people who live in a given area. [...] So it is not a matter of securing the cooperation only of those directly involved in schooling or education locally, but of all 'solicitable' subjects, firstly in the public arena, certainly: city hall, health authorities, libraries, museums, play facilities, theatres, etc. But also willing and generous private subjects, who can be asked perhaps for small and occasional offers of experience [...]. It is a matter of rousing up an entire social fabric around the education of the youngest, calling on each to give what they can, while taking the opportunity, in turn, to involve the children themselves in activities where they can make their contribution[5].

Publishing the paper in English, moreover, it is hoped also to stimulate a worthwhile stream of comparison between experiences across the international community, thereby valorising the socio-relational network approach — while not ignoring local interactions where expedient — and bringing about the acquisition of related skills among education professionals.

2. A networked pedagogical approach

The basic idea to which any plan in the field of education and training should relate, accordingly, consists in the fact that the practical process of education must necessarily be rooted in the life context of the educand, while also incorporating multiple and at the same time integrated elements.

– Multiple elements, because there are various specializations and educational settings that the educand will encounter; education cannot but refer to the biography of the individual, to his or her multi-faceted being. A specific action or process in one life system is affected by what

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[4] Cf. S. Calaprice, *Educatori e Pedagogisti tra formazione e autoformazione. Identità, azioni, competenze e contesti per educare all'imprevedibile*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2020.

[5] P. Mottana, G. Campagnoli, *Educazione diffusa. Istruzioni per l'uso*, Florence, Terra Nuova Edizioni, 2020, pp. 25-26.

the subject is experiencing simultaneously in other situations, and so this multi-faceted macrosystem must become a focus for the attention and consideration of every teacher and every educator who may find themselves accompanying educands along even a small section of their life's journey and in a specific environment[6].

– The process of education is also integrated, inasmuch as it must connect with the existential *continuum* of individuals, who in different settings have to find ways of expressing the capabilities and resources they possess, without "losing their identity", in the words of Erikson[7].

– Ultimately, it is a question of identifying the human resources, facilities and services present in an area so that they can dialogue with and truly get to know one another, integrating the possibilities that each one may have for educational action. Once the various educational settings are connected, the educand exposed to them is able to feel that he or she is a protagonist, and not simply a recipient or a passive user of an education or training service identified and managed by others. Among other considerations, as long as single educational services pursue a self-referential, sector-oriented and fragmentary agenda, or a logic simply of welfare, they will have little chance of making a real impact on a pathway of genuine rehabilitation or advancement of the subject. It is not uncommon, for example, for teachers to regard non-formal educational settings, such as the gymnasium or play facility, simply as "diversions" that take energy and commitment away from the process of instruction and schooling proper. Similarly, they identify the after-school educator as a facilitator of learning exclusively for the purposes of completing afternoon homework, in line with a school-based programme that does not envisage the involvement of extra-curricular educators.

The professional social and pedagogical educator, as we shall see, can also find acknowledgement by taking on the role of a network manager or builder of education-oriented relational networks. Consequently,

> the main competence of professional educators today must be that of having the ability to broaden their gaze and take in the social context of educational worlds, giving their attention to aspects that range from play areas to physical activity, from questions of nutrition to educational meeting places, from the education of feelings to support for parenting. The perspective can only be preventive, primarily, but there is also the need to respond to emergencies that require immediate help, to ensure situations will not develop into the tragedies so often reported in news bulletins[8].

If, therefore, the school must necessarily make a commitment to come out of its self-referential bubble and genuinely contribute to the definition of an integrated educational system, at the same time accepting a mandate to provide social and political education, it is the professional educator who has the task of *mapping* the services that are available to the educand

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[6] Cf. I. Loiodice, *Pedagogia. Il sapere/agire della formazione, per tutti e per tutta la vita*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2019.

[7] Cf. E.H. Erikson, *I cicli di vita. Continuità e mutamenti,* Rome, Armando, 1999.

[8] V. Iori, *Introduzione*, in V. Iori (a cura di), *Educatori e pedagogisti. Senso dell'agire educativo e riconoscimento professionale*, Trento, Erickson, 2018, p. 12.

and/or user. There is a particular awareness today of the need to refer to "integrated services, involving public, private social and tertiary sectors, aimed at families and at local and complementary settings, to expand networks of solidarity, break codes of silence, shake up attitudes of indifference and denial, and spread the culture of responsibility"[9].

Increasingly, schools find themselves having to address and deal with situations of malaise, unease and difficulties on the part of students, which can no longer be ascribed solely and superficially to knowledge deficiencies, or problems with method of study, or learning disorders. The malaise experienced by students at school calls for the application of a coping mechanism that the educator, supported by the network, can put into effect together with the teacher. In this way, teachers can be confident of reducing the risk of possible burnout caused by overload of work and individual responsibilities that they feel obliged to take on without adequate professional support and backup.

The educator, especially in cases of social unease or learning difficulties, in a certain sense knows the educand "more closely", that is to say the educator has "experiential knowledge" of the educand, and the educational action consists in developing the empowerment of the educand, which is increased through the interaction that takes place in the attentive accompaniment of everyday social life experiences. Indeed for educators it is often a matter of taking time together with educands, as part of their everyday relationship, to identify and review the possibilities they have for success in satisfactorily managing their life plans. It is necessary, therefore – reiterates pedagogist Vanna Iori – that the educational responses identified in connection with the genuine needs of educands are not based on outdated models, often linked to a welfarist conception of separate and specialised intervention[10] that schools still tend to use extensively. Rather, pathways must be managed by creating sodalities among educational figures, sharing the basic paradigm of generative welfare that carries with it the idea of networking and community care activities, of synergy of actions. Within relationships of this kind, the power that the educator can exercise directly over the educand, and indirectly over the network, is always a "power of service"[11] in which there is no intention of attempting to normalise the minds of educands by offering standardised solutions, far removed from personal needs – see Don Lorenzo Milani's historic censure of school, and of the way that extracurricular activities were organised[12] – but a mission of finalising actions toward the *liberation* of students, that is to say the aim of

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[9] *Ivi*, p. 12.

[10] *Ivi*, pp. 12-13.

[11] I. Loiodice, *Pedagogia. Il sapere/agire della formazione, per tutti e per tutta la vita*, quote, p. 41.

[12] The commentary on the school of his time given by Lorenzo Milani is pertinent to our discussion. He explores the lack of success achieved by children of the poor in secondary school, and looks for the causes. One of these is the assumption made by the school, in evaluating the progress of students, that they had acquired certain skills in an out-of-school setting, which the proletarian rural student would not have experienced. Children of the poor would not occupy their free time away from school in cultural activities, reading books, as would the children of the wealthy. Consequently, when starting high school, the children of peasant folk would already be backward and suffer humiliation. Extra tuition can resolve nothing in this situation: "The tutor stands before a desert landscape. One cannot even begin to explain to a boy who has never read a book, why his essay is no good" (L. Milani, *Esperienze pastorali*, Florence, Libreria Editrice Fiorentina, 1957, p. 184).

rendering them independent, by providing them with the necessary and appropriate cultural tools.

Above all, teacher and educator need to identify and reflect on the general underlying vision that justifies their educational mandate, so that, with due conviction, they are able to pursue a model of public governance where each network participant can become a user in need of one service and at the same time the provider of another service —in short, mutual care: looking after, and being looked after. More exactly, the relational practice of care represents a complex construct that is based on giving and receiving, on feeling responsible, in a donative interaction that involves a form of mutual recognition and respect, having concern one for another[13].

3. Preparing for relational networking in education

Anyone who engages in networking with the vision of community care before them subscribes to the idea that it is not about an inexpert user-educand benefiting passively from the services of a provider who happens to be expert at knowing what the other person needs. Rather, the client-educand has an active part in identifying the nature of his or her needs, and there is agreement on the educational plan to be adopted, signifying that the action of putting in place education and/or training services involves joint participation.

The anthropological paradigm on which educational activity is predicated, whether conducted in school or in extracurricular settings, takes its cue from a principle of community action that sees individuals in their totality and in the imagined realisation of their daily becoming, ensuring that no particular point of view held by a single teacher or educator can be absolutised and assumed as being the general experience of the subject[14].

The point here is that the school cannot, for example, limit itself to interpreting the substandard performance of a difficult student in various subjects merely as a natural disinclination to study or as a personal intellectual shortcoming, and on this basis suggest remedial work on content that has not as yet been assimilated, perhaps by designating a figure who will spend time with the student when doing homework, or appointing an expert (psychologist, speech therapist, etc.) to solve the problem "artificially". On the contrary, it is expedient that any educational agency, including schools, should understand the needs of users by understanding the subjects themselves, their life story, which is something dynamic, multidimensional and multidirectional. In our case, teachers will need to know first and foremost what is the family context and the microsystems to which the child relates, be it close family, or the community, or the sports setting in which he or she spends time. It will also be important to listen to what the actual educands feel may be a need, expressed to whatever degree, and to what may be the unease they are experiencing. In this way, people and situations are revealed, and it also becomes possible to gain familiarity with the resources that can support the educational plan for an individual educand.

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[13] Cf. L. Mortari, *Aver cura della vita della mente*, Rome, Carocci, 2013.
[14] L. Sanicola, *Itinerari nel servizio sociale*, Naples, Liguori, 1996, p. 103.

It is only through this type of action — intersubjective, relational, and mindful of the human condition — that one can identify and appreciate the value of educational networks that generate joint and shared actions and make use of tools and methods that are not an end in themselves. And it is in this context that the educator, working ideally in synergy with the teacher first and foremost, can become a coordinator as well as a networker. The network, in fact, is not reduced to a set of specific and predetermined places and techniques, to which individual users are 'fitted' in each instance, according to the need, or the deficit, or the problem they appear to have. Before even being considered as an assemblage of physical reception and delivery spaces, the network constitutes a shared, flexible set of *human* situations and relations[15] creating constant interchanges between operators and users.

By contrast, it happens that if a purely organizational-managerial model of networking is implemented, statically, this can overshadow the clinical aspect of the operation — in the relational sense — with the result that its educational-training essence is lost. Guay highlights how in community management the successful model of social action is based precisely on the *relational* aspect of the helping relationship, whereas the specific techniques of networking, considered in isolation, produce very limited results. Working with the relational network, which functions as a coping mechanism, persons-clients can feel accepted, respected and part of a journey that allows them to imagine a future perspective appropriate to their being. The social services operator, socio-pedagogical educator and teacher who offer their help, in their efforts to create an educational network, consequently do not set themselves up as judges of the user but are facilitators.

However, the actions of both the teacher and the educator take on particular characteristics that are not always easy to manage at one and the same time: they are facilitators and companions, but they are also called on to make assessments. The problem of how the teacher should accompany the student on a path of personal growth and at the same time give an objective evaluation of the school 'product' is well known. For the educator the problem is not so immediately obvious, but it exists nonetheless. This is why Guay[16], still discussing a general organizational social context, advocates an approach for would-be network operators that has an educational connotation. This would mean establishing a special relationship of professional alliance with the user, a blend of "getting close and pulling back", which is helpful in identifying the most appropriate ways and times for action while also allowing the educand the opportunity to find ways of reshaping and developing his or her identity. This can be managed better with the presence of multiple support figures who all have eyes on the user, enabling them to manage the educational plan in an integrated manner.

In effect, a relational network approach affords support to the student, but at the same time represents a self-training pathway for networkers, allowing them to monitor and reflect on the method of conducting the help-oriented educational relationship, indispensable for management

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[15] J. Guay, *Il case management comunitario*, Naples, Liguori, 2000, p. 69.
[16] *Ivi*, p. 73.

of the educational pathway, and in order to reach "outside the lines"[17], create broader views by uniting different standpoints, which would be hard to achieve in the case of an exclusively individual activity.

4. The educator in the educational-training network plan

From an educational and training perspective, a plan that makes the person of the student the centre of attention is one that asks educators, teachers and teams of professionals to engage in a kind of case management activity at community level, as part of the integrated educational system. Such a model is useful above all in conceiving a multiple but personalised approach, i.e. one that can identify the problems and needs each person experiences and are the outcome of personal conditions and relationships in real life environments. Well-being, in effect, is the outcome when life tasks are undertaken with common actions on shared goals[18]. It happens however, as mentioned above, that instead of externalising the personal need of an individual and sharing it, attempts are made a priori to make it fit an average profile, based on the outcome targeted by single services: in short, to standardise it.

By contrast, the task of the socio-pedagogical educator is to emphasise the need for action, not aimed at bringing the subject of our case into line with an average standard of the class, of peers, etc., but at identifying a personalised programme for that individual's life plan and pathway, to be put together jointly and shared by the networkers involved. And this is also the essence of the relational network approach in the welfare of society at large, which envisages a "process-based and intersubjective well-being [...] seen as the capacity of people for action in taking on their life tasks". Thus, "the subjective and 'constructive' element must necessarily be the cornerstone of the social helping professions"[19].

For this to happen, socio-pedagogical educators need to be well aware of their role, which is one that requires them to operate on multiple fronts, inasmuch as they connect and integrate the locations and the educational actions in which the educand can deploy new resources or embark on a problem solving pathway. At the same time, this professional capacity of educators must be clearly identified, both in the role played individually and in the operations carried out on the network. Certainly, the educator works in the situation, and thus "adapts" the pathway to the person and the circumstances that arise. An educational plan may be reworked in response to points highlighted by the different networkers, and reviewed by the educator on the basis of his or her pedagogical expertise, hence of the educational purpose in view. That is, situations are interpreted through a pedagogical methodology in preparing the personalised education plan, which is shared with the other networkers[20].

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[17] M. Sclavi, *Arte di ascoltare e mondi possibili. Come si esce dalle cornici di cui siamo parte*, Milan, Bruno Mondadori, 2003.

[18] Cf. P. Donati, *Teoria relazionale della società*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 1991.

[19] M.L Raineri, *Il metodo di rete in pratica. Studio di caso nel servizio sociale*, Trento, Erickson, 2004, pp. 25, 27.

[20] Cf. J. Dewey, *Le fonti di una scienza dell'educazione*, Florence, La Nuova Italia, 1951.

In the process of mediation with the school setting, the educator can reconstruct the history of the educand, interface with teachers, share certain educational objectives, and prepare a learning programme that is not limited to remediation in particular areas of study, but, looking from multiple angles, goes to the root of what may be a clear problem, such as a learning difficulty, a problem of socialisation in the classroom, a lack of motivation to learn, even the risk that the student could drop out of school, etc. The possible educational action, focusing initially on instruction alone, might thus be integrated with other elements — entertainment, recreation, sport, physical activity — or with a peer support programme. This would be the case when the educator recognises the desirability of providing educational plans that help to strengthen the vision individual educands have of themselves, and accompany them in learning how to live in the world, and consequently how to feel good at school. In effect, the involvement of the educator is not one of responding to an emergency or to provide therapy, to "repair" damage apparently affecting only the student and in a fragmented sphere. Indeed the logic of pedagogy would be discredited by simply complying with a broadly welfarist, medical or therapeutic request, coming typically from other professionals such as social workers, psychologists or psychotherapists[21]. The remit of the educator doubtless will include the step of evaluating the appropriateness of such specialised actions, which however must be seen in a more complex framework provided by the life story of the educand, in order to identify the conditions in which the educand can become proficient at self-training subsequent to the emergency action.

The networking activity of educators consists in a combination of formal and informal care; it is justified insofar as they operate on the existential aspect of the person; it captures and channels specific knowledge regarding educands and the settings in which they find themselves, so as to identify a horizon of meaning, in pedagogical terms, for the proposed actions. Consider, for example, the activity of the home educator, who operates simultaneously on several fronts and interfaces with multiple systems[22]. The educational import of each setting must be identified in terms of everyday actions, which the educator assesses and gives pedagogical significance[23] while seeking a method of crisis management and of empowerment that is shared with fellow network operators.

An interesting case study pertinent to the relational networking method proposed is that of Morad, recounted by Raineri[24]. Morad is an eight-year-old foreign child who has been referred to the social worker by the headmaster of the school he attends; he has learning deficiencies according to his teachers, who identify learning the Italian language as a priority objective. The teachers suggest that the child's mother should contact the social worker and a *centro animativo* (youth welfare centre) for help with his homework; the child attends, but only for a few weeks.

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[21] Cf. L. Caronia, *Fenomenologia dell'educazione. Intenzionalità, cultura e conoscenza in pedagogia*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2011.

[22] Cf. M. Bulmer, *Le basi della community care. Sociologia delle relazioni informali di cura*, Trento, Erickson, 1992.

[23] Cf. D. Bruzzone, *L'esercizio dei sensi. Fenomenologia ed estetica della relazione educativa*, Milan, FrancoAngeli, 2016.

[24] M.L. Raineri, *Il metodo di rete in pratica. Studio di caso nel servizio sociale*, quote, pp.127-163.

Aside from the fact that the network coordination in this case is handled by the social worker, whereas a more prominent role could have been given to the socio-pedagogical educator, the aspect of significance is precisely that of the relational network methodology adopted. The situation is in fact reassessed from the relational point of view and a flexible, expanded and shared coping programme is constructed, in which the teachers no longer limit themselves to sorting the problem they have with Morad by relying on the services of other professionals, namely the social worker and the educator-youth welfare professional. Instead, the problem is redefined as a network problem: one that involves several people who meet, in this case at the school, explore different points of view, delineate the student's life context and look at possible strategies for action, seeking input from formal and informal support networks. In this type of network-based planning action, one must also consider the eventuality that, initially, certain actors who are brought into the network may not be available or willing to collaborate, as might be the case with teachers, for various reasons. For example, "maybe it is the umpteenth time that teaching staff are faced with a dropout, maybe there is already at least one difficult pupil in the class who drains their energies, or maybe some teachers may be influenced by past negative experiences when, in an effort to contact parents who were hardly ever around, they were labelled as intrusive and told to desist, to stay away"[25].

It is important not to take a judgemental attitude in this case, and to shift the focus of thought from the objective and institutional level to the subjective connotation of the solution, which also calls into play the emotional and affective aspects of educational relationality. It may also be decided to launch the plan starting with a network having fewer participants but made up of players convinced as to the importance of taking action ecologically, for example, just one particularly sensitive teacher, who would then be able to "link up" other figures.

Educators can carry out the task of coordinating the network with ease, thanks to the special observatory they have at their disposal, which allows them to connect and integrate the different education proposals. Even so, each operator in the network must feel involved in formulating responses best suited to the needs of the user, interacting with the proposals of the others, taking a holistic view and responsibility for an action that follows community logic. Consequently, if we consider the problems of the school, and especially that of a so-called "difficult" child, or one that expresses particular unease, the socio-pedagogical educator and the teacher become key players in a perspective of wide area education and the network approach, as they can access the micro and mesosystems to which the educand relates.

In the relational-systemic approach, moreover, the intention is actually not to repair the systems with which the student engages, identified as deficient and fragile, but to establish relations with them in order to highlight how students can find a place in them, benefit from them and solve their problem: "networking operates in synergy "with" systems, it does not try to repair them one by one; it acts from strengths, it does not diagnose and attack weaknesses; it creates involvement, movements and automatisms in the social dimension"[26].

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[25] *Ivi*, p. 133.
[26] F. Folgheraiter, *L'utente che non c'è. Lavoro di rete e empowerment nei servizi alla persona*, Trento, Erickson, 2000, p. 26.

It should be stressed that the goal in educational networking is to enhance the possibilities for student empowerment in different settings, while giving power and responsibility for action to the various networkers. The relational aspect and attitudes of the network approach set in motion a communication pathway and redefinition procedures that enable both an elucidation and a review of the problem in question, as happened in the case of the 13-year-old student Marco[27], recounted by Folgheraiter, which illustrates the methodology of the relational educational network and shows how the actual educator can fill the role of network manager.

The preparatory work proposed by the educator for setting up the network consisted of studying the relationships established with Marco in different settings, and the fact that Marco was identified initially at school as being "the problem" (the individual displaying deviant behaviour and disturbing the class and the teachers) and not as a person in the process of maturing. The overview was then broadened by comparing different points of view and ultimately identifying the problematic aspects of the system in which Marco found himself. In this way, the network plan could be reformulated to support the student, so that he would cease to be an outlier and manage to find new possibilities within himself, and new skills, enabling him to reshape the course of his life, while at the same time improving the atmosphere in the classroom and the well-being of all the students.

A point of particular importance to emphasise here is that, in setting up the educational network, the educator and the teachers discard the supervisory approach and take up a counselling role, so that the user primarily, and then the various networkers, become resources for management of the problem. Also, the preferred relational status of everyone involved is 'we and us':

> Reformulated in this way, the expert will always communicate in a veiled but clear manner, "I believe you can..." both here in the current conversation and subsequently when words are put into practice. In reality, to be more precise, the communication is more subtle. Especially in reformulating an explicit instruction, it goes further and says, "You and I, together, can..." In short, the exact message communicated is that the power to act resides in the relationship, it is neither of the one (the expert) nor of the other (the user), in isolation, but of both in combination[28].

The educator in this case was a pedagogical advisor who offered supervision and stimulated the parties to examine Marco's story from an ecological perspective, which some teachers duly proceeded to do and in their turn became promoters of change in an extended network with headmaster, parents, pedagogist and classmates all actively involved.

5. Conclusions

Evidence suggests that the professional, conscious attention of the educator facilitates the promotion of actions to support the development and learning of the educand in keeping with

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[27] Cf. F. Folgheraiter, *L'educatore nell'"approccio di rete"*, in "Studium educationis", I, 1997, pp. 142-154.
[28] F. Folgheraiter, *L'utente che non c'è,* quote, pp. 195-196.

an ecological approach. The function of the educator, in direct liaison with the school and beyond, is to work toward the creation of solid educational ties and interchanges in the environment where the student lives and learns.

Such ties are proven at the same time to be flexible, making the most of "enabling relationship" processes while ensuring that the educand-student retains a personal identity and independence, expresses his or her empowerment and in turn places it at the disposal of the community in the spirit of a new approach to community care, which sees the teacher and the educator operating at the forefront. They assume a common vision while covering differentiated spheres of action.

Ultimately,

> the term 'networking' can be taken to mean the activity of an operator (at least one) who, instead of seeing the problem at hand as one he or she alone should deal with, 'spreads' the task as widely as possible among other people, however affected, maintaining links with them or supervising them, so as to have several distinct (but connected) sources of initiatives targeting a shared solution[29].

The relational network approach — whether one focuses attention on the educational professionals, teachers and educators in particular, or whether one thinks of the users, the minors to be educated — calls for the adoption of an attitude of welcoming and listening to others, of overcoming exclusions and limitations on educational fields, and removing mental prejudices. The acknowledgement of such a paradigm certainly widens the scope for the construction of an authentic learning experience that respects the person of the student and is based on principles of justice and democracy. Learning not only in school, but equally in life: a challenge that every educator must feel bound to address and take on.

> Anyone who has found themselves teaching in classrooms that seem more and more to mirror a fragmented planet and an economic system that generates growing social divides, I think must have felt, at least momentarily, the bewilderment of having before us unequal lives, in respect of which as teachers [and as educators, we might also add] we experience unease and feel powerless, because fighting disparities and seeking to heal social wounds is a difficult undertaking, one that cannot be accomplished alone[30].

Educational networking offers education professionals the chance, in a certain sense, to "join forces" in seeking to make learning generative, strengthening confidence in the possibilities of students being able to offer their expert contribution in improving themselves and the community. To be of real use in different settings, accordingly, the network approach must be regarded not as a mere educational-management technique — a tool — but as a true manifestation of the pursuit, on the part of schools, of social liberation for each and every educand.

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[29] F. Folgheraiter, *L'educatore nell'"approccio di rete"*, quote, p. 154.
[30] F. Lorenzoni, *Educare controvento. Storie di maestre e maestri ribelli*, Palermo, Sellerio, 2023, p. 19.

Networking helps to capture the value and specific worth of all learning and knowledge, which is always the result of continually evolving relationships, also to free up personal attitudes that interpermeate and reshape themselves in a readiness to participate beyond a rigid, individualistic and sometimes classist kind of knowledge that the school continues to deal in.

The network also represents an exercise in building the common good, which is, precisely, a "space for participation [...], the symbolic and/or physical place where we meet to share situations, institutions, values, resources, symbols and ideas"[31]. As an exercise of acceptance and tolerance, having the common good as its goal, this would seem today to be an action necessary for the very survival of humanity.

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[31] I. Loiodice, *Pedagogia. Il sapere/agire della formazione, per tutti e per tutta la vita*, quote, p. 22.

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