



Teacher education is a deeply pedagogical process rooted in values, ethics, and the social purpose of schooling. Globally, it sits at the core of educational quality and fairness, as research in comparative and international education demonstrates: the training of teachers directly influences students' learning chances, social inclusion, and the democratic aims of schools. Teachers are not simply transmitters of curricula, but active professionals whose convictions, reflective skills, and ability to manage the complexities of classroom life give shape and substance to the educational experience itself.

The pedagogical dimension of teacher education frames teaching as a relational, context-aware, and ethically grounded profession rather than just a set of procedural skills. From a research perspective, this demands robust research methodologies that can critically examine the complex realities of schools and inform evidence-based policies. Equally important is the connection between theory and practice, which helps to bridge the persistent gap between universities and schools.

The contributions gathered in this volume reflect the richness and diversity of experiences showcased during the ATEE Spring Conference 2024, held at the University of Bergamo from May 29 to June 1, 2024. The volume presents 70 selected papers out of more than 300 presented by researchers representing over 40 countries.

This broad spectrum of studies highlights promising directions that can inspire renewed inquiry and concrete proposals aimed at improving contemporary educational systems.

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Teacher education research in Europe: trends, challenges, practices and perspectives

May 29th - June 1st, 2024
S. Agostino, Bergamo



Edited by Nicole Bianquin and Francesco Magni





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BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS

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«The Italian didactic secret». Teachers' education according to Giuseppe Lombardo- Radice's thought

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Abstract

A hundred years after the reform of the Italian school carried out in 1923 by the minister Giovanni Gentile, it could be useful to meditate on the great role recognised to the teachers' education, especially on the primary school ones detailed in the programmes set by Giuseppe Lombardo Radice. What he used to consider the «Italian didactic secret» consisted in an education that consistently conjugated theory and practice, namely a philosophy-based pedagogy looking to the newest outcomes of the psychological researches and opened to the modern experimentations of the activism, but strictly refusing any didactic pre-established and rigid "method". In particular Lombardo Radice criticised the claim according to which the pedagogy had to focus on the child, indulging his or her spontaneity, while the main task of pedagogy is to define the educator's profile. The claim of children's spontaneity derives from a mistaken comprehension of Rousseau's work: even if the child is actually spontaneous, that spontaneity shows itself inside an educative room under the strict control of the pedagogue, who cannot neglect it. The main risk in the activist pedagogical approach, according to Giuseppe Lombardo Radice, was to «close children in their infantility», instead to lead them to adulthood. This risk can be avoided through the education of authoritative and trustworthy teachers, as cultivated people in whom children could see some models of wise and sensible adults. It is culture to assure authority to the teacher: he or she possesses knowledge and competence that the child does not have, but that he aspire to conquer in order to leave childhood.

Keywords: Giuseppe Lombardo Radice; neo-idealism; serene school; poetry; teachers' education.

1. «The good core of positivism»

«By now, in defending the good core of positivism, I am realising that there are none other than us despised idealists!» wittily observed Giuseppe Lombardo-Radice (1959, p. 65) in a parenthesis of *Athena fanciulla. Scienza e poesia della scuola serena* (*Girl Athena. Science and Poetry of the Serene School*), dropping *en passant* an annotation that could well represent the starting point for a reflection on what is really meant by “serene school” and thus on why contemporary pedagogy has perhaps done wrong to abandon this concept, that has been central in Italian early 20th century pedagogy, relegating it almost exclusively to the care of scholars of the history of education.

This consideration, placed as a commentary on the description of the home education given to his children, referred to the defense, which Lombardo-Radice (Scaglia 2023; Ead. 2021; Dessardo 2018; Rossi 2017) polemically conducted against the opinion of some colleagues, of the “objectivist and sensist tendency”, i.e. the “precise, very concrete reference to an object or being observed in its environment and life”. That is to say: Lombardo-Radice defended, against the positivists themselves, the didactics – of a typically positivist stamp – based on the observation of the environment and on concrete facts and objects. In short, everything the opposite of what is usually superficially attributed to neo-idealist pedagogy, and this is precisely the “good core” of positivism at the basis of the “serene school” promoted by the Sicilian pedagogue. And which is after all still at the basis of much of the didactics in use today in Italian and international primary schools, albeit under other names and without explicit reference to its former promoter.

It can therefore be said that if the concept of the “serene school” is considered outdated, perhaps even only because of the sensations that the adjective “serene” evokes in the ears of contemporaries, this is probably due to a certain misrepresentation of Giuseppe Lombardo-Radice's lesson that took place in the decades following the Second World War, in the need and perhaps in the anxiety to renew the Italian school in order to free it from the heavy legacy of Fascism and to make it converge towards other experiences matured at an international level.

What remained as the epitome of Lombardo-Radice's complex thought was the reference, often abstracted from the context, to the “poet” child, to an ahistorical, almost incorporeal child, made up entirely of intuition and spontaneity, reducing the “serene school” almost to a caricature. Justice clearly needs to be done: the *scuola serena* would be the ideal realisation – at least in its author's intentions – of the 1923 reform, which had posed as urgent precisely the problem of the rigorous training of primary teachers (Schirripa 2023), bringing their course of study from the three poorly structured years of the normal school to the seven years of the magistral institute, deeply influencing, for the following decades, through that of their teachers, the basic culture of Italians.

To get a truer idea of Lombard's original project, one need only read his own comments on the reform (D’Arcangeli 2024; Mattone, Moretti, Signori 2023; Galfré 2000; Charnitzky 1996):

«This is the didactic secret of the Gentile reform that concerns teachers, and which we want to be Italy's didactic secret in the face of other countries; an education that assists the child in his spontaneous development, that gives him the opportunity to give us what he already possesses, and receives, so to speak, from the child the cue and the element for education: an education that pushes the child to personal observations and abolishes all rhetorical conventionalism; an education that makes the pupil a little researcher, a discoverer in his own world; an education that sparks and ignites and puts the child in the presence of the beautiful and the great and makes him feel that school is beautiful, and that it cannot be replaced by anything else; that not even play is more beautiful than school; that school is the most enchanting spiritual recreation he can desire; in short, an education that despises nothing of what our people know and do and that moves from the traditions of the people, elevating and improving them.

An education that draws on the homeland's every strength» (Lombardo Radice 1925, p. 242).

Moreover, the entire book *Athena fanciulla*, published in 1925, collected the observations he had made over the years at Montesca (De Salvo 2017), the experiences he had gained with his children's education, the notes on childish drawing, on Giuseppina Pizzigoni's “La Rinnovata” and on a few other cases, all that book is nothing more – and the author makes this clear – than a collection of *exempla* for the realisation and implementation of the 1923 reform.

2. Being teachers

The purpose of education is not the pupil *per se*, as Lombardo-Radice feared positivist pedagogy and some declinations of activism intended - but his projection into the future: educating him means in fact leading him to adulthood. The Sicilian pedagogue warned the animators of activism against the risk of «closing children in their infantility», limiting themselves to indulging their most superficial desires and presenting them without sufficient authority, which is characteristic of the adult man and which in the adult the child always unconsciously seeks.

«He who educates studies; indeed, educating means neither more nor less than studying. It is not the handing over of a deposit; it is the strengthening of our soul to make it capable of the utmost spontaneity and truthfulness in contact with the pupils» (Lombardo Radice 1959, p. 26). Hence the teacher's ability to arouse the pupil's curiosity and desire to learn: from the intensity of his previous studies, from the culture that the child contemplates in the adult, notwithstanding remaining forever in his condition of minority, but aspiring on the contrary to confront the "greats", whom he perceives as authoritative. Culture, Lombardo Radice clearly explains, is not a mere "deposit" and teaching is therefore not simply the transmission of notions: culture is the elevation of one's own soul and teaching is accomplished in the spiritual encounter between pupil and master, an encounter made possible precisely by the soul-widening action - by magnanimity - of the master who has studied and made his own what he has studied: «Think with the philosopher, relive with the historian, palpitate with the poet, and I would be a master of philosophy, of history, of poetry; educate your character, refrain your unconscious impulses, spur on your weaknesses, be a gentleman and despiser of all selfishness, and you will be a master of morality, even without a didactic of moral education» (Lombardo Radice 1951, p. 6).

Authoritativeness comes to the teacher not only from natural and unavoidable communication skills (which may eventually be refined through didactic study and practice), but also from what he actually knows, and which is still unknown to the child. This is the reason for Gentile's reform focus on the teacher's culture, rather than on didactic methodologies for the transmission of knowledge, which are only useful if there is actually something to teach. It is from direct contact with authentic culture - this was Lombardo Radice's and Gentile's wager - that the teacher would find by himself the ways to perfect his teaching action: a "critical" didactics, as Lombardo Radice called it, and therefore always provisional, the result of daily confrontation with knowledge, updated from year to year, class after class, as new pupils, new contexts, new problems arose, rather than "learnt" on the benches of the teacher training college in schematic forms that in principle could always be reproduced over time. One can learn to teach, if it is ever really possible, only by drawing from great literature, by approaching the main authors directly, rather than through school manuals that "chop up" and return food that has already been "remixed".

It was precisely the teacher's need to continually adapt, and therefore to progressively revise and amend his teaching style, that made didactic "lessons" and the claim of a "scientific pedagogy", which would indicate once and for all the formula for the "perfect" lesson, superfluous, if not even harmful. Hence also Giuseppe Lombardo Radice's main interest in the history of pedagogy and education, which he understood - he wrote as early as 1905, in his first early work - as the most authentic pedagogy, as a doctrine in action and realised, even if by nature always subject to revision and updating.

3. "National" education

From this angle, one can usefully reflect also on another concept considered outdated and often misunderstood today, that of "national education" (Lombardo Radice 1916; Dessardo 2018), to be understood more appropriately in the sense of "popular", and closely linked to the "serene school", which in the end is nothing more than its practical realisation.

National culture is both the "high" culture, i.e. the literary, artistic and intellectual product left to their descendants by Italians throughout their history, but "national education" is also simply popular

culture, the customs and traditions of the people inhabiting the Peninsula, the “low” culture, often (at least in those times) illiterate, made up of popular wisdom, proverbs, folklore, lullabies and uncoded musical tunes. It is the encounter between these two cultures that constitutes the “authentic” Italian soul, that completes it in its different declinations, and this encounter proves to be possible almost only at school: it is up to the teachers, wrote Lombardo-Radice, to encourage this encounter and thus become the interpreters, mediators, in a certain sense maieuts of future Italy, an Italy that still had to complete its unity within itself, in the fruitful exchange between its cultures and social classes, transforming a simple “geographical expression” into an authentic spiritual community.

By understanding the dialectical process within the life of the spirit from this perspective, as a perennial dialogue between past, present and future, neo-idealism offers itself to us in far less palatial guise than it has often been recounted, and instead reveals itself as a philosophical doctrine that is not only humanistic, but also humanitarian, of which in particular - in this declination - Giuseppe Lombardo Radice became the standard-bearer with his - and his wife Gemma Harasim's (Sistoli Paoli 2009) - studies about Pestalozzi.

In the “national” datum, an essential attribute of the State, Lombardo Radice saw, probably deluding himself, the only motive capable of justifying, even to the point of self-sacrifice, a profound and gratuitous solidarity between citizens who were otherwise strangers to each other, in some way made brothers by the commonality, more than of lineage (Lombardo Radice's patriotism had absolutely no ethnic character), of spirit, a commonality given precisely by the participation in the same history and culture. Therefore, it is only in one's own homeland that a man can aspire to truly fulfil himself, to reach the highest peaks of spiritual life, which is, on the other hand, necessarily diminished if conducted among people who, having been formed in another culture, naturally aim to different spiritual goals.

The path of self-education, which the teacher must unceasingly exercise on himself, he must also know how to arouse in his pupils, introducing them to the fullness of the life of the spirit, thus mediating between their family origins, often of popular extraction, and the highest achievements of national culture. The school must therefore be “serene” because it is placed at the intersection of home life and national and then universal life, an extension of the home and at the same time open to society, of which it represents a sort of compendium, as also professed by Dewey in his *Pedagogical creed*.

For Lombardo Radice, the fruitful exchange between home and school, between family and society, takes place not because it is supported by “scientifically” collected data, but through the person of the teacher himself, essentially through his humanity, a humanity that must be nourished from the most disparate sources of culture, but according to a coherent programme, not improvised. For Lombardo Radice, the positivist school, which claims to rely on an objective view of reality is instead based on assumptions that it is incapable of guaranteeing and is therefore, inevitably, a “soulless” school, constitutively incapable of fulfilling its task of humanisation. It is the school of manuals and treatises, which remain a dead letter if they are not made their own by the teacher and, with him and for him, by the pupils. On the subject of “methods”, he wrote of the Montesca school and its patron: «Let us therefore study not Franchetti's method, but Franchetti herself» (Lombardo Radice 1959, p. 20), meaning that that of pure, aseptic scientific observation is nothing but an illusion, as it is not possible to identify a point of observation external to that of the educator, called upon to develop the methods, but ending up, inevitably, by coinciding the method with the person who adopts it. Hence, too, the aforementioned reservations about the more orthodox Montessori women, whom he mocked as «faithful priestesses of the method» because they slavishly applied it, avoiding making their own personal contributions, certain, however, that in the end «their teacher is the least Montessorian of all» (Lombardo Radice 1926, p. 25).

4. Science and poetry

Lombardo-Radice's school did not disdain the scientific disciplines, far from it; in many texts the Catanese pedagogue sang the praises of teachers who were "scientists" and "researchers". But they must be presented not through the pretense of a scientific objectivity, but with the personal involvement of the pupil, spiritually united with his teacher, who must have already had the same experience. «The sensible subject of a natural science lesson for a popular school is not a given tree, or a part of a tree presented verbalistically at school, but for example: the forest, the whole of life that is the forest both as a vegetal association and as a correlation of plants and animals [...]; not the frog, but the pond, also as a whole of biological and physical manifestations: the river, the meadow, the mountain, and the like. Harmonies and struggles of natural existence; contests and contrasts of individual beings». And again, summarising: «It is only of value to the child what he achieves through his own experience, or which, with the guidance of a master can become his own experience, with the complete illusion of having achieved the result by himself». Looking at the process from the master's side, it sounds like this: «The poetry I taste is that which I can make taste, and in making it taste I feel it more vividly mine; the scientific discovery is a revelation to myself, when I conceive it as a revelation for the human mind in the universal and launch it against error, of which I do not triumph, but she by my means» (Lombardo Radice 1961, p. 18).

As is well known, among the most successful school experiences he counted La Montesca directed by Alice Hallgarten Franchetti, which placed the observation of nature at the centre of its educational proposal. This school embodied the ideal of a "serene school" because of its ability to fully valorise the various inclinations of the children, exalting their nature as "poets".

It is precisely the definition of the child as a "poet" that is one of the most probable causes of the historical overcoming of Lombardo's proposal, since the image of the poet, with its implicit references to genius, seems to clash with the modern democratic conception of childhood, for which the child is primarily a holder of rights and a citizen; the imponderable concept of poetry, moreover, eludes the logic, particularly in vogue today, of the possibility of "measuring" the outcomes of educational action, which pertain more to the field of science. Well, for Lombardo-Radice, however, the scientific approach and the inclination to poetry, if correctly interpreted, ended up coinciding in the child's soul, naturally open to all the possibilities of the spirit: «Alice Franchetti's children», he wrote, taking La Montesca as a model, «receive a particularly scientific education, which however coincides with artistic education; expositors rather than narrators, but sharp; systematic illustrators of scientific observations, but full of serene joy and love for the things illustrated [...]. Science, but also poetry, therefore» (Lombardo Radice 1959, p. 42). And again: «La Montesca presents everything to him as a gentle miracle, which one must understand and love; it connects him with the social world, transforms him into a little conservationist, into a painter of his world» (*ibi*, p. 44).

Science and poetry - it is no coincidence that the subtitle of *Girl Athena* was precisely *Science and Poetry of the Serene School* - end up coinciding because, at least in Lombardo-Radice's conception, "poetry" is the first intuitive form, proper to children, of synaesthetic understanding of reality, thus a form of philosophy understood as hermeneutics of natural phenomena, which are precisely the object of science. This position does justice as much to the coldest positivism as - and perhaps above all - to the "insincere" school, so many times severely attacked by the Sicilian pedagogue, that school that only aimed at transmitting preconceived notions and subjecting the child to the social system, for example through the practice, harshly contested by Lombardo-Radice, of the fantasy theme, that is, disconnected from the real concrete experiences of the child: «The child is, in itself, poetry. He is a face all eyes, now dreaming, now laughing, now scrutinising. Do not upset him by forcing him into invention. He will give you, by himself, what poetry he can, and that is his own naivety. And the more he will give you, the less you will distance him from modest and precise observations and from everyday things» (*ibi*, pp. 281-282).

Poetry therefore as an expression of the child's observation of reality, as a reaction to the amazement caused in the soul by the encounter with novelty, an encounter made possible by the teacher. Here, too, we can see the Rousseauian attitude of foreseeing the child's desires and making him spontaneously fulfil what the master has planned: the so-called "reality tasks", the themes assigned

starting from concrete experiences that the master has prepared, go precisely in this direction. Conversely, “fantasy” composition, which asks of the pupil what he cannot give, because it is foreign to his life experience and his feelings, risks turning into a temptation to plagiarism, to copying and badly repeating other people’s forms and styles in a stereotyped and, indeed, “insincere” form.

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