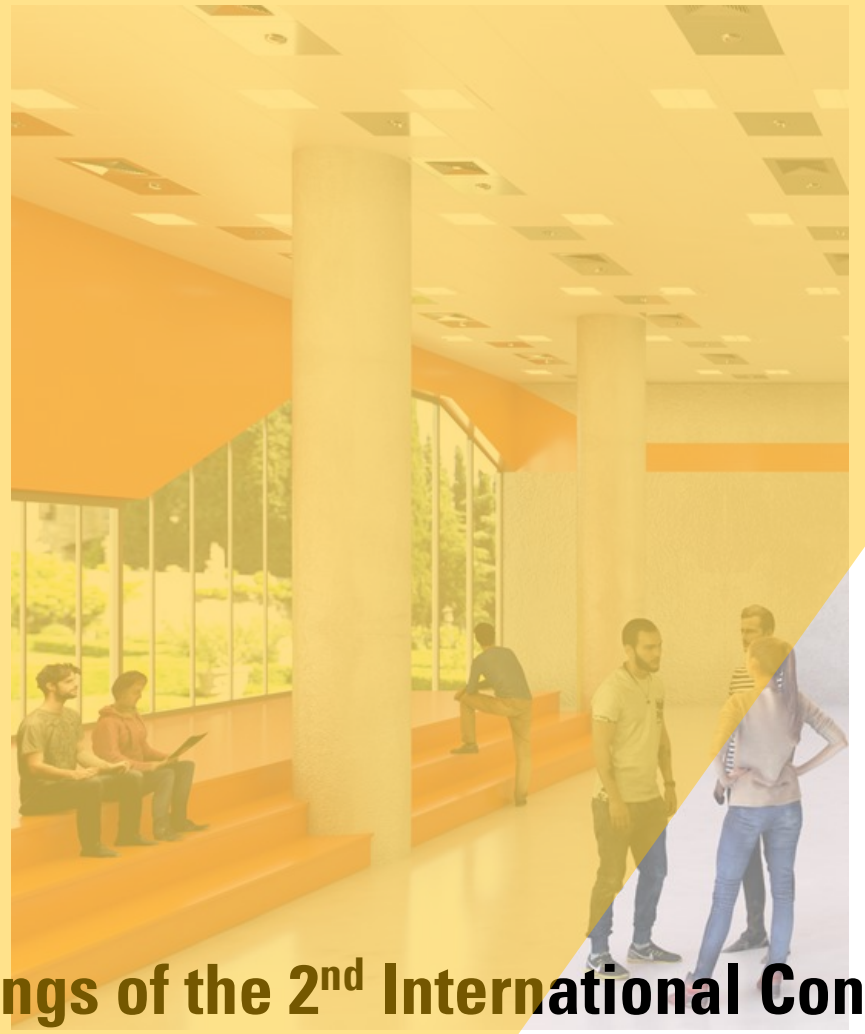

Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference of the Journal Scuola Democratica

REINVENTING EDUCATION

VOLUME II

Learning with New Technologies, Equality and Inclusion

ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA"

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Educating in Time of Global Pandemic: Pedagogical Consultancy as a Response to Educational Distress

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ABSTRACT: *This contribution intends to focus on the educational and transformative value of pedagogical consultancy in situations of educational and social distress in time of global pandemic. We will illustrate the theoretical, epistemological, methodological assumptions of an approach to pedagogical consultancy that uses phenomenological and sociomaterial theories to support educational professionals in a process of understanding and transforming distress. Based on these premises, our hypothesis is that consultancy should be conceived as an educational activity for teachers and educators. This means that the counselor must build a learning setting that makes it possible for educational professionals to explore their daily practices and learn from their experience, increasing knowledge of the different factors (subjective, social, relational, organizational, cultural and material), which produce habits, attitudes, speeches, educational actions. From this point of view, consultancy is not only an educational process, but it is also a research practice. The consultant's task is not to transmit notions, nor to offer 'recipes', but to build the conditions for the group to assume an attitude of research, in order to promote reflection on the educational experience and distress.*

KEYWORDS: *Pedagogical consultancy, Distress, School, Educational services, Inclusion.*

Introduction

The global pandemic caused by the SARS CoV-2 virus and the measures taken to face it have upset the organization of individual and collective existence, with respect to time, spaces, relationships and habits that marked our daily life (Ferrante, 2020; Palmieri, 2020). The health emergency is soon becoming an economic, social, political, cultural, educational emergency, which forced to redefine in depth and radically the structure of whole society, the ways of taking care and cure, of using services, to move, to socialize, to communicate, to produce, to purchase

This paper was conceived by the two authors. Specifically, Alessandro Ferrante wrote 'Introduction', 'Conclusion' and paragraph 3; Maria Benedetta Gambacorti-Passerini wrote paragraphs 1 and 2.

and to consume tangible and intangible goods, to educate and to teach: «The global pandemic is of course not only a serious public health emergency, but a political, economic and social emergency too» (Williamson et al., 2020, 107). Therefore, schools and educational services are in the middle of a sudden change that has affected both education professionals (educators, teachers), parents and pupils (Mantegazza, 2020).

For example, the switch to online and digital education formats, in the so called 'remote' forms of teaching and learning, have emerged as a consequence of mass closures of schools, colleges and universities. The 'distance education' have proved to be indispensable in order to continue to educate and have inevitably led to emphasize the fundamental role of technologies: «education has become a widespread matter of concern for political authorities, education businesses, charities, teachers, parents and students alike. Education has become an emergency matter, and along with it, educational technologies have been positioned as a frontline emergency service» (Williamson et al., 2020, 107). In other words «The Covid-19 pandemic, and associated measures of social distancing and school closures all over the world, have accelerated this digitization, triggering an urgent need for critical, up-close scrutiny of how this digitization is reshaping the worlds of education» (Decuypere et al., 2021, 1). The widespread adoption of digital technologies to cope with the emergency situation has not only created the conditions for maintaining social and educational inclusion, but has also generated (albeit unintentionally) social and educational distress (Ferrante, 2020; Gambacorti-Passerini, 2020). Indeed, the way in which the educational system has reorganized itself has entailed considerable difficulties for a wide range of subjects. Just to give some examples: to those who do not have the necessary skills to profitably use digital educational platforms; to those who for various reasons (economic, material, due to infrastructural deficiencies, or cultural choices) in their homes do not have the possibility to access the web or to use devices (PCs, smartphones, tablets); to those who have a learning style and a media diet that adapt with great difficulty to digitized educational and didactic methods; to those who already showed weaknesses before the emergency; to those who cannot benefit from an adequate domestic context in terms of available materials and usable spaces. Education is therefore undergoing a significant process of rapid transformation, the outcomes of which appear uncertain and problematic.

The emergency has accentuated the already existing inequalities and created new forms of educational poverty, discrimination, social exclusion and educational distress (Bertagna, 2020; Gigli, 2021). A strong investment of resources has thus become essential in the educational world, to re-invent one's work, one's professional practices, as well as the adoption of strategies to promote inclusion and reduce the negative effects of the current crisis. Precisely to support educational professionals in the persistence of the social hardship they face and in which they are

themselves involved, the contribution of pedagogical consultancy in school and other educational contexts can be a valuable resource (Palma, 2017; Ferrante, 2019; Gambacorti-Passerini, 2020).

1. Pedagogical Consultancy as a Possible Response to Educational Distress

Facing a situation of widespread distress due to the Covid-19 pandemic and its effects, as we wrote before, educational services are facing stressful work conditions that have forced a transformation of professional habits and practices.

Pedagogically reflecting on such a situation, therefore, the paper aims to question about the possibility of thinking and proposing vivid training actions to foster the possibility of thinking about an inevitable re-orientation of educational professionals' practices (Sangster et al., 2020), without losing a knowledge that guides and funds them, even in the exceptional and emergency conditions linked to the health emergency. Following this direction, there is the need to find something that, without denying the distress (Gambacorti-Passerini, 2020), can be able to reveal the opening of possibilities for living in a time of uncertainty: in this sense, a way could be the creation of a proposal to guide and initiate pedagogical processes of interpretation and action, precisely to 'stay inside' the dimensions of inconvenience and lack that characterize educational work in the current situation.

In our proposal, pedagogical consultancy can be a valuable chance in order to support educational professionals facing a widespread distress, as the one caused by the pandemic. While considering pedagogical consultancy as a resource to face distress, we have to clarify which theoretical, epistemological, methodological assumptions for thinking and acting consultancy can support educational professionals in a process of understanding and transforming distress.

Referring to Schein (1969) perspective, we argue that to embrace the problems and the complex aspects that educational professionals daily face, consultancy must be thought as a process, in which the consultant is not a passive receptor of knowledge and solutions, but in which thinking and reflexivity are stimulated and continuously generated, also in order not to depend on the consultant at the end of the course. In this sense, consultancy consists of a set of activities provided by the consultant, which aim to help consultants to perceive, understand and act on the events that occur in their environment. So, consultancy can be thought as a learning setting that makes it possible for educational professionals to explore their daily practices and learn from their experience, increasing knowledge of the different factors (subjective, social, relational, organizational, cultural and material). This learning setting can also be represented as a research practice to question and

explore the complexity of educational events: not a setting where an 'expert' (the consultant) offers pre-established answers (Schein, 2009).

Going further, we have now to focus on the specificity that can define a consultancy as a pedagogical one. Thinking about a pedagogical consultancy, educational experience and work must be addressed in their complexity with knowledge, methods of intervention, evaluation criteria, theoretical frameworks, interpretative paradigms that properly refer to pedagogy (Palma, 2017). It is essential that the pedagogical consultant has a solid competence in thematizing the educational experience, in its intentional and/or spontaneous aspects, as well as on how to set up an educational scene, knowing how to read the effects it produces.

Furthermore, in order to act pedagogical consultancy, in our opinion, it is essential to have a clear epistemological point of view through which we consider what is called 'education' and the modality in which it occurs, since every pedagogical consultant or supervisor explains the educational process using different categories of analysis and concepts, which inevitably influence the way in which he/she observes, analyzes or projects education (Palmieri, 2012). Based on specific theoretical readings and epistemological perspectives, therefore, the consultant's task, with respect to what is written, is precisely to offer an involvement in a process to focus on aspects related to how the educational experience takes place.

In this sense, to grasp the complexity that constitutes the educational experience, mostly with regard to a situation of widespread distress as the pandemic one, pedagogical consultancy can be oriented to a perspective that can allow to consider all the variety of aspects composing the educational scene. Following this direction, Fook (2002) proposes a *hybrid and inclusive perspective* that can offer the possibility to hold together in a single theoretical framework conceptual premises that belong to separate and often opposed research traditions, but that can be useful to consider different and complex factors in the educational contexts. Giving some examples, the effort is the trying to keep together different aspects that are present on the educational setting, as the human and the non-human components, the explicit and the implicit dimensions, reflection and action, language and practice, thought and materiality.

Far from the idea of creating a dangerous and casual miscellany of theoretical approaches to observe and understand what is brought to the consulting scene, a hybrid and inclusive perspective, on the contrary, bets on a meticulous and well-founded theoretical, methodological and epistemological knowledge of the consultants, which allows to have more than one focus to set up the consultative intervention.

The following paragraphs will so be oriented in exposing two different approaches for pedagogical consultancy that can be considered and composed in order to accompany consultants in highlighting the complexity of their educational practice and the contemporary distress in it.

2. Phenomenological Approaches

On the basis of the influence deriving from the phenomenological philosophy of Husserl (1987), which had a great influence on the revisiting of European culture starting from the second half of the twentieth century, a composite movement in the Italian pedagogical area was consolidated, systematized and theorized by Piero Bertolini (1999), which sets a consideration of pedagogy understood as a phenomenologically founded science.

Such a vision of human formation, giving considerable importance on the education of human reason and philosophical reflection on it, also indicates a further line of pedagogical investigation, defined as phenomenological-existential, focused on the re-evaluation of the subject, in its conditions of complexity, but also in its possibilities of signifying and building meaning in the world.

In this sense, referring to phenomenology, working in education, also as a consultant, means to embrace an hermeneutic paradigm, considering interpretation as the capability to *give meaning* to the world. From this thinking, a particular attention is devoted to subjects' tacit knowledge, educational relationships, dynamics of power. Going further, a phenomenological and hermeneutic gaze tries to lead the subject, always starting from problematic, contradictory situations, to *critically* explore (Fook, Gardner, 2007), understand, participate, interpret, grasp the essence of the educational problems and practices. A central point is so constituted by the concept of *reflexivity*, that has a cognitive, transformative, but also critical and emancipative function.

In this framework, the epistemology of pedagogy is oriented to promote an educational operation strongly focused on the relationship between subjects who meet and communicate their own story and their own semantic universe. Educational practices, therefore, depend on human acting, that is strongly connected with cognitive aspects and thinking. Deepening these aspects, thinking and acting a pedagogical consultancy referring to phenomenological approaches means to focus on individual thinking, relational dynamics between subjects, processes of signification.

Furthermore, the consultant will project a work focused on reflection and meaning-making processes, thought as instruments useful to gain knowledge, to be able to choose, to face problems, to modify practices and beliefs through which everyone interprets the world and other people. In other words, it is possible to affirm that referring to phenomenological approaches to think pedagogical consultancy means to accompany professionals in reflecting (Schon, 1983) on their practices and experiences, discussing on the way they think about them.

An important reference about these themes can be what Mezirow (1991) wrote about transformative learning: reflective thinking and meaning-making processes are thought as preferential ways to modify

our points of view, our implicit premises on which we base our reasoning. In this perspective, learning is understood as a conscious, dialogic, critical and reflective process through which the adult builds new interpretations of meanings, even if they are attributed to experiences or thoughts of the past, or he/she can builds new meanings, in order to guide the present and guide future action and choices.

Following these directions, referring to phenomenological approaches allows to highlight dimensions of distress situated in the meaning-making processes that inhabit educational contexts and practices. Using reflexivity, narration and other instruments to signify educational work, the consultant can promote an exploration of distress oriented to thematize the consultants' lived experience.

Beyond all the aspects we have highlighted regarding how phenomenological approaches can orientate the way in which education and pedagogical consultancy can be thematized, we have now to note that, while focusing on the themes we wrote before, the phenomenological approach leaves in the background other points. First of all, reflexivity is intended as a sort of 'solution for everything', through which the adult magically transforms any experience into a significant learning opportunity. Reflection, on the other hand, may not produce learning and change in itself. Going on, phenomenological approaches for consultancy think as a starting point (and not as a point of arrival) a self-reflective, free and critical adult, always able to seize learning opportunities. The unit of analysis for this approach is the single subject, thinking of he or she as a person able to consciously access experiences and to control and master learning and knowledge. In this sense, learning processes are reduced to phenomena that are primarily cognitive and individual. The context where learning happens is only a 'container' where an autonomous adult moves freely: subjects and contexts, reflection and action, mind and bodies are thought separately.

Trying to summarize, following these directions, we can say that phenomenological approaches promote a conscious and rational vision of educational processes and therefore it risks to neglect the role of desire, affections and unconscious in learning. It also leaves in the background the active contribution of the body, the objects and the materiality in defining the constraints and the possibilities within which individual subjects think, educate, learn, grow, enter into relationship with themselves and with others.

3. Sociomaterial Approaches

For several decades, philosophy and social sciences have been affected by a radical change of cultural and scientific paradigm. In fact, theoretical and empirical research is increasingly inspired by posthumanist and new materialist perspectives (St. Pierre, 2014; Braidotti, 2019). These perspectives challenge the assumptions of the humanist paradigm and

seek to go beyond a human-centered view, as they believe that such view is inadequate to understand a globalized, multiethnic and hi-tech society in which technological, scientific, cultural and existential changes have rapidly altered previous ways of living and thinking.

As Fenwick, Edwards and Sawchuk stated (2011), also in educational studies a significant change is occurring, linked to the contribution offered over the last decades by some approaches that they have generically defined as 'sociomaterial'. The spread of these theories in the international debate and the paradigmatic shift that they are generating has prompted scholars to affirm that a *material turn* in educational research is underway (Fenwick et al., 2011; Snaza et al., 2016; Ferrante, 2016).

These approaches open up new research directions and coin a new vocabulary to rethink pedagogy as well as educational practices (Fenwick, Landri, 2012). They challenge the primacy ascribed to humans in learning processes and divert the attention from teachers and students to materials and materiality. These approaches analyze learning, knowledge and educational action by decentralizing the focus from the individual who learns, knows and acts. Knowledge and learning do not occur in the mind of individual subjects, but are *collective, hybrid events performed in sociomaterial networks*, which the researcher has to trace and describe (Landri, Viteritti, 2016). Education, therefore, is no longer investigated as if it is only a human prerogative, a cultural, social and personal phenomenon, resulting from relationships and intersubjective communication between teachers and students, but is rather conceived as a performance rooted in practice. Education is the effect of immanent assemblages, which include objects, technologies, spaces, times, bodies, animals, organic materials and individuals. Sociomaterial approaches rely on *relational onto-epistemology*, emphasize the *heterogeneity* of the elements involved in the educational process, and avoid separating individuals from things: «In such accounts, all entities are understood to be mutually constituted – in their distinct boundaries, properties, directions of action, and relations with other entities – simultaneously with the constitution of the dynamic phenomena and events in which they are implicated, within and through the ongoing flux of multiple interactions and connections» (Fenwick, 2010, 107).

Sociomaterial approaches also redefine the concept of *agency* (Fenwick, Edwards and Sawchuk, 2011; Ferrante, 2016; Snaza et al., 2016). They refuse to ascribe agency only to human and recognize the active role of non-human too. For them, material is performative, rather than inert (Fenwick, Edwards, 2013). Namely, things act on and with subjects and vice versa (Sørensen, 2009). Consequently «No one person, place, or thing acts alone or unto itself. Humans and nonhumans interact together» (Helmsing, 2016, 148). Sociomaterial theories «*focus on the relations among entities through which actions occur, rather than entities themselves as the source of actions*» (Fenwick et al., 2011, 166). This specific attention to materiality in action, collective and hybrid

assemblages, allows to identify what directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly supports and enables learning and is often shadowed by human-centered perspective (Ferrante, 2018).

Sociomaterial approaches, however, also have critical aspects. For example, in some cases they tend to neglect the specific contribution of the human subject to educational practices. Learning implies complex cognitive activities that presuppose the determining role of humans (Lichtner, 2016). If, on the one hand, it is legitimate to think that learning is an effect of the interaction between human and non-human in both social and material contexts, and therefore what happens in education depends not only on intentions, values, meanings and human actions, on the other hand it makes little sense to deal with the various actors involved in the educational process in a symmetrical way. In addition, sociomaterial research lines tend to produce analyzes and descriptions, but are merely indicative of operational solutions, or even of pragmatic orientations. Of course, being able to rely on precise descriptions and analyzes of specific contexts and certain sets of practices creates the conditions for initiating a possible change in educational policies and daily actions. However, the almost total absence of research application is likely to create a distance between researchers and practitioners and hence may become a hindrance to change. Perhaps also for this reason, those who carry out consultancy and supervisory professions rarely adopt the epistemological premises that can be attributed to these approaches (Ferrante, Galimberti, 2019).

However, such perspectives may prove to be extremely helpful during consultancy to investigate the materiality of learning processes (Ferrante, 2019; Ferrante, Galimberti, 2019). In fact, sociomaterial approaches can be freely adopted to raise theoretical and methodological problems that, in our opinion, are very relevant in consultative practices, and are underexplored in reflective and human-centered approaches, such as the role of materiality and non-human actors in educational settings. Indeed, according to sociomaterial perspectives, learning is a contingent, unstable and changeable phenomenon that is embedded in a peculiar ecology of relationships and is intrinsically exposed to uncertainty and fallibility. From an operational point of view, this implies considering the need to continuously (re)design and (re)build mediations (objects, documents, practices, organizational and material modifications) that facilitate educational processes. In this theoretical framework, therefore, education and distress must be examined by highlighting the heterogeneity of actors, human and non-human, which make it possible to carry out educational processes. During a consultancy is necessary to try to understand how different elements (bodies, spaces, times, symbols, texts, documents, objects, technologies) interact with each other, articulating and disrupting daily educational practices. It is not a question of eluding the issues that arise in relation to values, choices, representations and experiences, but of anchoring them to the materiality of the action.

In summary, reflecting from a new materialist point of view on educational distress means asking how the affective, corporeal, objective, technological, spatial dimensions intertwine, creating and recreating the social and material tangle of educational contexts. At this level, the consultancy focuses on the performativity of educational practices, in order to trace materiality in the enactment of social process and «to engage productively with multiplicity and difference» (Fenwick et al., 2011, 168).

Conclusion

The crisis that has been going through educational institutions for some time and the widespread social distress that has worsened due to the pandemic raise very complex pedagogical issues and represent a difficult challenge for education professionals. Following these directions, practitioners need to be supported in various ways in carrying out their educational tasks. In this sense, pedagogical consultancy can be a valuable resource.

Our hypothesis is that in order to aid practitioners to manage the problems they face and to find adequate solutions, it is necessary to develop a project of pedagogical consultancy based on theoretical and methodological tools that can help teachers and educators to explore from different perspectives the educational practices in which they are involved. If the problems are complex, in fact, the interpretation through which to read, think and face them must also be complex. For this reason, in our opinion, it is more appropriate to use a hybrid and inclusive consulting approach (Fook, 2002).

In this paper we have focused in particular on two theoretical frameworks (phenomenological and sociomaterial ones) that are very different from each other and in many respects incompatible. Integrating them into a single consultancy process is neither simple nor obvious.

However, in a consultancy setting, connecting and hybridizing these very different theoretical frameworks can be useful, as it allows to limit the one-sidedness of each perspective and therefore not run into interpretations that could be reductive. Sociomaterial approaches make it possible to overcome the focus on the subject and intersubjectivity, paying attention to the materiality of education and acknowledging the active role of non-human elements. The reflexive and phenomenological approaches, on the other hand, allow to give the 'right weight' to the human contribution in the process of signification, also taking into consideration the cognitive and affective dimensions of the practitioners, in order to question their tacit premises of thought. From a methodological and epistemological point of view, the challenge is to be able *to reassemble subjectivity, meaning and materiality* within a framework of the whole. This undertaking, moreover, in the pedagogical field has already been attempted by various scholars, although giving

rise to different theoretical outcomes (Caronia, 2011; Sartori, 2012; Barone, 2014; Ferrante, 2019; Ferrante, Palmieri, 2019).

In a consultancy setting this means not only selecting which approach to use according to the circumstances, problems and issues to be investigated, but also and above all devising theoretical strategies to interpret educational practices and distress as complex phenomena, which emerge through processes that are both social and material, individual and collective, involving action and thought, mind and body, people and things, power and knowledge. The point, therefore, is to construct a set of conceptual tools that helps professionals to question their own assumptions and change the contexts in which they act, unraveling the material-discursive entanglements through which the meanings and actions are performed in the daily practices.

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