

Resilience and coping styles for transformative teaching and learning

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EDUCATION IN TIME OF CRISIS: FROM A PANDEMIC PEDAGOGY TO A RESILIENT PEDAGOGY

Across the world, teachers and school leaders are under great stress due to the highly complex challenges they have to face today. They are asked to teach in increasingly multicultural classrooms, integrate students with special needs, use ICTs to teach more effectively, engage in evaluation and accountability processes, involve parents in schools, and deal with growing pressures from students, parents, education systems and other stakeholders, all of which are increasingly demanding and too often contradictory. Furthermore, teachers are supposed to be innovative and creative to contribute to the ambitious purpose of “rethinking education” according to rapid changes in today’s society.

Henry Giroux, theorist of critical pedagogy, entitled his latest essay “Pandemic Pedagogy. Education in time of Crisis” (Idem, 2021). The title outlines a field of action in pedagogy characterized by the effects and consequences of Covid-19, expanding its analysis to the emergency needs of the education system and not only those related to health emergencies. According to Giroux, contemporaneity is a very distinctive story of various global emergencies that place human beings’ development at risk: the pandemic, racial violence, gender-based violence, migratory processes, wars, educational poverty, economic crises, the psychological and social hardships among the population. Following his perspective, all emergencies need to be read as a separating and founding gesture at the same time (Foucault, 1975), which, according to Giroux, has isolated and generated a specific field of knowledge: a pandemic pedagogy. This pedagogy has rethought educational and didactic actions in a virtual scenario. Assisted by new technologies, it has expanded spaces for learning and emergency training, but has nevertheless highlighted the risk of alienation and oppression, if it is not critically rethought and oriented through an empowerment and resilient perspective (Freire, 2004; Freire & Macedo, 1987). And even if there are school communities where emergencies are not present, we can affirm that

this vision highlights what occurs when a system, the educational system, is outside of its comfort zone, which is the case when introducing innovations that foster teachers to rethink education and themselves (Abbott, MacTaggart, 2010).

The pandemic pedagogy defined by Giroux intends to explore issues concerning knowledge-building, agency, desires and values that animate current educational processes, promoting actions of resistance to every possible attempt to subjection and passive roles (Annamma, 2018). The recent pandemic has produced a temporality marked by a pedagogic frailty caused by uncertainty, fragmentation, and apprehension. However, according to Giroux, this pause in the chaos offers an opportunity to face and reorganize new visions of educational work, by focusing attention on issues such as the agency of those in training, the values that can be traced to the affirmation of human rights and sustainable development, and the fight against inequalities, and by putting values such as inclusion or differences at the center of educational policies. Henry Giroux's vision therefore highlights something more than an educational model that has been outlined to respond to an emergency. He argues that the practices deployed by pandemic pedagogy are not just *adaptive actions* to respond to a health crisis, but define the space of a system of knowledge, ideas, values, and desires that aim to build specific identities, relationships, and distinct hermeneutics of the present and the future (Giroux, 2021).

During times of crisis and renovation urgent questions and training need to always emerge, which call for transformative teaching and learning practices characterized by reflexivity and meaning-making.

Despite this scenario, we ground our reflection and proposal in a theoretical background of the ecological paradigm for knowledge building (Maturana & Varela, 1984), the critical pedagogy movement (Freire, 2004; Mezirow, 2000) and Nussbaum theories (2001) on the importance of frailty in knowledge building. These models are confirmed by a number of initiatives aimed at supporting teachers and school leaders in addressing these numerous challenges. Teachers and school leaders are too often alone when facing them in their daily work. This situation may cause a number of them to give up, feel lost, depressed, passive, and exhausted or to suffer the so-called 'burnout syndrome'¹. Practitioners, teachers, and leaders build their knowledge through their experience, *in action and on action* (Schön, 1993), inside specific situations. According to this shift, teaching strategies should be rethought, moving towards a more active choice,

1. Data are grounded in the following documents: TALIS - The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey; Supporting Teacher Professionalism - Insights from TALIS 2013 (OECD); Rethinking Education Towards a global common good? (Unesco, 2015)

through which the learner becomes the producer of knowledge from the beginning of his/her education and throughout life (Garista et al., 2015).

According to different studies (Alimatu et al., 2021; Griffith et al. 1999; Hidalgo-Andrale et al., 2021), teachers' uneasiness influences their performance and well-being. This situation implies psychological, or even physical, suffering and leads to negative consequences for teachers themselves, for their students and impacts the educational system, affecting quality of life and academic success (Garista et al., 2019). Alternatively, if we adopt a pedagogical perspective, focused on making visible transformative practices, we realise that there are a number of teachers and schools that have succeeded in efficiently and creatively, addressing today's education questions, introducing innovative learning activities and routines, inspiring students and colleagues, and contributing to the necessary innovation and performance in their classrooms and schools. We can call them "Best performers in education" (Benedetti et al., 2020) and they represent a treasured asset in educational practices as they show how current challenges can effectively be mastered. Over the years, they have developed and tested positive and effective strategies that, adequately transferred and exploited, can stop and even reverse the vicious circle of passivity and withdrawal, replacing it by a virtuous circle of motivation, empowerment, effectiveness, and innovation. According to their stories, the scenario of a pandemic pedagogy can be turned into a resilient pedagogy: making possible the shift from negative to positive dynamics for teachers and schools.

RESILIENT TEACHING: BORDERING A PATH FOR POSITIVE EDUCATION

Resilience is becoming a very common term in relation to inclusion, disability, life skills, teachers' training, leadership, mentoring, and guidance. Capacity to create new opportunities, resources, and skills are the most important factor of resilience: in other words, new learning, emerging from a stressful, disadvantaged, chaotic, or traumatic situation. Resilience could be understood as a metaphor of learning and culture, as it is a process capable of transforming people, their knowledge, and abilities to cope with situations and solve problems.

Resilience refers to a process that can affect people, schools, communities but can also become a lens for reading the stories of great educational innovations that have helped to promote inclusion at school. The French pedagogist Goussot argues:

Pedagogical action is an area of important elaboration and implementation of the resilient process. [...] Resilience can become a prism to re-read the thinking of those involved in education, to retrace the bridge between resilience and learning (Goussot, 2014, pp 12-16, *our translation*).

The construct of resilience has been researched in education for many years (Brown et al., 2001; Newman, 2002; Ungar, 2021). Resilience and coping styles are generally associated with studies in the field of educational psychology. In this chapter we take an alternative approach by selecting and adopting reviews connected to pedagogical studies.

Looking at the literature dealing with the training of teachers/educators on resilience (Brown et al. 2001; Milstein & Henry, 2008, Garista, 2018), everyone agrees on the ethical need to reflect on one's own resilience, recovering its narrative root and biographical dimension (Goussot, 2014), to become aware of it and, in so doing, becoming able to promote resilience in other people. Two different models approach resilience education in schools, defining resilience as a process and not an outcome (Brown et al. 2001; Milstein & Henry, 2008). Both attempts to promote a transformative approach to resilience, centered on protective factors to foster resilience in young people and support educators' resilience. We know that teachers can respond positively or negatively to challenges, so resilience could help them foster both individual (or biographical) and collective capacity to cope with these stressful situations. There is no magic formula to make a school resilient, but the quality of the teaching and learning environment, the cooperative organization, a holistic view of school work, a sense of belonging to the school, social networks and, above all, "being connected" could help and promote the resilient process. For instance, the European network of E-Twinning schools represents one of the best ways to create resilience by connecting with other schools and educational agencies (Garista & Cinganotto, 2017).

LESSONS FROM THE PAST: EDUCATORS' NARRATIVES FOR TRANSFORMATIVE TEACHING

Within social sciences, resilience first appeared among stories. Its epistemology can be reconstructed in a phylogeny anchored to many micro-narratives, collected in research, and it has been enriched gradually through the imagination of further stories, handed down orally in many countries (Garista et al., 2015), collected by several research methods. These narratives represent a cultural heritage of resilience, each country produces its own. They have come down to us as cultural products of various communities that use art, literature, music, nature, traditional stories, to teach how it is possible to rebuild oneself after a traumatic event or with respect to difficulties of a depriving everyday life. Often narrative pedagogies in various communicative forms (fable, traditional stories, popular legend) have helped us to positively reconstruct revolutions and metamorphoses, both from a personal point of view and from a social point of view.

Starting from this assumption, resilience can become, as Goussot suggests (2014), a prism to re-read many educational innovations, to retrace the bridge

between resilience and learning, focusing on crucial aspects for education and relationships. According to Goussot (2014), biographies of famous resilient and innovative pedagogues (Montaigne, Decroly, Pestalozzi, Montessori, Itard, Vigostky, Freire, Rousseau, Helvétius, Séguin, Freinet, Makarenko, Korczak, La Garanderie and others) show an attitude which is contrary to the school situation of their time, turning their gaze towards human resources not considered in the school context, but fundamental to overcome difficulties and differences. They were educators who have been able to build educational devices of resilient processes, working on spaces, times, materials and on the educational relationships (ibidem). Goussot (ibidem) listed the pedagogical words of resilience: encounter, mediation, interaction, compensation, intrapsychic and interpsychic zone of proximal development, narration, dialogue, historical-cultural dimension of development, self-esteem, understanding, connection to oneself, connections to the world, cooperation, and inclusion. These are generative words of resilience, but also of democratic life at school.

When introducing an innovative strategy or when, as a teacher, you are facing a complicated situation, questions would be:

How to transform the resistance of those who do not want to learn into a learning possibility?

Is it possible to recover vulnerable, fragile, and traumatized individuals and make these difficulties a resource for change?

A pedagogical reflection on how to foster resilient teaching and learning is the idea that one cannot fully develop one's resilient self in an alienating or hostile setting (Giroux, 2021; Freire, 2004).

Goussot (2014) and Mayo (2007) note the importance of Freire's development of an educational model for literacy as a form of empowerment. Part of Freire's biography, masterfully told by Mayo, is also proposed in a resilient key by Goussot (2014). Freire, who grew up as a child in a wealthy family, went through the economic crisis of 1929, and lived within a context in which the rights to health and education are guaranteed on the basis of economic affiliations. When, after overcoming this phase of deprivation, he began to work to affirm a rights-based educational model, emancipation, social and political participation of all citizens, he underwent violent interrogations, prison, exile, the denial of the right to freedom of expression. Freire recognized *the power of words*, the generating themes coming from everyday life, that found knowledge through the construction of real and meaningful stories.

Antonio Gramsci, in another place and social context, experienced different traumas but, like the Brazilian pedagogist, he experienced prison. His physical frailty slowed him down but did not prevent him from studying, working, and fighting for a more equitable society. Gramsci, like Freire, intuited the power of narratives and the need to use clear and understandable language with an emancipatory purpose to promote *critical and analytical thinking*. Among his writings,

we can reread the “Letters from prison” where he reminded his children of the popular tales of his land. Among these, one in particular today can be reread with the lens of resilience and sustainable education. It is the fable of the “mouse and the mountain” in which a protagonist, the mouse, apparently with few skills, when faced with a problem, does not allow himself to be demoralized, but begins to *dialogue and debate* with everyone, to create bonds of individual responsibility in the vision of a common good (Garista et al., 2015). The protagonist’s resilience lies in knowing how to listen to everyone, accept their requests but also mediate, dialogue, mobilize resources and offer hope for the future. In sum, the mouse embodies the words of resilience listed by Goussot. A fairy tale, in fact, can be considered the place of all hypotheses as it donates keys to understanding reality through new paths. In Gramsci’s fable, the hero is able to “relier” (a French word that means “to connect”), to stage that process of “reliance”, recalled by the systemic thinker Edgar Morin. To face uncertainty, chaos, mistakes, critical events, and challenges, we need to develop a *systemic and creative thinking* that helps us to practice the possibility of “binding together”, acting to bring out the human face, fragile, poetic, sensitive, but also capable of finding a channel for dialogue with the world.

Pestalozzi is another pedagogist mentioned by Goussot (2014). He became orphaned very young. When he grew up, he decided to become an agricultural entrepreneur. But he found himself repeatedly in crisis and economic difficulties until bankruptcy. He found a mentor who encouraged him to write and when he began to take care of the popular education of orphans and the poor, he had the opportunity to develop his pedagogical model. Pestalozzi affirmed the need, as educators, to continually question oneself, to exercise the *pedagogical doubt* about educability and one’s own competence. Pestalozzi brings back to the center of the discourse the power of emotions and the importance of affectivity in learning, where fragility caused by an obstacle can become an engine for change. His educational project is permeated with life skills, relationships, and mutual recognition. Learning, therefore, becomes a compensation for human frailty. As Goussot points out, Pestalozzi felt the “connectedness” capacity of resilience, that is the search for harmony between the natural, social, and personal, corresponding to the dimensions that we can define as bio-genetic, socio-cultural and physics. The Swiss educator defined the importance of reflecting on his own biography:

Who am I? What is meant by humankind? I want to understand what my life has made of me: I also want to know what has become of humanity throughout history (Goussot, 2014: 68, our translation).

A TEACHING CARE MODEL: TIPS FOR RESILIENCE AND COPING STYLES

Given these premises, a few examples and evidence from research, we can use these narratives to create stories about school innovations.

What successful stories will it be possible to talk about our school and in our school?

The reflective path proposes thoughtful activities, actions to familiarize oneself with theoretical models and to transfer them into one's own context and self-assessment activities. Becoming aware of your own resilience will help you to recognize the needs and resources in other people. As Brown and colleagues (2001) argue, by reflecting on weaknesses and strengths, teachers will be able to observe, analyze and move towards transformation, enabling their role to develop as reflective practitioners. Milstein & Henry's (2008, p. 13) "wheel of resilience" and its dimensions (positive connections; clear, consistent & appropriate boundaries; life guiding skills; nurture and support; purposes and expectations; meaningful participation) will enable recognition of the complexity of resilience education (Tisseron, 2017). The expected outcome to increase teachers' and students' wellbeing and, consequently, their capacity to cope with innovative teaching and learning methodologies and to deal effectively with social and historical challenges.

As a practical example of shifting theories into practices, we cite an action research grounded and developed within the European community of e-twinning schools (Garista, 2022), where participants (422 enrolled from all over Europe) were able to share their different experiences of resilience education, making them explicit and visible through narratives and drawings. Some participants (328) created a metaphor and drew an image of resilience with a brief written explanation. Participants agreed on the importance of sharing practices and problems, without fixing actions or dimensions of resilience. The risk could be to exclude and not include, to judge and not to help. The importance of offering, without forcing, different types of tools to communicate thoughts, emotions and experiences can be considered an added value. The resilience represented in the visual and narrative compositions was situated between the relationships where "sharing" and "trust" could help teachers solve problems, without setting actions or dimensions of resilience in an overly structured way but offering a multidimensional, flexible, and complex framework. Materials for developing reflective practices in teaching are not difficult to find and use. Reflective practices through narratives and visual exercises need just pens and papers and a safe setting.

Based on these premises we think that tips for teachers, which support resilience and coping responses to educational challenges and innovation could be summarised as: critical and reflexive practices; emotional routines; relational and networking actions. They need to be read just as inspiring examples that can be adopted, reinvented, modified to face the chaos and transform it in a creative

dance of possibilities in education. Students are not involved but they can be asked to give feedback on the teaching process of their educators. All the activities can be organized in a first phase, dedicated to individual reflection, and a second phase for sharing one's own thoughts within a group. The second phase is not mandatory. This type of activity does not require a formal evaluation although a final briefing with colleagues can be useful for metacognition, to transform reflection into new actions and to support a better quality of life and teaching.

Critical/reflexive practices

Faced with challenges teachers can catch solutions in their personal box of experience or in that of other colleagues' communities. Useful practices are grounded in narratives that stimulate reflection on experience and insights for new solutions. Narratives can be related to one's own experience, for instance, writing an unsolicited diary made of words and images, or they can come from the outside looking at a film, reading a book, visiting a museum, or reading a scientific paper. All these narratives become material for pre-reflexive activities (as in the case of expressive methods such as picturing or dancing) and for reflective activities (as in the case of writing a logbook or a critical event). Some guiding questions to start a logbook are reported in fig. 1.

Fig. 1 - Reflective questions for stimulating writing, critical and creative thinking (adapted from Garista & Pocetta, 2022a, in press)

Logbooks may be solicited or unsolicited diaries. Not all Teachers felt comfortable with an open task to write something for reflection. Some prefer following guiding questions.

The suggested format for writing can be flexible.

Guiding questions' examples:

What is your role in the school? What are your feelings about your role and activity? How do you think your job will contribute to academic success? Do you have any personal objectives to reach by the end of this project?

How have you contributed to the project lately? What adjective would you use to describe this contribution? Did you come across any particular challenge which made you reconsider your work? Have there been any constraints that limited the development of your work? What do you think about communication with students or other colleagues?

Is there an event or a situation you would like to share with others? Looking back at your log ... have your feelings changed about teaching?

Do you feel you have achieved/learnt something you weren't expecting to learn?

Emotional routines

We know that teaching and learning are human practices full of emotions that influence the way we participate, observe, reflect, and transform teaching practices (Brown et al., 2001). Mindfulness proposals are well described in the literature. Amongst them is an easy one represented by “The emotional cup”. Something that teachers can experience and also propose to their students.

The emotional cup is a mindfulness suggestion for teachers. It recalls a negative capability strategy aimed at stopping and observing reality to restore and find new solutions (Garista, Cinganotto, 2017). Teachers can imagine their coffee break as synthesized in fig. 2.

Fig. 2 - The emotional cup

When teachers' emotional cup is empty, we may see behaviors such as these emerge:

- attention seeking behavior to alert us that they need a refill.
- think they have to fight or flight to get a refill.
- demonstrate a sense of anxiety once they approach empty.

In this case suggestions are: stop and think about: *What causes an empty cup?*
Stress and pressure to achieve, isolation, yelling, evaluation, failing, fatigue, being frustrated by student's response

So, think about: *What refills my teacher's emotional cup?*

Relaxing, Friendship and relationships with other colleagues, Love and affection, Connection, success, being given the choice to do what you master and prefer.

As adults we can see how the emotional cups will need to be observed carefully, but is it also important to know how full your own cup is? If you are running a little bit low too, take some time to do what you love, listen to music, read a romance, watch a film, or make a connection with a long-lost friend.

Relational and networking actions

Connectedness, mentorship, and networking have shown their potential to help teachers to cope with educational challenges. A suggestion could be trying to find a friendly and professional community to share doubts, critical events, cases to discuss. An interesting practice that enhances *critical thinking* may be organizing a *Journal club* on new evidence from the literature. It can be organized in informal contexts, such as a café or outside in the school outdoors and gives the chance to briefly discuss interesting solutions from the literature to solve everyday educational challenges (Montuori, 2005). The rules are flexible.

Time may be very short, a brief introduction of an interesting paper by a member of the group and debate (if it occurs). The choice of informal setting is based on theoretical assumptions stemming from competency development theories, and principles of holistic development. The idea is to create a friendly appealing atmosphere, enticing the members to discuss the scientific papers proposed in an informal situation, full of salutogenic and resilient resources: good food, cultural heritage, nature, comfortable seats. This alternative setting makes it possible to foster the pleasure of reading, developing critical reading skills necessary for information literacy, while sipping coffee and nibbling on good food (Golde, 2007; Garista & Pocetta, 2022b). In addition, it offers a tangible experience of how unusual and neutral settings, already available within the community free of charge in each city throughout the world, can be set up easily for knowledge building and sharing. At the end of the journal club, participants had more time available to socialise and extend their discussion through a senso-biographic walking (Boero & Mason, 2021) back to their classroom.

CONCLUSION

Nowadays the social and educational system calls for performance. In this scenario, attention is given to top performers at school and at work. This knowledge building system “is alienating and dehumanising students, teachers, and families who are looking for what would help to orient themselves toward a changing and unpredictable world” (Todd, 2016, p. 619). According to Todd, and her interpretation of Anna Harendt’s thoughts on “time of present”, we should refocus on education rather than on learning. The latter has a close relationship to outcome, outputs, and performance. In doing so, we can understand deeply the importance of transformation and uncertainty in transforming people’s lives and their way of coping with “uncertainty meaningfulness”. In brief, learning demands action and decision-making, education highlights inaction, reflective inaction, and the ability to use transformation and new challenges to produce transformative learning. The poet John Keats best described this life process through the expression of “negative capability”. If a positive capability is related to problem-solving and decisive action, negative capability describes “reflective inaction” (Garista, Cinganotto, 2017). Its possible contribution turns out to be the creation of an “educational zone”, a sort of mental and emotional space, where new learning can emerge from narratives. Resilient narratives finally became powerful tools when they could be also listened to and shared within a community.

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