

NEW SEEDS FOR A WORLD TO COME

**POLICIES, PRACTICES AND LIVES
IN ADULT EDUCATION AND LEARNING**

10TH ESREA TRIENNIAL CONFERENCE

edited by Laura Formenti, Andrea Galimberti and Gaia Del Negro

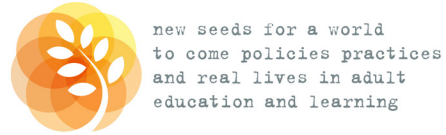
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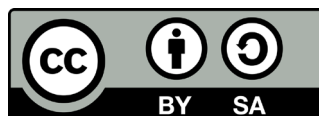
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Ecologies of Education: Covid Pandemic as an Occasion to Interrogate Adult Education Theoretical Frameworks

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Abstract - The global pandemic caused by the Covid-19 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. Therefore, also schools and educational services are in the middle of a sudden change that has affected both education professionals (educators, teachers) and pupils. The pandemic situation has suddenly shown that it is necessary to orient educational and social reflection to the links existing between spheres of existence usually considered as separate. The reference to adult education is significant, because the tenets of dualist and anthropocentric thought appear more deeply rooted in adult subjects. Our proposal is to reassemble the human with the environment through a perspective we termed “Ecologies of Education”, that will be discussed by the present paper.

KEYWORDS: Adult education, Covid pandemic, ecologies of education, educational world.

1. COVID-19 GLOBAL PANDEMIC: CHANGING AND TRANSFORMATION IN THE EDUCATIONAL WORLD

The global pandemic caused by the Covid-19 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.

Spaces and times in which our bodies were used to move in “taken for granted” modes have undergone a sudden change according to norms and rules that we never thought we had to refer to: in this sense, the fundamental dimensions of our experience had to be re-thematized, re-worked and re-sized precisely for the needs of containing infections (Sangster, Stoner & Food, 2020).

Following this direction, what was the ease, lived in a tacit and daily way, of our everyday life, was suddenly interrupted, making everyone perceiving, in different degrees and ways, a feeling of distress (Fratini, 2018), based precisely on the rupture of an abruptly changed previous “normality”.

In addition to personal, subjective and individual distresses, the health emergency has soon become an economic, social, political, cultural, educational emergency, which forced to radically redefine the structure of the whole society, the ways of taking care of people and using services, as well as our previous habits related to moving, socializing, communicating, producing, purchasing and consuming tangible and intangible goods and, not least, educating and teaching. Therefore, schools and educational services are in the middle of a sudden change that has affected both educational professionals (educators, teachers) and pupils (Williamson, Eynon & Potter, 2020).

¹ This paper was conceived by the three authors. Specifically, the first paragraph (Covid-19 global pandemic: changing and transformation in the educational world) is written by Andrea Galimberti; the second paragraph (Epistemological reflections for educational research: which status of the “human” in the field of adult education?) is written by Alessandro Ferrante; the third paragraph (Ecologies of Education) is written by Maria Benedetta Gambacorti-Passerini.

So, even within the educational services, we found ourselves overturning every usual concept of normality and everyday life, with the effort to design beyond the known schemes and in an atmosphere in which it was difficult to glimpse a certain or foreseeable future horizon: the world of education, therefore, found itself experiencing that feeling of widespread distress (Gambacorti-Passerini & Ferrante, 2021), already recalled with respect to what each of us experienced in our everyday life.

In this sense, a strong and fast investment of resources has thus become essential in the educational world to re-invent professional practices and to foster the adoption of strategies designed for promoting inclusion and reducing the negative effects of the current crisis (Ferrari, Triacca & Braga, 2021).

The forced changes with respect to social habits, school life management using digital media have contributed to making some forms of distress more evident, known and thematized, as well as bringing out unprecedented manifestations of fatigue, generating and accentuating the already existing inequalities and created new forms of educational poverty, discrimination and social exclusion (Gromada, Richardson & Rees, 2020), involving, for example, those who have not the skills, the economical budget or the logistical conditions to reach and use digital devices connecting to internet.

The professional world of education has been forced to pause in the uncertainty resulting from the breakdown of everyday life and its own habits: so, the challenge for education was to glimpse new possibilities and ways of thinking and acting educational practices, in a world suddenly modified by Covid-19.

2. EPISTEMOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: WHICH STATUS OF THE “HUMAN” IN THE FIELD OF ADULT EDUCATION?

In addition to social and pedagogical themes linked to schools, specific educational projects and services, the relevant changes occurred during the pandemic raise relevant epistemological questions that interrogate the theoretical frameworks of educational research and practice, as well as the conceptual categories that are adopted in it (Ferrante, 2021a; Ferrante, 2021b; Gambacorti-Passerini & Ferrante, 2021; Gambacorti-Passerini & Palmieri, 2021; Pitzalis & Spanò, 2022).

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, Eynon & Potter, 2020, p. 107). This means that “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” (Decuyper, Grimaldi & Landri, 2021, p. 1).

The pandemic situation has also shown that it is necessary to orient educational and social reflection to the links existing between spheres of existence usually considered as separated: nature-culture, society-technical, human-non human, etc. (Ferrante, 2021a; Ferrante, 2021b). It is therefore necessary to change the reference paradigm in order to grasp the transformations that are taking place, otherwise not visible.

This paper is aimed at introducing a reflection about the status of the “human” and his/her relationships with “non-human” alongside the domain of pedagogical knowledge and the adult educational field. A body of knowledge and a field of practices that have been always characterized by a human-centered perspective rooted in anthropocentric assumptions on the relationship among humans, nature and other living beings (Ferrante & Sartori, 2016). This dualistic vision,

opposing human and non-human, nature and culture, meaning and matter, is becoming more and more unbearable in connection with dramatic ecological changes we are witnessing (Braidotti, 2019).

The reference to adult education is significant, because the tenets of dualist and anthropocentric thought appear more deeply rooted in adult subjects, such as teachers, educators, social workers and adult students (Palma, 2017). This means renewing research and educational practices in adult education in order to critically deconstruct the anthropological concepts underlying the current educational models internalized by adults (Ferrante, 2014; Palma, 2016; 2017).

In this scenario, then, who is the “human” in the field of adult education?

In the adult education studies, the adult to be educated tends to be considered in relation to an anthropological model that in educational theories, discourses, research, and practices may be more or less explicit, more or less stated, and of which researchers, teachers, and educators may be more or less aware. For example, in the field of critical reflection (Mezirow, 1991; Fook & Gardner, 2007; Brookfield, 2009), the adult is described as a subject who has acquired – through educational and life experiences – a body of tacit knowledge which the researchers and educators have to bring out and critically discuss, in order to show the subjects the implicit premises from which they think and act. In this sense, the human is defined as a being who learns from experience and is capable of developing critical thinking about self and social structures. At the same time, the focus of these perspectives is placed on individual subjectivities and cognitive dimensions, rather than on other aspects, such as the body, affects, and materiality (Ferrante & Galimberti, 2019). This view is not wrong, negative, or problematic in itself. However, it can become so if those who promote it tend to “naturalize” it, if they are not aware of its partiality and transitory nature. Moreover, one may wonder whether this (clearly human-centered) anthropological model could be the most suitable way to think about the human in a more-than-human world, crossed by a dramatic ecological crisis, in which it appears increasingly essential to reflect on the entanglement of human and non-human (Braidotti, 2013).

From these considerations, the question of who the human is, can be, or should be in the field of educational studies and especially in adult education can be developed in at least three different directions, which are nevertheless deeply interconnected.

The first direction has been indicated by poststructuralism and in educational theories has been thematized with great lucidity by Gert Biesta. According to the scholar, who is the human is a question that must remain open (Biesta, 2006). This means that this question needs to be problematized, without taking the category of human for granted, and that we need to avoid defining the other, especially before encountering him or her in the educational relationship:

I have explored a way to understand and approach education in which the question of what it means to be human is seen as a radically *open* question, a question that can only be answered - and has to be answered again and again - by engaging *in* education, rather than as a question that needs to be answered *before* we can engage in education (Biesta, 2006, p. 151).

The second direction has been indicated by posthumanism and new materialisms and consists of deconstructing, and reinventing discursive practices with respect to conceptions of human being that are embedded in pedagogical knowledge and cultural systems, in order to open these conceptions to the encounter with otherness, including non-human (Ferrante & Sartori, 2016; Snaza et al., 2016; Braidotti, 2019). Specifically:

to adopt a post-humanist perspective provides opportunity to analyze educational phenomena without exclusively focusing on humankind. The object of a post-humanist pedagogy is to study the ways in which the human and the non-human co-emerge and interact, and to generate new educational experiences. Learning is no longer considered as an

individual cognitive process or as a mere social realization. It could be rather considered as the effect of a complex system, composed by both human and non-human (Ferrante & Sartori, 2016, p. 185).

The third direction is to develop a complexity-oriented ecological vision, which allows the interpretation of the human by emphasizing what connects him or her to the environment (social and natural) and broader systems (Ferrante, Gambacorti-Passerini & Galimberti, 2022), so as to broaden the theoretical framework and the categorization models of adult education, also as a response to the challenges posed by the pandemic and climate change.

3. ECOLOGIES OF EDUCATION

Our proposal is to reassemble the human with the environment through a perspective we termed “Ecologies of Education”, thought as an inclusive theoretical vision of education aimed at grasping the multiple interactions involving people, technologies, objects, spaces, animals, living beings embedded in a world characterized by intense and unprecedented contaminations between different bodies, domains of knowledge, theories, fields, imaginaries and experiences. The challenge is to try to explore educational themes and issues through an ecological perspective, able to understand and analyze educational phenomena as situated, complex, processual and relational events, assuming contingent and dynamic forms, deeply connected to the environmental, technological, social, cultural and natural transformations of the contemporary world (Wals, 2017; Stankevičienė et al., 2011).

In fact, nowadays, it is essential to relate ecology to education, rethinking both terms of this relationship (Lynch & Mannion, 2021). Tackling issues related to climate change (Wamsler, 2018) and the environmental crisis in a globalized, hi-tech, multiethnic, fragmented society, marked by conflicts, discrimination, marked asymmetries of power and rapid and intense transformations that expose the planet and its inhabitants (humans and non-human) with disturbing drifts, involves not only changing behavior, recycling, reducing consumption and emissions of polluting gases, reviewing agricultural, industrial and energy policies or using “green” technologies, although all this undoubtedly is essential (Davis, 2014). More radically, it is a question of assuming more ecological models of thought and lifestyles that allow us to recognize ourselves as an integral part of the complex circle of life. It is therefore necessary to build the conditions for changing the individual and collective mentality, developing new ways of being in the world, fueled by visions capable of questioning and re-meaning the dominant paradigms. The latter, in fact, are pervaded by profoundly anti-ecological assumptions that have contributed and contribute in a decisive way to generate unsustainable cultural, political and economic assets from an environmental and social point of view. This calls into question (also) pedagogy - understood both as a specific area of knowledge and research and as a conceptual and operational perspective - and the educational professionals: while education alone is certainly not sufficient to counteract environmental degradation and social distress, however its contribution appears to be truly decisive for concretely promoting an ecological transition and a more equitable and inclusive society, as is widely attested in numerous national and international documents, including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. At the same time, it is essential to redefine pedagogy itself through an ecologically oriented paradigm, in order to build sustainable processes, contexts and subjectivities in a complex and multifaceted historical situation.

Following this direction, an ecological gaze can be an interdisciplinary perspective (Guattari, 2015) to observe practices and actions, also in the educational field. An ecological approach can therefore be employed to analyze any living, working, educational, sociotechnical environment (Barnett & Jackson, 2019). The point is not the type of context we are observing, but the way in which it is conceived and interrogated. At this regard, these conceptual lenses interpret the practices through some basic assumptions: first of all, the units of analysis are ecosystems, therefore complex ensembles

consisting of interactions between networks of heterogeneous elements (Braidotti, 2013; 2019); the reference to the concept of “networks” is thought as a whole of hybrid actors (Fenwick, Edwards & Sawchuk, 2011), at the same time natural-cultural, discursive, social and material. In this sense, the focus should be placed not on individual agents, but on the relationships and processes that connect them; this perspective allows to problematize a context regarding the question of the relationship with otherness and the sustainability of the practices that take place in it.

Furthermore, an ecological perspective in pedagogy assumes the task of rethinking itself and expanding the field of experience of the subjects to help in problematizing and reconfiguring the relationships between humans, between them and non-human othernesses through multiple, sustainable and inclusive becomings (Postma, 2016). In this perspective, educating is a collective, located, problematic, reticular action, never guaranteed in its outcomes, which requires forces that connect multiple subjects and worlds, in order to translate desires and aspirations into contexts and concrete experiences, so as to disclose sustainable futures and to experience existential horizons of hope in the changing materiality of the practices within which complex ecologies continuously take shape.

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