



# “TEACHER’S ROLE BETWEEN METHOD AND QUALITY OF SCHOOL’S EXPERIENCE”

Managing diversity in class: reflections  
from an action research

*By Cristina Palmieri & Laura Selmo - University of Milan Bicocca*

*EARLI Conference - 29 August 2015 - Cyprus*

# AT THE BEGINNING OF THE ACTION RESEARCH

- 2011, in Cinisello Balsamo  
(Milan, Italy)

- institutional town group  
composed by:

- school managers,
- teachers who work in different schools,
- the psychopedagogue of the Municipality,
- a Municipality officer

Aims of this group:

- To reflect on the educational difficulties and distress in school
- To find shared strategies to face up with it



# AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

To build methods to support the learning process of each student through teachers' reflection practices

To inquire the practices used by teachers to answer to individual students' needs

To find new strategies or perspectives to enhance teachers' work to face different situations in class



# EXPERIENCE AND EDUCATION

- Education is a **specific experience** that has to try to link knowledge with experience and to transform it into action (Dewey, 1938)
- Educational situation is **complex** and it needs a **situated** and **deep understanding** (Dewey, 1938)
- This understanding is the first step **to redesign teachers' actions** (Schön, 1983)



# EXPERIENCE AND REFLECTION

- Reflective thinking is a **process of discovery** (Dewey, 1910; 1938)
- Reflection facilitates the **continuous integration** of knowledge, experience and action (Schön, 1983)
- Reflection allows **innovations** in practices (Schön, 1983; Gardner & Fook, 2007)



# REFLECTION, TEACHING AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

- Reflection is a **key** element in learning through which learners can **develop and change** (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1974)
- Teachers need to develop **reflection on their actions**, in order to allow a sustainable learning for each student (Booth & Ainscow, 2000)
- Creating learning environments means to build **protected contexts** in which all students can analyse their **limits** and **capabilities**, can understand their **mistakes** and their **difficulties**, can **reflect about what they do and they feel** (Massa, 1987, 1997)



# EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

## Epistemology

- Ecological paradigm
- Naturalistic epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 1985)

## Methodology: action research

- As a method for **improving practices** (Koshy, Koshy & Waterman, 2011)
- As a **dynamic, empowering and participatory process** that involves a group of researchers and other participants (Waterman et al., 2001)
- As a methodology that helps teachers **to be engaged in inquiry** (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009)
- As a methodology that reinforces **awareness** of teachers' knowledge and of their practices in an **emancipatory** way.





# SAMPLE, RESEARCH GROUPS, TIMING

## Sample

20 teachers of infant, primary and secondary school (*purposeful sampling*)

## Timing

- From April to September
- 6 meetings of three hours each
- Final plenary meeting

## Groups

- 2 groups, with teachers of different levels of schools
- 3 researchers per group
  - 2 researchers facilitated activities and reflections
  - 1 researcher took notes and shown them during the meeting





# DATA COLLECTION METHODOLOGY

## Group activities

- **Narrative** activities: teachers were asked to write and tell their teaching practices and to read episodes of school life and teaching practices as described in «School's Diary» (Pennac, 2007)
- **Reflective** activities on both teachers' and Pennac's episodes

## Research process documentation

- **Step by step** documentation
- **Agreement** of the documentation by participants



# DATA ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

## During the meetings (researchers and teachers)

- **Taking and sharing notes** of representations, meanings, emotional dynamics, educational contexts and teaching strategies that teachers and researchers got from these stories
- **Identifying recurring** words and expressions used to describe the episodes
- **Building some categories** that represent teachers' awareness about their practices and research results

## After the meetings (researchers only)

- **Re-analysing** the whole documentation
- **Building further categories** starting from those shared with the teachers
- **Matching** the categories identified by each researcher
- **Proposing some «situated theories»** to discuss with all the teachers



# RESULTS

Teachers become more conscious that creating supportive learning environments is the the “core” of the work of a responsible teacher

In their experience, it deals with:

1. To engage students in learning through dialogue in class
2. To recognize and manage the role of emotions and context in students' learning
3. To reflect, as teachers, on their own emotions and actions and on the whole educational process



# 1. THE IMPORTANCE OF DIALOGUE IN CLASS

- Dialogue isn't a personal, private or confessional practice
- There's dialogue where students can talk with the teacher and other students to refine knowledge, skills, attitudes
- Non-verbal communication is essential
  - Teachers have to manage glances, gestures and actions, movements and postures of their body.

**This environment produces significant effects in students' involvement and learning**



## 2. THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS AND CONTEXT IN STUDENTS' LEARNING

- A supportive learning environment is created when teachers are able:
  - To recognize and manage both learners and their own **emotions**
  - To use the **materiality**: time, spaces, rules, roles, objects and new teaching instruments and procedures according to class situations and the particular students' needs
- To build a supportive learning environment, teachers have to work as:
  - “**actors**”, in the scene of the learning-teaching experience
  - “**directors**”, in the backstage of this scene

**This is a complex competence to be reached through professional experience and reflection on and in action**



### 3. THE KEY ROLE OF REFLECTION

- To develop this awareness **pedagogical competences** are required
- They can be acquired by training based on:
  - **reflection-on-action**
  - the opportunity to develop a shared strategy **of evaluation of learning processes** (not only of the results)



# LIMITS AS STARTING POINTS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

To transfer the awareness of teachers who took part in this research to their colleagues or other teachers

## Conditions

- The **group** composition
- The **institutional** organization
- Connections with **territorial** stakeholders

## Perspectives

- Caring of school's group
- **Negotiation** about their composition, participation ways and research topics
- A clear and strong **alliance** with institutional stakeholders
- A positive **collaboration** with territorial stakeholders





# MAIN REFERENCES

- Booth T. & Ainscow M. (2000), *Index for Inclusion. Developing Learning and Participation in Schools*. Bristol: Center for Studies of Inclusive Education.
- Cappa F. (2014), *Metodo e qualità dell'esperienza scolastica*, Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Dewey J. (1910), *How We Think*. Boston New York Chicago: D.C. Heath & Co, Publisher
- Dewey J. (1938), *Experience and Education*. New York: Kappa Delta Pi
- Fook J. & Gardner F. (2007), *Practising Critical Reflection. A Resource Handbook*. Meadenhead: McGraw Education.
- Guba E. & Lincoln Y. (1985), *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Kolb D.A. (1974), *Experiential Learning*. Englewood Cliffs, New York: Prentice-Hall.
- Koshy E., Koshy V. & Watermann H. (2011), *Action Research in Healthcare*. London: Sage.
- Massa R. (1987), *Educare o istruire? La fine della pedagogia nella cultura contemporanea*. Milano: Unicopli.
- Massa R. (1997), *Cambiare la scuola. Educare o istruire?*. Roma-Bari: Laterza.
- Pennac D. (2007), *Chagrin d'école*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Pinnegar S. & Hamilton M.L. (2009), *Self-Study of Practice as a Genre of Qualitative Research. Theory, Methodology and Practice*, Dordrecht Heidelberg London New York: Springer.
- Schön D.A. (1983), *The Reflexive Practitioner. How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books.
- Waterman H., Tillen D., Dikson R. & De Koning K. (2001), Action Research: a Systematic Review and Guidance for Assessment. *Healths Technology Assessment*, 5 (23): iii-157.

Thank you for  
your attention!  
Cristina Palmieri  
& Laura Selmo

[cristina.palmieri@unimib.it](mailto:cristina.palmieri@unimib.it)  
[laura.selmo@unimib.it](mailto:laura.selmo@unimib.it)

