

EARLI – MORAL EDUCATION FOR A DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

Abstract

“We care!” Living with psychological distress could be a form of democratic education?

This speech focuses on the possibility to find democratic education working with people experiencing psychological distress. Both perspectives and modalities of intervention of educational work within mental health can be read as a view of democratic education. The core of the issue is the promotion of recognition and acceptance of individual uniqueness as well as the construction of a dialogue with the most difficult aspects of existence (the limits, the suffering), through the creation of places where it would be possible to experience sharing as well as learning different ways to take care of oneself, the others and the world.

This theoretical research is a work in progress. It analyses in a pedagogical, archaeological and genealogical way the significant interdisciplinary literature (either psychiatry, philosophy, sociology and pedagogy), and it also analyse some studies developed by practitioners in the mental health field.

These are the main issues emerged.

The study of informal education highlights an environment that is animated by undemocratic anti-pedagogic customs and trends: daily life makes it more and more difficult to process the experience of limitations, of suffering and of all forms of differences, life “teaches” us to flee from these aspects, actually confining experiential subjective possibilities and the sharing with others. Educational work in mental health forces people with psychological distress, as well as services and territory, to deal with human fragility and existence uniqueness, creating situations and building tools for an educational confrontation. Therefore it may be a valuable opportunity to learn new forms of intersubjective relationships and to extend the scope of existential possibilities of each. “It may”: to move in this direction it is necessary to support the educational work, not so much with those who have psychological problems, but with those who think they do not have any.

Summary

Title: “We care!” Living with psychological distress could be a form of democratic education?

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1. Psychological distress always troubles society. Whether it's seen as a pathology or an individual deviance or as the outcome of some processes of existential education, it challenges the social order, forcing it to react (Foucault 1963, 1999, 2003). Considering the history of western society, the answers to psychological distress would reveal the democratic capacity of a social structure (Basaglia, 1997, 2010; Basaglia & Ongaro Basaglia 2010; Basaglia, Ongaro Basaglia, Pirella & Taverna, 2008). At stake here is the ability of people to relate to elements of suffering, limitations, fragility and the various possibilities of human condition. This ability is learned through the care of one's self, the others, the world (Mortari, 2002, 2006; Palmieri, 2000). This raises the research question: can the construction of forms of living with mental distress be thought of as a mode of education to democracy? To answer, it's necessary first to understand which forms of care and existential education are offered today in educational contexts, especially informal ones; second to ask ourselves whether and how the educational way of working with people who live in situations of mental distress may help to rethink the forms of education in a democratic perspective.
2. According to references at the end, the theoretical framework involves:
 - the epistemological reflection on mental illness in relation to the existential dimensions and the socio-economic and cultural context;
 - the sociological and pedagogical reflection on social exclusion and inclusion;
 - the reflection on modernity;
 - the pedagogical reflection on care, the caring professions and educational work;
 - studies on educational distress and the educational work in mental health.
3. This theoretical research is a work in progress and it has exploratory objectives. The sources are both from the scientific literature and from the studies developed by practitioners. The approach is pedagogical, clinical, archaeological and genealogical (Massa, 1992, 2001). The focus is on the semantic stratification of concepts and on the reconstruction of the models that are subject to formal and informal education in the daily context.
4. Regarding the research questions, so far we can highlight that there has been a radical change in the way of experiencing both material dimensions (space, time, body, objects) and symbolic ones (emotions, imagination, knowledge, thought, language) in relation to each individual existence. The “device” of daily life is based on the coexistence of elements that are contradictory among each other (real and virtual,

homologation and individualization) and on the presence of trends (a spectacularization of themselves, of affection and pain accompanied by a widespread negation of human weaknesses, the emphasis on performance, the negation of the subjective and social passage of time) that make difficult the experience of limitations and therefore of the subjective discovery of one's possibilities (Palmieri, 2012).

Pedagogically, this has an impact on the possibility to build an individual life plan: it is difficult to find "one's place in the world" (Natoli, 2010) and the form of interpersonal relationships is declared in terms of contingency, profit and consumption (Bauman, 2007; Zoja, 2009). This affects both formal and informal educational relationships: in the deal between generations the experience of authority, trust and solidarity has been eroded (Benasayag & Smith, 2003).

More over, protected places where work on existential effectiveness and build tools (cultural and material) in order to confront oneself with the limitations that are given in everyday life are rare. Places where people can come to terms with the subjective and cultural differences, to understand how to give them meaning, to accept, cultivate and develop them in their various forms seem to be missing. This lack of contexts of "educational care" seems to jeopardize the conditions for a democratic education.

Regarding mental health, the increasingly widespread diffusion of psychological uneasiness and a change in symptoms (Recalcati, 2002; Giorgetti Fumel and Beans, 2012) makes a very complex situation:

- the existing socio-economic conditions have caused new forms of relational and cultural poverty (Iori & Rampazi, 2008);
- the territorial services of mental health have experienced widespread difficulty in re-thinking their interventions to face the social, economic, relational, educational change. Often they work in emergency conditions: care about the educational and existential path becomes secondary (Brambilla & Palmieri, 2010; Motto, Canton & Bosis, 2008);
- "the ordinary man" seems to have more and more difficulty to face the experience of mental distress outside of a medicalised framework.

The work of educators in the mental health highlights issues that concern moral and democratic education: the work done in apartments or in communities forces people with psychological stress to deal with their daily lives, experiencing the fatigue of a democratic management of communal living. It's the educators' responsibility to establish contexts and to identify mediations, which generate intersubjective experiences of trust and solidarity, and which make some resolution of individual recovery (Brambilla & Palmieri, 2010).

The condition to make it happen is to work in a similar way both with the territory and the services: the educational work shows how it's possible for people with psychological distress to learn to live with their own life and illness only if the context in which they live enables them to learn to accept their existential differences and to redefine the possibility of sharing and processing the hardships of life. For mental health services and for those who live in the neighborhoods of these services, this means being able to learn from the experience of those who live with mental distress, in view of a change in their lifestyle. This experiential learning in itself have the features of moral and democratic education. To create the conditions to make this possible seems to be the most problematic way of the educational work.

5. The significance of this research lies in the possibility to identify constructs that can interpret the actuality to understand how we can regenerate contexts of effective democracy today.

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