

Education, morality and values

By Piero Paolicchi

Since the origins of psychological and sociological theory and research in the twentieth century, two among the greatest founder fathers like Dewey and Durkheim in a period of deep social and cultural changes, saw education as the only means to create and keep alive the cohesion necessary for a shared identity and collective life. The former stated that "education, in the broadest sense, is the means of the social continuity of life" (1997, p. 2); the latter thought of the human beings as both individuals with their mental states that make up the personal life, and as social beings capable and willing to overcome the limits of their personal interests and devote themselves to the common good of the whole society; and, he stated, "to constitute that being in each of us is the end of education" (1956, p. 72).

Both scholars sensed the crisis education was undergoing for the complexity and multiplicity of problems coming from rapid social changes and the growing cultural pluralism on both sides of the Atlantic. Then both thought of education also as a process of transmitting from generation to generation an heritage not only of rational or practical knowledge, but also a set of shared values to rule the interpersonal and social-institutional life of a human group, notwithstanding the differences and the changes that characterise every modern society.

The problem of relating to differences between cultures has as long a history as humanity itself. It depends on the universally human dilemma between the acknowledgment of some features shared by all human beings as distinct from the world of non-human entities (animals, things), and each human group's cultural invention of boundaries which determine one's own identity with respect to some "human otherness" defined on the basis of the most varied features, such as the colour of skin or language, religion or political ideology. Nowadays, the contacts and reciprocal knowledge between different cultures have grown greatly, both through living together in the same territories and through the spread

of communication systems. Awareness of the interdependence between individuals, groups and societies for the solution of global problems, however, stands together with hostility, exclusion, discrimination and violence towards minority or weaker groups in real life practices and in cultural patterns.

Intercultural education then is not a totally special issue or problem in modern education, but a particular expression of recurrent dilemmas between authority and autonomy, tradition and novelty, freedom and order, individual identity and belonging. Intercultural encounters, exchanges, conflicts, are much the same as those between individuals with different religious or political beliefs, or sexual orientation, when in their confrontation something important with respect to the participants' identity, such as values, is at stake. So the aims and methods of intercultural education, and of education for citizenship, tolerance, democracy, are the same as those of moral education in a context in which the function of cohesion, which education always carries out through the sharing and transmission of a common heritage of beliefs and values, has to be combined with the idea of difference and pluralism as an unrenounceable conquest.