

The school as an educational community

By Piero Paolicchi

According to Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979), the family, the class, and the peer group, are microsystems. As such, they exert their influence through systemic features and processes (norms, routines, rituals). All together, the microsystems constitute the mesosystem in which pupils develop. The importance of the mesosystem, as the whole relationships network between the family, the school, the peer group and other kinds of relationships systems during infancy and adolescence has been adequately demonstrated by Bronfenbrenner himself in his comparison between education in the URSS and the USA in the seventies. Subsequent studies by Rogoff (1990) and many others corroborated the systemic influence of the family and of any group context in socialization processes.

Kohlberg's theory and practice of moral development met a basic turning point when cognitive development through reflection and debate on moral dilemmas was accompanied by "just community" programs (1985), with a whole school life institutionalised and governed together by all of the components of the school. Starting from Kohlberg's "Just community" projects, a lot of evidence from research and intervention on moral development inside schools shows the primacy of the formative influence of the school as a system, as a real, concrete, everyday moral world. On the contrary, when values education is a rhetorical set of statements or paper support, at large distance from the reality of concrete everyday experiences of the students, it is easily overcome by the force of the hidden curriculum. It is partly the same also when the goal of values education is limited to a specific curriculum in a couple of hours a week or to single issues inside a literature or history curriculum, and so perceived as the professional task of one or some teachers.

The school's influence grows together with pupils' age and school becomes a primary socialization agency in the formative years of pre-adolescence and adolescence. It represents

the first non-familial authority and represent the larger societal system to its pre-adult members. Emler and Reicher's research on adolescents (1987) demonstrated that school experience is central in socialization processes with special reference to deviance in youth and adult life. Studies and projects brought about by Nisan (1984) in Israel, and Youniss in the USA (1997) show that helping behaviours and altruism in pupils can be significantly supported by redefining those kinds of behaviours from exceptional actions of very good, heroic people, into everyday tasks shared by every member of a community. The schooling's influence comes not only from the formal curriculum, (textbooks, teaching and learning methods, rituals practices), but also from the hidden curriculum (structures of school decision making, authority relationships within the classroom, composition of the school population, general relationship climate, or what could be defined the "school ethos", including teachers' attitudes toward achievement, fairness, competition, cooperation, obedience, expression of critical points of view).

The educational profile of a school depends to a great extent on its formational ethos, whether, for instance, there is a commonly held educational philosophy among the staff which is reflected and accentuated in the organization and everyday practices of school life. Basic patterns of relating with others must be acquired, much as mother language is acquired, through directly experiencing and enacting them, through the force of daily life and shared world visions. Intercultural education, like moral education, is about issues of living together. It cannot be delegated to experts or relegated to particular spaces and times of school activity, but must be undertaken responsibly by all members of the community and by any institution that represents it. Schools must become places where pupils and teachers, as members of a whole community, experience a shared social climate of acceptance, respect, open-mindedness, and put

into effect "an 'ethics of everyday', a morality of minor affairs, that translates respect for persons into small deeds of kindness, honesty and decency" (Lickona 1980, p.131) as occasions for all to take responsibility in a concrete and real way. The morality of teachers as professionals The moral world is much more than mere reasoning on moral questions: there are also things like feelings, empathic and identificatory processes, everyday analogical and metaphorical arguments, attention to the common features of classes of actions and to the specificity of each case, to principles and to the affective relationships between people, to peoples' virtues and vices and to the contexts in which decisions are enacted. Moral decisions are always made in an involved and dilemmatic experience of finding out a solution to individually and collectively relevant problems with cognitive, affective, social and cultural connotations.

According to Oser (1991), when we refer to teachers as professionals, as well as any other professional group, we have to distinguish three kinds of morality.

Normative morality – Refers to reasoning about hypothetical courses of action in moral decision making situations. A major characteristic of this type of moral reasoning is that it is insufficient in itself to generate action in a concrete situation. This type of hypothetical reasoning tends to be justified by the subject's most optimal cognitive means, and is characterised by its prescriptivity (i. e., reference to moral norms).

Situational morality – Is crucial in real life situations where the individual is required to act. Conduct has a particular form: moral action is action with respect to certain normative standards (do not lie, do not hurt, do not destroy life, etc.). Every concrete course of action has to be justified – especially in the case of normative transgressions. Now this justification is much more complicated than in hypothetical dilemmas because situational facts (social, psychological, political, economic aspects) play their role and influence moral reasoning.

Professional morality – Is connected to non-moral, functional, professional

acting. When a teacher assigns grades ... when a salesperson offers a certain musical instrument, when a craftsman renovates the front of a building ... - all these situations are instances for types of actions that refer to professional standards and that, at first sight, don't touch moral standards. All these situations, however, are also potentially conflictual by their very nature. The teacher must assign a bad grade if the student's performance was too poor – though the student might have strived very hard ... The teaching profession normally is oriented to children's academic success and to supporting learning conditions (class climate, etc.) above all. But as soon as teachers have to give grades and to select students (which means to affirm or to deny short-term and long-term career chances), as soon as they make an effort to integrate a handicapped child in their class (or fail to make that effort), as soon as they have to decide whether to act against the parents' will; in other words, as soon as the normal routines of instructions are interrupted, it becomes blatantly apparent that ethical standards have their significance for the teaching profession, too. In many conflict situations teachers must be mindful of some sort of comprehensive principle that helps establish appropriate criteria for solving problems of this type.

A central issue in traditional education, but not less recurrent in recent school life is discipline. Both teachers and parents highly evaluate respect for school rules as a central aspect of education in general and as a preliminary indispensable condition for academic achievement. But all too often family and school do not agree on criteria and practices necessary to reach the goal of a cooperative action in order to create classroom environments in which students are able to learn about and experience their responsibilities for the other members of the class. In fact, classroom management is also an exercise in moral education as it provides a consistent framework for interactions among peers, between pupils and teachers, and between teachers and parents, which is the base for the development of students as members of a community deserving of respect and capable of being trusted. An ability that is enhanced by a solid decision-making framework that assists educators in approaching a wide variety of issues in concrete situations of everyday school life.