The school as a system

By Piero Paolicchi

The growing autonomy of school institutions, inside a general framework defined by the central government, should strengthen the potential for the endorsement of the educational responsibility on the part of the single institution as a whole. It also should contrast the misinterpretation of education in terms of individual professional skills and freedom of teaching, which often makes schools not integrated educational organizations, but places where single teachers carry out a personal and quasi-private educational relationship with their pupils. This should in turn strengthen also the capacity of the school to act as a public agency, responsible towards all of its stakeholders (pupils, their families, the whole society).

To activate and sustain this process inside the school as an organization, teachers have:

a) to become active protagonists of a renegotiation and reconstruction of the rules and norms of what it means to be a teacher; b) to enable the kinds of social interaction necessary for renegotiating and reconstructing of what it means to be a teacher;
c) to manage the feelings associated with changing their activities and beliefs about education, particularly when they go against the current or proposed socially constructed and accepted models;
d) to develop new beliefs and conceptions underlying their actions, including the values and commitment that are central to the development of new moral frameworks in education;
e) to become able to know about and monitor the change process;
f) to start a process of autonomous empowerment for ongoing development, rather than one of continued dependency on a facilitator's or others specialists' suggestions for change.

To this goal, teachers have to:
1) contribute to the teacher development process and program;

2) feel that their contributions are valued, that their opinions, ideas, teaching activities, suggestions in decision-making, and initiatives are worthwhile; 3) have a sense of control over the nature of their development; address their concerns and needs; 4) view themselves as learners;
5) become innovative and creative, rather than only implement given strategies; 6) feel that changes are possible and beneficial in the current school and political situation.

This kind of teacher development raises challenges not only for teachers themselves, but also for teacher trainers, school managers and policy makers. However, teachers stay central as ultimately responsible for their activities and their formation, while the task of local and national authorities is to support and fund teachers' actions coordinated inside each school as a collective agent, an educational community and an operative system. They refer respectively to technical skill in the class work, personal trait such as self-esteem and openness to interpersonal relationships, and the capacity to propose and produce changes at the organizational level.

Receiving immigrant pupils as a system process: resources and obstacles Receiving immigrant pupils into the school means not only to follow adequate educational criteria, but also to be provided with environmental conditions and operational tools apt to face up the problems of linguistic and cultural pluralism at the levels of organization, didactic, interpersonal and social relationships. It is not only a matter of preparing specialized individual educational projects, but of restructuring the whole school organization in both its institutional and relational features (Pinto Minerva 2002).

The existence of advanced laws with respect to criteria of equality, democracy, solidarity is important, but all too often those

criteria are very hard to put into concrete practices, because of lack of financial and organizational support from the Government and the other public institutions.

Teachers know from direct experience that the school can play an important role for the integration of immigrants in our society by means of a cooperative involvement of parents in projects that in turn could have a positive impact at the general social level. But they usually add that difficulties come from the lack of financial and organizational support from the national and local institutions, so that what is actually done in school depends mostly on teachers' free voluntary initiatives and support from family and social associations.

Since the seventies, a lot of researchers have underscored the historical and social factors that support and explain in part prejudice and discrimination, and that the same factors condition projects of integration (Tajfel, 1981; Mazzara, 1996). Experimental studies and field research have pointed out two main strategies to reduce stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination and conflict between groups: a superordinate goal and interpersonal contact.

After the classic experiments by the Sherifs (1965), in a school context too, when Aronson (1978) applied the jigsaw classroom technique, which makes groups of mates necessarily interdependent in their work and subjected to a unique evaluation as a classroom group, stereotypes and prejudices decreased significantly. The same outcome went out of other experiences of cooperative learning through the instructional use of small groups, so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning (Johnson & Johnson. 2000).

The contact hypothesis too is of special interest for its possible applications in the schools, as it presupposes to provide occasions for direct personal contact between teachers and parents, which is a core of general educational theories and methods. But it has to be implemented with some precautions, especially in the case of immigrant parents.

According to Allport's (1954) classical formulation, indeed, prejudices decrease when the two groups' members

have not only some common goals, but also similar statuses, and receive support from the social, cultural and institutional context in which they meet. Thus, obstacles are more easily overcome when interpersonal contacts are brought about firstly by higher status members of the minority group, and when differences are not stressed in the social environment through forms of discrimination like housing or job segregation. Of special interest could be activating interpersonal relationships in a context of cross-category belongings, in which the effect of a category that separates (e.g. religion) could be balanced by a common belonging to the same role category (e.g. motherhood).

Focusing on teachers-parents relationships, we can assume that the superordinate goal strategy can be grounded on a goal common to both sides: to improve the academic acquisition and well being of children. But a second and not less important factor in any situation in which people communicate or cooperate is their status-role position in terms of power. Power has to be thought of not only as the capacity to administrate rewards or promises and punishments or menaces, but also as the disposal of more information and competence, and as a consequence of the position one occupy in an institutional, legitimated context. As any communication has an aspect of content and an aspect of relationship, and as every institutional context, be it the school or any other, is more or less hierarchically structured, minority parents who enter a relationship with the school and with teachers as its representatives, always start in a "one down" position. Then, the communicative-relational process has to be oriented not only by a clarification of the shared goals, in order to strengthen their motivation to partnership, but also by a communicative-relational attitude that clearly strengthen their authorship, their feeling to be in themselves, and being judged by others, enough competent partners in the cooperation project.

To this end the teacher's main instrument is "to take seriously both the quest for life's meaning and the call to care for persons" (Witherell & Noddings 1991, p. 3), and to invite other people, through deeds as well as words, to do likewise. This invitation cannot be made only by proposing abstract principles of justice or of duty as the contents of a program

of civic or moral education, but also by stimulating emotional and even aesthetic responses to suffering and injustice, joy and brotherhood. To that goal, school life plays a strategic role. It identifies a relational experience that is privileged, in that it can be really meaningful, deeply involving and long lasting, potentially incisive in the immediate present and, in many cases, in the long term. The paradox of education lies in the necessity of proposing a point of view in which we believe without aiming at imposing it, in expressing the deep meaning and value it has for us, its "truth for us", and at the same time our respect for other points of view, for the points of view of others.

To realize some changes inside social organizations and systems, some agents have to start with actions that have to follow the principle already defined in the larger field of ecological phenomena: "think globally, act locally". The more some little changes become visible and enjoyable in concrete terms in people's everyday life, the more some other people will be willing to join the endeavour of working out a better way of living together.

Analyzing organisational behaviour