

## Rethinking Ethical and Social Education

**Maria-Chiara Michelini**

Università degli Studi di Urbino, Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici, Urbino, PU, Italia

 [mariachiara.michelini@uniurb.it](mailto:mariachiara.michelini@uniurb.it)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8776-9079>

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### Abstract

It is apparent that the social transformations of the last few decades, in turn swept and exasperated by the pandemic and the ongoing war, make it necessary to reevaluate the social-ethical purposes of education in the context of these changes. As a result of these events, it is indisputable that the following existential dimensions of our society have a global and interdependent character: health, economy, politics, interpersonal relations, education, relationships between people, etc., which illustrate that these existential dimensions are interdependent and global in nature. The author of this article argue for the necessity of revising the idea of social ethics education as a factor essential to human development. To begin with, it's investigated the sense of connection between social ethics education and the other facets of human existence, such as politics and economics. The purpose of this contribution is to describe some crucial choices humanity faces when it comes to harnessing pedagogy to bring out its authoritative voice as a subject of cultural elaboration and a platform for training the next generation of teachers. The document proposes some guidelines within these frameworks for educational directions because it regards them as essential and in accordance with the perspective that has been outlined.

*Keywords:* curriculum; ethical and social education, human development

### Repensando a Educação Ética e Social

#### Resumo

É evidente que as transformações sociais das últimas décadas, que foram exasperadas pela pandemia e pela guerra em curso, nos obrigam a reavaliar os objetivos ético-sociais da educação no contexto dessas mudanças. Como resultado desses eventos, é indiscutível que as seguintes dimensões existenciais de nossa sociedade têm um caráter global e interdependente: saúde, economia, política, relações interpessoais, educação, relações entre as pessoas, etc., o que ilustra que essas dimensões existenciais são interdependentes e globais por natureza. A autora deste artigo defende a necessidade de rever a ideia de educação ética social como fator essencial ao desenvolvimento humano. Para começar, é investigado o sentido da conexão entre a educação ética social e as outras facetas da existência humana, como a política e a economia. O objetivo desta contribuição é descrever algumas escolhas cruciais que a humanidade enfrenta quando se trata de aproveitar a pedagogia para trazer sua voz autoritária como um assunto de elaboração cultural e uma plataforma para treinar a próxima geração de professores. O documento propõe algumas linhas orientadoras nestes quadros de diretrizes educativas porque as considera essenciais e de acordo com a perspectiva que se traçou.

*Palavras-chave:* currículo, educação ética e social, desenvolvimento humano

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## Introduction

As a result, the social transformations of the last decades have been swept in his wake and, in turn, have been exasperated by the ongoing pandemic in addition to the ongoing war that is currently raging in the heart of Europe, all of which support the need for a reconsideration of the purpose of education from a social-ethical standpoint. In particular, the pandemic, an *important watershed in the history of humanity* (Harari, 2020), has incontrovertibly shown the global and interconnected character of the following existential dimensions in our society: health, economy, politics, social relations, education, relationships between peoples, etc. Besides, the war underway, regardless of the direct involvement of peoples and nations in the military conflict, has revealed potentially catastrophic profiles for the balance and survival of the world in the present set-up, the result of exchanges of goods of primary importance, rather than of energy. Considering that all dimensions have interconnected relationships with each other, there is no doubt that the interdependence between them represents reality for all of us, undermining the strongly and powerfully asserted criteria of neoliberalism. Therefore, the destinies of people around the world have become intrinsically interdependent within a context where connections, reasons, values, and practical consequences seem to shatter all borders and boundaries within the framework of human existence. We are deeply convinced of the fact that pedagogy can't dismiss the need to exercise an active and proactive role in relation to the social and cultural events and transformations that are taking place around the world, a role that can only be undertaken by rethinking the purpose and methods of teaching. The most important thing we consider to be necessary is the rethinking of social ethics as an essential factor for human development, capable of empowering graduates from our schools to anticipate and prevent crises like the current one, [as well as] deal with them when they appear (Dewey, 1986, p. 336). In this way, it is highlighted that education has a transversal and integrated character in that it has a dual sense of the relation between education and the other spheres of human experience (starting from the political and economic ones) and an internal sense of educational directions (especially cognitive and affective ones).

### **Pedagogy as Part of the Entire Social Evolution**

Education is a science that takes into account the fact that it can directly contribute to human development by starting with the younger generations, thus emerging as a subject of cultural elaboration as a means to give an authoritative voice to critical decisions regarding the

global destiny of humanity. We will briefly mention some of these options for illustration purposes, without making any claim to be exhaustive in this regard.

- Individuals and communities are called on to make choices that will encourage and highlight from multiple angles the values that underpin the process of living and coexisting and that provide the foundation on which both live and coexist. With events such as the recent war between the Russian Federation and the Ukrainian government, what in many cases can be taken for granted is brought into question, enlightening us on how to interpret and reflect the founding values of our civilization in a way that is meaningful to us. The conflict that is underway demands choices that interpret their meaning differently from the way they were previously interpreted if we can consider peace and peaceful coexistence between people as fundamental values. The right to self-determination of people has to be guaranteed for the sake of peace, which is why, as a result, if aggression takes place, should the victims of the aggression be supported by weapons so that they can defend themselves, or should, on the contrary, should only diplomatic means be pursued, allowing any implication of using force to be waived in order to preserve peace? To put it another way, what are the extents and methods in which the safeguarding of life and human rights mandates the intervention of subjects who are not directly involved in a conflict to defend innocent populations during a conflict? Recovery, or rather human development, as a horizon under which every choice must be directed, implies that people are in a better position in terms of their well-being. If they are to be asked to give up acquired levels of well-being that are potentially unsustainable, in addition to recourse to resources that feed the power of the aggressors, then how and to what extent and from what perspective is it appropriate and even necessary to ask them to give up acquired levels of well-being? There is no doubt that questions of this type are begging to be addressed as an inevitable consequence of the conflict that is taking place, not only by the rulers that are called upon to make important choices directly and officiously but also by every citizen, as it is an ineluctable outcome. Leaving aside understandable reactions, including those of an emotional and existential type, it is necessary to cultivate and support the capacity for reflection, critical thinking and processes of conscious participation in historical events. It is in this regard that, in our opinion, pedagogy ought to play a key role, certainly in the dialogue with the other sciences, by virtue of the educational task that is intrinsic to it.

- Coping with catastrophes by opting either for the empowerment of citizens or for totalitarian surveillance, problematizing the far from theoretical perspective of digital dictatorship. The hypertrophy of technological development has long made such possibility feasible. Therefore, we are well aware that we can be tracked as spontaneous suppliers via social networks, etc. - of precious and sensitive data, which the market uses with all the unscrupulousness we are familiar with.

The pandemic emergency has somehow attenuated the critical and ethical precautions against such risk, justifying the recourse to harsh measures without an adequate democratic discussion. To illustrate the point, already at the beginning of 2020, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu authorised the Israel Security Agency to use the surveillance technology normally reserved for the fight against terrorists to track down patients affected by coronavirus. When the competent parliamentary sub-commission refused to authorise the measure, Netanyahu approved it through an “emergency decree”.

Present-day technology likewise makes it possible for surveillance to be “under the skin” and no longer “over the skin” (Harari, 2020). Pedagogy cannot fail to raise questions of this type, offering its essential contribution to the cultural and political debate, being one aimed at human development and committed to its promotion both theoretically and practically. In this sense, due to its ethical status, pedagogy cannot but lean towards and offer its contribution in the educational sphere to promote the path of information, backed up by scientific facts, active involvement and self-motivation. This cooperation, however, requires trust in the institutions, in science, in politics. For decades now, we have been witnessing a progressive erosion of this trust, especially in respect of some unscrupulous political forces. This is certainly not a trust that can be rebuilt overnight. But these are not normal times. We are going through emergency moments in which minds, too, change rapidly. Because of this, there has to be a consistent commitment to the involvement and empowerment of citizens, as opposed to constructing a surveillance regime. In this connection, the coronavirus epidemic is an important test of citizenship (Harari, 2020).

- Facing crises within a logic of global solidarity or a sovereignist and isolationist one, considering that the effects of global catastrophes entail an interest in the protection

of the poorest people and the least developed countries even for the rich and the most developed countries. In recent times, this appeal has been voiced from many quarters, for opportunistic more than ethical reasons. So long as there is someone at risk of contagion on a global scale, the whole humanity will be at risk. So long as the war between Russia and Ukraine goes on, supplies of energy as well as of primary goods, such as foodstuffs, will be undermined for many countries. Therefore, humanity needs to make a choice. Are we going to tread the path of disunion or are we going to adopt the course of global solidarity? If we opt for disunion, it will not only prolong the crisis, but will probably result in even worse catastrophes in future. If, instead, we choose global solidarity, it will represent a victory not just against coronavirus, but also against all future epidemics and crises that might assail humanity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Harari, 2020). When talking of the economic situation of his time as a challenge to education, Dewey had already warned that, ‘There might be a direction, just as there might be a continuation, only when human beings gather their thoughts around a common problem, aiming together at a common result. A direction is lacking at present due to the absence of this capacity for collective thinking accompanied by shared emotions and desires» (Dewey, 1986, p. 337)’.

- The speed with which science has responded to Covid-19 brings the attention back to the responsibility of politics in knowing how to make the wisest choices when faced with natural calamities. This means increasing the possibilities of political wisdom, a crucial aspect in avoiding political and human failures. What contribution can pedagogy offer towards this political wisdom? In this regard, it might be useful to rethink the sense of the titling of social pedagogy, which in Italy, starting from the 1970s (and even earlier in Great Britain), has brought to the fore its being “prompted by the pressing requests of society” (Mencarelli) to be able to first confront the problems relating to marginalisation, want and illiteracy, and, in a second moment, developing in a specular fashion the concept of permanent education, which has presented itself from the outset as a vast social promotion undertaking. It would be reductive to interpret social pedagogy as a response to a wide-ranging differentiated quantity of needs, conscious or unconscious, all of which find their backbone in the subjects’ right to education. In tackling the thorny issue of the relationship between education and social changes, we cannot but refer to Dewey (1949, pp. 2-3), who has gasped its meaning in great depth.

The supervening changes in the method and programs of education are produced by the altered social situation. They are an effort to cater for the needs of the new society under transformation no less than the changes that occur in industry and commerce. I accordingly ask you to pay special attention to the meaning to be assigned to the term “new education” in the light of the broader societal changes. Can we connect this “new education” to the general course of events? If we can, it must leave behind its isolation; it must stop being a matter that only concerns the relationships between the sublime minds of pedagogues and their particular disciples. It must be considered an integral part of the entire social evolution and, at least in the most general lines, as something inevitable. Let us then seek information on the main aspects of social motion; and let us turn to the school to find what proof it offers us of actually striving to get in line.

Pedagogy will recover (since we are dealing indeed with a recovery) its responsibility in a political sense to the extent that it will succeed, precisely, in abandoning its isolation and breaking the scheme of education as a private and internal matter, in a relationship of estrangement to the level of economic, social and political choices. *It must be considered an integral part of the entire social evolution*, as recalled by Dewey, retrieving that web-like structure, as per the metaphor used by the doyen of American scholars specialised in studies on Dewey, Mc. Dermott, vis-à-vis the Deweyan thought marked by lines of systematic theorising yet strongly anchored to the political and casual events of his existence, which lent significant orientations and turning points to his conception of the world. It is a question of elaborating a proposal, rather than a mere response to social promptings, according to that planning dimension that translates the ultimate educational *telos* in terms of a proposal fitting the context and realistically feasible, unfolding its capacity for a utopian vision. To do so, it is essential to break the vicious circle that sees education as a mere provider of “answers” to social needs and urgencies, within a functionalist and instrumental logic of education towards society and, in the current neoliberal conception, the market. There is even a case for taking this ahead of what is intuitively the most important task of education, namely the formation of wise people capable of critical thinking, reasoning and problem solving, a dimension we will cover in the second direction.

## Guidelines For a Social Ethics Education

In the second sense, internal to educational directions, we identify some inescapable guidelines in line with the perspective we have just sketched.

- Reviewing the function of education and school, especially as a stronghold safeguarding democratic and civic life. This entails strengthening the link between democracy and education, outlined by Dewey in hitherto unsurpassed terms. What is required is a reinforced commitment at all levels towards *a democratic school for a democratic society*, to paraphrase the title of a famous 1960 article by Tristano Codignola. The close relationship between school and society, understood - as he did - in an active sense from the former to the latter, entails the definition of the major purposes of school education, whether it should act as a driving force to the economy, and thus, we could succinctly put it using his own words, be a mirror of contemporary society; or whether it should serve as a political tool to ensure to all citizens, without distinction, a basic level that allows them to be free individuals, and a habitual practice of self-government that enables them to be democratic individuals (Codignola, 1960, pp. 126-127). This reflection brings us back to the important critique put forward by Baldacci of the neoliberal society, which views school as a transmission belt of the market, developing a comparison between human capital and human development. The former aims to train the consumer and the producer, whereas the latter seeks to train the citizen. This orientation extensively values the conceptions of Sen and Nussbaum, starting from the construct of capacities as an expansion of substantial freedoms. In this sense, school is the stronghold of democratic life to the extent that it reflects on matters with a view to repositioning the entire planning dimension (which becomes curricular, when referring to the school) in the direction of expanding everyone's individual and social freedoms, particularly with regard to its profile of social ethics and education to citizenship. This must translate into the adoption of adequate and consistent educational and didactic models: participatory and active, rather than mainly transmission-based models, anti-dogmatic models, hence inspired to the forms of scientific knowledge, open to problematisation and to the plurality of possible interpretations, models always susceptible of critique, review and reformulation; models capable of directly involving

teachers and students, encouraged to pose questions, experiment, explore, hypothesise, within contexts that enhance everyone and promote open confrontation.

- Underlining the importance of training the thinking skills and reasoning of each person. In this sense, the cognitive training implemented by school contributes in an essential manner to social ethics education and must be reconsidered from this viewpoint as well. *Educare il pensiero* (“*Educating thought*”) (Michelini, 2013) must be interpreted in all its depth, as a founding dimension of human capacity, of the younger generations in particular, to exercise global citizenship properly so-called. In an age that exposes everyone to the flattening and crushing force of neoliberal logic, which massively reduces the margins of individual self-assertion in life choices, school, and education as a whole, must recast themselves in a social ethics, rather than a merely cognitive and fact-finding, sense, aiming at the development of reflective, critical thinking, argumentative skills, aptitude for reasoning and cultivation of moral reasoning. This means both bringing such goals into relief and making them explicit and making adequate and consistent choices from a didactic viewpoint. In this sense, moreover, the intersecting connection between means and ends, likewise masterfully tackled by Dewey, cannot be eluded.
- Considering school curriculum forms in the sense of social-ethical training. We have already broached this topic (Michelini, 2020, 2021), expressing ourselves, in particular, in favour of a global approach to the curriculum and to social-ethical training, as furthermore suggested by such programmatic documents as the 2012 National Guidelines, revised in the light of the new scenarios in 2018. A global approach in the sense of rethinking education in its correct context, *i.e.* within the global political and cultural framework, as Law 92 of 2019 itself reads, Civic education contributes to forming responsible and active citizens and promoting full and conscious participation in the civic, cultural and social life of communities, in compliance with rules, rights and duties.
- This approach goes in the opposite direction of regulatory interventions, such as the aforementioned Law No. 92/2019, relating to the introduction of civic education at school; interventions that identify a specific disciplinary and temporal space, to which the accomplishment of a moral teaching of students is entrusted. As we previously clarified, we deem it utterly unrealistic to imagine that educational processes with a



deep impact on the ethical training of people could be solved through sectoral and limited programs, aimed at teaching/learning principles, rules and norms. While considering it necessary to cultivate curricular spaces specifically devoted to the knowledge and in-depth examination of peculiar aspects, such as, for example, the study of the Italian Constitution, the character common to all disciplines and all curricular activities should also be valued. In this sense, therefore, we must consider and enhance the educational value of disciplines, endowed with languages, logic and methods with a high educational potential from a social ethics viewpoint. In our abovementioned contribution on the subject (Michelini, 2021), we already highlighted how the National Guidelines put forward school curriculum disciplines pursuant to this interpretative key, offering a rich overview thereof.

- Methodological options will be consistent with social ethics purposes, so that the proposal of cultural perspectives, offered by all its disciplines and by all its activities, will occur in accordance with methods capable of enhancing the contribution of each one from a viewpoint of global and collective training. The National Guidelines, for instance, offer recurring and forcefully expressed suggestions on all those methodological options that facilitate critical reasoning, within the scope of the opportunities offered by the specific features of each discipline.
- Enhancing the active participation of students at all levels. According to the approach paid regard to, education as a whole, social ethics included, is founded on assertive participation by students, in the richest sense of the term, *i.e.* not confined to the active dimension of teaching/learning, but extended to the personal, autonomous and responsible participation of each student in each activity.
- Explicitly and intentionally taking care of the implicit curriculum, whose weight has emerged in all its worth in these years of distance learning. We often run the risk of underestimating this dimension, limiting ourselves to spelling out the curriculum exclusively in its explicit (disciplinary) aspects. Attention to the implicit component of the school experience demands placing at the centre of the school's choices the bond of consistency between what is declared and what is enacted, between

intentions and actions, creating the possibility of enabling the exercise of citizenship and nurturing social and civic skills.

### Conclusive Remarks

The aim of the contribution was to outline the role of pedagogy in the face of some crucial challenges for the whole of humanity, rendered unavoidable by the exceptional and tragic events that have succeeded one another in recent years. These events, in fact, require it to be held accountable both as a cultural subject as such, and as a science entrusted with the education of generations called upon to tackle those challenges. From this viewpoint, in the current historical phase pedagogy is confronting the distinctly political responsibility of leaving behind the isolation it often finds itself in and breaking the scheme of education as a private and internal matter, in a relationship of estrangement to the level of economic, social and political choices. Pedagogy must be considered, and it must consider itself an integral part of the entire social evolution, along the path of human development. Within this framework, and in the light of some of the current challenges, having significant moral depth, we must rethink the forms and purposes of social-ethical education, beginning with the school curriculum. Strengthening the link between democracy and education, regaining the centrality of educating on how to think, reason and exercise a critical capacity by resorting to consistent didactic approaches and interpreting the curriculum in a global sense for the sake of a social-ethical education, promoting students' assertive contributions, creating the conditions for the personal, autonomous and responsible participation of each student in each activity. These are some of the fundamental guidelines on which to develop the pedagogical research and the educational practice.

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