

The journey as a pedagogical research method

Il viaggio: un metodo di ricerca pedagogica

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abstract

During the 20th century, several important educational theorists conducted journeys that gave them the opportunity to develop particular personal and professional relationships, and to get to know other educational and pedagogical realities. They could then critically appraise what they had seen and experienced, deriving significant ideas which would consolidate, complete, and be integrated with their own pedagogical theories. The journey as an opportunity for discovery and the acquisition of scientific knowledge, as a source of innovation, enrichment and professional training, can be seen as a pedagogical research method that anchors today's international exchanges (all too often considered a source of novelty) to their historical roots. By drawing on several examples of scholars who have a special place in the history of pedagogy – Leonarduzzi, Montessori, Hessen, Volpicelli, Calò, Maritain and Borghi – and looking at their differences and similarities, we can identify the fundamental features of this research method, which enables life and thought to be interwoven into fruitful and original theories.

Keywords: Journey, Method, Pedagogical research, Discovery, Theories

Nel Novecento alcuni pedagogisti hanno realizzato viaggi durante i quali, intrattenendo relazioni umane e professionali, conoscendo altre realtà educative e pedagogiche e riflettendo criticamente su ciò che avevano visto e sperimentato, hanno tratto spunti significativi per consolidare, completare, integrare le proprie teorie pedagogiche. In questo senso il viaggio, come opportunità di scoperta e conoscenza scientifica, si potrebbe considerare un metodo di ricerca pedagogica che radica nel tempo gli odierni scambi internazionali, spesso ritenuti una novità. Attraverso alcune esemplificazioni relative a studiosi che ricoprono un posto significativo nella storia della pedagogia – ad esempio Hessen, Maritain, Montessori, Volpicelli –, raffrontando e facendo emergere le similitudini, si rintracceranno le caratteristiche fondamentali di questa metodologia che permette di intrecciare vita e pensiero in fruttuose e originali sintesi teoriche.

Parole chiave: Viaggio, Metodo, Ricerca pedagogica, Scoperta, Teorie

1. The journey and research

In the history of humanity, the journey – in the sense of a physical displacement in space that takes us beyond our known and familiar world – has always been a learning opportunity. Populations and individuals have constantly been on the move to discover new worlds. This has led sometimes to fruitful, mutually-enriching encounters with the “Other”, and opportunities for growth, and sometimes to personal and collective conflicts, to the point of causing deaths, and even the extermination of whole populations. We only need to look at Marco Polo’s journeys to realize the formative value of personal experience outside our usual surroundings, just as the geographical discoveries of the great navigators like Magellan, Columbus and Cook are an example of how dangerous a journey can be, and how devastating for the autochthonous populations when explorers reach new worlds.

In pedagogical research, the journey is now a way for scholars to gain direct knowledge of educational realities differing from their own, and of the political, economic, social and cultural substrate in which these different pedagogical theories have developed. They can then draw comparisons between these other worlds and their own training and cultural heritage. This type of knowledge gained ‘in the field’ has expanded in recent decades thanks to a gradual internationalization of scientific research (Bandini, Polenghi, 2015, 2017). It has become increasingly necessary to broaden our horizons in order to achieve a genuine exchange of views between scholars in a globalized, Internet-connected world, although virtual reality cannot replace living human experience. In actual fact, educational theorists dedicated a great deal of energy to ensuring increasingly frequent international exchanges already in centuries past. It is thanks to their efforts that Italian pedagogy, wrapped up in its own world for too long, could finally become less provincial - although the input was all too often perceived as a novelty, lacking in historical roots.

Both in earlier times (Zago, 2010, pp. 124-144; Zago, 2016, pp. 15-19), and in the 20th century, some educational theorists embarked on journeys during which they engaged in human and professional relations that brought them into contact with other educational and pedagogical realities. This enabled them to reflect critically on what they had seen and experienced, and to obtain some significant input for consolidating, completing, and integrating with their own pedagogical theories.

From this perspective, the journey can be seen as a genuine research method, capable of combining theory and practice, experience and critical reflection. Merely seeing and recording (even emotionally) another education system that is the fruit of different pedagogical theories does not bring genuine understanding, but reflecting critically on this information, and integrating it with our own theories, absorbing different stimuli and suggestions, can generate a unique, innovative warp and weft in the fabric of research. Even in the past, that particular category of pedagogical scholars described as comparativists – who had always been in the habit of travelling – understood the importance of gaining direct experience of “other” realities, or what we could call an encounter with otherness. Other educational theorists active in the last century also perceived the importance of reinforcing their own cultural identity through direct comparisons with other colleagues, places, and situations, and thus promoted intellectual exchanges and mutual acceptance.

A clear example of this emerges from the words of Leonarduzzi, in the *Preface* to a volume written in 1974, entitled *Educazione e società nell'America latina, Cile e Brasile [Education and Society in Latin America, Chile and Brazil]*. In referring to the events that led to Pinochet's dictatorship after a coup d'état in September 1973, Leonarduzzi wrote that, even bearing in mind the need for detachment when conducting historical reconstructions or research that prescind from any directly political or party-related motives, it was impossible for him to remain silent about his concern and anxiety over what was going on. Thanking the lecturers and students he met during his stay in Latin America – from whom he claimed to have received much more than he was able to give – Leonarduzzi went on to say that these people had enabled him “to grasp those traits of the national character that can only emerge in a direct and spontaneous relationship”¹ (1974, p. 7).

By drawing on the similarities we can see in a few, by no means exhaustive but significant examples of scholars who occupy an important place in the history of pedagogy, such as Montessori, Hessen, Volpicelli, Calò, Maritain and Borghi, we trace the fundamental features of the journey as a research method. The approach of these scholars enables life and thought to be woven together into fruitful and original theories.

1 All quotations have been translated by the author.

They are examples of how journeys become opportunities that serve as a means of professional renewal, enrichment and training.

2. Journeying, meeting and developing theories

Among the educational theorists who used their journeys as a research method, even in times when travelling was neither easy nor commonplace, we can include Maria Montessori, a woman, a scientist, and a very remarkable educational theorist in the panorama of her time (Fresco, 2017; Pironi, 2014, pp. 45-87). For her, journeying became a personal and professional lifestyle. In 1934, as a result of a disagreement with Italy's fascist government, Montessori moved to live in Spain, from where she "travelled tirelessly all over the world to present her teaching method: to South America, Germany, Austria, England, Ireland, France and Denmark" (Giovetti 2009, p. 89).

Right from her first journey to the United States in 1913, Montessori seemed curious to understand the world around her and attentive to her human encounters: "as she crosses the ocean, Maria notes down her thoughts and her vivid impressions [...] she is fascinated by the new technologies that enable the exchange of radio-telegrams [...], she is moved by the melancholy song of the migrants in third class taking a journey that, for most of them, will be of no return" (Honegger Fresco, 2018, p. 113).

During a stay in London in 1931, Montessori has an important encounter with a very special person, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. So different from people in the West, what Gandhi has in common with Montessori is an ideal very difficult to achieve: peace. Giovetti writes that: "after that first meeting in London, Maria Montessori and Gandhi did not lose track of each other. On his way back to India, Gandhi stopped off in Rome, and there were other meetings that made a profound impression on the educational theorist" (2009, p. 80). Educating towards nonviolence and peace is one of the core elements of the pedagogy of both the Mahatma (Gandhi, 2002; Borsa, 2006;) and Montessori. After the conference on *Peace and education* at the *Bureau international d'éducation* in Geneva in 1932, and the one entitled *For peace* at the *European Congress for Peace* in Brussels in 1936, Montessori was in Copenhagen in 1937 at the *VI International Montessori Congress on Ed-*

ucation for peace, where she spoke of children as supporters of peace (Montessori, 1949). The idea of peace that Gandhi and Montessori shared was not merely of the absence of war, but of a deliberate creation of the conditions that prevent it from occurring. For Gandhi, it is important to teach *Swaraj* (self-government or individual and collective autonomy), or in other words a form of freedom that is limited only by the freedom of others, and that relies on the *Ahimsa*, or non-violence, as the way to combat injustice and oppression (Callegari, 2010, pp. 221-228). For Montessori, the way to transform society is to start by giving value to children's individuality, letting them experiment with their own power by extending the boundaries of their lives and bringing them into contact with the individuality of others. According to the Italian educational theorist, the battle between adults and children must end. Adults must realize that there is nothing to correct in the psychological diversity of children. They must learn to respect childhood, and allow it to develop freely in its vital features. It is only in this way that adults' efforts to create a social and educational environment suited to children's potential will nurture the emancipation of children, and of adults too. This is the necessary premise for constructing a single human nation, a global citizenship, and a consequently durable peace. In both approaches, it is a question of acknowledging and giving value to anthropological diversity.

In 1939, Maria Montessori arrived in India, accompanied by her son Mario. When interviewed a few days after her arrival, "Maria Montessori expressed the joy this long-awaited visit gave her, and said she was convinced she would gain more from that ancient country than she would be able to give" (Giovetti, 2009, p. 9). We note that Leonarduzzi had said the same thing: a journey makes us think, enriching our human dimension, weaving cognitive and emotional aspects into something that cannot fail to be wholly personal and therefore unique.

Despite being obliged to stay while the war was raging (she remained in India until 1946), Montessori returned again from 1947 to 1949, staying in the mountain village of Kodaikanal. It was this particular journey, and this particular experience that laid the groundwork for her *cosmic education*, one of the most important products of her years in India. Giovetti makes the point that "the little schoolhouse right in the middle of a luxuriant rural environment enabled the children to observe nature directly, and – in line with the Montessori method – to choose freely those aspects that most interested them" (2009, p. 112). In those years,

Montessori realized that all children everywhere react to the natural world in the same way, and this could not fail to confirm the validity of her theories. Her son Mario confirms that the Indian experience had the merit of establishing the universal nature of the characteristics of childhood, and of his mother's method as a consequence. At the same time, it also disproved all the racist theories advanced by fascism in Italy:

India could be compared with a united Europe for the diversity of peoples, languages and mentalities that comprise this enormous country, and we were able to conduct our activities in many places, from Kashmir to Ceylon, which proved a great advantage for our research. We had the privilege of prolonged contact with children of all conditions, Brahmin or Parsi, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Muslims or Zoroastrians, belonging to the families of maharajas or great industrialists, or humble fishermen. The children were our universal ambassadors. [...] I came here (to India; *Author's note*) convinced that a (racial) superiority does not exist – a conviction instilled in me by her teaching. And it made me very happy to confirm this conviction for myself through personal experience (2009, pp. 120-121).

Another scholar who made journeying a lifestyle was Sergej I. Hessen. When he travelled in the early part of his life, he was driven by the desire for knowledge, and he recalls in his *Autobiography* how his research activity benefited from his travels:

After graduating and travelling with my wife in Switzerland, northern Italy and southern France, I took up residence in St Petersburg, often going to Moscow for the publication of *Logos*, that I directed jointly with Stepun. [...] In the four years that followed, from summer 1910 to summer of 1914, I wandered, moving between St Petersburg and Moscow (because of *Logos*), to Freiburg and in Switzerland (1947, pp. 15-17).

In the second part of his life, he was driven to journey, first to move away from the communist regime established after the October Revolution, and then to save his life during the Second World War. In 1920, when Hessen had to choose whether to live in Moscow or St Petersburg, he opted for the latter because he was already thinking of having to escape abroad and the city seemed to him a better place for reaching his fa-

ther in Finland. In fact, the political situation was tending towards a dictatorship, and Hessen wrote: “I would have been unable to express my thoughts on Marxism, on legal socialism, on the goals of education; and as I could not conceal my ideas on these topics, I would have unavoidably come into conflict with the government that, at best, would have ended up removing me from the University” (1947, p. 28). The scholar spent the autumn and winter of 1922 in Jena. At the end of that year, a group of expelled Russian scientists arrived in Berlin and founded the Russian Institute of Sciences. Hessen was invited to work with them, so he moved to the German city, holding a course on logic at the Institute in 1923-1924. Hessen wrote: “at the time, I often met with G.D. Gurvic, and the discussions I had with him helped me a great deal in preparing my *Problematics of Legal Socialism*” (1947, p. 31).

A distinctive feature of Hessen’s journeys lies in his numerous changes of residence. He was capable of learning many languages, even writing his own works in different languages. One account of his (sometimes pressing) journeys is worth quoting, despite its length:

The years 1926-32 were full of travels for conferences abroad. I held conferences in Russian at the *Russian Scientific Institute* in Paris, and in Warsaw, Cracow, Vilnius, Revel, Kaunas, and Riga. I held conferences in German at the Kantian society in Prague and then in Vienna, invited by the Society of Masters, in Dresden, Berlin and Leipzig, in Wroclaw and Münster, invited by the local universities. Thanks to Miss Koritchoner, I was invited to the Congress of the *World Association for Adult Education* in Cambridge in 1923. After that, I travelled around England for three months, holding conferences at the adult education centers belonging to the *Workers Association for Adult Education*. I also held a conference in London at the *School of Slavonic Studies* at Kings College, which had appointed me as a foreign member a little earlier. This journey was extremely educational for me. In London I lived at the home of N.A. Hans, who collaborated with the *Russian School Abroad*, and we became close friends. Thanks to Miss Koritchoner and N.A. Hans, I had the chance to gain a thorough understanding of the pedagogical literature and the pedagogical movements in England. Together with N.A. Hans, I later published a volume in English and German on *Pedagogy and the Russian School*. In 1929, Kerschensteiner invited me to hold a conference at the German Congress of Pedagogy in Wiesbaden. My

presentation on *State and School in France and England* was printed, together with the discussions on it, in the proceedings of the conference, and later also separately in Russian and German in the *Zeitschrift für Geschichte der Pädagogik*. [...] (1947, p. 34).

Like Montessori, Hessen found that the people he met on his journeys helped him to fine-adjust his theories. Journeying was an opportunity for cultural and pedagogical exchange, as well as a chance to make friends and establish fruitful scientific collaborations with other important educational theorists. His knowledge of languages and expertise in using several of them was extremely helpful on his travels, and probably gave the Russian scholar access to numerous direct sources that echo in his work. If his analysis of the different European school systems in *Democratic Schools and Schooling Systems* (1959a) is so accurate and detailed, it is probably thanks partly to direct experience, observation and the critical analysis that Hessen conducted after his travels in Europe. His proposal of a single school in *Structure and Content of the Modern School* (1949¹-1959b), which made him so well-known and provided study matter for several generations of teachers in Italy, is so effective because it is the outcome of a comparison in which he was able to combine theory with observation of educational practices.

Hessen certainly established important relationships that had reverberations on the whole of his life as a philosopher, jurist and educational theorist. Before the Second World War caught him by surprise in Warsaw in 1936, he took his last journey to the West, which was steeped in significant encounters: “I stopped in Freiburg at the home of my old master and friend Chon, and I also visited Husserl” (1947, p. 40).

3. Journeying and critically analyzing one’s own pedagogy

Luigi Volpicelli was the educational theorist who worked the hardest, in a fruitful association with the editor Armando, to disseminate Hessen’s thinking in Italy. He was a convinced traveler and had a thorough knowledge of pedagogy, not only in Europe but also in America and the East. He travelled at length in the 1950s, and this enabled him to “gain a personal knowledge of the educational orientations of most of the countries around the world, particularly in the Near and Far East, as well as in Russia, China and Japan” (Zizioli, 2009, p. 183). As Mencarelli noted, dur-

ing those journeys, the man always accompanied the scholar in interpreting a place's "life, history and culture, in its numerous aspects" (1986, p. 151). In fact, Volpicelli is the intellectual who (influenced by the thinking of Gentile) wants to investigate pedagogy by bringing it down to different, novel cultural dimensions. He wants to modernize and broaden the horizons of Italian pedagogy, opening it up to comparisons with the teaching methods and education systems of other countries, even outside schools. That is why he edits numerous publications, also by foreign authors, in Armando's series on *The Problems of Pedagogy*, and countless articles in the journal going by the same name, of which he is director, and in which the column called *I Meridiani* gives voice to the international debate.

In 1993, one of the issues of the journal was dedicated to the memory of Volpicelli. Aldo Agazzi writes in his article that Volpicelli "could not bear mental constrictions, treatise-like systematizations, *summae* and *summae pedagogiche*; he preferred, and had a predilection for a discursive, free and artistic pedagogy, alive with thoughts and living realities, inasmuch as education is and demands intuition, a grasp of situations, be they already experienced or waiting to be experienced, to be seized and faced with *esprit de finesse*" (1993, p. 358). Ferrarotti also describes Volpicelli's approach as a "pedagogy of experience" (1993, p. 380), while Flores d'Arcais wonders whether it might be a mistake to present Volpicelli more as a man than as an educational theorist. Warning against the scientific abuse that he identifies in his time, Flores d'Arcais answers his own question by saying that when an educational theorist's knowledge takes the shape not of a doctrine, but of an experience of life, events, and emotions, there is nothing weak or fragile about it. We should focus on perceiving "the intensity of the energy inherent in an education revolving entirely around the criterion of *personal dignity*". He goes on to add that: "actually, it is only by becoming a man – in the entirety of a living experience – that the educational theorist can validate education, which is always *praxis*, and can never be brought down to mere mental schematics" (1993, p. 386).

Confirmation of this interpretation of Volpicelli's pedagogical thinking can be found in his introductory *Notes* to articles by foreign authors that he had often met on his journeys, and who became precious collaborators of the journal, illustrating their own countries' schooling systems. In the *Note* on the issue dedicated to Japan, Volpicelli reveals his inclina-

tion for comparative studies and surprising modernity. He does not hide how difficult it was for the Japanese education system to become democratic. Instead, he underscores how “the experience of others can serve as an effective stimulus, providing opportunities for comparison and meditation” (1966, p. 191). In his introductory notes to papers on the schooling systems in France, England and America, Volpicelli thanks famous educational theorists of the likes of Debesse, Bereday, Giraud, Kandel, and Dumazedier, demonstrating that he had not only established some significant friendships, but also that he had a thorough understanding of the scholastic and pedagogical realities he describes. But it is especially in his *Critical note* on the Soviet school that the man and the educational theorist emerge together. Volpicelli describes what he saw in the Soviet Union, making it an object of critical reflection, not only to explain its educational reality, but also to propose a “Soviet” activism (1956, p. 270) as opposed to the American one reigning in Italy in the post-war years. He writes that there is no lack of “pedocentric motives” in the humanizing practice of the Soviet school. Pupils are required to fit into a precise political reality, “just as a mother places her son in a world of hygienic and moral rules that he, by organizing his own experience within them, converts into autonomous and conscious norms” (p. 271). Volpicelli’s journeys had paved the way to a new knowledge that made his pedagogy lively and anti-dogmatic, emphasizing theories that were the outcome of his development of a personal creative spirit. This was possibly the lesson of his master Gentile that he had most successfully digested, adopted, and made his own.

There are many other educational theorists that we could discuss, but in the space available here it is worth briefly mentioning Calò (Scaglia, 2013; “Il Centro”, 1970) who travelled all over the world, also on behalf of international organizations like UNESCO, animating the renewal of the Italian school system’s pedagogical and teaching approach. Then we could add Maritain and Borghi, who represent a significant example of an “encounter” with the same sociocultural reality and the same pragmatic North American pedagogical approach, though the effects on their pedagogical theories differed.

The two scholars’ human experience was similar. Maritain, a Catholic spiritualist, was obliged to remain in the United States in the 1940s to avoid his wife Raissa of Jewish origin being deported by the Nazis. Borghi, who had trained in the neo-idealist school of Gentile, also took

refuge in the United States to escape the racial laws and fascist persecution in Italy. It was Maritain, however, who came to develop his philosophy and pedagogy “focusing no longer on European rationalism, but on American pragmatism, while always remaining faithful to St Thomas” (Viotto, 1971-1976⁵, p. 6). He rejected the North American pedagogy so strongly that he even classified it as the third of the seven errors of modern pedagogy (Maritain, 1963, pp. 27-31). Borghi, on the other hand, adopted it as his own, even going so far as to propose it as crucial to an analytical interpretation of Italian authoritarian pedagogy (Borghi, 1951). By means of the first translations of Dewey’s works edited in the years after the war, he disseminated American activism in Italian schools. As Cives writes: “as we know, Borghi remained faithful to him (Dewey) all his life, circulating, further analyzing and even integrating his thinking with critical originality” (2004, p. 55). So the journeys to the United States that Maritain and Borghi were obliged by historical and political circumstances to make had a very different influence on their theoretical reflections. This goes to show how reality (even pedagogical reality) is not neutral, but always interpreted on the strength of our own views of the world and of education. It can be perceived with a variable degree of sensitivity, and its critical appraisal can even move in opposite directions.

Conclusion

When we think about the experiences of the educational theorists we have mentioned here, we can see how their journeys proved a valid research method: like any other method, it can naturally be integrated with other approaches, but it has some distinctive traits.

Travelling brings us into contact with different pedagogical and educational realities, so it reveals an anthropological and cultural diversity that may prove difficult to understand, making us feel detached (even psychologically) from what we are seeing. The “cultural shock” is an integral part of the anthropological-ethnographic research method. For pedagogy, that means opening up to a discovery that relies on researchers’ vital freedom, unfettered by any ethnocentric prejudice, and willingness to adapt. It is in an intellectually honest comparison, that accepts or rejects as a result of in-depth debate, that their own cultural identity is reinforced.

We can therefore say that journeying is a pedagogical research method

because it contributes substantially to our ability to focus on what the comparativists call the *tertium comparationis*, a superordinate criterion without which there can be no comparison, and no scientific progress. This criterion was for Hessen the search for the real defining factors of a democratic school. For Volpicelli it was an “anthropological” pedagogy revolving around human development. It can also be seen in the pedagogy of Montessori, Borghi and Maritain, who were not – strictly speaking – comparativists, but they were educational theorists of great standing. In what they see on their travels, they all identify elements that can be compared with their own fundamental ideas. For Montessori, it is the theory of how a child’s mind works; for Borghi an anti-authoritarian pedagogy for everyone; for Maritain the formation of a human being as a whole. Montessori tested her model in India and elsewhere around the world, becoming convinced that it worked everywhere. Her scientific observations demonstrated the universal value of her idea of childhood. Borghi found in pragmatism and Dewey’s concept of educational experience the cornerstone of a democratic pedagogy that he wanted to develop in Italy too, a country where an authoritarian and selective theoretical tradition has always left educational practices intended for all social classes in the background. A historical-comparative analysis also characterized Volpicelli’s approach, and led him to some original conclusions. Maritain became convinced instead that an integral humanism should develop every facet of a personality because the results achieved by American society fail the test of his pedagogical ideal: only wisdom and love enable human fulfilment and a peaceful society, not the methodological concreteness of American pragmatism, which sets humans squarely with their feet on the ground.

Journeys enable the collection of real data, which is a characteristic of the descriptive phase of the comparative method developed by Bereday (1969) in the 1960s. But, above all, it places the accent on their subsequent interpretation, which does not necessarily take the shape of a comparison, but must be a feature of pedagogical research. Contextualizing data (whether they come from real observation, statistics or studies in similar disciplines), understanding them, and making them usable (even when they had not initially been foreseen in the research hypothesis) is one of the characteristic elements of humanist research, and pedagogy in particular. Man, in all his concrete anthropological and cultural facets, is impossible to classify. So too pedagogy, as a theoretical, practical, poetic

science, should focus mainly on this aspect relating to hermeneutics and heuristics in its research method. This means that scholars need to be capable of adapting cognitively and emotionally to grasp discoveries and the unexpected in such a way that, instead of remaining mere emotional echoes, they become opportunities for critical appraisal, a stimulus for research, and a tool for the renewal and further investigation of concepts, ideas and theories.

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