

The ethical and pedagogical competence of the teacher in personal training and building a community of practice

La competenza etico-pedagogica dell'insegnante tra formazione personale e costruzione della comunità di pratiche

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ABSTRACT

Given the historical and social significance of the current times, a new educational impetus is needed in schools, provided not least through the work of the teacher, who must responsibly take on the role both of facilitator, with regard to the education of individual students, and at the same time, of a professional who is expertly capable of contributing to the reconstruction of a democratic citizenship. This calls for discernment in both epistemological and didactic aspects of teaching, but also in the ethical and political spheres. It is essential that teachers acquire competence in ethical and pedagogical areas from the start of their training, so that they are able to identify values and attitudes, shared by others in the profession, which can be translated into ethical and social education in schools. These ethical capabilities also enable teachers to build a community of practice, as a constitutive element of professional identity, with the ideal of life-long training in view. The practices in which the teacher is involved call for adherence to an ethic of responsibility that must be developed by everyone working in education, not individually, but collectively and adopting a reflective approach, nurturing a community of teaching professionals ready to avow, express and take on pedagogical and educational values that will shape the direction of learning in school.

L'attuale momento storico-sociale richiede che si dia nuovo vigore educativo alla scuola, anche mediante l'operato dell'insegnante messo in grado di rivestire responsabilmente il ruolo di facilitatore per la formazione della persona-studente e di rappresentare, al contempo, un professionista esperto nel contribuire alla ricostruzione di una cittadinanza democratica. Egli è quindi chiamato a compiere scelte epistemologiche, didattiche, ma anche etiche e politiche. Diviene fondamentale fornire l'insegnante di competenze etico-pedagogiche sin dalla sua formazione iniziale, così da individuare valori e orientamenti, condivisi dai professionisti educativi, che si potranno tradurre nell'educazione etico-sociale scolastica.

Tali competenze etiche permettono inoltre ai docenti di edificare una comunità di pratiche costitutive dell'identità professionale in un'ottica di formazione continua. Le pratiche di cui si occupa l'insegnante richiedono l'assunzione di un'etica della responsabilità che ogni operatore educativo non dovrebbe costruire individualmente, ma collegialmente e in maniera riflessiva, alimentando una comunità di professionisti educativi che dichiara, esprime e assume valori pedagogico-educativi per definire la direzione dell'impegno scolastico.

Keywords: Professional teacher, Pedagogical competence, Ethical competence, Community of practice, Democratic education

Parole chiave: Insegnante professionista, Competenza pedagogica, Competenza etica, Comunità di pratiche, Educazione democratica

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1. Ethical competence in the teaching profession

Practices, experience, learning, training, self-tuition: these are all expressions that relate to a range of different professional activities, but take on a particular significance when considering the *educational* aspect of *professions* and, more especially, the profession of teacher.

Education is indeed constantly associated with questions of values and ethics¹ given that it is concerned with the complete fulfilment of human beings, individually and collectively, by embracing “the ethical, political and educational option of democracy as a way of life” (Baldacci, 2020, p. 25). Given its community-based nature, the school must feel involved in an educational pathway that brings with it a moral duty with regard to taking responsibility for minors and responding to their need for integral growth; the moral education must be considered with both individual and social dimension. An echo of this awareness is discernible in recent discussion generated following the introduction of civic education in school as required under Italian Law n° 92 of 20 August 2019. In practice, the aim with this kind of “teaching” is not only to provide knowledge on rules of law or regulations concerning constitutional or environmental matters, etc., but also, and above all, to give guidance to the student on being and behaving as a citizen, developing a cultural approach which, if it is to be understood and embraced by students, must be reflected in “virtuous” teachers in the school itself. The school environment, in effect, must become a setting in which to gain experience of a democratic community capable of building educational relations that humanize and give due regard to the value that each person has in the intergenerational exchange. Accordingly, the ethical competence of the teacher has a social characterization that places it at the service of education in citizenship and at the same time inspires engagement in establishing a professional community of practices. In other words, it is a question of expressing ethical competence as the ability to perform the tasks pertinent to one’s role with moral awareness, taking ethical decisions (Rest, 1986). Moreover, all these elements take account of what has emerged from studies on the subject, which have widened the debate on the meaning and the application of ethical competences possessed by the teacher (Cheetham, Chivers, 1996; Tochon, 2000; Prairat, 2001; Campbell, 2003; Husu, Tirri, 2007), and on the ethical and moral characterization of the community of practices that can be created and cultivated by teachers.

The ethical-moral imprint of the school environment is identifiable consequently both in the *mission* of the institution and in the way that the individual action of the teacher is characterized (Baldacci, 2020, p. 25). The two aspects are interrelated: as an institution, the school must project an ethical identity, consistent with the standards and values that the community it represents considers essential for fulfilment of the individual. These values and standards must also hold good for the educational-training network made up by the various actors in education and by the relative dynamics: between teachers, between teachers and school principal, and between teachers and families. Similarly, the morality of single teachers represents a guarantee for their professional qualification, given that this involves the acceptance of responsibility for identifying what is right and good for the educand. Alongside standard practices concerned with organizational and management or subject and curriculum related aspects, the teacher is entrusted *in primis*, as one who carries on a “moral profession”, with pursuing an empathetic educational approach whereby knowledge can be didacticized (Damiano, 2007) and personalized to render it educational, with the needs of every single student in mind. In this way, the school can be set up as an educating community able to engage with persons who are growing up and help them to build their personality. To this end, the school is called on to renew the democratic spirit, and this means taking care in educational activity over dialogue and words, the originality and creativity of every person-student, openness, adopting an experimental and altruistic attitude, and avoiding standardization, demagoguery, corruption of consciences, deception (Zagrebelsky, 2007). It is therefore essential that the teacher should be ethically competent, capable of reflecting on these values, practising them and sharing in them. There is in effect a *sui generis* element to the work of the teaching profession: its unique educator-educand relationship, given the very uniqueness of the two persons, has to combine with the universality of the educational process, in a blend of precepts, rules, ideals, acculturation pathways and anthropological visions of humankind. In addition, the relationship established is asymmetrical in nature, and so the situation of dependency experienced by the student can create a sense of fragility and subordination that must be dealt with ethically.

1 In this context the terms *ethical* and *moral* are used synonymously.

This said, the moral conceptual categories that define educational practices – i.e. those designed to bring about the improvement of persons – are often not manifested in the classroom, despite being one of the key dimensions in defining the quality of the instruction and education process. Such categories are considered, at best, as a topic for theoretical and philosophical disquisitions and seen as not directly relevant to the business of teaching, which it is felt should be left to the individual specialist and discipline-based judgement of the single teacher. In reality, the business of educating is at once educational, ethical, political, academically instructive (Broccoli, 2017, p. 9) and subject to public accountability.

As Cambi states, the teacher carries on a public ethical profession that means being in the spotlight as a provider “of clear-cut social skills and responsible subjects”, whilst the community “delegates to the school and to the teacher that entry-into-the-social-world and that integral (or more integral) growth of young citizens which is the essential task of every organized community” (Cambi, 2002).

The problem today is often that the school, faced with the uncertainty of the human condition and of the meaning of life (Mancuso, 2021), and with the demands of ethical pluralism, prefers to fall back on the standardized technical and managerial approach, whereas teachers, preoccupied with the values of the person, mistakenly focus on their own technical, educational, informative and subject-related skills and consequently do not see it as their first duty to concentrate on helping students to develop so-called *character skills* (Chiosso, Poggi, Vittadini, 2021), which include social and emotional skills, and general character-building. Through *character skills*, sciences and school subjects are turned into genuine knowledge capable of providing answers to the needs of a global and complex society (Ceruti, Bellusci, 2020). They are conveyed by the establishment of an ethical educational relationship between teacher and student, which renders their implementation possible through a kind of “dual contract” (Damiano, 2007, p. 197 et seq). In short, the teacher provides a formal educational offering based on knowledge and assessment, but at the same time puts the student on the right path, rationally and authoritatively (Baldacci, 2020, p. 84 et seq). Students must therefore take part in the school experience with conviction, so that the teacher can properly recognize where they are wanting to go and help them on the path to empowerment, as their talents gradually emerge. This calls for the teacher to adopt an ethical approach of responsibility, commitment, cooperation and dialogue, and to foster the respect that currently risks being impossible to establish in school (Volpicelli, 2015, p. 30), with the result that education is reduced to a “sequence of geometrical and statistical procedures” (Broccoli, 2017, p. 77). Today, in order to reinvigorate the school and restate its importance in education, there is a need to uphold the educational experience of teaching as an ethical and moral experience related to an ethics of care (Broccoli, 2017, p. 149), to be instilled from the earliest stages of teacher training and cultivated through career-long training pathways.

The factor on which analysis of the teacher as a reflective professional must focus (Schön, 1993) is that the school stands as an institution having the special task of providing education, but in a context of social relations that prepares the educand for the process of developing ethical and social behaviours (Baldacci, 2020, p. 10). Teachers cannot underestimate the need to work toward ensuring that the human condition of the educand can be secured in a spirit of morality and democracy. And democracy – seen not as a mere acknowledgement of common usages and customs, but as the basis on which to build a life plan – has a moral foundation, speaking to the development of human character, of manners and virtues, which in their turn find their expression in civic life or citizenship (Mari, Musai, 2018).

This has relevance to the “heightened morality” (Derbolav, 1988, p. 61) inherent in the exercise of the teacher’s profession, testifying to the moral conduct of the professional and to an awareness that the student must be educated to develop a responsible and civil mode of conduct. Teacher training must therefore deal with personal and professional reflection, but also with the identification of good practices on the ethical front (Fabbri, 2014), which, when re-discussed and reviewed, contribute to the establishment of a professional community of practices. This becomes a milieu in which teachers themselves can continue training and self-learning, while at the same time setting the conditions in which an educational environment replete with moral and civil stimuli can flourish.

The question is much in discussion today, the post-human age, a time of secularization, polytheism of values, or indeed the absence of values, the primacy of the economic over the human, of the individual good, whilst the behavioural tendencies of the young become increasingly problematic, and not only in school. But it is precisely in view of these difficulties that the ethical training of teachers becomes even more needful and urgent, and the question is certainly a complex one, beginning with identification of

the ethical model to which the person adheres. In any case there is more involved than the simple philosophical definition of an ethical model – which is not designated from above but must develop in its turn from the professional experience of teachers – and, moreover, the model must be transposed and reworked in applying the “pedagogical touch” (Derbolav, 1988, p. 77), which has a practical and moral characterization.

The professionalism of the teacher, therefore, is diluted in a series of actions that cause a person also to “feel in particular ways” (MacIntyre, 1988, p. 181). First and foremost, in effect, this means taking on the responsibility of managing to unite multiple aspects – subjective and objective, eidetic and universal, of dependence and independence, technical and human – in the educational equation, and therefore in implementation of the teaching and learning pathway. It also means exploring a reality that calls for thoughtfulness and circumspection, elegance and grace, readiness and willingness to embrace a challenge not confined to imagining the existence of an ethical-moral protocol divorced from the professional intentionality of providing care (Fabbri, 2014, pp. 118-119). As Zagrebelsky points out, “the classics teach us that good rules in themselves are not enough; we also need good men, that is to say men who act in the spirit of the rules” (2007, p. 13).

2. Training for ethical competence through community of practices

In seeking to reflect and to identify the most suitable way to proceed, bearing in mind responsibility of choice and freedom of discretion, to give substance to a genuinely democratic educational relationship with the student and with the class, the teacher can find support through participation in the teaching community, operating as a community of practices. Perception of the school as a *community of practices* can be useful as a point of reference for the shaping and implementation of ethical competence. As a *community of practice*, or perhaps better, *of practices* and *of thought* (Michelini, 2016), the teaching profession does not in fact set itself objectives connected merely with the circulation of information, such as knowledge in school subjects, but seeks collectively to identify and build skills relative to the ethical responsibility that all teachers find themselves having to exercise, often alone, in the course of carrying out their everyday instructional and educational duties and interacting with the student.

This often consists in “telling stories” of a kind that illustrate the ethical aspect of human being and becoming, in other words the various educational situations, relationships and agreements that the teacher develops with the single student and with the class. The “making public” of such stories (Maletta, 1997) provides a way of overcoming the individualism that holds sway in the school, the reductionist and fragmented view of the professional role filled by the teacher, the outlook of simply teaching one’s own subject and running one’s class by oneself. By “narrating” professional cases or critical incidents, teachers in a community of practices can share whatever may be seen as the singular aspect of a given educational relationship, perceivable during the actual experience of training. In this way, participants can identify, shape and develop ethical competence, not by translating it into an abstract culture of theories or a sterile moral code or charter of ethics, but relating it to a set of ethical and educational practices that the school community can subscribe to and process, arriving at the *modus operandi* best compatible with interpersonal respect.

In defining *community of practice*, the contributions of Wenger (1998), and in particular of MacIntyre (1988), seem fundamental as references to support the ethical and moral, historicized and communitarian dimension of educational practice.

In a period when “the population is more society than community [and] the web unites individuals more than associations” (Cassese, 2021, p. 82), the establishment of a community of practices to support the development of ethical competence in teachers can help give life to new ties and a renewed sense of responsibility, expressed in the quest for the common good linked closely with the good of the educand. The community of practices endeavours to shed light on that which gives substance to education, the implicit values it underpins, and the common standards that also translate into a responsibility on the part of professionals to bring these same standards to the fore in relational practice between teacher and student.

The term *community of practice* or *practices* unites two important concepts for recognition and endorsement of the teaching professions from the ethical standpoint: the idea of *practice* as relating to professional

experience, and that of *community*, associated with joint reflection on such experience, collective or individual, and with the sharing of goals and values, as well as methods and tools. In a community of practices made up of school professionals, one is able first of all to gauge the importance of situational and proximity-related aspects that are common to a given group of professionals, especially when considering education, an activity that happens precisely through practice, by a process of enculturation where there are different areas of knowledge and subjects of study in play.

In other words, in the community of practices, teachers seek to recognize the salient features of *educational practices*, and that which binds the work of caring for the citizen-student, as well as turning professional action into informational and curricular products and content, rules and constructs, accessible to everyone. The idea of community, maintains MacIntyre, seems to be inseparable from that of practice, but from practice come the implicit values by which it is also developed. The philosopher states, in effect: “by practice I mean every coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended” (MacIntyre, 1988, p. 225). The community of practices is built on the basis of *expertise* as well as on a wealth of theoretical and cultural learning, acquired along a recursive/recurrent pathway that goes “from information, to formation, to transformation” (Formenti, 1996, p. XV). If it is from experience and in experience that educational activity is put to the test, it is also true that this must be interpreted ecologically and shared, conceptualized, rendered a virtuous practice as meant by MacIntyre (1988), and reconstructed as theory and praxis.

The importance of ethical competence in generating an educational and instructional pathway that reflects the specific nature and the quality of the educator-educand relationship is manifested once the community of practices converges on the idea of practice in its *inner recognition*, which means the capacity to regulate and interpret the selfsame practice, on the part of the originator. Thus, in the definition of practice offered by MacIntyre, and in the reference to goods internal to it, emphasis is placed on the importance of the community being governed by practical rationality, able to seek out and share within it, through practices, a conception of what makes a good life, in which the participating members learn one from another not by seeing individual good and the common good separately, but perceiving both as integrated expressions of human good. Having excluded the “fetishism of rules” (MacIntyre, 1997, p. 23), the *wisdom of conformity* is noted within the scope of practice not only and not so much in connection with objectively noted external standards, but with the identification of its nature. Being concerned with professionalism in teaching, this means that teachers have the task and the responsibility of always defining the significance assumed by the instructional and educational practice they apply on each occasion, observing the rules and the models that distinguish it from others, interpreting it in the historical sense and in relation to the single pathway of each educand, and renewing it continuously. A practice such as this therefore calls additionally for the cultivation and possession of certain virtues, namely honesty, justice, temperance and courage, which allow the professional to display MacIntyre’s “goods internal to the practice”. These attributes allow professionals both to improve their “performance” and to achieve personal growth, the practice providing them with motives for enrichment and for betterment of their lives. The distinguishing and qualifying element of school-teaching practices should be that of pointing the way toward ends and values concerned with integral growth, with achieving the good of the student and of democratic society. Accordingly, it is the internal benefits of practice that must be pursued, and not only the external, such as seeking the relative assets like economic well-being, acquiring student clients, achieving a certain social status, or furthering one’s career.

As a community, education professionals recognize certain practices, which therefore take on ethical and democratic connotations and at the same educate the mind to absorb them. They state that the distinguishing mark of educational practices is that they should be able to convey ends and values of enrichment for a person within the community. Once an educational or school-teaching practice is developed, teachers must ask themselves what value it holds for improvement of the person and the community, in what way does it contribute to the definition of a *good life* for humans, for their “state of being well and doing well in being well” (MacIntyre, 1988, p. 180). Sharing the history of practices, each single professional finds motivation for growth and personal development.

3. Ethical intelligence

The development of ethical competence also comes about through communication and dialogue between professionals who recognize the importance of overseeing the process of education adopting ethical and moral competencies influenced by traditional cultures, by planning and teaching models, by different schools of thought, by personal ethical choices, all of which will rarely, or not at all easily, be the subject of shared reflection in everyday practice. The community of practices and “of discourse” (Mortari, 2008) can thus also be seen as a community of “learners”, operating in an environment of collaboration, creativity and cooperation (Alessandrini, 2007). It is founded on a basis of dialogue, situation, sharing and awareness; the “relating of experience” is an element characteristic of this model, one that is able to disqualify the action of the professional, who can re-interpret the case in question on the basis of a process of argument in order to arrive at a sort of *proposal of meaning*. Professionalism in education is founded on an ethical competence developed through experience, compared and shared with a sense of responsibility and commitment. In short, a set of professional ethical values, hence public, but nonetheless linked to the personal dimension, which by way of a hermeneutical process can evolve to the point of being embodied in a code or charter of ethics. Codified regulation of such a document, while essential, is not enough; the hermeneutic aspect is necessary in that it allows professionals to rediscover their professionalism by seeing their role acknowledged and endorsed to the full.

Looking to develop the essentially pedagogical approach by adding a chiefly psychological perspective, it could be claimed that the community of practices allows the development of what Gardner defines as *ethical intelligence*, which represents one of five intelligences this author considers fundamental and necessary if humanity is to develop in the future (Gardner, 2007, p. 135 et seq). He highlights its importance in the place of work, pointing out how there is a greater probability that the ethical mentality of a professional will permeate work that is *good* – i.e. ethical – where there is a shared pursuit of this end among all those involved in the profession. The community of practices is thus conducive to the sharing of an *ethical mentality*. The author identifies “four signposts” to the achievement of good work (p. 155 et seq) which, with suitable adjustments, we might see as methodological contribution» for the community of practices relating to the teaching profession. They are: *mission*, *models*, *mirror test I: individual version*, and *mirror test II: professional responsibility*.

- *Mission* is concerned with the ability and willingness to identify the goals that inspire the professional to be an educator and the values that characterize this activity, that is, in the language of MacIntyre, the goods internal to the practice.
- By *models* the author means the possibility of relating to sources of knowledge, traditions and expert professionals that will provide help, not least to the young professional, in defining what is “good work” in educational terms.
- The *mirror test I: individual version*, relates to the capacity of professionals for constant self-examination and self-assessment of their performance, and, to avoid self-referentiality, the fact that they are able to rely on consultation and the expert guidance of other figures with regard to the activity carried on by the educator. This is made possible in part by the practice of narrative.
- The *mirror test II: professional responsibility*, represents perhaps the most critical aspect in seeking to project the profile of the ethical professional, but in this regard the community of practices can offer dependable support. This fourth signpost makes the point that it is not enough for single professionals to act as ethical watchdog over their own work, given that such an arrangement “does not suffice if one’s colleagues are behaving in ways that are unprofessional” (Gardner, 2007, p. 156).

A community of practices takes on the idea of professionalism as a search for guidelines that are open to change in a supportive civic environment. It enables the development of a socialised competence (Chiosso, 2018, p. 60), identifying a set of educational goals that give the practice of teaching and learning direction coherently and ethically, not merely in a contractual sense.

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