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## The relationship between school and community as an opportunity to re-think teaching

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### Abstract

This paper presents an action research conducted with teachers at an istituto comprensivo (jointly managed preschool, primary and lower secondary school) in Bergamo (Northern Italy). The study was informed by ecological and naturalistic paradigms, and above all by the values of participatory action research. It examined the possibility that the difficult relationship between school and community may be viewed as an opportunity. The outcomes indicate that focusing on school-community relations can offer benefits on two conditions: 1) that this focus is taken as a starting point for re-thinking the school's identity; 2) that keywords are identified as a basis for understanding the school-community relationship in the current social context and for guiding appropriate action. We identified three types of action that may usefully be undertaken: introducing new forms of documenting school experience, involving the students' parents and the broader community in school projects, and using the outcomes of such projects to redefine school programs. A key recommendation for the future is to conduct further participatory research with students, their families, or other stakeholders, and to revisit the school curriculum in the light of the findings.

Keywords: Action research; relationship between school and community; school identity; students' families.

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## 1. Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the outcomes of an action research project conducted with teachers at the Istituto Camozzi, an *istituto comprensivo* – or school spanning the preschool, primary and lower secondary levels of education – in Bergamo (Northern Italy). The project focused on the relationship between the school, the community, and the students' parents, the first community members encountered by teachers in their work. Such a focus is crucial for two reasons: first, parents may be viewed as invaluable members of the educational team; second, parental involvement is frequently associated with enhanced child outcomes, including higher academic achievement, lower dropout rates and more positive student attitudes (Nzinga-Johnson, Baker & Aupperlee, 2009).

During a preliminary meeting with the research team, which was focused on research and training needs, teachers recognized the need to address the relationship between school and family, a relationship that is undergoing changes and which therefore needs to be thematized and strategically developed (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Rethinking this relationship is critical to defining a new “educational partnership” (Cowan, Napolitano & Sheridan, 2004). The teachers suggested that parents are perceived on the one hand as allies who are needed to support the work of the school, but also, on the other hand, as people with whom it is not easy to cooperate in practice, perhaps because – as suggested by Cowan et al. (2004) – the educational system is not prepared for a certain level of parental involvement.

Parents' attitudes and requests were experienced and described by most teachers as problematic. In the teachers' narratives, parents were represented as over-protective towards their children with the result of hindering the gains in independence promoted by the school (Ungar, 2009). Such attitudes also constrain the school's scope for action and freedom to develop an educational program.

In addition, parents were characterized as ambivalent towards school. On the one hand, the teachers reported, parents offer advice to teachers and guidance on how to do their jobs in a way that is increasingly intrusive. On the other hand, parents fully delegate the achievement of educational goals to teachers. It appears that parents think that teachers are the only people with responsibility for educating their children, and, whether due to disadvantage or indifference, do not see themselves as successfully contributing to their children's educational development.

Finally, in the teachers' view, parents are increasingly focused on their children's individual needs. It seems that parents do not recognize the specific nature of educational experience, and this leads them to make personalized requests that are incompatible with optimum classroom management.

These considerations were taken as the point of departure for the research project, whose aim was to explore how teachers define their professional role in the light of these new requirements. It was hoped by this means to encourage the school and its teachers to reject self-referential practices, and foster new ways of experiencing the significant relationship between schools, families and society at large (Epstein, 2001).

## 2. Purpose of the Study

The topic of the school's relationship with the community, especially with the students' families, emerged as a key issue at the first research meeting. To examine this topic in depth, the research team decided to approach it from within a broader theme that the participants recognized as crucial. More specifically, the profound transformation taking place in contemporary society which has key implications for schools: teachers are indeed being forced to rethink and clearly redefine their duties, strategies and identity in the light of the changes being experienced by students, families and

communities. The school-parent relationship is thus related to the broader social context in which the school operates.

This is borne out by Epstein's observation that home-school relationships occur within broader political, economic, and social contexts, and that the dynamics of these relationships may be influenced by multiple factors (Epstein, 2001).

The new media and alternative sources of training, communication and information (Postman, 1969), the spread of informal learning which now competes with formal training (Biesta, 2006), the changes affecting the "family" (Santoro, 2013), and the ambivalent links between education and the labor market are all phenomena that today's schools are called upon to engage with (Dewey, 1938).

In a book on the so-called era of sad passions, the psychoanalyst Miguel Benasayag (Benasayag & Schmit, 2004) argued that educational agencies need to redefine their roles in light of the crisis currently sweeping contemporary society. The future – in an era dominated by a pervasive sense of uncertainty – is no longer a promise but something to be feared. Educational agencies with the potential to lead students into the future are those most exposed to the effects of the crisis. One of these is the decline of the principle of authority, which is particularly evident in schools. While in the past teachers enjoyed undisputed authority over students and their parents, in the current scenario listening and respect may no longer be taken for granted but must be won, often with difficulty. The teacher does not represent a sufficiently strong symbol for young people: relationships with adults are perceived as symmetrical. In other words, there is no longer a perceived difference, or asymmetry between adults and youth to automatically establish authority, endow meaning, and generate a suitable environment for the educational relationship.

Recalcati (2014) has analyzed the demise of the principle of authority in relation to a weakening in the educational agreement between teachers and parents. In order to explain the changes in current society and schools, Recalcati draws on mythological images, analyzing them from a psychoanalytic perspective. He argues that, in the past, the school system was inspired by the model of "Oedipus": it was thus characterized by fidelity to the past, the transmission of traditional knowledge, and the principle of authority. Parents trusted the school as an institution and the teacher took the place – the authority – of the parent, in a secondary socialization process. Students recognized the adult's right to obedience; they engaged in conflict as a rite of passage to adulthood, in order to differentiate themselves and find their own place in the world. In place of the "Oedipus school", Recalcati argues, we now have a "Narcissus school", characterized by horizontality and symmetry, the mixing of roles, and an alliance that is totally internal to the family, based on the narcissism of both parents and children. The alliance between teachers and parents, between school and family, fell apart with undermining of the principle of authority. The home-school relationship has changed because parents are no longer guaranteed to act as the teachers' faithful allies, but are more inclined to be protective of their children, increasingly leaving teachers in sole charge of establishing limits and rules and of ensuring the attainment of educational outcomes over time.

The theme of the relationship with parents, though important, seems to pose a broader question about the role of schools in a changing society and about the skills that teachers must acquire to adequately cater for demands originating in the broader social context outside school.

As observed by Dewey (1938), schools are closely related to the social context in which they operate. Thus, changes in this broader setting cannot be ignored because, they will automatically be replicated within the school itself as an educational agency, forcing teachers and other education professionals (education specialists, educators) to address them.

For all of these reasons, the research was divided into two main phases. The first step was to analyze the educational identity of the *istituto comprensivo*. Before going on to identify the form and contents of the school-parent relationship, and before sharing goals with parents and establishing a true partnership (Cowan et al. 2004), it was deemed of value to analyze the specific identity of the school, the meaning and educational value of the experience it offers in this new and different scenario of

contemporary society. The second phase in the action research focused on the current relationship between school and families and possible strategies for developing a fruitful working partnership.

### **3. Epistemology and Method**

The epistemological and methodological approaches adopted were informed by ecological and naturalistic paradigms (Mortari, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Indeed, the research was conducted on the ground in a professional context, with the aim of constructing in-depth and situated knowledge of value to participants and their school. This perspective facilitated recognition of the factors influencing the characteristics and outcomes of educational work at this school, particularly concerning the relationship between the school, students' families, and other stakeholders in the community.

More specifically, the study was based on a Participatory Action Research (PAR) approach (McIntyre, 2008). All the phases of the research process were shared with the participants, and the research activities were defined on the basis of both their individual feedback, and group discussions. Great attention was paid to the negotiation of the main research question. The researchers perceived and recognized the difficulties experienced by teachers in their relationship with students' parents, and the risk of them remaining locked into a self-referential approach despite their interactions with the community. It was decided to explore these difficulties, while sharing interpretations of the changes currently being undergone by families in this time of global economic, social and cultural crisis. This led the group to become more aware of the complexity of their relationships, and to identify keywords providing them with a better understanding of these relationships in relation to the current social context. The methods used to collect and analyze the data were shared by the research team and defined with due ethical care. Participants provided written informed consent for the use of the research data, while the researchers guaranteed confidentiality and full sharing of the research conclusions with the participants. The researchers also made every attempt to establish a non-evaluative and collaborative atmosphere: they proposed and consistently enforced a brief and clear set of rules for communication and interaction, allowing participants to concentrate on the research topic; they sensitively followed the participants along their path of discovery, choosing step by step the most appropriate activities and instruments for encouraging participants to express themselves, engage in reflection and construct shared learning; finally, they encouraged the recognition of difficulties encountered in relation to the research process itself and helped the group to address these issues. The researchers, with the participants' agreement, wrote the research report. They took into account all the materials produced by the group during and at the end of each activity, and all the notes taken during discussions. Hence, the knowledge represented was grounded in the research process.

#### **3.1. The research activities**

The activities used to collect and discuss the data were narrative and expressive. All participants were involved in:

- Writing about, sharing and discussing significant episodes that represented their way of "school-teaching";
- Identifying the most salient features of the institute's approach to schooling, based on discussion of the representative episodes;
- Focusing on what the school asks of families and the community, and what families and the community ask of the school;
- Planning new modes of communication and sharing to foster new strategies for enhancing the relationship with the students' parents and the community.

Participants had the opportunity to alternate individual work on the research objectives, with working in pairs, small groups and the full group. They were facilitated in their enquiry, reflection and sharing by the organization and care for the setting provided by the researchers.

#### **3.2. The participants**

Participants were 10 teachers working at three different levels of education within the *istituto comprensivo*: infant, primary and secondary school. The school principal and educational psychologist

also took part. Participants were chosen because they were members of the school's Community Relations Committee. Thus, a purposive sampling method was used to identify teachers with a specific interest in the research topic.

### **3.3. Structure of the research activities**

Participants attended five 2.5-hour sessions. At the first four sessions, the group explored the research topic, carrying out the activities outlined above; the final session was used to share the preliminary outcomes and draft report with the participants.

## **4. Results**

The first concerns the school's educational identity. School offers students a unique and irreducible experience, which is different to ordinary life and produces learning. The objective of the first research phase was to identify the distinctive characteristics of this experience. The research brought to light a range of educational practices being implemented by the participating teachers: cultivating openness to society beyond the school, cooperating with stakeholders and involving them in school life, fostering experience-based learning and teaching.

The second category concerns the ways in which teachers can experience the school's relationship with the community: the teachers identified keywords that enhanced their understanding of this relationship and suggested appropriate lines of action.

### **4.1. The school's educational identity**

#### **4.1.1. Openness to external society**

The school is an institution with its own rules, and characteristics, a highly recognizable and rigid micro-structure, an educational agency that is distinct from other realities. Schools often seem to be closed off from the rest of society, committed to their own programmes and structure, and to implementing ministerial guidelines. The school that participated in the current study appeared to depart from this traditional image, presenting itself as more open, more permeable to the outside and with less rigid boundaries. The experiences narrated by the participants suggest an open school that constantly chooses to interact with the community and its different actors. The school welcomes proposals that come from "outside", but also actively creates opportunities to interact with the broader social context. In this model of openness, the school plays an active role: the teachers seek out and attempt to draw maximum benefit from opportunities to encounter the external community. This strategy is underpinned by the belief that bringing students into contact with the broader community means offering them an enriched educational experience and giving them access to types of learning that they are less likely to acquire by other means.

#### **4.1.2. Collaboration with stakeholders and their involvement in school life**

Compared to the isolation traditionally associated with schools, the practices described by the participants in this study were characterized by collaboration and the sharing of an educational plan (Cowan et al., 2004). In the traditional school model, individual teachers manage their classes on their own and in isolation for the duration of the predefined lesson-time, which is generally devoted to teaching their allotted part of the ministerial program. The Istituto Comprensivo Camozzi in contrast continually establishes relations with other actors with whom it shares the process of educating the students. It appears that responsibility for the students' education is a jointly borne and implemented by all the parties involved. Cooperation takes place both with the different community stakeholders and with the parents who are viewed as privileged partners in community-school relationship. Interconnections are both disciplinary (projects based on different materials and collaboration among teachers) and local (projects with the community). On the one hand, this aspect appears to be a typical characteristic of this institution and its way of providing education. On the other hand, it emerges as an approach that is mainly adopted by individual teachers on their own initiative ("I can do it because I

have a good working relationship with my colleague") and it does not always seem to be institutionally promoted and encouraged by the school.

#### **4.1.3. Experience as a condition for learning and teaching**

The narratives clearly show that the teachers believe that children learn best by doing: that is to say, for learning to take place, students not only need to hear ideas and study them but also to experience them and put them into practice. These practical experiences enable a different kind of learning, described by participants as deeper and more enduring. Children learn more and work better when they directly and actively participate in learning activities. Moreover, practical experiences are those most enjoyed by students. The teacher's ideal educational model is therefore an active, co-constructive one. This model in short differs from transmissive approaches and advocates learning by doing.

#### **4.2. The relationship with the community**

In terms of the values that the teachers felt should characterize the school's relationship with families, the data clearly showed that their approach to interaction with parents was oriented by the specific identity of the Institute Camozzi. The salient aspects of the way in which teachers believe the relationship with parents should be conducted are described by keywords: sharing, belonging and recognition.

##### **4.2.1 Sharing**

Sharing appears to be a defining characteristic of school-parent interaction. The participants explicitly associated the value of sharing with openness. Sharing is related to transparency, making explicit, the desire to make the school's work visible; it is also connected with cooperation or involvement, and doing things together. Specifically, the term sharing appears to bear two different meanings. On the one hand, it implies the construction of a common vision, consensus-based planning, recognition and therefore trust between school and parents. In this sense, the school offers parents a form of "belonging", by inviting them to oversee its educational programme, and jointly observe outcomes. On the other hand, sharing is also explicitly interpreted in terms of practical cooperation, active involvement, synergy, participation, the practice of sharing with others, and having something in common. These two energies are potentially complementary, but at the same time they reveal an element of ambivalence.

##### **4.2.2. Belonging**

The school invites parents to feel that they are part of the institution and takes steps to encourage and nurture a sense of belonging. On the one hand, belonging appears to be an "a priori" phenomenon: that is, it may be viewed as a starting condition that with which interaction is initiated – "we invite you to feel that you are part of this school". On the other hand, belonging may also be viewed as a target outcome to be constructed and developed, rather than something to be taken for granted. In relation to this point, differences may be observed among the various levels of school: the daily presence and the proximity that characterize parents' relationship with the preschool and primary school help to maintain a sense of belonging. This belonging, in contrast, becomes weaker when the physical distance between parents and children increases during lower secondary school, given the students' older age and more advanced development.

##### **4.2.3. Recognition**

Recognition, understood as an ongoing process, appears to be a key element required for sharing and belonging to merge and become a reality. Recognizing others means accepting differences, changes, and distinctive roles; it is an act that relies on a constant dialectic process of dialogue. Recognition requires certain key pre-conditions to be in place: for example, the opportunity to be challenged, called on and summoned by another, which – vice versa – makes one feel entitled to challenge and call on the other in one's turn; the opportunity to listen and be listened to, express oneself, feel seen, heard and

accepted. Recognition is a dialogical process, although it is often driven by a one-sided desire: “I want to be recognized by you”.

Addressing the theme of recognition means opening up a space in which to actively think about the interaction between school and family as a decisive factor in educational experience. The school needs to recognize the students’ families, but this is only possible if the school in turn enjoys the recognition of the parents, within a relationship that requires each party to resist the need to defend itself from the other.

This action research project pointed up the need for teachers to think of their professional identity as including elements of sharing and openness with communities and parents. Teachers’ work is carried out at school but also in the course of their interaction with the outside world and in developing those skills that underpin a true partnership with parents and the local community.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The research findings show that the Istituto Comprensivo Camozzi identifies itself as a school that is open to the *outside* – to the community – and *inside* – to cooperation among teachers, who attribute crucial importance to offering learning from experience and experimental teaching projects. The data also suggest that for the characteristic of openness to be attained or enhanced, some basic conditions must be in place: first, the pact with the students’ families must be constantly revisited to take into account changes in both the families’ lives and needs and the economic and social needs of the local area. This result confirms claims in the literature that nowadays nothing may be taken for granted in the relationship with families and communities; schools must care for these relationships day by day. This means that schools are obliged to re-think themselves, from a dynamic and dialogical perspective that will lead them to experiment with changes in both their curricula and teaching methods. For the schools this is a challenge, because it entails tolerating the uncertainty of the contingent situation.

This study presents some limitations: it led the participants to identify their practices and needs with respect to their relationship with the “outside” community, but it was not possible – due to a lack of time – to plan and implement concrete strategies for caring for the pact with families and the broader community. Moreover, the teachers participating in the action research were members of the school’s Community Relations Committee. This facilitated their involvement in the research process, but issues were raised concerning the extent to which they would be able to share their learning with the other teachers at the school. If this learning is to be disseminated and appropriate strategies planned with the teaching staff as a whole, further recommendations are in order.

First, it will be of key importance to engage teachers, students and parents in continuous reflection on the school’s educational identity. The research data indicated that rich and good practices are already being implemented, but all the actors need to become aware of the meaning of these practices in the current social and cultural context. This will allow teachers to communicate to the “outside” what the school does or can do, and foster recognition of these good practices and the teachers’ work. Furthermore, becoming aware of the value of particular educational practices implies taking the institutional step of asking “what” the school wants to be for the community, both now and in the future.

The second direction for future research and a consequence of the first concerns the issue of documenting the daily school experience of students and teachers. Bureaucratic and institutional language cannot represent the complexity and the richness of this experience, yet are often the language of choice for documentation and internal and external communications. Therefore, a future challenge for the Istituto Camozzi will be to find alternative ways of writing about and communicating the happenings of school life, and thereby to build a new narrative with the collaboration of the

students. By using a different language, this new type of narrative would raise awareness of educational practices not only among teachers and the students, but also among the families and the community.

The third recommendation concerns facilitating the parents in playing a meaningful collaborative role in educational practices and in school life. This implies asking parents and other community stakeholders what contribution they are prepared to make to enrich the quality of school experience and enable teachers to programme a holistic educational experience that goes beyond the teaching of curricular knowledge in the classroom.

Finally, the fourth point is related to the need to develop and enhance collaborative practices that are co-responsibly shared among teachers, students, parents, and community. This will imply providing dedicated spaces and times for joint planning, taking into account the needs of all the actors involved, and redefining the educational aims of the school as citizenship-oriented and not just academically-oriented. It will mean making structural provision for an open planning process involving a plurality of subjects and conducted from a democratic perspective that fully recognizes the importance of education for the new generations. In short, the key condition will be to view the curriculum as a dynamic process composed of a variety of activities led by a range of different actors within a shared and inter-subjective framework.

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