

Micaela Bordin
School society / city school.
Interview with Marco Rossi-Doria

Abstract

The Italian edition of Colin Ward's "Il bambino e la città" is introduced by Marco Rossi Doria. The interview with one of the most authoritative experts on educational and social policies, at the forefront of the defence of children's rights, is based on that book and on the idea of the city as an important resource, able to offers girls and boys a widespread education starting from all its spaces. A teacher since 1975, Marco Rossi Doria has taught in the difficult neighbourhoods of Rome, Naples, the United States, Kenya and France. The first street teacher, he founded the "Chance" project - a second chance public school. He received the Gold Medal for Culture, Education and School from the President of the Republic in 2001. He founded the Association "If-Imparare a fare". Today he is president of the social enterprise "Con i Bambini", which implements the Fund for the fight against juvenile educational poverty

Keywords

Geography of learning — Widespread education — Educational co-responsibility

The school is the privileged place for meeting and exchange, also between diverse cultures. A fertile ground for integration and to reduce inequalities and segregations, a place to cultivate and create the most innovative and ambitious projects for society and its "wellbeing". A space for socializing, aggregation, meeting and growth, and for this reason also a place of conflict, confrontation, and the encountering of diversity.

The school, to return to John Dewey's teaching, is a "social institution" (Dewey 1954) whose sole task is not simply the transmission of knowledge, but that of offering a variety of experiences which can allow children of all ages to swap opinions, co-design, feed their imagination, awaken interests, and engage in critical and constructive thinking, starting from a direct, concrete experience, one always subjected to comparisons and verification, of the natural and social reality.

Only in this way, only by operating in this way, can an education system create thinking, active individuals and lay the foundations for a democratic society. Democracy and education (Dewey 1949) are deeply interrelated and feed off each other. Democracy is achieved only when there is an education system capable of creating free and critical individuals, and an education system fully fulfils its mission only if it can enable individuals to swap opinions, to co-construct, to become "public", that is, not only able to guarantee access to everyone, whether male or female, but able to generate good practices and opportunities for sharing in society and in spreading culture and a sense of citizenship.

This can happen only and exclusively if a school is «without boundaries»¹, if it emerges from its enclosure and its walls, if it becomes a city and if it measures itself against and enters into listening and dialogue with society,



with the physical conditions and social practices of its local context. The school is an integral part of the social complexity and spatial resources of a city. It is part of an urban system and its rich “geography of learning”. A city offers itself as tangible and intangible cultural heritage, it is described through its architecture, its open spaces, but also through the transformations taking place or already rooted in its fabric, through its inhabitants and its differences, its history and its stories. Its listening and its discovery constitute paths of knowledge to create informed and active citizens, capable of appreciating and, consequently, of taking care of its places.

As Colin Ward reminded us, a city is a valuable resource because it offers children a widespread education in all its spaces and places. Everyone’s growth and education is enriched by participation in the life of a city. Each square, each public building, is a classroom, because each place can offer vital relationships and a unique opportunity for comparisons and growth, helping to stimulate autonomy and a direct participation in social life.

After reading the introduction to the Italian edition of “The Child in the City” by Colin Ward, it seemed to me a precious opportunity to be able to ask some questions to the Italian teacher and politician Marco Rossi-Doria, one of the most authoritative experts in educational and social politics², at the forefront in defending the rights of young children. A teacher since 1975, he has taught in the difficult neighbourhoods of Rome and Naples, but also in the United States, Kenya, and France. The first “street teacher”, he founded the “Chance” project – a second chance public school. He received the Gold Medal for Culture, Education and School from the President of the Republic in 2001. He founded the IF Association – *Imparare a Fare* [“Learn to Do”]. He is currently president of the social enterprise “Con i Bambini”, the implementation body of the Fund for Combating Child Education Poverty.

I join him via Teams, and he greets me with a smile in a room with two bookcases full of books behind him. I cannot deny my embarrassment. I ask him just one question which he smoothly begins to answer and then tells me about his extensive experience as a teacher around the world. His voice is reassuring, his words are measured, considered, heartfelt. Every now and then he cracks a joke. He speaks with the slowness of someone who is used to speaking, respecting everyone’s timing. I listen to him and take notes. I write without haste, and I can follow his words while I am writing, and I think that this calm and this clarity in his phrasing is a habit learned in many years of teaching. I can imagine a class of his with chil-

dren who are listening and writing, perhaps a dictation, and I think that together with learning to write they have learned something else: the habit of respecting, paying attention, and listening to everyone else.

Micaela Bordin: *I would like to start this dialogue from Colin Ward's book, "The Child in the City", for which you wrote an introduction to the Italian edition entitled "For a practice of rights". In it, you emphasize that Ward was a radical critic of the policies which influenced the construction of the city and that in his studies he stressed that cities are deeply marked by social injustice. Today the situation does not seem to have improved, far from it. What do you think about this?*

Marco Rossi-Doria: Colin Ward's studies date back to the 1960s and are still surprisingly current. I would like to begin this meeting by going back to that wonderful definition which Ward took from the entry *Anarchy* in the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* written by Peter Kropotkin: «Harmony is not obtained by submission to law, or by obedience to any authority, but by free agreements concluded between the various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilized being».

For Ward, the sense of anarchism has nothing ideological or proclamatory about it, but is the most effective form of social organization, not a hypothetical organization, but a living social reality. His research focused on how society can produce alternative proposals to the dominant ones.

I would start from these suggestions and then try to say some concrete things. There is always the danger of speaking while remaining on a generic level, while "grounding" is important. It is important to work, to get your hands dirty, in an attempt to combine concrete facts, operational issues, but looking up because, if you only look at your feet, you cannot play football well.

A school is made up of a system of relationships and different points of view. It is made up of a continuous "groundings" which involve boring administrative and organizational tasks, tiring negotiations, and a lot of work to do with people and not just with the children. It requires constant work within a system of relationships in which there is not a single individual and there are no pre-compiled forms of how teachers, parents, pupils and therefore society should be, because each individual is primarily a person and not the category to which he or she belongs. Working within such a complex system requires an incessant "making sense", a careful and scrupulous work similar to that of an artisan.

For me, the relationship between the school and the city is not detachable from the operating system of human relationships, knowing that this involves a continuous intertwining in multiple layers and a progressive knowledge of the context understood in a complex and multidimensional sense. So, there is the institutional part, the methodological part, the psychology of the community and also of the individual; your projections exist, the fact that you need to deal with yourself, your limits along with those of others, the ideal thrust exists, but also the material interests, the most brutal ones, the good and the bad of everything and then you to fulfil the luminous theories you have studied on the relationship between school and city, even the most airy-fairy ones like those of Colin Ward. But you are in that neighbourhood, in that situation, in that city, in that moment of



history, with those limitations and drives, etc. You need to be integral; you need to accept it all, and you don't have a clearly defined selector upstream of it all. You certainly have some knowledge and an awareness that, if richer, makes your "toolbox" better equipped to navigate this complexity, but all of this is certainly not easy because it is necessary to operate through authentic and participatory negotiations and above all, the result obtained is not valid forever, and this is a further burden.

Having said that, there are some things that you need to know and be acquainted with and that perhaps are upstream of the "toolbox", that is, things which guide you and that you need in order to manage what scientists call «navigational capacity» (Appadurai 2014), that is, the ability to stick with the uncertainty and make decisions with others in complex contexts. All of this concerns the two poles of the title of this interview: "city" and "school". Because a school basically has its own major rules, whatever the political and social contingency of the nation or the city.

So, I have been trying for many years to analyse these rules and these guidelines and to reduce them more and more. The reason comes from the fact that some of these, which seemed eternal, even if they were criticized from the outset by certain pedagogues and scholars and that perhaps over time have frayed, are still there. The school we imagine is the school that we attended and it's not very far from that of our parents and/or grandparents. We all attended a school whose location was a closed and time-driven place, in a class that was always the same every day, and in which the class and the classroom coincided.

We all want what we know, so it becomes important to identify those "targets", those elements, from the point of view of the school, which are not too calibrated on tradition, and so present in your own country and in our

individual and collective memories.

In my long experience as a teacher I have tried to minimize the targets, to summarize the elements that define the founding character of a school, working on a continuous and precise subtraction from my own certainties, to arrive at the consideration that a school is first and foremost a place among unrelated peers who must also learn how to get on; a place where we learn the knowledge of humanity in all its uncertainty, and ultimately that is the place where you learn quickly and well all those codes without which knowledge of humanity is inaccessible. These are in principle the essential guidelines that lie behind the contents of the “toolkit” that you carry with you, to enter the arena of a complex negotiation.

From the point of view of the “city”, the “school” is a stronghold of emotional unity as well as ethics, I would even go so far as to use the adjective “republican” to talk about the city, that is, it is the stronghold of the Republic in the city’s neighbourhoods. This is a target which lies behind everything. And this is the first thing. The second thing is that it is a place around which and within which a meeting might take place between different citizens, and who have in common the fact that they take care of people who are smaller and younger than themselves. It is the place where we live, where we are in everyday life in the proper sense, day after day, together and uninterruptedly.

To simplify, I think that if people steal from that school, and in certain contexts this happens continually, this is a problem of the city from the point of view of its “civitas” and the “republic”. And likewise and at the same time, if around the school or inside the school there is a bar, or a library, or a square, a place to pass the time, somewhere to share the problems of one’s own children with other parents, it is better that there is one, rather than not.

One final issue which I have dealt with for a long time, and which perfectly represents the arena that links “city” and “school”, is everything to do with comprehending and learning. It has now been established by the sciences and studies that we “sapiens” learn everywhere and not just at school. We now know that children learn best between school and after school. Realization and disorientation, the basis which arouses discovery and curiosity, which occurs on some occasions after school, brought back into the school, is a powerful learning lever.

So, if you accompany the children in your class to discover anything: from observing snails in the garden in front of the school, to learning geometry by calculating the height of the shadow of a church tower cast onto the square in the daytime, as Thales did, and you have them take notes and then have them argue and formulate hypotheses, these children are going to learn a whole lot more. This direct experience will remain in their memory for a long time because, when learning is accompanied by an emotional and affective significance, it settles both in the heart and in the mind and remains there forever. In fact, it is important to start from their emotions, not to remain on the affective level, but to start a path which leads to the cognitive, and returns to the affective, enriching and developing it.

In some schools, all of this is already happening. And those who are doing it and those who conduct their profession in this way are not a special or innovative teacher, they are simply a “normal” teacher who wants to thrill children in the world in which they will have to live for the rest of their days.

But for this to happen, it is necessary that there is a city willing and



equipped to welcome them around it and to discover it.

It should be emphasized that it is possible to obtain satisfactory results even without reaching the total realization of Ward's "city of children" or the other possibilities that have been codified over the years, but rarely followed up. There are a number of projects and good practices underway which support the "grounding" of these ideas. For example, there is a very interesting and captivating project called "The School Adopts a Monument"³ whose purpose is to educate people to respect and protect their historical-artistic heritage and more generally the environment, keeping the school at the centre of this process of knowledge, protection, care, and valorization.

Adopting a monument does not only mean knowing it but also taking care of it, guaranteeing its conservation, spreading knowledge of it, giving it value and thereby rescuing it from oblivion and decay. So, if there is a city willing to do all of this, if you live in a city capable of welcoming these opportunities and opportunities, then this is good for the whole community, but where this does not happen, where the city is indifferent or reluctant, it is only the school, as a social institution, which is the active subject capable of initiating a path of "reconquest", of knowledge, and in some cases even of use, of the places of a city.

For me, the pandemic has boosted the potential for innovative alliances between school and city on which it is necessary to work to think of an effective educational revolution.

I believe that it's essential to rethink educational systems and relationships in order to renew the school which has not been at the centre of attention for too long and is suffering from the failures of politics and public administrations. There are still too few ongoing renewal processes capable of making education a laboratory of citizenship and a strategic asset for the development not only of the most fragile or peripheral areas but of the country as a whole.

I maintain that this action is necessary and urgent regardless of the tough times marked by the pandemic. The school must open up to the territory and the city, and the city must welcome the school.

I think of those young and older children whom we lose every day and to whom we have offered, during the closures of the schools, only two possibilities: either stay at home in difficult and fragile neighbourhoods, far from school, but immersed in problems of family hardship, precariousness, educational abandonment, and in some cases even of nutrition; or go to school in that alternate and more or less dependable way known as remote learning. But there could be points of solidarity and safety that

lie midway between the two. In the squares, museums, and libraries, in some places in the city, educators, with due distance and attention, could follow groups of children staying in connection with the school and with one another. For all of this there are the legal premises such as Article 118 of the Constitution on Subsidiarity⁴ and the funding could be found. The voluntary sector has been mobilized and active since before Covid and the alliances between educators and teachers are already present in many contexts and are building more extensive and richer educational offerings by acting as educating communities, wider than school alone.

Notes

¹ The proposals of the “School without Boundaries” have been published in AA. VV., *Scuola Sconfinata. Proposta per una rivoluzione educativa*, Fondazione Feltrinelli, Milan, 2021. (Downloadable [in Italian] from the site <https://fondazionefeltrinelli.it/schede/scuola-sconfinata-per-una-rivoluzione-educativa>).

² He was Undersecretary of Education of the Monti Government from 2011 to 28 April 2013, reconfirmed in the same position from 2 May 2013 to 22 February 2014 in the Letta Government.

³ Launched in Naples in December 1992 on the initiative of the Napoli Novantanove Foundation, in agreement with the Education Department and the Superintendencies. <http://www.lascuolaadottaunmonumento.it/index.php>.

⁴ The principle of subsidiarity is governed by Article 118 of the Italian Constitution, which states that: «The State, regions, metropolitan cities, provinces and municipalities shall promote the autonomous initiatives of citizens, both as individuals and as members of associations, relating to activities of general interest, on the basis of the principle of subsidiarity».

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