

# Chapter 9

## Critical and Reflective Thought in Education for Sustainable Awareness and Well-being

*The Pandemic Crisis and Education's Role in Tackling it*

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### The Challenges of Complexity: *Thought* and *Agency* to Become Critical Agents of Change

The socio-economic, cultural and political transformations of recent decades and, in particular, of recent months have placed us before new challenges that redefine the role of education and pedagogy, giving the latter an in some ways unprecedented *agency*. The current crisis that we are going through, albeit with its dramatic consequences in social, health and economic terms, should be reread as an opportunity to renew and change all those factors that have demonstrated their *un-sustainability*. If it is true that every crisis is an *Unconcealment* (Heidegger, 2013), we are witnessing the emergence of all the contradictions of our time.

When collective well-being is lost for reasons linked to the pandemic, a whole series of dynamics are affected, which concern the quality of life, including people's physical and mental health and social cohesion. Therefore, we need to find a new universally agreed idea of justice and act to implement it. However, we must prevent our freedom of action from being understood in an individualist light rather than as social engagement and development (Sen, 2009). To guarantee these premises and create a truly inclusive and sustainable society, the prime target for action is the education system. Indeed, it has to be the first to offer all students a fair and good-quality education capable of responding to their needs and creating inclusive programmes that account for the differences and all the forms of disadvantage present

in the classroom.

The pandemic that exploded because of *Covid-19* has placed us before a challenge that should see us all engaged in looking for new answers to questions we had not even asked ourselves before. Indeed, we have to find solutions to answer the needs of a society in growing difficulty. In a period when every country has discovered its vulnerability and all our habits, behaviours, conceptions of the world and priorities have radically changed, what epistemological and methodological paradigms serve to read and interpret the complexity of our times? In a moment in history when the various communities on the planet feel wounded and economic, cultural, gender inequalities are becoming even more evident, what teaching and pedagogical strategies are of service to the new generations today to lay the foundations for the critical thought necessary to create a genuinely inclusive, fair and sustainable society? Suppose the true aim of development is *human development* (Nussbaum, 2010), as well as the subject's *well-being* and *well-becoming*. How can education help form communities of citizens capable of guaranteeing the subject a full existence, in which quality of life is measured based on respect for human dignity and in which all individuals have the possibility of developing their potential?

Today, all these questions represent the main *challenges of complexity* (Morin, 1990), to which every one of us is called upon to reply, first of all as educators. Each of them has a common basis upon which we can act and find leverage. This basis is education, the pivotal tool of democracy. It is education's task to prompt that critical process of problematizing our culture, which would allow possible new actions, transformations and changes to be brought to light (Freire, 1970). No society that considers itself truly democratic can survive without a formative culture capable of promoting pedagogical practices whose aim is to create critical, reflective and conscious citizens who can think and act in a socially responsible manner.

In these difficult times, we need to recover the idea dear to a particular critical perspective that pedagogy can condition both the individual's formation and society's development. This discipline has to do with all those conditions that are at the basis of the learning processes and attribute different meanings to experiences gained or lived, changing ourselves as a consequence and our relationship with

the surrounding reality. This makes pedagogy critical knowledge with a strong political character consolidated in practice and the different manners of intervention. By giving this knowledge back, its long-forgotten *agency* can encourage individuals to take risks and act responsibly while questioning the various forms of domination through which power is demonstrated and conditions society at multiple levels (Giroux, 2011). Hence, it becomes increasingly necessary to promote an education firmly anchored to real life and all those problems that affect the public realm to be tackled with commitment and responsibility.

At present, our society is in the midst of an epoch-making transformation, and a turn is needed to regain that harmonic balance that once impeded those environmental changes, now causing irreparable damage. To achieve this turn, on the one hand, we need to adopt an ecological paradigm that highlights the interrelations linking the single parts to the whole; on the other, it is indispensable to put the individual back in the centre, with their reflective and critical capability as well as the opportunities for *agency* that they enjoy, to achieve full development as a human being, in harmony with the surrounding environment.

In a historical moment in which *technology* regulates itself and the world and is decreeing the decline of humankind and its hegemony over nature, causing imbalances that risk being irreversible, pedagogy has the task of reviving the *Anthropos*, its humanity, as well as its critical, reflective and meta-reflective capability thus to rethink *Techne*, its purposes and its structure. All of this requires a constant process of *Bildung*, that is, continual human formation and self-formation that allows the development of a life rich in meaning and the avoidance of that destiny that would like to see the human being reduced to a *thing* (Gennari, 2001). As such, the capabilities approach gives a normative framework to assess individual and social well-being, providing a tool to evaluate and conceptualize these phenomena. So, it is not a matter of theoretically explaining concepts such as inequality or poverty but providing a guide for potential societal change and development (Robeyns, 2005). The capabilities approach focuses attention on what individuals are capable of *being* and *doing* since it starts from the assumption that it is not enough to produce knowledge if we do not create the conditions to build it, starting from what is defined as

*capabilities*. These ways of *acting, doing, and being* are indispensable to guarantee human development, respect for people's dignity, and promote individual and collective well-being (Nussbaum, 1997).

Knowledge and action hence must proceed hand in hand, each at the service of the other. Not only that, but the action must also be coherent with what we think at the level of consciousness (Freire, 2000), and the language that we use must be coherent too. In other words, to be effective, our practices must first of all be understood. Subjected to the scrutiny of reason, once accepted, they should be put to the service of all citizens, who are called upon to recover that Gramscian vision of society, which makes it the individual's responsibility to actively participate in the common problems that affect those living in it. A democratic society is made up of individuals in constant relation with each other, in a dialectic process of mutual growth and calling ourselves into question, but also of *care*. Our life is inseparably connected to other people's lives, caught up in a network of indispensable relations for the subject who – through comparison – can define themselves and give shape to their future.

Only together can we build different worlds. To do so, we must learn to make the most of and boost the possibilities of all people, encouraging their creative, critical and collaborative capability, a spirit of initiative and engagement to build an informed citizenry that is careful to guarantee the development of fundamental freedoms and respect for differences. Moreover, if we want to promote a substantially democratic education (Dewey, 1997), we have to learn to conceptualize alternative visions to the dominant ones. This is a fundamental condition to respond to the needs of a complex society.

A balanced relationship between the subject, culture and society is indispensable. Indeed, if education is a way of intervening in the world (Freire, 2000), an educational practice needs to be thought of as something closely connected to a critical reading of contemporary society. For this to happen, the individual must actively participate in social life, in open and multiple cultural perspectives suited to dealing with the significant problems of the present day, and through a critical analysis of society and those political-economic conceptions that inevitably condition it.

Based on this vision, education is allocated a crucial political role.

No educator can shirk from assuming a problematizing position towards our planet and all the dynamics running through it. Teachers, in particular, should demonstrate an ethics of engagement and responsibility as well as an ethics of communication-based on listening and dialogue (Cambi, 2002). At the same time, they should promote freedom in education which is also self-determination, that is, which leaves the subject the possibility of building their self, as well as the meanings to give to their existence, in an outlook that should nevertheless be critical and reflective (hooks<sup>1</sup>, 1994).

Contemporary human beings lack certainties, their condition is *disenchanted* and precarious, but they are constantly engaged in building sense and meanings for this very reason. Moreover, they are engaged in thought and action for which they hold prime responsibility as the bearers and builders of rationality that is always ‘*sub judice*’ or under judgement. Only the fruitful exercise of one’s thought can guarantee freedom, essential for human life. Acting is not enough if the action is not prompted by reflection to anchor us to our responsibilities. By so doing, how we relate to others also changes and becomes based on reciprocity, dialogue and dialectic comparison, which are indispensable to arrive at one of the many interpretations that can be given to a particular experience. To become critical agents of change, some essential requirements are: to reflect on our way of thinking and be willing to call our ideas into question, deconstruct and improvise, and in substance have a *metacognitive* mind. This pedagogical category implicates existential and, at the same time, social transformations, that is, transformations that are linked to the future of humankind (Bertin, 1983). By challenging the existent, we open ourselves to the unknown, trace new paths capable of welcoming differences, and escape all homogenization attempts. Therefore, every subject is engaged in a self-transformation that is inevitably reflected in society. Now more than ever, it is evident that we all belong to the same *Community of Planetary Destiny* (Morin, 2020) and are potential victims of the same threats.

Each of the crises bearing down on our lives today, from the health and economical to the ecological, social and cultural crisis, has opened up issues – pedagogical ones too – whose upshots are uncertain, contradictory and discordant. To deal with them, we need to adopt a new

methodological paradigm: *Complexity*, the most suited to interpreting the *Postmodern*. It can account for the intricate network of problems, events, forces, phenomena, subjects, and interests running through society and education. It is fundamental to think of complexity to build our future. It requires imagination, mobility, research, plural points of view and openness towards the unknown and the unexpected, all of which are essential to building a society based on democracy, freedom, emancipation and equality. This category of interpretation also has the task of linking sectors of knowledge and piecing them back together to form single horizons of sense so that they can be understood and dealt with critically and as a whole. These phenomena must not be looked at from a reductionist and fragmented standpoint; on the contrary, they must be deemed interconnected parts of a whole and, hence, read from a multidimensional point of view.

To overcome the mythology of the so-called Western theory of knowledge, giving rise to the *disciplinarian* that still characterizes our schools and universities today, we need to adopt a transdisciplinary approach that can highlight the single elements' dependence on each other and therefore achieve a synthesis capable of accounting for the complexity of the world. Consequently, it is the task of education to promote paradigms of thought that can combine different disciplinary sectors. One such paradigm is sustainability. It embraces three dimensions – ecology, economy and society – but awareness of the importance of a fourth dimension – anthropology – is increasingly coming to the fore. We will only be able to guarantee genuine human sustainability when people's inner peace and well-being are ensured, avoiding technocratic drifts. Therefore, as educators, we must fight the domination of neoliberalism, which leaves no margin for dissent, exalts individualism and deprives education of its critical function (Mayo, 2015). In the same way, we need to defend the anthropological function of sustainability by promoting an education that is first of all responsible, not only in the sense of being able to give an actual response but also in the sense of being able to take on the 'weight of things,' that is, the problems happening around us. Such problems are represented in the UNESCO Agenda 2030s (UNESCO, 2017) 17 sustainable development goals, in light of these considerations, these problems should be read in a perspective of care, in a moment of social and civil awakening.

So, a challenge must be mounted against those schooling and development methods that aim to promote economic success, creating passive consumers and citizens incapable of critically assessing what is happening globally. To this end, education cannot be entrenched within school's four walls; it has to come out of the classroom and be open and show curiosity towards the local area and the social contexts it comprises. This is the only way to know the Other, that is, the subject whom we must meet to call ourselves into question in a dialectic process of reciprocal growth.

Complexity, including human and social complexity, is inevitably made up of contradictions. This must be taken into account. Just as “*homo* is at the same time *sapiens* and *demons*, *Faber* and *mythologicus*, *oeconomicus* and *ludens*” (Morin, 2020, p. 155 own translation), society is not a harmonic space wherein cultural diversities act. Instead, it is a context laden with contrasts and antagonisms between cultures which – far from being monolithic and homogeneous – are, on the contrary, always the fruit of reciprocal contamination (Steinberg, 1992). Therefore, in the endless quest for fulfilment and search for freedom, every individual will build their presence in the world in the awareness of this variety and human unfinishedness. But upon what do the individual's *being* and *well-being* on the Earth depend?

### Gaining Understanding Through Knowledge: From Awareness to Well-Being

Today it is the task of pedagogy to rethink a *Homo Novus*: active, critical, aware, creative, capable of cultivating doubt and being in society, conscious of their role. This means that education must – to promote the individual's well-being – offer the tools necessary to achieve his/her self-realization and self-determination, as a man/woman and citizen (hooks, 1994) responsible for his/her own choices and actions. To reflect on oneself, on one's being and acting in the world is the first step in becoming critical agents of change, capable of responding to the problems of our times. Thought is an integral part of the experience. It involves our lives, influences him/her, points them in a certain direction and determines the ethical and moral principles that guide our actions (Dewey, 1997c).

Acting within a globalized and multicultural society, fitting ped-

agogical proposals need to be built to show individuals how to live and act in pluralism. These can only start from truly inclusive learning experiences. This, first of all, implies connecting the know-how and knowledge transmitted in school to students' life experiences. As teachers, this is a way to know who is in front of us, challenge prejudices and don mental guises that make us think beyond identities and forms of belonging to draw common meeting spaces. Doing this, first of all, implies changing our paradigms of thought and abandoning any sexist, imperialist, racist and homophobic logic to promote teaching based on dialogue, which places us in a position of openness, curiosity and seeking. The teacher's first task is to embrace a broad and deep outlook. In the same way, understanding is the necessary condition to act from an intercultural viewpoint. With everything, this involves responsibility, attitudes and actions.

Interculture is one of those pedagogical devices that is fundamental to build planetary citizenship. Education cannot ignore this. On the contrary, it must use it to create physical and mental spaces based on reciprocal recognition and open and critical dialogue, within which individuals can educate themselves, debate and exchange opinions. As such, the classroom should not be understood as a neutral environment but as a *place of possibilities*, where all have the right and duty to make their voice heard, as well as to listen to the Other. These are the necessary conditions to build learning communities and allow individuals to achieve full self-determination (hooks, 1994).

Changing paradigms is a long and complex process, both for teachers and students. Today, there is no question that we have to carry out new didactic experiments based on dialogue and promoting a critical culture, directed towards the subject's emancipation and calling authority into question. However, the fact remains that school has to experiment and redesign itself continuously, in line with the needs of the class and society, while considering their internal contradictions. This is what we must do if we want to build new mentalities, willing to go beyond forms of belonging and closedness, and if we want to rethink the categories of *Identity* and *Difference* dear to the postmodern paradigm in order to open up to a dialectic comparison with the Other. We are looking at multiple concepts which – in light of their complexity – need to be redefined in a critical and reflective

light to help build that *meeting space* that is presently becoming more and more fundamental (Cambi, 2006b).

The differences characterizing our society – gender, cultural, social, sexual, religious and political – must be known before they can be understood. The presupposition to achieving this understanding is to adopt rigorous forms of thought based on analysis of the facts; at the same time, however, they must be open, that is, capable of embracing different cultural universes and making them dialogue with each other. As such, school has a central role in fostering inclusion: its task is to promote an education in which understanding guides the action of the subjects under its formation. By creating spaces where learning can be fun and adopting new teaching styles, communities of students can be made with a particularly well-anchored sense of belonging and cooperation. In these places, all have the possibility of expressing themselves freely, in a game of ping-pong and exchanges of opinions that allow us to observe the Other from unusual perspectives, overturning our expectations and deconstructing – if necessary – our prejudices. Therefore, we need to engage in meta-reflection and self-investigation and suspend judgment to accomplish a long gaze, and a flexible and broad manner of thinking that is open to novelty and critically observe our cultural and symbolic system. If we want to put ourselves into the Other's shoes, a balanced dose of relativism is essential. But this does not mean giving up our right to dissent in the face of dubious actions, behaviours and choices.

It follows that a good education of the mind is necessarily plural, critical and divergent. In a word, it is *ironic*. It teaches the subject to cultivate differences and take more than one perspective into account, which is fundamental to making every individual a citizen of the world. Some mindsets, more than others, enable us to open up to what is around us in a critical and, at the same time, ethically oriented way. One of these is 'meta-cognition,' a necessary mentality to understand our way of learning, thinking and, inevitably, acting. Meta-cognition searches for meanings that give life a sense and makes it fully human (Nussbaum, 1997). Thinking rests on the very essence of our existence. Without this activity, the creative and propulsive drive required for our civilization to flourish would come to a halt (Mortari, 2008). This need for thought emerges in the society of science and

technology, where development must always follow a system of values that can guarantee the sustainability of our planet, respect for human rights and people's dignity.

Thought does not originate inside an uncontaminated and pure space. On the contrary, it develops "in a context marked by power logics that materialize in discursive practices engaged in by the mind every day" (Mortari, 2008, p. 19, own translation). Therefore, it is crucial for thought to learn to exit these logics through reflectivity and self-analysis. Cultivating doubt puts us in the condition of learning to accept uncertainty, the unknown, and change. It allows us to achieve a deeper understanding of our experience and everything happening around us. It is no coincidence that critical thought had proven fundamental in all those dark moments of history when power was imposed by an authority that did not permit dissent, criticism or, in general, the exercise of fundamental freedoms. In all these cases, critical thought called the existent into question to then come to constructively trace new horizons of meaning, showing how much thought can condition action and cause change. Hence, the possibility of exercising one's freedom is closely connected to the act of thinking, that is, to the passage that allows us to grasp existential truths that can give a sense to our actions and guide us towards well-being and well-becoming.

### Irony as an Educational Device to Counter the Mythology of Inclusion

To counter the mythology of inclusion, we have to start by taking apart what Bruner (1996) called *folk pedagogy*: all those beliefs and conceptions inherent to children's and young people's way of learning, consequently influencing educational action in particular school teaching. Culture is not only produced and reproduced in the classroom, but it concerns all those contexts in which the individual comes to act. Since it is the culture in which we live that moulds individuals' minds, school can guide the subject in building themselves and help them understand the world and use all those resources and opportunities offered by the surrounding environment in the most effective possible way.

We learn from experience, from other people's examples and from the places in which we live. Above all, we learn for the whole course of

our existence. And so it follows that education is the most significant undertaking that an individual can fulfil in their life. This is the reason why it cannot be left up to chance or limited only to school. The latter, a hinge between the single person's rights and social requirements, should make a certain progressist and critical pedagogy its own and offer an education capable of releasing the liberating potential of learning by proposing alternative models to the dominant ones. Education should stimulate curiosity, bring the desire to discover new things back to the center of the learning process by asking questions that do not have a standard answer. A complex educational system must never aspire to completeness or standardization because this would be to close off the creative dynamic characterizing the variety of reality. In this way, a new subject is formed whose anthropological, cognitive, and social conditions are marked by freedom.

School must act towards the subject's emancipation, make the subject responsible, provide guidance in the development of critical thought and free him/her from prejudices and habits which only reinforce the *status quo*, suffocating every attempt at reaction and innovation. Therefore, we must strive towards an open, unfinished and incomplete system, with the prevailing awareness that knowledge is a *poietic* process that is always *in fieri* (Morin, 2011b) and that the classroom is a space of opportunity that the subject must be able to grasp and critically evaluate.

Critical pedagogy has long opposed the substantially passive function of school, which saw it engaged in social, political and cultural reproduction aimed at economic growth and professional training (Giroux, 2011). In the same way, a fight must be put up against all those classroom control methods which see students as the passive users of *truths* that are imposed upon them with no possibility of exercising any form of debate, criticism or dissent. The exercise of power by an authority – such as the teacher – risks holding back the students' exercise of doubt and, therefore, their process of emancipation, making them apathetic future citizens. On the contrary, school should offer the possibility of interpreting a fact or a phenomenon in a cooperative and dialogical but also multidimensional manner, analysing the various levels of reality to grasp its heterogeneity and complexity (Braa & Callero, 2006).

There are possible worlds we are not aware of, and to grasp them, we need the capability to observe complex phenomena (Sclavi, 2003). This would mean initiating that *conscientization* process indispensable to learn to pay attention to the things surrounding us and understand what is happening around us to act in a transformative perspective (Freire, 1970). This process calls a series of dynamics into question, which Gregory Bateson (1953) connects to *humor*, as they allow the individual to exit their frame of reference to learn to observe a problem from different points of view and find new ways of seeing and acting.

Pedagogy must therefore begin to be thought of according to new paradigms, in turn entailing new structures and models: cognitive, formative and also relational, which leave room for reflectivity, divergence, error and complexity. Pedagogical devices are required that help deal with the contradictions characterizing our actions and our communication. This does not mean proceeding via simplifications or rationalization processes but attempting to understand situations that appear problematic or complex. A mindset needs to be activated to get to the bottom of phenomena and observe them from new perspectives to draw up new and far-sighted solutions. A systemic thinker is *ironic* in the sense that he/she is used to accounting for the overall picture and changing perspective to achieve a deeper understanding of events through plural readings and thought capable of expecting the unexpected.

In order to understand how we can include change in education today, we need to investigate all those pedagogical devices that allow us to act, at ease, within the *Paradigm of Complexity*. In addition to *Difference* – an essential category to interpret culture, society, and the subject (Cambi, 2008) – another important device helpful in drawing up new educational values is *irony*: this could be one of the *cultural attitudes* (Cambi, 2010) through which we can embrace what is new while learning to deconstruct our certainties and activating processes of self-reflection, criticism and self-criticism, achieving a greater awareness of ourselves and what surrounds us. It is a multiple intelligence that points to an *open mind* (Bruner, 1986), giving rise to brand new cognitive, emotional and reflective styles. In the process of attributing meanings, the ironic mind can generate new interpretations of

different situations, thanks to its ability to overturn its expectations and observe a problem from points of view not yet taken into consideration. This allows us to think and act in a divergent manner, fuelled by the doubt that total and absolute truths do not exist but that how an event is interpreted varies depending on the point of view from which it is observed. This inevitably brings all the paradoxes of the real into the open and reveals the *disenchantment*, the “interpretative category of our time,” highlighting the precariousness of the human condition (Cambi, 2006a, p. 9).

Therefore, irony is an alternative which, on the one hand, gives renewed hope for a freer, more tolerant and solidaristic future, and on the other, teaches human beings to soften their relationship with the real by relativizing their ideas and helping draw that necessary distance between their expectations, strategies and desires and those of the people with whom they relate (Cambi, 2010). And so, we can mark a detachment that is as critical as it is meta-reflective. One of the pedagogy tasks today is to reassess the mind’s reflective capacity to show the importance of an *ironic consciousness* in terms of dynamism, complexity and awareness.

Today it seems more necessary than ever to have the capability to build multiple models of being, thinking and communicating which are open to novelty and can effectively interpret the surrounding reality, but also cast a critical gaze on ourselves and our visions of the world.

As such, to rethink our vision of the world, culture has to be able to make the most of the new paradigms distinguished by detachment, openness and an overturned perspective. Therefore, having an ironic consciousness helps to observe a phenomenon. It allows us to exit our frame of reference and look at it from a broader and more complex perspective, which could even be the opposite of our usual point of view.

The ironic mind also allows the subject to cultivate their individuality. However, in so doing, it makes him/her aware of the necessity of comparison with the Other. Irony is not a solitary game but a shared, playful and creative rite that becomes the indispensable condition to cast the foundations for a compassionate, welcoming and plural society open to the unexpected (Cambi, 2006a). Its importance is also ev-

ident in learning processes in the classroom. As highlighted by hooks (1994), learning does not necessarily have to be boring; quite the opposite, it can be fun. Some traditional conceptions of teaching need to be taken apart to make it fun, with the introduction of *transgressive* and engaging pedagogical practices, such as flexible syllabuses that respond to each student's needs. All pupils must be aware that they can make a difference within their community class, which is why we must seek alternative manners of communication capable of involving the boys and girls in the learning process. This must be dynamic, adopt different strategies depending on whom it is aimed at, and promote new visions in the young generations, capable of looking towards the future and imagining change.

In order to become an everyday practice, irony needs social spaces that foster a type of communication that sets value by divergence, doubt, freedom of expression and above all, fantasy. This means that irony can be educated, but to this end, it is fundamental to interact with others. In the same way, it is important to understand its collocation within the culture we belong to and the conception of the world that this implicates (Madrussan, 2018). It is a style of cultural intelligence that is learnt in those contexts that embrace pluralism, innovation, criticism and complexity and which, therefore, require a thought with these same characteristics (Cambi, 2006b). Irony develops where there are stimulating educational environments, in which students are placed before issues that require research activities, discussions and comparisons that consider different points of view.

Transdisciplinary syllabuses that aim to develop free associations, creativity, and critical and divergent thought can also be hypothesized at the teaching level. Language appears a vehicle for the promotion of a mentality of this kind. Hence the importance, for example, of Socratic dialogue and its *maieutic* function. Thanks to its *peripeteia* and its ability to change outlook, irony teaches the individual to overcome the conflict and contradictions between the verbal and the non-verbal and, once overcome, it directs the subject to build their interpretation of the facts, taking into account the context within which they take place (Russo Cardona, 2017). We are inside a process of negotiating meanings, also chosen on a cultural basis, which find themselves being

problematized. Indeed, by fostering the appearance of some discursive acts, such as exercising doubt, irony questions the Other's point of view to then reach a shared idea.

As underlined by Rorty (1989), the device of irony allows us to inhabit that *Postmodern* world, which requires the subject to have the capability to "be in contradiction and experience this as an opportunity and a resource" (Cambi, 2006a, p. 84 own translation). Therefore, this pedagogical category is related to the needs of a complex society, which requires an equally as complex mind or, more correctly, a mind capable of deconstruction to be understood and acted. Therefore, to relate to the complexity, we have to go way beyond a single and functionalist thought. In light of these reflections, irony should be considered a device that helps us accept differences and inhabit pluralism, which are fundamental attitudes to learning to think and act responsibly in the world.

## Conclusion

In this attempt to cast a look at the present day, it appears evident that we are facing threats on a planetary scale. We are in the midst of a health crisis and a political, ecological, social and economic crisis, with governments all over the world engaged in actions to combat the *Covid-19* pandemic, which has further exacerbated existing social inequalities. Whoever was fragile and precarious before is even more so today: hence, among those most at risk, we find women, young people and low earners. This means that the wave of *Coronavirus* has but accentuated all those forms of discrimination that the neoliberalist model had already helped to augment in recent decades, reducing everything to the inevitability of economic laws called upon to respond exclusively to global market demands.

However, the forms of domination are not just economic but also cultural. Culture exercises a strong pedagogical influence because it influences individuals' *agency*, particularly their capacity to implement forms of resistance and social transformation (Giroux, 2004). So, we need to restore critical reflectivity and give renewed value to individual experiences to fill the gap between everyday life and learning to

create those opportunities necessary to cause social transformation.

Since thought is followed by action, the acquired and critically analysed knowledge needs to be put at the service of society so that it is ready to make those currently so hoped-for changes, amongst which the development of a critical culture based on dialogue, action and the dissemination of a counterhegemony to the dominant neoliberalist model.

In light of these considerations, pedagogy should be reformulated in a critical and reflective sense to rediscover its social and, in some ways, political role. School can create the conditions to offer learning capable of allowing individuals to tackle the change underway in society. Now that humankind is finally *disenchanted*, emancipated from ideologies, faiths, and a whole series of fanciful certainties, through education, we need to help build a culture capable of interpreting the unfinishedness, complexity, restlessness and the constant tendency to search for what we do not yet know or possess. This is why humankind must break down walls, build bridges and alliances, take assumptions apart, and rebuild meanings that enable us to *live the Postmodern* (Cambi, 2006a) and create a genuinely democratic society.

The starting point for this has to be the subject, meant as the free, restless individual, constantly engaged in a process of *Bildung*, namely, self-formation and self-construction, and aware of the precariousness of their existence. It is an existence that requires thought and that everyone is called upon first to imagine and then to build. And to do so, we need to promote education meant as a *Practice of Freedom* (Freire, 2000), capable of encouraging the subject's civic engagement and critical awareness. The classroom is the first place whose traditional and transmissive logics should be taken apart: it is a radical place, a place of transformation, involvement, awakening and opportunity, where the subject must be given back their centrality and their uniqueness brought out. We need to build up a sense of community belonging in young people so that they learn to feel part of the classroom-universe and then extend their involvement so that they feel they belong to the same planetary community of destinies (Morin, 2011a).

Inside the classroom, all those educational strategies must be implemented to promote the development of a creative mind, accustoming students to curiosity and wonder towards what they do not

know and opening them to that comparison, enabling shared thought. Among the pedagogical devices that could give a contribution to developing a mentality of this kind is irony: it should be considered a resource at the disposal of the teacher and, in general, of the individual who uses it, to be employed in their formative process to customize the mind to openness, the non-linearity of methods, the problematics of facts and the unpredictability of events. Irony trains the subject to listen actively, suspend judgment and put themselves in the other person's place: all fundamental for realizing authentic dialogue and indispensable to live in pluralism and complexity. To practice it in class as a form of dialogue is to encourage students' participation, involving them in a meta-cognitive as well as critical and self-critical process which will bring them to have greater self-awareness and to fill the gap, very much still present, between what they learn at school and the experiences they live in their everyday lives. As the ironic mind is also a reflective and meta-reflective mind, this helps the subject achieve greater self-awareness and consciousness of their well-being and think of what is happening in society in a systemic and problematizing way. As a result, the individual will be able to focus their attention on what today are sensitive and urgent topics, linked to forms of domination, to gender, social, political, sexual and even digital inequalities, as well as to forms of economic exploitation (Braa & Callero, 2006).

Education has a performative nature; it guides values, creating the conditions to offer the new generations an array of possibilities to build a more inclusive, democratic and socially responsible society. Hence, it is the task of school to create the conditions to enable students to become critical agents of change by first reflecting and understanding what is happening in the world and then fielding all those *capabilities* directed towards individual and social well-being and full human development.

## Notes

1. As is known, bell hooks are the pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins. The feminist activist and writer prefer to use the name of her mother, Bell, and the surname of her maternal great-grandmother, Bell Blair Hooks. She writes her name in lower case in a political gesture to challenge the traditionalism inherent in name-giving, thus asserting a new feminist subjectivity.

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