

An improbable leadership: structural limits of educational communication.

The case of Italian primary schools

Introduction

Education has the function of bringing about changes in children, creating cognitive abilities and adaptation to social norms (Luhmann & Schorr, 1979). This function presumes that children are incomplete persons, not sufficiently responsible and autonomous in their actions with respect to the societal standards: this is the reason why children should be formed. Hence, education is expected to function as a means of correction for childhood (Britzman, 2007). However, since James' conceptualization of education as an intersubjective relation where children, rather to be seen as empty box to fill with knowledge, play an active role in influencing the outcome of education (James, 1899/1983) the myth of development of personality that presupposes a chronology from immaturity to maturity, controlled by educators by means of educational techniques has appeared more and more controversial.

If development is understood as a linear evolutionary process from immaturity to maturity, the unpredictability of children's constructions of meaning, the opaqueness of children's minds are considered a serious risk for education. In order to reduce that risk, pedagogy has devoted many efforts to design curricular and behavioural rules and structures, incorporating the cultural presuppositions of standardised role performances and cognitive expectations. Despite all these efforts, since the 1950's an unfinished "crisis of education" has become a major concern for education scientists, sociologists and politics. Hannah Arendt (1961/1993) understands that crisis as a translation to the political agenda of the structural limits of education, that is, its incapacity to control the development of children's personality, calling to mind James' idea of the inescapable role of children in their own development. Arendt highlights a double paradox of education, if conceptualized as developmental process controlled by educators: 1) development of personality brings about the problem of trying to know a mind that resists being known and, 2) teachers have to take responsibility for the children, who are inescapably free.

Since the 1980's the culture of childhood has been placing particular emphasis on socialising children towards an "understanding of their own competencies" (Matthews 2003: 274) rather than towards the achievements of curricular state-of-development, on socialising children to a sense of responsibility and skills in planning, designing, monitoring and managing social contexts rather than to a one-way adaptation to normative expectations. The success of this new vision of children as social agents has changed educational cultural presuppositions, leading education to use children's self-expression as a resource for reflexive learning.

But the promotion of children's agency (James et al. 1998) and active participation (Baraldi, 2008), which grew over the ruins of the technical approach to the crisis of education needs to be applied somehow, needs to be translated into communicative techniques. Many publications in the field of pedagogy offer prescriptive resources to empower children's participation, for example through teachers' active listening and consideration for children's creativity (Gordon 1974; Rogers 1951), but few of them discuss the results of the empirical application of theoretical prescriptions. Basic questions such as: "how does promotion of children's active participation materializes in actual and natural interaction in the classrooms?", "is it possible to educate without bringing about asymmetries of educational relation?" and "what happens when the educators force children to actively participate? Is it the paradox of an education to autonomy solvable?" are simply avoided. With this article we offer some examples of the actual application of promotion of children's active participation. We focus on the failures and crises of promotion, where asymmetries in power between educators and children end up in excluding children from active participation. We focus on critical phases of promotion because we aim to highlight the way in which promotional intentions fail in sustaining children's active participation when they materialize as a communication form which brings about social asymmetries of educational relation in the interaction. Hence, we aim to show a range of actions and strategies, from the distribution of opportunities to talk to rhetorical questions, from correction to repair of problems in understanding, which make promotional intentions fall through, bringing about a form of communication where children's active participation represents a risk to minimize.

Our analysis might be useful for teachers leading children, administrators, other educational leaders

who, starting from the theoretical assumption that the development of children's minds cannot be completely controlled by education (James, 1899/1983; Arendt, 1961/1993; Luhmann & Schorr, 1979, Vanderstraeten, 2000, Vanderstraeten & Biesta, 2006, Britzman, 2007) accept the challenge of looking at children's freedom as a resource for education, rather than a risk to minimize.

After showing how promotion of children's active participation may paradoxically evolve in the marginalization of children, we will offer some useful guide-lines for professionals engaged in the promotion of children's participation as a mean to sustain their socialization.

Our object is to propose an analysis of actual and naturally occurring educational interactions which were recorded during an intensive field research, that involved 250 children (age 10-12) in eleven primary schools in Northern Italy. The object of the research was a project of education in conflict management, designed by the Department of Language and Culture Sciences at the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, in collaboration with the Educational Office of the province of Modena.

The epistemology of the project took into account the most recent cultural presuppositions of interaction with children, that concerns the quality of their participation and self-expression.

Children's participation is primarily observed as involvement in decision-making, through which children can feel influential (Lawy & Biesta, 2006). To achieve this goal, promoting children's self-expression is a primary task which changes the relationships between adults and children: "working in partnership with children requires that adults leave aside the role that society has often prescribed to them of being the teacher with all the answers" (Blanchet-Cohen & Rainbow 2006: 122). Adults become facilitators rather than technicians, and both children and adults are co-constructors of knowledge and expertise.

Children's empowerment is considered to be the final result. It has been observed that the results of this empowerment are unpredictable: "adult society must accept that there will be complexities when children express views that do not coincide with those of adults" (Holland & O'Neill 2006: 96). Empowerment means taking seriously that when the children are able to determine the issues that they consider to be important, the results cannot be known in advance. This means that promotion of children's participation may result in conflicts and that these conflicts must be

managed, guaranteeing opportunities for their diversity. This makes education in conflict management complementary to the promotion of social participation and a primary issue for social planners, education officers and educators interested in the promotion of children and young people's participation.

We outline the interventions we analyzed: the classes involved were divided in groups of five children, each asked to create a fantasy story. To accomplish their task, children had to face processes of decision-making that could engender conflicts. In this case, trained operators intervened to promote reflection on conflict management, rather than transmitting knowledge about the correct ways to manage conflicts. Educators were previously trained to avoid pedagogically stylized communication and to systematically sustain the self-expression of pupils through appreciation, perception checking and feedback on their and others' actions.

Observing the interactions through which the social intervention materializes gives us the ability to recognize if education is, or is not, a form of communication that fits the epistemological premises of the promotion of children and young people's participation. But the first step of this paper, is a theoretical one, to give a definition of the most general object of our research, that is, communication.

A sociological perspective on communication

Our concept of communication is established in cybernetics. Cybernetics focuses on purposeful behavior analyzing it with theoretical tools such as the concepts of feedback and feedback control (Wiener, 1948). Systems act purposefully within a chaotic and threatening environment, processing information about the results of their own actions, as part of the information on which they continuously act. This process is called self-reference; it represents the *modus operandi* of all cybernetic systems. Further developments in the 1970's made it possible to give to self-reference a more encompassing meaning. The crucial concept here is the one of autopoiesis (Maturana and Varela, 1980).

Autopoietic systems are systems that produce the elements out of which they exist, by means of a network of these elements themselves. External factors do not directly interfere with the functioning

of the system, as they are translated into internal elements by the system's structures. The environment resonates in the system by means of the elements that the system itself produces. The application of the idea of autopoiesis to social reality is central in Luhmann's systems theory. The autopoiesis of social systems consists of chains of communication processes. In Luhmann's sociology, communication is defined as an event which consists of the synthesis of three different selections: information, utterance and understanding (Luhmann, 1984).

The first selection, information, concerns a selection from a repertoire of possible themes for communication; without this selectivity of information no communication could emerge. The second selection concerns the choice of a communicative behavior, the utterance. The third selection, understanding, is crucial for Luhmann's concept of communication. Understanding implies a change in the state of the receiver: it happens when a distinction between information and its utterance is made. Understanding realizes the communicative act; however it needs to manifest itself: the receiver needs to show he/she understands the uttered information by addressing the information (accepting or rejecting it) or addressing the utterance (questioning, or not, the way, and the reason why, something is said).

Luhmann (1984) defines communication as a process of penetration. Communication is an event of penetration: psychic systems are reciprocally opaque: any psychic system needs to rely on communication to infer meanings and motivation of actions. Even though communication cannot orient the chains of thoughts out of which the autopoiesis of psychic systems take form, psychic systems cannot avoid to take communication into account.

According to the concept of penetration, we can affirm that psychic systems coordinate with other psychic systems (they behave in some way) through structured communication processes, or relationships. The structure of communication processes consist of social forms, which make possible the attribution of intentions responsibility to communicators. Basically, social forms are distinctions available for an observer to mark both the meaning of information produced in prior communication, and the meaning of utterances, with reference to his/her interlocutor. Following John Spencer-Brown (1969), the operation of distinction is the fundamental cognitive operation. In the social dimension, an observer has to orient to the expectations or actions of other actors,

through meaning attributional processes which may be conceptualized as distinctions (when something is observed it is indicated as being distinct from something else). The indication of one side of the distinction provides the observer with information of the kind of: “this-and-not-something-else” (Vanderstraeten, 2001).

Psychic systems must continuously penetrate into communication in order to give meaning to information and to attribute intentions to utterances. In education, like in other communication systems, they rely on social forms (Baraldi, 1993).

Educational communication and its limits

More narrowly, the object of our analysis is the relationship between a specific form of communication, educational communication and the cultural presupposition of the promotion of children’s participation and empowerment. Here, we suggest that education could be an appropriate medium to support children’s empowerment. Firstly, we have to start from a theoretical definition of education. What are the features of educational interactions? What do we mean by educational? Traditionally, commonly endorsed and commonly observed norms and values are considered a prerequisite for an integrated society (Heyting, Kruithof and Mulder, 2002). In Parson's view normative orientations materialize as social roles and role expectations; therefore one contribution of schooling and education to the integration of society consists in the furthering and strengthening of consensus on these basic values (Parsons, 1951).

Luhmann’s sociology offers an alternative theoretical framework, stressing that the fundamental function of education is not to impart knowledge, to discipline, to transmit social values and norms, but to minimise the improbability of social communication. Education imparts to pupils the ability to participate in social communication, that is to say to behave in a (largely) predictable way in social contexts. Because it is possible to simplify the complexity of psychic variability, speaking with one as a teacher, another as a pupil, and a third as a beloved, communication is possible (Luhmann 1984). Teacher, pupil, beloved, and many others in modern society, are social roles. We define social roles as “human beings made communicative through socialisation”; otherwise, if one had to take into consideration the empirical multi-facets of other human beings, communication

would be impossible (Qvortrup, 2005). Education has the function of bringing about changes in children, creating cognitive abilities and adaptation to social norms. This presumes that children are incomplete persons, not sufficiently responsible and autonomous in their actions with respect to the societal standards: this is the reason why children should be formed.

In the educational system, the generally recognized tasks are: 1) guiding children's socialisation, shaping their choices and actions according to shared criteria and values and, thus, 2) producing reflexive learning (learning to learn) as an instrument of self-regulation. The selection of shared meanings seems to be the best way to accomplish these tasks: the system selects "correct" meanings, binding children to them, in order to allow them to assume social roles.

The concept of a grammar of education (Tyack and Cuban, 2000) describes the relations between social roles in educational organisations. These relations are asymmetric, because educators instruct pupils but pupils do not instruct the educator. A grammar of education is based on expectations attached to social roles; these expectations enable modes of support and co-operation, excluding others; and enhance particular types of experiences, at the expense of others. The problem is that consensus cannot be the *telos* of any ongoing communication process, because communication cannot control its consequences. In distinguishing between information and utterance, the receiver of a communication is able to criticize or reject the information (Vanderstraeten & Biesta, 2006). Educational communication does not necessarily produce social consensus; on the contrary, it renews the possibility of resistance. A norm or a rule cannot be an item of socialization in itself, because it can only be presented together with its alternative. As the unpredictability of children's construction of meaning is considered a serious risk for the reproduction of cultural presuppositions in social systems, it becomes necessary to shape their meaning construction and guide them towards self-regulation; in interaction, children are invited to believe that their thinking is part of shared cultural presuppositions, and are invited to adapt to them.

Educational communication has a resource for reducing its unpredictability, that is, social structures. Social structures work to limit the contingency of communication, both on the side of utterance and understanding. The structures of educational communication are: 1) a treatment of

participants as persons in roles implying standardised performances; 2) an evaluation of such performances; 3) a cognitive form of expectations concerning students' learning, that is their achievement of knowledge, abilities, competence, and rules.

According to recent approaches in childhood studies, education is the key site of an attempt to take control of the future through rational knowledge and planning (Prout, 2000). This attempt relies on a specific form of communication, grammar of education, where children are considered neither creative, nor able to construct meaning, where their participation is accepted until it follows curricular and behavioural rules and structures, incorporating the cultural presuppositions of standardised role performances and cognitive expectations which are highlighted and made salient in actual interaction by *contextualization cues*, that is, in verbal and non-verbal (lexical, syntactic, structural) signs used by interlocutors "to relate what is said at any one time and in any one place to knowledge acquired through past experience" (Gumperz 1992: 230-232).

Grammar of education refers to the fact that in complex societies socialisation has to be a systematized process (a grammar of education), necessary to reproduce social knowledge and capabilities acquired in long sequences of coordinated individual steps. The difference between education and non-systemised socialization is that educational communication is always intentional, attributable to intentions, programmed on the basis of scientific premises (pedagogy).

A grammar of education involves the evaluation of children's performances, with respect to standardised expectations. Education has generalised expectations about cognitive development of children: age is connected to a specific cognitive status. A grammar of education makes it possible to evaluate if children satisfy educational expectations, by means of the observation of their everyday participation to educational interactions. The redundancy of evaluations creates expectations about the "quality" of each children. In this sense educational communication transforms equality into inequality.

Education builds hierarchies among children on the basis of the adherence of their cognitive performances to standardised expectations. It follows that the marginalisation of pupils who do not satisfy standardised cognitive performances is possible. These effects of education are described as "secondary socialisation", where "secondary" refers to the unpredictable and often unseen

consequences of education as an intentional form of socialisation. The capability to create the condition of children's marginalization is an efficient medium for educational communication, which makes much less likely that children resist to it. However, according to the concept of communication we presented above, the possibility of resistance does not disappear with structured educational communication. When a participant understands an educational communication, he/she also attributes intentions and responsibilities to the one who uttered it, through a psychic process that communication cannot control. It follows that, in education, like in any social system, intentional action cannot control the differences it makes. For human beings, educational relationships cannot result in the transmission and internalization of norms, rules or knowledge; rather they result in an autopoietic construction of their meanings, which is influenced by social forms that makes it possible to infer meanings and motivations of communicative actions. While it may have a negative impact on the socialisation of children, a grammar of education does not impart to educational communication the ability to control the operations through which psychic system give meanings to information, and infer motives of action. Besides, at the turn of the twentieth century, well before the limits of educational communication got to be an issue for sociology of communication, James (1899, 1983) destroys the teachers' illusion that somehow education will be a smooth affair if only the right technique could be applied. Freedom (in social system's theory terms, the independence of psychic processes through which people attribute meanings to communication) makes development of personality uncertain. Education has to face freedom, and educators have to be prepared to uncertainty (Britzman, 2007). This paradoxical limit of educational communication motivates an increasing interest in alternative forms of intentionalized socialisation of children. Among them, the most prominent one is the promotion of social participation, which considers freedom as a resource for education, rather than a risk.

The promotion of social participation

The mainstream culture of childhood has recently placed particular emphasis on children's self-realisation and on children's agency (Vanderbroeck and Bouverne-De Bie, 2006). This

representation leads to the promotion of children's active participation, self-expression (Baraldi, 2008) and children's self-determination (Murray and Hallett, 2000). Promoting children's active participation means socialising children towards an "understanding of their own competencies" (Matthews 2003: 274); that is, to a sense of responsibility and skills in planning, designing, monitoring and managing social contexts. The success of this new vision of children as social agents has changed educational cultural presuppositions, leading education to use children's self-expression as a resource for reflexive learning. This seems to be possible through an evolution of educational communication, for example through teachers' active listening and consideration for children's creativity (Gordon, 1974; Rogers, 1951), promoting a change in students' and teachers' roles, and in forms of relationship between children and teachers (Cotmore, 2004, Jans, 2004). In particular, it promotes a new role for the teacher as an "organiser of learning" (Holdsworth, 2005: 149), who is inventive, leaves pre-planned activities and embarks into the unknown, is able to understand that children can and must tackle important issues. It promotes teaching as a "dance with the students" (Holdsworth 2005: 150), neutralising the differences between qualified adults and unqualified children.

These are the epistemological presuppositions of the project we analyzed, videotaping the interventions through which it became concrete, observing if the educational interactions among educators and children were an appropriate medium for the promotion of children's empowerment. The coupling between education and promotion of self-expression is a key-site for understanding the meanings of innovative interaction between adults and children, where education is addressed with the responsibility for the simultaneous reproduction of : 1) individualism, which is implied in roles performances; 2) acceptance of normative presuppositions; and 3) personal attitudes to self-expression. Therefore, it is particularly relevant to observe how and under what conditions education systems promote children's self-expression, also with regard to the issue of conflict management.

Method

In a sociological perspective, relationships may be understood as structured communication

processes. We can find this assumption in symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934), conversation analysis (Schegloff, 1991) and Luhmann's social system theory (Luhmann, 1984). In this sense, the analysis of relationships and their effects on behavior requires the analysis of the communication processes through which relationships materializes and manifest themselves. We analyzed the interactions by which the project of education in conflict management took form, focusing our attention in:

1. the cultural forms of education, expectations and rhetoric of educational communication;
2. the social structures of communication and
3. the relations between the actual forms of educational communication and the epistemological premises of the promotion of children's social participation.

Focusing on the communication processes that involved educators and children during the interventions imparted to us the ability to recognize where, and in what measure, social structures of communication and cultural forms of education interfere with a social intervention addressed at sustaining children's empowerment. An ethnographical analysis of interactions by which the project became concrete could shed some light on the relations between the epistemological premises of the empowerment of children and young people and the social structures and cultural forms of education.

This article is based on data collected through video-taping of interactions and transcribed using Gail Jefferson's transcription system (Jefferson, 2004, see figure one 1 below).

Figure 1 about here

As the project provided for four encounters of two hours in each of the 12 primary schools classes involved, we had the opportunity to work on nearly one hundred hours of videotaped interactions. All of the schools are located in Region Emilia-Romagna of Italy. We think that, since the publication of Charles Goodwin's now classic work on the interactive coordination of gaze, posture, and sentence construction (Goodwin 1981), serious work at the intersection of language and

interaction needs videotape technology. The advantages of video recording are compelling. Identifying speakers is made much easier by watching, not just the movement of lips, but the motion, gaze, and posture of participants. Much of the taken-for-granted fabric of our social existence can be exposed under repeated viewings of well-recorded material that render it in sufficient detail that an analyst can move closer to an account of what is actually happening, as opposed to what he or she assumes is happening (Zuengler & Fassnacht 1998). (All personal details that are mentioned in talk have been altered in the transcription to protect participants' anonymity). Even though a significant amount of data would be available, our intention is not to quantify the different interactive situations and structures observed in the classes. In this article we would like to comment on some meaningful interactions, in order to show the variety of possible conditions and forms of communication during the project's activities. Our general purpose is to highlight a range of possible meaningful communicative situations and problems, and to prepare the adults who will be involved in relationships with children in the frame of the promotion of their social participation, to face these communicative situations and problems. On these bases, in our analysis we select examples of communicative situations and we comment on them in depth.

We analysed the data collected using conversation analysis; it is necessary to stress that those who do not know Italian will be reading an English translation of the Italian original. But conversation analysis simplifies and helps to fulfil the criteria of adequate translation, because it strives for a translation in which the item in the receptor language does the same job as the item in the source language, a translation whose criteria of equivalence are sequential and interactional (Moerman, 1987).

During its 40-year history, conversation analysis produced many rigorous concepts that describe structural features of the organisation of human interactions (Heritage 1995). In this article, we focus on the effects of two of these structures on the form of participation of children in activities: the management of turn-taking and the interrogative negative questions.

As for all types of talk-in-interaction, turn-taking is the basic mechanism for organizing educational interaction; turn-taking takes place on a turn-by-turn basis so that after each completed turn a speaker arrives at the point of a possible speaker change (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson,

1978). The asymmetry between the educators and the children in debriefing sessions is visible in the organization of turn taking: there is little opportunity for the children to take the initiative while the educators maintain control over the trajectory and the agenda. This asymmetry in the possibility of participation relies on the cultural presupposition that the educators have the task of imposing constraints on which contributions are allowed in the interaction by controlling the sequence turns in the interaction.

Another resource for educators to control communication is the use of interrogative negative questions, exemplified by turns that begin with interrogative frames like “*Isn’t it..?*”, “*Doesn’t this..?*” and “*Don’t you..?*” (Heritage, 2002).

Building the question using a negative form, the educators project a yes/no answer, asserting their control of the terms that may be used by the interlocutor in her/his assessments (Raymond, 2003).

Finally, the interrogative negative questions strongly invite agreement (Heritage, 2002), as a contradiction to such an assertive question would represent an aggression to the epistemic primacy of its performer, the educator. The strength of interrogative negative questions in controlling the trajectory of action comes from their mixed format: interrogative negative questions combine the import of a declarative assessment and the sequential implicativeness of an interrogative, exploiting them as resources to project the initiative from the next speaker.

The rhetorical exploitation of turn taking system to reallocate social participation

The possibility of active and autonomous participation of children in interaction largely depends on turn-taking rules that allocate the opportunity to talk among participants. Turn-taking is a pre-requisite for the development of any communication process: without an organised turn-taking system, communication would soon fall into chaos.

But in some circumstances, turn taking rules in action can be violated: researches in the field of conversation analysis (Schegloff, 1991) show that problems of understanding of a prior utterance allow one to get the turn, even if another is talking. The possibility of giving meaning to the action of the interlocutor, and to infer the motives and scope of that action, represents a pre-requisite for communication, and has the priority against the preservation of the turn-taking rule in

action.

Problems in understanding allow people to suspend, not definitively but step by step, the efficacy of turn taking rules: we observed that educators exploit this opportunity to interfere with communication: in this case it brings about meanings inconsistent with the objectives of the interventions.

Educators get the turn at talk out of a transition-relevant place, that is to say before another speaker completed his/her turn, to interrupt utterance of meanings they don't like, exploiting the possibility to do so in case of problems in understanding.

(S1) ((San Martino in Rio Primary School, Children age 10))

- 1 Ahmed: Nico ormai lasciava il gruppo, sì? (0.7) non voleva fare niente per il gruppo!
- 2 [Lui vuo:le]
- 3 Edu: [scusami] questo fatto mi interessa ma: non capisco il problema
- 4 Ahmed: deve riempire con I colori ma=
- 5 Edu: =chi ha detto che deve fare questo?
- 6 Lisa: noi, l'ultima volta nella riunione [dice-]
- 7 Edu: [noi?] scusa, non capisco, anche Io ho detto che lui
- 8 deve riempire? Non mi ricordo
- 9 Ahmed: no, noi, la squadra ha deciso
- 10 Edu: voi la squadra non Nico, decidete qualcosa che lui deve fare (.) è: quello che voi
- 11 avete fatto (.) imporre le vostre decisioni, Ahmed?
- 12 ((silence))
- 13 Edu: capisci la questione?
- 14 ((silence))
- 15 Edu: lo farai, vai avanti col tuo lavoro
- 16 *Ahmed: Nicu was about to leave the team, yeah? (0.7) he didn't want to do anything for the*

The rhetorical exploitation of the turn-taking system. The switch of speaker selection rule in action to sustain educational communication

In conversation, all turn transfers are coordinated around transition-relevant places (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1978). With a “current speaker selects next” rule in action, the party so selected has the right, and is obliged, to take next turn to speak. This rule is exploited by educators to avoid frozen communication. When lengthy gaps follow the completion of their turn, educators systematically utter a tag question selecting a next speaker, who cannot then avoid speaking, without being accountable for doing so.

(S2) ((Gramsci primary school in Modena, Children age 11))

- 1 Edu: ah, siete d'accordo così (.) Lui dise:gna? Voi state obbligando qualcuno a fare
 2 qualcosa (.) hh Mettersi d'accordo (.) significa questo?
 3 (5)
 4 Edu: vi chiedo, eh?
 5 (7)
 6 Edu: dimmi tu, Michele
 7 Michele: io:
 8 (5)
 9 Edu va male? >Un'altra soluzione non si può trovare?< (0.5) un'altra soluzio:ne?
 10 (5)
 11 Edu: Tu hai un'altra proposta?
 12 (5)
 13 Luca: bo:h

1 Edu: so, you all agree (.)He dra:ws? You are forcing someone to do something (.) hh find

- 2 *an agreement (.) is it its meaning?*
- 3 *(5)*
- 4 *Edu:* *I'm just asking, eh?*
- 5 *(7)*
- 6 *Edu:* *you answer now, Michele*
- 7 *Michele:* *I:*
- 8 *(5)*
- 9 *Edu:* *is it awful? >another solution isn't it possible?< (0.5) another solutio:n?*
- 10 *(5)*
- 11 *Edu:* *do you have another solution?*
- 12 *(5)*
- 13 *Luca:* *bo:h*

In (S2), a group allows a child only to draw, because his handwriting is recognized as very bad. The very first educator's utterance (lines 1-2) is addressed to promote the pupils' reflection on the meaning and consequences of their actions. After a first a long pause (line 3), the educator clarifies for the pupils, entering into a meta-communication dimension with rhetorical goals, that he's only seeking information, not asking for an account of deviant behavior (line 4). Another long pause (line 5) shows again that pupils understood the question at line 1-2 as rhetorically addressed, which constrains them from acknowledging their accountability for the marginalization of their teammate. Here, pupils choose silence to escape from the educational communication. To avoid a communication freeze the educator switches the rule of turn taking to current speaker selects next (line 6), addressing one of the pupils, Michele. After Michele's failure to offer an account of his behavior, and a third long pause, the educator (line 9) starts a brainstorming session that suddenly fails, because pupils again choose silence, to avoid the risk of negative evaluations (line 10). For the second time, the educator switches the turn-taking rule to current speaker selects next, addressing to a specific child, Luca (line 11). Again, this rhetorical device is ineffective. With an

awareness of the relationship shared with the teacher, pupils are able to infer the motivations of the teacher's utterances, recognizing his management as a rhetorical instrument to create the conditions for educational communication. Consequently, they are able to neutralize the teacher's rhetoric, opting for silence.

The rhetorical use of negative-interrogative questions to promote second order observation in pupils' communication systems

In the case of deviant behaviour, in conflict with expectations of the educational system, deviancy provokes no doubt about the actual validity of the criterion, therefore deviance is understood as an ascribable action, stimulating the assumption that something is wrong with its performer (Schneider 2000). Following Luhmann and Schorr (1979), we can say that education, because of its apparatus of standardised expectations attached to social roles, tends to low levels of reflexivity.

The asymmetries among social roles are social structures that allow an educator to take his/her expectations as a valid criterion for judging the behaviour of pupils.

Our analysis shows that, in the interactions we videotaped, interrogative-negative questions are often designed to favour a response from their addressees that contrast with their earlier statements or actions, forcing them to acknowledge that there was something wrong in their behaviour (Heritage 2002).

(S3) ((Castel San Pietro Primary School, Children age 11))

- | | | |
|---|--------|---|
| 1 | Edu: | scusate ma: (.) per evitare fraintendimenti (0.7) la decisione che Josh avrebbe |
| 2 | | collaborato con entrambi I gruppi è stata presa l'ultima volta che ci siamo |
| 3 | | incontrati, o no? |
| 4 | Paola: | ma noi: |
| 5 | Edu | no: se dovevate parlare (0.3) dovevate farlo stamattina; <u>hh</u> vi ascoltavate |
| 6 | | prende prendevate questa decisione? |

- 7 Miriam(G1): °no. è che:°
- 8 Nico: il problema è che loro non rispettano le regole
- 9 Edu: non alzare la voce, potresti offendere qualcuno, è importante stare calmi
- 10 quando si parla con gli altri
- 11 Nico: Tu hai alzato la voce!
- 12 Paola: come sempre, gli insegnanti possono fare tutto
- 13 Edu: >mi dispiace di aver alzato la voce, è una brutta cosa da fare<
- 14 Paola: non state attenti a parlare (..) perchè dovremmo essere attenti a parlare?
-
- 1 Edu: *excuse me but: (.) to avoid misunderstanding (0.7) the decision that Josh*
- 2 *would collaborate with both teams was taken last time we met, wasn't it?*
- 3 Paola(G1): *but we:*
- 4 Edu *no: if you had to tal:k (0.3) it was this morning; hh did you listen to*
- 5 *yourselves taking the decision?*
- 6 Miriam(G1): °no, it is tha:t°
- 7 Nico: the problem is that they don't respect the rules
- 8 Edu: don't raise your voice it could offend someone here, it is important to stay
- 9 calm when talking with others
- 10 Nicu: You raise your voice!
- 11 Paola: *just like always; teachers can do everything*
- 12 Edu: >I'm sorry to have raised my voice, it's an awful thing to do<
- 13 Paola: *you are not careful in talking (..) so why should we be careful in talking?*

For example, in sequence 3 (S3) below, the educator makes use of an interrogative-negative question to force children to acknowledge some problematic aspects of their behaviour (lines 1-3, 5-6). This acknowledgement should be the first step of a reflection focused on alternative behaviour, more coherent with the goal of social integration.

Children usually understand the rhetorical valence of interrogative-negatives questions and their

hostile contents, and refuse to align with operators' strategic questions (lines 4, 7, 8). In sociological terms, we can say that, by doing this, children refuse the role of people in need of education.

In most cases operators supply the reflection that interrogative-negatives question weren't able to obtain, accrediting to children lack of competence in relationship' management, with a harsh negative evaluation of their behaviour. By doing so, operators give themselves the opportunity to impose their expectations, but it doesn't come without a price. An evaluation of children's behaviour activates the asymmetries between the social roles in education. These asymmetries are inconsistent with the goal of the interventions, to sustain socialization of children, starting from their active and autonomous participation to the interventions.

Moreover, the expression of negative evaluations by operators activated ethnocentric reactions (Tajfel, 1981) among its addressees, with the creation of a group identity of "US-children" against "THEM-adults" that makes the success of educational intentions it very improbable. In S3, it is possible to observe a children's ethnocentric form of reaction (line 12, 14) to the educational intention of the educator (lines 9-10, 13); the children's reaction is ethnocentric, because it undervalues the personal specificity and autonomy of adults as persons, categorised as a uniform group and labelled by shared attributes (Moscovici, 1984).

Lowering pupils expectations: the rhetorical function of post confirmation-confirmation

In a recent paper, Jefferson (2007) defines a structure where someone asks a question, gets an affirmative answer and follows that with an utterance that conveys something like "ah, just as I thought", as "post confirmation-confirmation". We recognize this structure as a common rhetorical strategy, which educators use to emphasize that their cognitive capacities are sufficient to compute the operations of psychic systems in their environment. By doing so, educators reiterate in communication the asymmetry of the educational relationship and, consequently, lower pupils expectations to be successful in selecting deviant or strategic behaviors.

In sequence 4 (S4) below, the educator asks a question (line 1), gets an affirmative answer (line 2)

and follows that with a post-confirmation-confirmation (line 3), to show Nicole that he has fully understood the pragmatic function of her behavior. The form of the educational relationship, that is to say the expectations attached to the role of educator, helps Nicole understand the rhetorical value of the educator's question. In line 2 she tries to resist, with an opposition tag (*però*/but), to the educator's utterance. Even though the educator, by violating a turn-taking rule, performs his post confirmation-confirmation and does not allow her to complete her turn (line 3), Nicole shows her insistence (line 4) in refusing the educational communication.

(S4) ((Malborghetto primary school, Ferrara. Children age 10))

1 Edu: a:h, ma: tu urlando cerchi di avere ragione così, senza discutere?

2 Nicole: e: °si° [*però*-]

3 Edu: [inf]a:tti hh

4 Nicole: infatti: se lo sapevi perché me lo chiedi

1 *Edu: well but: you scream to overcome the other, avoiding to talk about issues??*

2 *Nicole: well: °yeah° [but-]*

3 *Edu: [here we] are: hh*

4 *Nicole: here we are: you already knew it, why did you ask?*

Can education promote social participation and the empowerment of children? The challenge of evolution

This article tries to answer to some questions around the issue of promoting children's active participation which are often neglected, such as: "how does promotion of children's active participation materializes in actual and natural interaction in the classrooms?", "is it possible to educate without bringing about asymmetries of educational relation?" and "what happens when the educators force children to actively participate? is the paradox of an education to autonomy

solvable?”

In the paragraphs above, we focused on instances where asymmetries in power between educators and children ended up in the exclusion of children from active participation, making the promotional intentions of the intervention fall through.

A sociological analysis of actual and naturally occurring interaction made it possible to appreciate how a range of communicative actions and strategies which were precisely recognized in the interaction made promotional intentions fail in promoting children's active participation.

We think that teachers leading children, administrators, educational leaders and those who prepare them who are interested in promotion of children's participation may benefit from an analysis of the way in which a project that looks at children's freedom as a resource for education may end up in excluding children from participation.

Promotion of the children's active participation requires that the educators take into account that children's creativity and issues may shape the trajectory of interaction, even if they are not aligned with their expectations and goals .

In the interventions we analyzed, the form of communication which derives from the educators' action reduces the possibility of surprises and dangers from the educational activities. However, this is exactly what makes it ineffective the interactions with regard to their institutional function, the promotion of children's active participation.

In the frame of an educational monologue, the educators act as gatekeepers of the children's participation, which is submitted to its adherence to their goals. In this way, it is very difficult to achieve creative learning, which should be based on the experience of autonomous reflection on conflict management, which would represent the core of the project's epistemology.

During the encounter in the classrooms, we observe: a) frequent hierarchical relationships between adults and children, based on a model of difference in competence (expert and competent adult vs. incompetent child); b) frequent worries for the organisational success of the activities, rather than for the children's participation and c) insufficient effort at promoting the children's active participation and self-expression.

In the educators' perspective, as it comes out from their actions, the children can achieve a better understanding of conflict management through their passive experience of values and competence rather than through participative action. The analysis demonstrates aspects of great importance in the educational interaction, that is, the confrontation concerning role performances. Role performances are particularly relevant in the encounters with the children. Role performances and cognitive expectations, tied to normative expectations concerning the execution of the activities, are the basic cultural presuppositions of a large part of the intervention. They give an important contribution to the children's socialisation.

Therefore, an interesting question concerns the absolute importance of role performances inside the encounters, and their relations to the children active participation and socialisation. What is the impact of the importance of learning and doing in the educational relationships, even in the frame of an intervention addressed to sustain the empowerment of children?

Social structures of educational communication impart to educators the ability to activate social asymmetries to pursue educational goals, if pupils communicate that they refuse the role of someone who needs to be educated. At the level of interactions between social operators and children these social structures materialised as the grammar of education. The analysis of the educational interactions showed that social operators relied on asymmetries between social roles to sustain educational intentions by means of a grammar of education. The activation of a grammar of education made it easy for children to recognise educational intentions, bringing them to mistrust the opportunity of autonomous participation. This was an ironical outcome of interventions addressed to create the presuppositions of that participation.

Our research highlights that even the most refined rhetorical devices cannot secure the attainment of educational goals. Educational relationships make educational communication possible, but, at the same, they provide a resource for children to resist to it.

The promotion of children's social participation was the goal of the interventions we analyzed.

Once this epistemology materialised in concrete educational interactions, some paradoxical results came out; it was possible to observe that educators systematically violated children's spaces of

communication, that is to say children's opportunities to experience, in the context of the social interventions, an active and autonomous participation in conflict management. Educators interfered with children's autonomous participation to interactions as soon as it brought about meanings inconsistent with the ideological and theoretical premises of the interventions. These interferences empirically materialised as overlapping and interruptions in conversation. Even though these events of communication have to be understood as operators' efforts to create the condition for the transmission of values, norms and knowledge, thought to be necessary to give to children the ability to autonomously manage conflicts, they brought children to mistrust the opportunity of their autonomous social participation.

Interrogative-negative questions, strategic misunderstanding of contributions and the switch of turn-taking rules share something: they rely on a grammar of education. They presuppose that social operators control the trajectories of interactions, exploiting role asymmetries.

We observed that educators didn't experience difficulties in doing it, but this didn't come without a price: it brought about the failure of the social intervention. As soon as their addressees understood the educational intentions of the social operators, they tried to escape from communication and if they were forced to participate with educational interaction, they limited their social participation to the lowest levels.

A resource for a genuine promotion of children's participation: dialogue

Primary education in the Emilia Romagna Region of Italy is historically concerned with the promotion of pupil's social participation and autonomy, from their early childhood (Cadwell, 1997). The improbability of an educational communication not relying on the asymmetries of pedagogical relationship, that is, the improbability of a communication that promotes pupils' autonomy and empowerment, even though in a favorable cultural environment, could perhaps be ascribed to structural features of educational communication. We think that the problem is that educational communication is not an efficient medium for the promotion of social participation. But the educational one is not the only communication form available. In the last fifteen years,

relevant studies in the field of intercultural education have defined the characteristics of a communication form that promises to be much more effective than education in sustaining social integration of young migrants by mean of the promotion of their autonomous participation. This communication form is called dialogue.

The concept of dialogue is commonly used as a synonymous with conversation: verbal and non-verbal communication in interaction. Dialogue is based on some kind of distribution of turns of talk among the participants. In this perspective, communication is always dialogic. The concept of dialogue, however, can be interpreted in another, more restricted way, as a particular form of communication. David Bhom describes it as “the collective way of opening up judgements and assumptions” (1996: 53).

This idea of dialogue may be considered normative and idealistic. According to Wierbicka, dialogue always embodies a positive evaluation and a social ideal; however, “it does not imply closeness, intimacy, heart-to-heart communication, or even complete frankness and openness. It implies that each party makes a step in the direction of the other, not that they reach a shared position or even mutual warm feelings. It does not imply full mutual understanding – the closeness which no longer requires words” (2005: 692). In this approach, dialogue is considered “a recognizable type of speech act” (2005: 693) in which the participants’ efforts to understand each other and make themselves understood is a particularly important feature.

In this light, we may speak of *empowering dialogue*, creating the opportunity to negotiate contributions and to show positive involvement in the relationships between participants.

Some features of dialogue could be summarised as follows (Littlejohn 2004; Pearce and Pearce, 2003): 1) distribution of active participation in interaction; 2) addressing of participants’ interests and/or needs (empathy); 3) expression and display of personal attitudes and stories; 4) checking participants’ perceptions; 5) active listening; 6) appreciation of actions and experience; 7) interactive feedback on the participants’ actions and 8) avoidance of intimidating assertions.

An educational project aiming to offer to children a first experience of social participation in such a problematic issue as conflict management needs a communication form specialised in promoting

the self-expression of communicators, a communication form that creates mutual trust, that is able to explore common ground and continuity of views between interlocutors. We think that the experience of mutual trust in communication is a fundamental step in children's socialization.

At the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, an experimentation in the application of dialogue, in the context of a project addressed to the promotion of non-violent conflict management in primary schools classes was analyzed in 2006 (Iervese 2006). The research showed that the application of dialogue was effective in promoting non-violent forms of conflict management in classrooms. Although this was a pilot project, we can say that their results are very promising.

Dialogue requires educators to:

- 1) respect the turn of talk of their interlocutors, to show their unconditioned appreciation for their self-expression. It means to avoid overlapping and turn taking outside transition relevance points;
- 2) make use of rhetorical tools to promote the socialisation of reflection about everyday experience through self-narration. An effective tool seems to be the use of *continuers* (Fairley 2000), that is to say little tokens used to sustain the current speaker in his/her talking and
- 3) avoid the use of rhetorical tools that rely on grammar of education, because grammar of education brings about social asymmetries and disincentives the autonomous participation of pupils/young people. The activation of dialogue to create mutual trust between educators and their addressees cannot take the paradoxical form of strategic action that, if understood in its hidden function, motivates mistrusts and disincentives to participation in communication.

Final remarks: from role performances to perform as persons

This relevance of role performances, of learning and cognitive expectations, of normative expectations about the correct and plain execution of performances, seems to be exaggerated in the encounters we observed. We think that the promotion of participation would benefit from an effective promotion of adults' and children's active participation during the activities. The crucial tasks for promotion are: 1) to avoid that promotion itself becomes something to be learned

passively experiencing the action of the educator as an expert and, 2) to sustain children's and educators' in performing as persons rather than standardized roles, by means of a communication form designed to promote self-expression and active participation.

Experiences that looks at children's freedom as a resource for education would be improved and qualified through a more specific and accurate socialisation to the importance of active participation and a greater awareness of being involved in effective interactional dynamics with different people. In particular, a much stronger awareness of the importance of promoting autonomous participation and coordination might be very useful for education officers, social planners and educators, including administrators

The limits of educational communication we observed, and the success of dialogue suggest that dialogue is an opportunity to experiment, to make our work more effective and the projects in which we are involved more efficient.

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