

# Foreword

First of all, I have to say: “Excellent idea”. Alberto F. De Toni and Stefano De Marchi have thrown themselves headlong into innovation, into the true search for the new. The book is a bit of research on the feasibility of self-organization in schools. It is both a cultural and an empirical self-organization, given that numerous schools have been concretely examined in their effort to introduce a radicalness – such a decisive change self-organization is! It is no coincidence that the authors use words such as “heroes”, “courage”, “creating new learning environments from the bottom-up”; not by chance: aware as they were, and are even more so now after their research, that to introduce such a radical change in the organization of Italian schools, a good dose of courage is needed. It is not by chance that the protagonists are prefigured as real “heroes”, that is, they challenge the static nature of the situation, regardless of the danger, and yet they are extremely confident of the need for a result. Excellent, then; excellent the idea, above all because it is one of the first times in which educational research, especially with respect to the function of schools, radically shifts onto learning.

The watchword of the forces of progress in this field is precisely that of the centrality of learning. The right watchword, correct, even if incomprehensible to most people. With it we want to grasp the sense of a *mission*, of a new path to venture down, focusing precisely on learning, making the whole school organization, and not just its function, rotate around learning. And with this we try to better understand what it is, what learning consists of, to overcome a biological vision that we have of it. It is in fact natural that every human being has a vocation for learning, inasmuch as the human being exists, precisely because it naturally grows, and not only that, indeed, it exists with its growth. Its existence is not only ontological, it is above all functional, or rather it is inseparably a function of growth itself, it also reveals itself through that function, which is precisely that of growing. Learning is growing.

Any human being, even later on in life, grows, he/she never ceases to grow, that is, he/she develops; and growth is not only a biological, physiological fact, it is also a strongly characterizing fact; and every human being is conditioned by education, that is by the fact that it is possible if it is accompanied by an investigation of that growth itself, by an analysis of the ways in which

one grows. Growing up means above all learning, growing intellectually. Even physical, biological, physiological growth is intimately linked to and conditioned by the impulse of an essential component: curiosity, with respect to knowledge, to a new knowledge, crossing that path of access essential to formation, to enrich oneself intellectually. So that growing, learning and developing end up converging.

In this book, there is an awareness that the centrality of learning is not just a new educational line, it is a real revolution. In the past, the school was always a transmission of knowledge, it has always focused on the teaching function and it has always dedicated all of the physical and temporal space of the school organization to teaching, to transmitting knowledge. Until the singular, perhaps grotesque, point that the student's studying does not take place at school. It takes place at home; his main cerebral effort is not to listen and to record the knowledge transmitted to him but to "study" in order to learn, that is to say to test himself on the acquisition of new knowledge through "learning", and unlike listening, this takes place alone, at home, outside the school and its organization. If we do not understand this difference, we cannot understand the reason for our opposition to the school as it is constructed, organized and therefore functional to transmission, that is, to teaching. In it, the central figure is not the student but the teacher; the student studies at home, studies alone, studies outside the school, out of the economic efforts that are produced for a school, out of its organizational efforts, out of its mechanisms. These efforts, on the contrary, in a school based on the centrality of learning, should be aimed mainly at learning, rather than transmitting.

The teacher's function should instead intertwine with that of the student by means of a radical leap, modifying the two actual functions, significantly reducing that of listening, which still remains the student's main function, instead increasing that of each person's first-person participation in the construction of their own path. The first change must come about within the school organized from high up, rigidly disciplined in rigorously planned procedures, with identical time arrangements, always, everywhere, with a discipline of school organization entirely top-down and all substantially authoritarian (not always in the negative sense of the term, but yet authoritarian). We want to contrast this type of school with another one, in which we want to use completely new and even "blasphemous" terms with respect to the past. The students are the main actors; they are in a sense "heroes", not common beings, and therefore the abnegation typical of the "hero" should be solicited in them, not the typical obedience of the bureaucratic and authoritarian relationship.

We therefore call attention to the fact, which is very important, that we are talking about *self-organization*. The school today is not self-organized at all, it is hetero-organized, it is regulated, governed from high, in procedures that refer to those in command. We do not start from the enhancement of diversity among the various students, and we should tend to avoid

homologation, starting from the fact that the differences among students are a wealth, a heritage, a resource; they are not at all an obstacle to be overcome through homologation. The logo-centric school is entirely founded on the *logos*, on the severity of reasoning, on the almost exclusive care of the mind in the classic and traditional sense of the term – which is a correct and necessary goal – and no care being given to the artistic-creative stimulus (which is equally necessary). Not the solicitation of creativity but merely the solicitation of diligence alone.

The revolution – precisely – that is necessary today must focus on self-organization, even on the stimulation that derives from the analysis and correction of the errors that are encountered in the school activity itself. This is the great novelty of the objectives and also of the intuition, of the severe elaboration, even in the details, which is at the base of this book: self-organization. Mind you: we are not speaking of self-management but more properly of self-regulation, because this is simpler, it is more radical, it can also exist in a school which is in other senses authoritarian. Self-organization is much more because it means that autonomy, which is the basis of this process, maximizes even in its etymology, the term that consists not only of *auton*, referring to the subject, but also of *nomos*, and that is “rule”. Autonomy not only self-organizes its own methods, its own discipline, but it produces its own rules (*nomos*), maximizes the term, its true conceptual content.

In the past, the school has always experienced autonomy reluctantly, due to a widespread mood among the teaching staff, and today it seeks somehow to navigate through the thrust of the State, which tends to remove oxygen from autonomy, to suffocate it, and the thrust of a part of the teachers, who tend toward the defense of hyper-disciplinarity, especially in secondary schools. Here the need prevails to cultivate the individual subjects, each one on its own, and thus to preserve the fragmentation of knowledge in different disciplines, rather than making an effort to re-consolidate knowledge, as should be necessary.

This dialectical point of contrast against autonomy has not allowed the full affirmation of autonomy, the acceptance of an extraordinary revolution of the idea of school, inherent in the invention of school autonomy, in having introduced it with such energy into the school system and now in having pushed further efforts for it to take its first steps. The real revolution is autonomy: the whole which is *autos* and *nomos*. The real revolution is that every single school must give itself a proper form of organization: therefore, self-organization as a necessary premise and temperament of the risk of the single autonomies remaining isolated and alone – an effort to give value to the network and to forms of solidarity among autonomies, to produce effective results. All this must be based on what is called the “capabilities”, the professional quality and the construction of the new, both in the teaching staff and in the students’ willingness to compete with themselves. It is an answer,

perhaps it is the only answer, to what today is emerging on the one hand with an increasing attention to the network, but on the other especially to the risk of what is called *homeschooling*, that is to the idea that the orientation among individual schools and single families to organize a home school, home-made, set up to satisfy peculiarities and differences, both organizational and even social, of the different families. A solution that could seriously threaten to accentuate the social inequities that are within our society.

On the contrary, the response of self-organization is a strong response, forward-looking, with respect to the defects of the traditionally bureaucratic structure – an answer that could meet real needs and that is feasible. We must therefore convince ourselves that this path is possible; we must treasure the novelty of the Epilogue on the circus elephant tied to a rope, which despite being substantially free fears that it is not so and therefore is afraid of trying to move freely. So, even the school elephant must feel free, and it can only do so on condition that the extraordinary novelty represented by self-organization is discovered, especially if this means development of learning environments, as stated in the message of Sugata Mitra and the great intellectuals who have understood the meaning of all this: discovering, encouraging one's own soul in school, one's dream of building something new in society – and that is self-determination, which is then the true substance of freedom.

At this point I want to add a consideration on a theme that is perhaps less developed in this book: the enrichment of the curriculum, the disciplinary horizon, the extension of knowledge; the cognitive aspect is not the only factor of intellectual growth. It is also necessary to deal with the enrichment of the experiences that everyone has to live during their own lives and that are also part of learning. It is precisely for this purpose that that part of the brain, of intellectual potential, which is also a component of the natural propensity of the human being, is to be solicited: to engage with art, and especially with music. In other words, to feel, to be intellectual not only by producing *logos*, developing reason, but also by producing art, living artistic experiences.

And here it is quite urgent to modify the school structure that has existed even since before the birth of the unitary State, in the 19th century, and confirmed so far in the Italian school system (one of the great blasphemies of our history): art and music are not culture. This is an unworthy blasphemy, which has sacrificed generations and generations of young people, depriving them of an essential part of their education, the artistic one. A measure which is not only intellectually stupid but also socially backward: that is, making it impossible for the individual student to engage in his own creativity and become a permanent subject of innovation and individual and social growth, through what the stimuli of artistic production represent in the growth of a human being. Correcting this insane direction and instead giving full educational dignity to the artistic experience is necessarily part

of the structural modification of the system, and therefore also of self-organization – of a hope, that is, that the “heroes” of the school can create an education that is totally different from the current one.

We must realize it: school today does not need reforms, which I fear will be of little use. The school needs a real revolution, a scholastic revolution that puts learning at the center, and that therefore supports learning itself in a different manner, and which supports it both in a logical and artistic context and presents the students with what society will be like right from the time in which they begin to study. I allude to the culture of work. To the great educational value of the idea of work, of the culture of work, in which the human being deals with himself, in the crucial moment in which he is expected to become a social being, to place himself in this new dimension. All these elements, largely missing in the current structure of the school, must instead be found along the path of autonomy. In other words, we propose another kind of school, not the one managed so far by the apparatus in Viale Trastevere (the seat of the Italian Ministry of Education): a truly autonomous, self-organized school, the true school of autonomy, which is able to understand and value the contribution of artistic experience, creativity, work culture, their full formative nature for the cultural and social formation of the citizen, in a truly democratic country.

by Luigi Berlinguer  
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