

Saying *Paideia*, saying *Scholé*

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In order to interpret education – especially as it is implemented in practice – alongside with a large number of current education-related issues and problems, it is necessary to investigate the meanings of the words used in this field. Such unavoidable work of research and analysis highlights the dissonance between words and meanings that has been hypothesized – often constructed – over time and has influenced the recurring discourses on schooling, on the idea of education, of pedagogical culture and culture in general, of teaching practices and methodologies. Recurrent terms seem to have lost the deep meanings originally given to them by the auctores; much of their semantic value has faded in favour of a partiality of meaning that affects the reading and interpretation of current educational phenomena. Starting from these premises, this paper focuses on the semantic essence of such keywords as school and education as well as on the significance of the several hermeneutics of these terms in the history of Western education.

Keywords: *Paideia*, *Scholé*, Pedagogy, Educational experience.

Dire Paideia, dire Scholé

Per interpretare l’educazione, soprattutto quella praticata, con il fascio di questioni e problemi che oggi appaiono evidenti è necessario interrogarci sui significati delle parole che hanno detto e dicono l’educativo. Questo ineludibile lavoro di ricerca e di analisi mette in luce la distonia assunta, spesso costruita, nel tempo fra le parole e i significati, che ha influenzato i discorsi ricorrenti sulla scuola, sull’idea di educazione, di cultura pedagogica e di cultura in generale, di pratiche e di metodologie didattiche. I

termini cui si ricorre di continuo, se osservati con gli occhi degli auctores, nel trascorrere del tempo hanno perduto la profondità originaria; molto del valore semantico si è affievolito a favore di una parzialità di senso incidente nelle letture e nelle interpretazioni dei fenomeni educativi attuali. Muovendo da queste premesse, si rifletterà sull'essenza semantica di alcune parole-chiave, come scuola ed educazione, e sul peso che le diverse ermeneutiche hanno esercitato nella storia dell'educazione occidentale.

Parole-chiave: Paideia, Scholé, Pedagogia, Esperienza educativa.

The defective paideia

If there is something tragic in our lives, that is falling into stagnation. There is nothing worse than living a routine life, which leads to an existence that is always the same and is unavoidably reduced to the constant mnemonic repetition of habits, manners, and forms acquired and consolidated through the power of “amorphous” intelligence. The comfort provided by a life of ease, which urges individuals to satisfy material needs, triggers a mechanism whereby certain behaviours, thoughts, and mental schemes are always the same. Although these respond to certain needs and are therefore less unlikely to produce positive results, they weaken every human being by progressively dragging him or her into the abyss of univocity, where the subject tends to surrender to some parts of oneself, to one's own emotions for example, or to the “calls of the soul”. Individuals fall into psychic and mental laziness which does not imply questioning something that has been thought and done by inertia. Escaping this unspeakable fate is something very difficult! It is difficult to get out of the grip of recursiveness and avoid the ferocious blows of limited and limiting material needs, the lashes of social expectations, the grip of homologation that imposes its rules and does not allow individuals to express themselves; and, not least, it is difficult to elude the fear of making mistakes, of losing something if daring a change. The issue of man's education is interwoven with the complex topics emerging from these premises and has consistently been a major topic in Western culture, from the philosophical and *paideutic* reflection of early civilizations to present days, which are, in all respects, a new era for mankind; or rather, this is the era of the Self, arising from the crumbling of the individual's foundations, which had ensured

personal control over oneself and primacy over the world. It is a paradox that, while “something else” rather than the self-reproducing recursiveness is advocated, while attempts are made to foster creative freedom through education, at the same time it becomes clear that the idea and practice of education itself are intertwined with a solid, safe model of man, to an ideal of man that becomes stronger as it adheres to a defined paradigm of values, traditions, and religious, social and *political* references.

In the long history of our civilization, in other words, a static order has been pursued in all fields; despite the cultural and social revolutions that have occurred over centuries and millennia, this has claimed an *a priori* designed programme, finely devised and defined, and forced us to follow it. Indeed, to ensure that the order established by Hellenic classicism could last, there have been several plans aimed at preventing the Self to get shattered – as the Self was sometimes exalted and comforted by Reason and sometimes swallowed up by the power of Passions. Many have also been the attempts to resolve the divisions within oneself and restore a unitary Self, up to the point of making man’s irrational side rational and of masking human reason as reason of state, for instance in the 18th-century Jacobin era. Let us think of Plato’s problem of the One¹ and the radical resolution of the problem that Plotinus finds in the One as infinite in itself².

Thus, it is not preposterous to say that, after all, the centrality of man’s education has coincided, since the beginning of our civilization, with the

¹ On Plato, Jaeger writes: “[...] True paideia, which has always been the education of men for ‘the whole of areté’, has collapsed into purely specialist skills with no dominating aim in view. His [Plato’s] philosophy is meant to put that purpose back into human life, and so give a new meaning and unity to all the disjointed activities of our existence. [...] What he means by restoring true paideia he has shown by the opposition between the true culture he is trying to attain and the specialist or vocational culture he decries. To restore wholeness in areté – that is in life and the human soul – was the most difficult of all tasks, incomparably harder than any specialized investigation that philosophical thought could carry out” (Jaeger, 1934/1986, vol. III, pp. 224-225).

² On Plotinus, the references to the Enneads remain fundamental. With regard to the theme of this paper, Mondolfo’s interpretation is also very interesting: “[...] in the series of hypostases (the One, the Intellect, the Universal Soul: from which then the world is born), the One is always the power that generates all of them, is present in all, like the source in the whole river and the root in the whole tree; and has in itself all beings, though transcending them all. In its unity the unitotality of the intellect can be found, and therefore the totality of the multiple, through which the productive soul of the cosmos moves, thus marking the passage from eternity to time” (Mondolfo, 2014, p. 174).