

Letter to *Corriere della Sera*

Dear Editor, impressed with the particular attention your newspaper is dedicating to the school system in this troubled time, we would like to offer the contribution of our experience as teachers and educators.

The unexpected delay in reopening secondary schools after the Christmas holidays, due to the persistent health emergency, is unsettling most Italian teachers and students. These last few months, distance education has strikingly triggered some problems that already existed in the school system: lack of interest, demotivation, concentration problems and even the risk of early school leaving for 34.000 students, as recently reported by a survey carried out by *Ipsos* for *Save the Children*. No one doubts that going back to school with classroom learning can make all the difference, but certainly it will not be the solution to the problems revealed by the closure of schools.

First of all, as teachers, we would like to acknowledge we too are facing difficulties that are similar to the ones students are experiencing during this time: fear of infection, social withdrawal and flattening of desire. The circumstances we are under right now are revealing all our powerlessness in a situation that keeps overwhelming us from all sides. A hidden discomfort and a deep cry for meaning have emerged, not only in young people. We're in this together.

We can't pull any solution out of a hat, but we would like to testify how we are facing these times without hiding behind complaints against the political management, or even locking up behind slogans such as "no learning is possible without classroom learning." We would run the risk of getting caught in schematizations which bring about only anger and discouragement. And these feelings are perceived by youngsters, who are always keen observers, even before understanding the very meaning of our lessons.

By recognizing our own fragility, we've been able to be corrected several times, to find out that from this historical moment we (who should be teaching others) can learn something new for our personal and professional maturity. How can we stand before a boy who has lost one of his relatives because of the pandemic, or who has stopped coming to school after letting himself be taken by apathy and lack of interest? We all had to go back to a vital experience that would let us teach with a glimpse of hope in our eyes, rather than simply and marginally preaching hope during our class hours.

After noting that only six out of her twenty-five students had submitted their test, a physics teacher told them during their online session, "Come on, guys, I know you would like to do something completely different, like going back to school with classroom learning; I'd like to do something completely different too, I loved coming to school by bike. But we are more than the mood we are in when we wake up. You won't be dying because you haven't completed your test, you'll definitely survive, but I can tell you that following reality has never betrayed me." After seeing their teacher getting so involved by their life, their faces changed, something moved deep inside of them, and the lesson started again with a new momentum. Without a living experience deep inside of them, capable of lighting their own eyes, how could they go back to their classroom, exhausted and hurt as they are after a day with hours spent before a screen and with poor learning results?

Pasolini's words prove to be as relevant as ever: "If someone [...] had educated you, he could only have done so through his being rather than through his speech." Education is not made by our speech, it is made by our being. Whether face to face or remote, by being there we can challenge the unease or lazy lack of interest the young ones may feel. The present time has revealed the aridity an aseptic and detached teaching, but also that search for fireworks to entertain and amuse like old actors, may have. The emergency of the situation we are now experiencing has made these young people even more yearning for truth and authenticity, for teachers who, by explaining any subject, are able to communicate a hope which is worth living for, committing oneself today and building a tomorrow.

Recognizing teaching as communicating oneself, that is what gives beauty and hope to our life, is a wonderful opportunity of liberation, especially at a time like this when results are not always immediate and not all the lessons turn perfectly out. We don't only free ourselves from the anxiety

of succeeding—as filled as we are of what positive we wish to communicate by teaching every day—, but most of all we stop treating our students as a mechanism that automatically reacts to our strategically orchestrated inputs. Thus, even in the present situation, teaching turns back to its original beauty: the freedom of a teacher in dialogue with the freedom of youngsters through everyday contents.

We may not be able to see the first results of what we've been sowing after entering the classroom each day, nor do we claim to measure our effectiveness through the immediate receptivity of our students, however surprised we have been by some of them with the path of maturity they have made this year. These last few months we have seen many faces lighting up, even only for a moment, during the lessons. As when a Latin teacher, after resuming a video lesson after the break, picked up a discussion among her students on the meaning of life, “nowhere to be found at only fifteen years of age” as they were saying. As soon as they noticed the teacher was there, the students asked her, “Teacher, does the meaning of life exist?” She might have backed out diving into her program, but she chose to get involved, “When I was your age, I had the same question, and when the meaning of life knocked at my door, I recognized it and let it in. The meaning of life will come to you, I can assure you.” A tangible silence filled even that virtual classroom and the lesson continued with gerund and gerundive and both teacher and students with different faces, almost transfigured. We'll never forget moments like this. Or as when, at the end of the last lesson before the Christmas holidays, a girl warned, “Teacher, wait a minute before shutting down.” The videos turned off on the screen, but then immediately turned on again showing, one by one, the many “thank you teacher!” cards they had handwritten on the sheets torn from their notebooks. “Why?” The teacher was moved and surprised by this gesture, from a class that seemed so impenetrable. Their answer was, “Because, during these difficult times, you gave a hundred percent and you wouldn't have had to... and you've always listened to us.”

We shall need a time to be rooted in the life of teachers and students, also through other circumstances that are not in our hands, those glimpses we have seen lighting up on their faces. But yet, we are sure that the energy we need in order to face the hardship of the present time and to rebuild our country in the future will come from those glimpses. And young people can already learn this today, by seeing the way in which we as teachers, despite the repeated change in our education methods, let ourselves be corrected by reality, without fear of declaring our own powerlessness, untamed as we communicate what can give us hope and certainty in the positivity of life.

Thank you for your hospitality

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