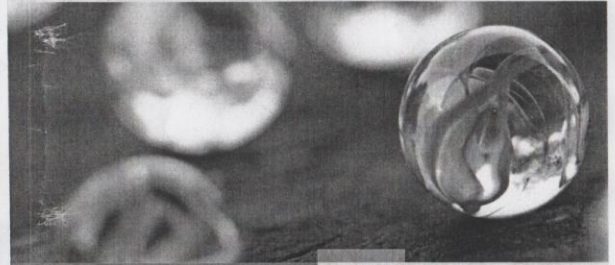djdattica

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ANALYSIS
OF EDUCATIONAL
PRACTICES

A comparison
of research models

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The analysis of teaching practices at school and at university

It is well-known that teachers are required to have an experimental mentality leading them to constantly verify the educational efficiency of their teaching actions and make new hypotheses to improve. Actually, what really happens at school is that intuition is predominant because of the lack of time, so these hypotheses are quite dim, working procedures are the fruit of almost indefinite improvisation, and assessment does not fit the need for observing the benefits and results of learning or it is not even carried out at all. Therefore, it is required for school teachers to have a strong methodological competence in the field of teaching research.

The Research Group at the University of Palermo reckoned that this kind of competence would improve thanks to a more direct teachers' involvement in collecting their teaching practices and analysing them.

There follow the aims we tried to reach through our researches exposed in the present paper:

a. Analysing the quality of a teaching practice thought to answer the different needs of students, according to the principles of personalized education;

b. Providing teachers with hints for reflection on their teaching process so as to urge them into a revision of their habits, communicative styles, pedagogical & teaching methodologies, contents and tools in order to exploit all possible forms of students excellence;

c. Finding out teaching methods able to develop student motivation to learn.

Researchers have focused on the teachers, but as the students' results are the expression of the teachers' methodology, we have followed two parallel paths:

– evaluation of professional improvements as revealed by teachers;
– evaluation of the students' results obtained thanks to the professional growth of teachers who work to improve the quality of education.

In our analysis on the teaching practices, great attention has been paid to personalized education within several educational contexts.

The scheme followed has been that of Research-Action, integrated with the best quantitative and qualitative methods of research yielded by the classic teaching experimental background.

The use of this research method has helped teachers individualize & personalize the teaching/learning process, while considering the efficiency of their work and comparing the same work with that of their colleagues.

The reports of teachers, along with all the didactic materials produced, have been related to the previous teaching planning and classroom observation carried out by the researcher. Surveys to teachers, parents and students, focus group, classroom observation, routine collection, regular observation are the means used for gathering the required data. Any single item of the research has been carefully observed and compared so as to obtain some constants in the field of individualized didactics.

The teaching experiences as collected at the end of each and every research may be the starting point for teaching in educative settings similar to those described by their colleagues who joined our research programme. This is why we have cared the description of settings in which both teachers and students interacted.

Here follow the research reports carried out by school teachers and university professors both working on the initial planning phase through the technique of "equal negotiation".

In the first part of the present paper, we will show some methodological aspects common to our analyses made in the field of teaching practices. In the second part, we will provide a brief description of each research carried out from 2007 and 2010 by the f Didactic Research Group at the University of Palermo.

1. Methodological aspects in the analysis of teaching practices

The studies made in the last ten years demonstrate that, within the field of teaching practices, there is no defined teaching model of which we can assert the effectiveness at the end of the educative action as well as we usually do with hypotheses. This is because the learning/teaching process has several facets and teaching is an educational phenomenon we can approach only thanks to the aid of scientific research. This scientific research helps us building proper teaching methodologies which are specifically suitable to different contexts.

Those teachers taking part into the research are observed in their routine life contest while respecting the way they live their teaching experience and integrating their experience within the research process.

A first question arises about the effectiveness of the data collected and the evaluation we express, a second one deals with the integration of the collected data with quantitative and qualitative tools, in a word, we ask whether it is possible to use a blended research methods with elements belonging to different scientific traditions and extrapolated from their different epistemological areas.

When teachers are involved in a research project about their way of teaching, this fact brings about their professional improvement and, consequently, a better quality in the school service.

This way of approaching research has certainly motivated both the researcher and the educator, but it has also produced some epistemological problems which usually come out when dealing with "the way teachers teach". The solution has been that of using the Research-Action operational paradigm integrated with the best research methods yielded by classic teaching experimentations.

Those who work in educational-teaching field research in everyday contexts are aware of the dynamic nature of school life and the way it may obstacle the respect of strict research procedures and protocols.

We had to face similar problems during our research work, therefore we had to had to continuously revise and reformulate our path, although maintaining a clear operative direction in the research, a balanced sense of our methodological limits and an holistic vision towards the complex school context.

The description of the participant teachers' activities, the telling of their personal experience, and the presentation of the results, made by the researchers, have been integrated with quantitative measurements and with "triangulations" and have required the intervention of external assessors.

The efficiency obtained through the triangulation may be considered of a "cumulative" kind because it comes out of the combination of researchers and teachers initial predictions, the results interpretation, systematic observation, interviews, and the protagonists' personal telling.

It is possible to overcome the obstacle of results generalization (a problem common to all kinds of research in the educational context) just considering that, in similar research situations, there is a grade of pre-determined probability of gaining the same results.

In Qualitative research, it is fundamental to be careful and precise in describing the students' features, the educational situation where teachers work, teachers' personal characteristics, and the socio-cultural context where the school is located.

Although Qualitative research is valid within the context where it has been carried out and for the specific group of teachers involved, yet it is true that every scientific discipline advances thanks to the scholars' reflection on the scientific data collected.

In the field of Didactics, in order to compare the results of different researches dealing with the same topic, a researcher is required to describe the assumptions of his every teaching intervention, of the favourable or unfavourable conditions where he has operated, the limits to the accomplishment of the intervention, the final effects of the intervention itself. Therefore, though respecting the idiographic dimension of the research on teachers' good practices, some "constants" may be drawn from the analysis of final research reports and may be useful to future actions of teachers coping with the same topics in the same contexts.

We do believe that it would be generally preferable to lead two parallel research paths: one focused on the teacher's action and the other one focused on the addressees of his teaching action. In that case, the logic-empirical tradition and the hermeneutic tradition perfectly combine because the rich information gathered about the way the teacher teaches is completed by the information related to students' educational improvements and advancements.

The research methodology we have applied to the teaching practices is mainly of a qualitative kind, although some elements of quantitative research are also taken into account. On the other hand, when dealing with the students' learning process, we follow the lines of the classic experimental protocol because it aims at grasping the possible relations between the teacher's actions and the students' ones. However, along with quantitative tools (such as test, questionnaire, objective evidence, semantic differential, etc.), we sometimes used qualitative tools with students as well. This kind of instrument facilitate to catch their inner life experience while learning, thanks to the support of the teacher who is supposed to create a positive affective relationship with his students, no matter what teaching method he uses.

The assessing tools we mainly used within the affective area were: participant observation, non-directive interview, life story telling, projective techniques, role-play, critical incidents technique, content analysis, and log-book.

We have analysed teaching practices to obtain a professional improvement in those teachers who have cooperated with our university researchers trying to innovate school didactics. Therefore, teachers have been - at the same time - the subject and the object of our research. At the end, with the help of the researchers, the groups of teachers involved in the experiment questioned and reflected about the improvements in their way of facing and coping with different educational situations.

In analysing teaching practices, we followed two parallel paths. On the one hand, we used the methods, techniques and tools proper of Research-Action with teachers; on the other hand, we preferred to use a quasi-experimental design with interrupted time series and with only one group. This required the use of psychological tests, questionnaires,

pre-/while-/post- experimental activity checks, log books and non-directive interviews.

When carrying out a Research-Action, the researchers' attention is rightly focused on teachers professional development. Yet, it is important to consider that teachers professionally grow once they decide to improve their personal contribution to the educational service.

At the end of a research made *with* and *on* teachers - as it happens in any Research-Action procedure - the group is to carry out a phase of self-assessment. Considering this self-assessment phase, we noticed that the teachers positive or negative opinion about the research is strongly influenced by their perception of their pupils' improvements. This is not, of course, the only element useful to evaluate the results of a Research-Action with teachers because, first of all we have to consider their human and professional growth. By the way, their interest and motivation improve once they perceive that they have been used the right educational strategies and devices to guarantee their students' improvement.

This is why, along with the analysis of the teaching practices, we also worked on the analysis of the students' learning.

Our researches on teaching practices may be properly labelled as "researches on the *good* teaching practices" because, since the beginning, we all members of the research group have shared the didactic model of " Personalized Education", thought to be the most suitable and desirable in all the educational contexts where those *good practices* have been collected.

In the researches we have carried out over the last four years, the teacher started explaining his planned activity in the classroom and he was observed by a researcher who recorded his teaching actions on a grid built up according to the teacher's proposals and the researcher's pedagogical indicators.

Right after the teaching activity, the students were asked to express their idea of the aims they would reach and their perception of effectively reaching them.

There followed the most capital phase of the research, the time when the researcher facilitated the teacher in telling what he had done in class,

the reasons why certain un predicted changes had occurred, the pupils' feedback, and the final assessment & evaluation. During the interview, the researcher also tried to stimulate the free expression of the teachers' feelings and emotions.

The research group has finally reflected upon the whole number of data collected through each research and the results obtained have been compared to those of other researchers who had already studied and analysed similar teaching actions in similar teaching contexts as ours.

The materials we gathered, both in paper and digital format, may be considered as a precious tool for the educational training process and also for all those teachers who are willing to innovate and revitalize their teaching action. In particular, the teachers' pieces of telling are supported by the teaching material they produced to reach precise educational objectives according to precise student profiles.

We are aware of the non total objective nature of the tools we used to collect the good teaching practices, because it is natural to be influenced by the idea we have of teaching. However, we think that before expressing an opinion on someone's way of teaching, it is necessary to have a clear concept of how a good teaching practice should be to help the students reach their complete and mature growth.

What does this man's "complete and mature growth" consist of? When can we affirm that a learner has actually reached a sufficient grade of growth so as to consider him as "well-brought-up", although it is well-known that this is a lifelong process? The answers to these questions depend on the conception we share of man, of what is good for him to pursue his happiness. In other words, education should give each individual the chance to become exactly what he really is deep inside himself. Every good or bad idea of teaching is based on a pedagogical conception about the nature of education and this conception is linked, in turn, to a definite kind of philosophic anthropology of reference.

According to scientific honesty, each researcher is supposed to render his personal point of view explicit before starting any research.

2. The analysis of teaching practices at university and at school[1]

2.1. A formative path to develop the meta-cognitive competence: the analysis of teaching practices at University

An example of analysis of university teaching practices is the one carried out during the Academic Year 2007/2008. It was a formative path aiming at the acquisition of the meta-cognitive competence through three types of exercise (Case Study, Decision Making, *Activation du Développement Vocationnel et Professionnel*) articulated into nine modules usable both *in presentia* and online (Zanniello, 2009 and La Marca, 2009).

The aims of the formative activities we planned were the students' improvement of their studying methodology in relation to the autoregulation of learning, to their self-assessment, their critical competence and cooperative learning.

We assumed that a well-planned and well-conducted sequence of teaching activities would help each student not only learn the main disciplinary topic of the activity, but also consolidate the competences which are fundamental for those who deal with education: Problem Solving, Experiential Learning, Self-Correction, Critical Reflection, and Reciprocal Learning.

The methodology we have used and the teaching practices we have recorded may help the new university professors define the habits, communicative styles and adequate teaching methodologies fit for the needs of those students who are about to chose educational professions in the future.

The analysis of the recorded teaching practices and university professors' routines (Longo, 2010) provide useful guidance to let the students acquire a meta-cognitive competence, conceived as the combination of motivated effort, perceived auto-efficiency, interest in the academic activities, satisfaction for studying with profit, search for help in the conduct of intellectual work.

[1] A survey of the researches carried out by the Didactic Research Group at the University of Palermo from 2007 to 2010.

2.2. Orientation didactics in secondary school

A. During the School Year 2007/2008, six teaching teams of year 5 - classes of some high schools in Palermo experimented - in collaboration with expertises and university researchers - a real way of using orientation didactics at school. This favoured both the learning of disciplinary contents & notions and the development and consolidation of the students' abilities necessary to plan an effective undergraduate formative and professional path.

The didactic experimentation was inserted in a project called *Aracne Due* (Zanniello, 2008; Zanniello, 2009) based on a number of coordinated activities involving the schools, the University, the Orientation Centre *Collegio Universitario Arces* in the professional growth of young high school students and in their acquisition of the pre-requisites to start their university career.

According to the ADVP (*Activation du Développement Vocationnel et Professionnel*) method, teachers built - and later described - some exercises of exploration, crystallization, specification, and of execution to improve the students' process of professional growth exploiting the content of the subjects taught during the 5th school year.

The usual aims of the ADVP methodology have been re-interpreted in terms of assessable and verifiable objectives and six series of tasks have been created to be harmonically inserted in the teaching/learning activities thought for the class groups involved. In creating the tasks, autoregulation of learning has been considered as a crucial strategy to let students reflect on their cognitive processes.

In the final publication, teacher's guide-lines have been inserted before each task or each group of tasks, containing the analyses and reflections carried out during the research phases.

B. During the School Year 2009/2010, within a research named *P.O.n.Te* (La Marca, 2010), we tried to provide both teachers and parents with hints for reflection & thinking about educational habits, communicative styles, methodologies, tools, and contents suitable for the improvement of parents/children communication and for the promotion of the learners' motivation to study.

We have been thinking that a wider knowledge of the typical problems related to adolescence could help parents and teachers prevent from situations of uneasiness so as to intervene with proper aids and support. Therefore, we attempted to let parents and teachers acquire a better competence in Educational Guidance towards the adolescents.

The research involved eleven schools on the Sicilian territory: three secondary schools 1ˢᵗ grade, eight secondary schools 2ⁿᵈ grade, that is five *Licei Scientifici* (scientific college), two *Licei Classici* (humanities-based college), and one *Istituto Socio-psico-pedagogico* (teachers' college).

The project has been articulated into two different kinds of actions divided into several interconnected phases. The formative action and the research action harmoniously integrated one within the other. This integration has been possible thanks to the coordination of researchers, family orienters, and teachers who worked in perfect synergy and unity. The final publication contains the description of the formative practices considered as well as some of the tellings by the participants involved in the research.

2.3. *Personalized didactics and gender differences*

A. The personalization of the learning process implies the use of didactic differentiation, that is a special way diversifying teaching (class lessons and practice drills, group work, workshop, techniques of self-instruction, and e-learning). This was the premise for a research (Ferotti, 2010), carried out during the Academic Year 2009/2010 with the aims of collecting some good practices of personalized didactics which may urge teachers to individualize habits, communicative styles, pedagogical & teaching methodologies, tools & contents able to exploit the different forms of students excellence.

The research has been articulated into three phases: 1) assistance to teachers during the planning of the actions to conduct into the classroom (tools: teachers' initial telling + researchers' observation); 2) realization of the planned activities in the class (tools: teachers' successive telling + researchers' observation); 3) evaluation of the practices (tools:

analysis of the teachers' telling, researchers' observation, interviews to the students).

We have collected and analysed the good practices of personalized didactics of 30 Italian teachers attending the IUL (Italian University Line) Master in "Personalized Didactics".

B. The analysis of teaching practices diversified according to gender differences, has been carried out in some primary schools. Two volumes edited by Zanniello (2007) and La Marca (2007 and 2009b) contains the theoretical references used to build the tools for the collection of those kind of teaching practices.

2.4. *Learning innovation and Media Education*

A. The SCOLA project (La Marca, 2010 and Cannella, 2010), – Sviluppo COllaborativo Learning Objects Autoprodotti (collaborative design and development of self-produced learning objects), involved a network of 11 schools on the islands of the Eolie, Egadi, Ischia and Capri, San Antioco, San Pietro and La Maddalena in Sardinia, during the (2006-07 and 2007-08) school year. The main objective was the collaborative design and development of an Open Educational Resource by a group of Italian teachers from the Mediterranean island of Favignana (part of the Egadi Islands, off the north-west coast of Sicily).

The project had three aims:

1. to improve the quality of digital content available for the schools of the small islands;

2. to introduce teachers to the issues surrounding production of digital content (e.g. granularity, context, content, interoperability, accessibility and standards), its integration in their teaching and its impact on the school curriculum;

3. to introduce innovative teaching and learning practices, taking a new approach to the learning environment and school time.

The project was designed as a pilot activity, based on action research methodology and, of course, ICT tools were at its core.

The project was designed and supported by the Department of International Relations of the Italian Ministry of Education, INDIRE

(the National Agency for the Support of the School Autonomy[2]), and the SIMI Consortium of small islands.

The SCOLA pilot project was designed to promote the introduction and integration of ICT in the schools of the small islands of the Mediterranean. It was organised in two phases: the first one (2006-07) focused on teacher training using collaborative methodologies and to support the teachers as they designed and produced their own Open Educational Resource. The second phase (2007-08) aimed at proposing to students a virtual learning environment where they can retrieve and use learning object of Maths, Science and Italian subject. The learning activities are analyzed and uploaded on line in the learning environment.

This double approach was proposed to solve two social and cultural challenges:

• to include these island schools in innovative developments occurring in education throughout Europe over the last decade;

• to use ICT to overcome the physical isolation of the islands and enable students to study.

The project aimed to give teachers and students the opportunity to use ICT, and to appreciate its potential, not just as a classroom tool or for overcoming problems associated with the physical isolation of the islands, but for promoting equal opportunity for all students. In this respect, ICT has great potential for supporting and even transforming learning.

B. For nowadays, technological innovation allowes the use of a lot of media tools in a simpler, cheaper, and more accessible way than in the past, we have planned – and then realized at school – a pedagogical-didactic project based on cartoons (Cappuccio, 2008). Thanks to the

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[2] INDIRE collaborates with the Italian Ministry of the Education in the management of EU programmes, projects and initiatives, including European Schoolnet, SOCRATES, Eurydice and the eTwinning National Support Service. It has participated in many Community funded projects in the 4th and 5th framework programmes, including the EUN Multimedia Schoolnet, the European Treasury Browser, EUNCLE, Valnet, Celebrate and eColours. Since 2001 it has conducted research on the use of elearning to train school personnel and students.

researchers' help, primary school teachers were able to: provide their pupils efficient criteria for the choice of cartoons, making a difference between good and bad ones; enlarge and improve their knowledge and understanding of the cartoons code; experiment a personal and creative rielaboration of the message vehiculated by the cartoons. During this researc, teaching practices have been collected focusing the attention on the way teachers use cartoons in the classroom.

2.5. Competence-based planning and assessment

A. The continuous school reforms and institutional changes within the Italian educational system, made a precise definition of competences indispensable in the multiple field of teaching, learning, assessment and contexts of use of the competences themselves.

What if there were, for each and every discipline (or subject), as it is for modern languages, the chance to individualize some common levels of reference to describe specific competences in clear and shareable terms? What if we all used the same vocabulary, criteria and parameters to refer to competences? The it would be easier to find a way in the triple praxis of teaching/learning/assessment carried out of a well-organized teachers' team work.

This was the starting point for the hypothesis of extracting the theoretical-methodological structure of the «Common European Framework for Languages»[3] and of its further application on other disciplines so as to create a sort of operational protocol (particularly addressed to primary school) useful in several scientific areas or subjects other than languages.

The Framework has been, therefore, conceived as a dynamic tool for a reconsideration of the concept of "competence", through the analysis of the teaching practices used by primary school teachers of English and Italian (Compagno, 2010).

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[3] Common European Framework for Languages: Learning, Teaching., Assessment. Council of Europe for Cultural Cooperation, Education Committee, Modern Languages Division, Strasbourg, 2001.

B. Thanks to the research *Dagli obiettivi alle competenze* (Zanniello, 2010), our attention has focused again on those educational aims and long term objectives which had been put aside, for a while, by the behaviourist objective-based planning. In order to help each student develop and grow as a person, these elements are crucial.

A system of fundamental educational objectives (already experimented and checked) has been used to overcome the sectorial and fragmented nature of old taxonomies and also to guarantee educational continuity, the hologrammaticity of the learning experience, the easy link between school activities and the main educational aims transformed into fundamental educational objectives promoting educational continuity at every educational level. Yet, we believe that the recourse to such an objective-based system is perfect to keep the specific educational features of school experience especially when moving from an objective-based planning/assessing process to a competence-based one.

Teaching practices have been here collected and analysed pinpointing the connection between specific learning objectives and general educational ones (derived from fundamental educational objectives).

C. The research on the *Valutazione delle competenze e autoregolazione dell'apprendimento* (Pedone, 2008) has been conducted with teachers from thee Sicilian schools sharing the Authentic Assessment Theory of their students' real competences. It has offered a contribution to the theoretical framework and to the reflection on the concept of "competence". Through the research, attention has been focused on the main features of competence assessment, conceived as a privileged tool for personalizing and exploiting the learner's school path.

There came out the competences (and the way to assess them) expected at the end of the primary educational cycle from pupils. Later on, we have collected some good competence assessment practices referred to students attending the 3rd and last year of the secondary school 1st grade.

2.6. The analysis of practices in the didactics of storytelling and the assessment of written essays

A. The research path denominated *Analisi di pratiche di didattico della narrazione* (Anello, 2008) is made of two distinct, but complementary phases.

The 1st phase of the descriptive inquiry has involved 11 teachers and 222 learners. We have individualized two main goals: 1) to improve the knowledge of the didactic use of storytelling; 2) to plan and carry out formative actions aiming at the consolidation or promotion of the narrative way of expression in all its possible forms. We have observed teaching situations of narration/animation where the teacher supports the narrative expression and guides the student in the temporal structuring of the telling, in the acquisition of accidental relations, and in the understanding of both deductive and inductive inference. This 1st phase has been characterized by a qualitative analysis with tools such as: protocols of free observations and of semi-structured observation (*what the teacher does* in order to teach how to tell; *what the student does* in order to learn how to tell); instruments to check the learning process and also the students' motivation (check-lists, questionnaires). It has been possible to individualize some kinds of didactic use of storytelling occurring at school: creation and collection of short stories and fairy tales, creation of story books, autobiographies and personal albums, scenographic storyboards and pieces of drama, hypertexts, poster presentations, exhibitions. Considering specific reasons for storytelling and working on the evocative power of words, teachers often guided their students along creative paths.

The second phase has been centred on the collection of "storytelling teaching practices" and has been carried out through the recourse to both individual or group interviews (focus group) and the use of a testimonial narrative.

B. In the research on the *Valutazione sulle composizioni scritte e promozione delle abilità metacognitive a scuola* (Sangiuseppe, 2010), we tried to find out how to develop primary school teachers' specific doci-mologic competence aimed at the evaluation of written essays.

The research has been articulated into two phases: the 1st one dedicated to the making & implementation of the docimologic analysis, the 2nd one based on the operational planning, building and experimental validation of report containing both remedial activities and tasks of cooperative creative writing for the development of linguistic and metacognitive skills.

In particular, in the 1st phase of the research, we worked with 50 primary school teachers on duty and we provided 252 university students, attending the Degree Course in "Primary Education" with a formative training on the importance of the writing skill for the individual's growth. A specific guide has been used to correct 2.583 essays and we have also taken into account the analysis of all the skills involved in the written production by learners aged 9-10.

Teachers had the chance to use both the guide and a profile with average data & information in order to create suitable analytic rubrics for the evaluation of written essays.

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