Scuola democratica First International Conference

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## EDUCATION AND POST-DEMOCRACY

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# VOLUME I

# Politics, Citizenship, Diversity and Inclusion

ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA"

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# Italian Schools and Sustainable Development. A Network Approach: the Italian Case Study

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## Introduction

Over the years, the attention to Sustainable Development has become increasingly important. This is shown by the growing number of events and initiatives organized on a national level, the multiplication of university courses and educational insights in schools, the increase in the number of debates and political interventions on the subject. But this is not just a matter of numbers, but also of increasing sensitivity and awareness. It is, after all, there for all to see the need to undertake a transformation process capable of combining economic growth, rights and social integration and protection of the natural environment. Great goals such as those required by this new paradigm of Sustainable Development cannot be considered achieved if cultural, social and ethical resources are not activated, and the creation of networks between the actors is not promoted.

The aim of this paper is, first, to describe the role of educational institutions for Sustainable Development. The school must put forward the change that is taking place, as well as, be an incubator of innovative teaching methods in which sustainability is the keystone in which all aspects of school life are addressed. The school, along this path, which is virtuous but absolutely tortuous, is the main driving force behind the pursuit of the training objectives identified as priorities by the various national and international entities, such as equality, inclusiveness, the culture of the exchange of ideas and knowledge between public and private realities.

For this reason, this paper aims to define the basics of a theoretical framework useful to understand the importance of the network approach to achieve a sustainable growth. Given the objective of this work, in the final part of the chapter, in fact, it is highlighted how the need to meet common objectives (among the schools) of concretization of the outgoing students, staff training and improvement of the quality of services provided in the perspective of sustainability, has led to the creation of a network of schools, ReSS - Network of Schools for Sustainable Development - as one of the first experiences of coordination and sharing between Italian schools, of different order and degree, committed to the issues of social responsibility and environmental sustainability.

## 1. Collaborating for education for sustainable development

The role of propeller attributed to school education is promoted by the indications contained in the objectives of 2030 Agenda. Indeed, with the Goal 4 'Quality Education', the Agenda identifies the school as a carrier to spread sustainability in every field of society. School has also to support the sustainability

from an educational, scientific, technological, cultural and educational point of view. Therefore, it's evident that the school is not an institution that welcomes the principles that derive from the observance of the provisions contained in Goal 4 but is recognized as the body that allows the promotion of the entire system which revolves around Sustainable Development. This to represent an effective lever for promotion for the adoption of the entire 2030 Agenda. This is acceptable, since knowledge is a transversal element for change: the spread of the principles and of sustainable development in the culture of the new generations, the acquisition of knowledge and skills for a sustainable lifestyle, appear indispensable elements for the dissemination of virtuous models of responsible production and consumption and for the creation of a conscious and active citizenship.

**FIGURE 1.** *SDG 4: correlation between goals and network of target*

source: elaboration by authors

Reference to the 2030 Agenda and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, one of the specificities that emerges is the clear correlation between the 17 goals (Fig. 1). And it's this correlation that must also be encouraged among the bodies and organizations of the various sectors involved in the 2030 Agenda, as it is not guaranteed that any result will be achieved unless work is stopped in compartments within the system of Sustainable Development.

If the institutions would work together, more results would be obtained. The success of the Agenda will be possible only through a joint action of the various actors in the community. In fact, the ability to organize and manage education based on principles of sustainable development implies the existence of strong and cooperative institutions able to initiate inclusive, representative and reacting decision-making processes, involving various reference stakeholders through the creation of network, the creation of networks, and the interaction between different educational institutions. In this way, schools collaborate for sustainable development, sharing resources, tools and, above all, know-how. The virtuous circles triggered by the collaborative approach stimulate, indeed, the crossed fertilisation of innovative and sustainable ideas and projects, able to overcome

the limitations of the «mental models» (mix of knowledge, experiences and skills) of the single subjects. (Fiorani, Di Gerio, 2017).

Actively participating in sustainable networks, creating solid partnerships, in a scenario that sees sustainability as a fundamental factor for development, inevitably generates advantages, since it guarantees the sharing of knowledge and skills, resources and knowledge that an organization can have internally, often not sufficient, on their own, to face a rapidly changing reality. Being part of a sustainable network certainly means giving (sharing a part of your know-how) but also receiving (being able to have a greater number of ideas, suggestions, information).

Still, a further advantage lies in being stimulated to change, thanks to the fact that participation in a network makes it possible to face the difficulties that a change brings with it: one learns to consider it as a positive push, as an opportunity for growth and comparison with other realities. We must not forget that organizations are made up of people who sometimes struggle to change their beliefs and behaviours.

Third advantage concerns the possibility of feeling part of a community. It's like be part of a group that, sharing the same reality, reduces the risk of suffering the adverse effects of adverse situations and allows to seek solutions to the problems that are found in organizations operating in the same compartment.
So the logic of network creation and the care of relationships are found to be basic aspects for the development of sustainable approaches and methods. For this reason, the patrimony of collaborations established between schools allows to optimize the realization of new project ideas, to share good practices and to implement interventions and activities in a synergistic way, directing the compass needle towards the pursuit of sustainable development in the field environmental, social, economic and institutional for the entity itself and for the community and the reference territory. In this perspective, in the following paragraph, it will be possible to analyse what is developing in the Italian school context through the establishment of the Network of Schools for Sustainable Development (ReSS) through which the commitment that the participating schools are implementing for the pursuit of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

## 2. The Italian schools, sustainable development and the network approach: the network of schools for sustainable development

The marked interest in a collaborative approach between educational institutions has found a positive foundation in the Regulation containing rules on the autonomy of educational institutions, introduced with the D.P.R. 275/99 (implementation of art. 21, of the law 15 March 1999, n. 59), which, introducing the so-called 'School networks', provided the appropriate tools to actively involve the various schools, helping to promote growth and maturity of responsibilities connected with autonomy, creating projects with significant impact on the innovation of the current education system. Subsequently, the Italian government, with the Law of 13 July 2015, n. 107, has finally provided the conditions and bases for reforming the national education and training system. The reform, which has precisely the purpose of affirming the central role of the school in the knowledge society and raising the levels of education and the students and students' competences and preventing and recovering abandonment and dispersion, has provided for in paragraph 70 of the art. 1, the establishment of networks of scholastic institutions of the same territorial finalized scope for the upgrading of professional resources, the joint management of administrative and administrative tasks, as well as the creation of projects or educational,

educational, sports or cultural initiatives of territorial interest, to be defined on the basis of scholastic autonomy agreements of the same territorial area, defined as «network agreements». Subsequently, the MIUR, in the ministerial note of 7 June 2016, defined in detail the operating methods for the constitution of networks between schools, as well as suggested an organization of the networks at two levels, or two types of network: *i*) the area network, which regularly brings together all the state schools in the territorial area identified by the Regional School Office; private schools participate in the area network, in relation to the actions and activities that involve finality and fiction; *ii*) the networks of purpose, which spontaneously constitute themselves between the schools, even beyond the sphere of belonging, for the pursuit of specific goals that are reflected in the priorities identified for the territory of the area or in more specific local and national needs.

In this context, the *Network of Schools for Sustainable Development* is inserted, a network created during the *Summer Camp 2018 - Inspire Sustainable Innovation in the School Stakeholder Engagement and Participatory Design for the Creation of Shared School-Territory Value*. This was organized by the University of Rome Tor Vergata and formally established on October 2018, represents, as already mentioned, one of the first network experiences among all schools engaged in environmental sustainability and social responsibility issues. Currently, the network is made up of 17 founding members and 52 ordinary members. The choice to build this network was an important change of pace that today allows us to create systemic paths, positive relationships, and exchanges of good practices. It also shows that, despite common opinions, educational institutions are open to change and accept the challenge of guiding and guiding them, thanks to the transmission of knowledge, skills and knowledge they carry out every day during their training activities.

The need that led to the establishment of a network of schools engaged in following a sustainable path lies mainly in three reasons, related to the advantages mentioned in the previous paragraph. *i*) share experiences and best practices, already used by individual institutes: on the theme of sustainability, the Summer Camp event highlighted how a good number of participating schools already had in their activity a wealth of sustainability-oriented experiences that, through the creation of a network, could have been easily transferable, in terms of knowledge and skills, to all other participating schools. Communicating best practices also allows the nascent Network to act as a stimulus for other schools, not particularly virtuous in terms of sustainable development, to take concrete actions on sustainability issues; *ii*) satisfy the common interest in the design of methodological and didactic paths aimed at the realization of the outgoing profile of the students and students, the training of their staff for the development of professional skills and the improvement of the quality of the services provided, with a view to sustainability; *iii*) the creation of a community, necessary to manage activities that, each institute, would struggle to govern on its own.

The Network, an expression of collaboration between schools of different order and degree present on the Italian territory, represents a network of purpose, since it is spontaneously established between institutions beyond the sphere of belonging. Among the aspects that have favoured the birth, it includes the possibility of contributing to the adoption, among other things, of more effective initiatives to combat the phenomena of social and cultural exclusion such as the dispersion and school dropout, and the search for the best strategies for the scholastic insertion of disabilities, for the improvement of the quality of learning, for the educational success and to ensure a greater homogeneity of the quality of the training offer on a national scale, as well as to define an effective training

of internal staff, perfectly in line with the objectives of the 2030 Agenda. In general, in fact, the institutional rationales that the Network sets itself are those of:

a. transforming the network of the institutional collaboration as generative of new systemic, coordinated and essential arrangements. From this point of view, the education and training system enters into collaboration, contaminating itself with sustainable issues of relevance;
b. promote ideas, experiences and projects that have already been successfully implemented by one of the members who, by communicating the results obtained and the way they operate, makes it possible to spread and transmit knowledge and useful skills so that others can also develop their own initiatives;
c. train not only students about sustainable development issues, but also technical-administrative staff and teachers who are the first spokesmen for disseminating knowledge;
d. develop innovative methodologies, transdisciplinary approaches and participatory methods to actively involve students;
e. develop awareness-raising campaigns on a local, regional and national scale that involve all stakeholders that revolve around the educational institution:
f. collaborate with the University of Rome 'Tor Vergata' which acts as a support for network coordination, project supervision;
g. to foster collaboration, through agreements and conventions, with actors from the public, private and non-profit world who intend to give their support in achieving specific objectives.

The attention to the constitution of the Network allows to bring out how in schools committed to sustainable development a cultural change is beginning to take place. The result of a commitment that involves the entire school community. The key role is undoubtedly played by the school managers and the teachers who are the first convey knowledge; nevertheless, the commitment of the students, called to adopt sustainable behaviours and lifestyles, as «sustainability multipliers» (Calvano, 2017) inside and outside the school premises becomes strategic. It's in fact the very value that the school recognizes for the students that leads them to rethink the way of teaching, focusing on an active participation with the learners and among the institutes present on the local and national territory in order to activate educational and training courses capable of generating not just knowledge, but to construct and incorporate the ways of thinking that make sustainable development understand the guiding principle of social development, questioning its fundamental values and relating them to other social orientations.

## 3. Limitations and future directions

In this paper, the analysis of a case study in an embryonic stage does not allow us to adequately conceive the potential of the network. In this sense, in order to understand more deeply the ReSS's ability to trigger virtuous interscholastic mechanisms in favour of sustainable development, an empirical analysis must be added to a purely descriptive study. A survey among the participating schools would allow, in fact, to bring out possible changes in the way of working to respond to global challenges.

## Conclusions

The path that schools need to take is long and very complex. It's a road in which the current educational systems must be rethought and where must be placing the goals of the 2030 Agenda at the centre, in order to create a full synergy between the knowledge system and sustainable development. Thinking today of a new educational paradigm, open to the integration of social responsibility and environmental sustainability logics and capable of responding to the changes brought by modernity, globalization and innovations, also integrating the objectives of the 2030 Agenda, represents a way for the same educational institutions can ask themselves about 'doing school'. This to improve and transform existing educational programs and paths. It's a fascinating challenge, ambitious but extremely complex, to which schools have to respond by opening their eyes to the world. With a strongly collaborative spirit, widening the boundaries and sharing the initiated initiatives, relaunching them vigorously and extending them throughout the national territory, in to allow more human, healthier, more sustainable growth. Therefore, the newly established ReSS presents enormous potential in bringing schools closer to sustainability and its principles, focusing on the diffusion of culture and good practices on sustainable development to all stakeholders, putting initiatives and skills together to increase the positive impacts in environmental, ethical and social terms of the actions put in place individually by the schools and at the same time strengthening the recognisability and value of the Italian experience at national and international level.

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