

Introduction. For a Renewed Protagonism of Historical Knowledge in Teacher Education

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Historical knowledge, as well as studies in the humanities in general, seem today to be located outside the cone of light cast by the contemporary spotlight. Over the years, the weight of hard sciences and applied sciences, of the fundamental importance of mathematical thinking and information technologies has increasingly grown. Dramatic changes on the global scene have ceased to be echoes of distant events and have begun to make themselves felt in so many aspects of our daily lives.

In this volume, we do not focus on the causes of this progressive decline of history understood as ‘magistra vitae’, nor do we deal with the disconnect between academia and civil society that has long preoccupied scholars who are most attentive to the needs of society. For these two essential insights, we will refer to other readings, while here we want to focus instead on what makes historical knowledge strategic as a tool for the educational world, and especially for schools.

Our aim is to explore the transformative potential that historical knowledge can offer in the educational context, emphasising the crucial role it plays in creating aware and critical citizens. Through the teaching of history, schools can help develop a critical sense in young people, stimulating reflection on complex issues and promoting the ability to independently analyse past events and their implications for the present. History provides a conceptual connector between different disciplines, enabling students to understand the interconnections between historical developments, the sciences, the arts and society. This integrated perspective can greatly enrich the educational experience, encouraging a view of

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knowledge that contributes interpretative keys to address contemporary challenges and the ethical choices they require. By analysing historical dynamics, teachers can thus help place contemporary events in a broader context, encouraging a deeper understanding of the roots of current problems and facilitating the development of more informed and sustainable solutions.

Therefore, we do not dwell on the defence of history in the face of the onslaught of modernity, because we believe that the best way to enhance the importance of history is to put it to the test and highlight its peculiar characteristics that can be very useful for contemporary man. At the same time, the volume moves away from any opposition between hard sciences and soft sciences because we think that humanistic studies can make a personalised, interesting and original contribution precisely in the connection with the present and the past of hard sciences and technologies. In this sense, through reconnecting with the origins of public history, we want to build bridges between different fields of research, between academia and society, between schools and territories, between the classroom and the local community. It is precisely this bridging activity that history excels at, especially if practised as public history, reconnecting and not dividing, helping to contextualise complex and global phenomena that never have immediate, simple or even intuitive solutions. History, as well as science in general, teaches that human culture has freed itself from the immediate domain of the senses thanks to a multiplicity of cultural artefacts and especially thanks to the potential of measuring instruments, tools of logical and argumentative reasoning, and the constant recourse to procedures of falsification of research hypotheses that are very often counter-intuitive and defy common sense.

The authors of this volume are united in shedding light on and emphasising a particular and very important function of historical knowledge, namely its place within teacher training courses. It is a multi-voice dialogue between academics and non-academics, between professors and school leaders, between students and tutors. All those who, in various capacities and roles, are interested in and committed to enhancing historical knowledge both during training for the teaching profession and, after the recruitment phases, within educational institutions. From this common understanding come the following pages, within which there are many consonances, but also some reasonable and interesting dissonances, which are to be understood as variations of thought on the general theme of the usefulness of historical knowledge in education. We believe we have only begun unearthing the potential of this meeting ground between history, education, schooling, and professionalism. We hope this research, both theoretical and in the field, can be continued – deepened and broadened – in ways that have only been glimpsed here or not yet analysed.

Furthermore, we believe that understanding the dissonances and variations in thinking in this volume is crucial to nurturing constructive debate not only to prepare for teaching, but as a teaching style and practice in the classroom. The differences of opinion underline the complexity of the issues and open up spaces for reflection that can lead to innovative developments. Indeed, history presents itself as a particularly functional approach to address even divisive and

controversial issues in the classroom, in order not to limit education, in scientific literature but especially in public communication, to subjects that incite no reaction or protest (Council of Europe 2015; Cowan 2012; Noddings, and Brooks 2016). Training does not mean transmitting, but rather educating in critical awareness, providing conceptual tools to master the interpretative difficulty of problems.

Historical competence is a typically anthropological path that leads people to develop a lively sense of curiosity about the others, whether they lived a few years ago or many centuries back in time. It is in this wonder, arising from the encounters with the countless variations of human cultures, that lies the fascination and also the great difficulty of doing history. It is a wonder that goes beyond curiosity about the exoticism of other cultures or the simple recognition of cultural differences, prompting people to understand more deeply the complex dynamics that have shaped societies over time. This ability to put oneself in the shoes of others is an essential foundation for shaping global citizens who are aware of and are open to intercultural dialogue. We thus have at our disposal a powerful tool to dismantle stereotypes and prejudices, a critical perspective that has history as its specific research method and that allows us to explore the multiple facets of human experience, giving voice to testimonies that are often neglected or marginalised. A history that is not subservient to political and nationalistic needs, but open to understanding the past, both when mankind has followed positive paths of collective well-being and when it has chosen paths of death and destruction. The joy of historical discovery is thus always mixed with anguish and compassion for the victims of violence.

History should be understood both as disciplinary knowledge, i.e. the discipline of history in the various school grades, and as transversal knowledge, as an approach to human problems based on an investigative, logical and argumentative method. This approach is fundamental, especially for cross-curricular education, from citizenship education to intercultural education, to dialogue between people and populations. We should not think, therefore, that school subjects that do not have the adjective 'historical' in their title are extraneous to this approach. One thinks in particular of the importance of the history of medicine or, in general, the history of science and technology. How useful it is, in the sphere of the sciences, to study the history of relationships between man and the environment, of the reciprocal adaptations and transformations, which are so difficult to fit into simple patterns and repetitive structures. In this sense, every school discipline has its own historical part that serves an incredible heuristic function, that of making students realise that when we open a textbook, we are not simply coming into contact with a series of statements to be quickly digested and returned to the teacher in the form of tests or questions, but rather to engage with the multiplicity of cultures and their efforts to survive and adapt.

For what interests us most in these pages, we can say that history allows the teacher (and the future teacher) to consciously appropriate his or her professionalism, recognising his or her own styles of teaching and relating to students, discovering their long-term characteristics, permanences and discontinuities. In

the context of teacher training, the historical approach can draw on a rich heritage of historical research, which has expanded and consolidated during the 20th century, both nationally and internationally. In this way, by cross-referencing personal history with the history of teaching, it is possible to develop the cultural sensitivity that is appropriate and necessary for teachers to become reflective professionals who can fully develop their maieutic skills. School, in fact, «is not a place where one teaches. Nor, properly speaking, where one learns. It is a place where one produces (one should produce) intellectual work. By working, or even by wanting to, one learns. Just like in primary school (to read, write, do arithmetic)» (Sanguinetti 1987, 3).

As Lawrence Stenhouse, a pioneer of the reflexive pedagogical approach, stated many years ago, the teacher is a researcher (Stenhouse 1975, 142ff): he continuously seeks to improve his understanding of students, of the ways in which students can learn to understand the problems he poses to them. Teaching is essentially a day-to-day act of research, crossing disciplinary skills and personality traits, and going beyond the rigid structures of the traditional curriculum.

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