World Library and Information Congress: 69th IFLA General Conference and Council

1-9 August 2003, Berlin

Education and educational responsability of the school documentalist in the school of the learning society

Donatella Lombello

Dipartimento di Scienze dell'educazione, Università degli studi di Padova
Italia

Abstract :

The European Communities have published during the last years several texts about education in a " learning society ". The way learning is considered, has now changed too, and constructivist approaches are regarded. The school documentalist is an important actor in the school team, and he has a complex educational role. He must be delivered training courses to enable him to play this role efficiently. These courses include Library Science, pedagogy and didactics, as well as communication and groupwork abilities.

1. Introduction: the demand for education in the 21st century society

The passage from the old to the new millennium has been marked by swift transformations affecting lifestyles, working and personal relations within each community.
Complexity, plurality, differentiation seem to be interactive and basic features of any aspect of our daily life: they require our capacity to provide answers that are not to be categorical or simplistic, rather open to dialogue and therefore flexible, creative and well though-out.
Responding to the new challenges issued by the 21st century means guaranteeing the world citizens' initial and lifelong education, from the moment they were born throughout their lives.
The pedagogical challenge in the 21st century's society consists of its capacity to face and manage the sudden and continuous changes occurring both in the private and in the social life.
This pedagogical challenge can only be met by adopting suitable educational methods enabling the new generations to acquire in particular:
- new attitudes to: dialogue, democratic coexistence, interpersonal communication, cooperation;

- new capacities to face-interpret and solve problems: by means of creative-original solutions (divergent thinking); by searching and formulating new hypotheses (heuristic capacity); by exercising reflection and criticism;
- new organizational, technical, and professional competences.

The international documents released at the end of the 20th century launched an appeal to make a heavy investment in the education of the new generation.
The educational responsibility, which school and society share in the light of their common feature, namely the project of continuous learning, is all the more felt. Formal learning provided by the school, and informal and non-formal learning provided by the society give a significant contribution to the quality of each individual's educational process [1].
Indeed, in this climate of pedagogical innovation and quality research in teaching and learning processes, the importance attached to the school library and the school documentalist proves to be crucial.

The 21st century society's pedagogical requirements and the promotion of the specific teaching-learning environment provided by the school library are more or less explicitly mentioned in the most recent documents drawn up by international organizations such as Unesco, IFLA, IASL. Moreover, I think that the educational role assumed by school libraries and documentalists is particularly highlighted in those Community documents, in which attention is continuously drawn on the optimisation of human resources in the new millennium's learning society, and in which the close link between the quality of education and the innovation capacity of society is emphasized.

In this regard, reference can be made to the White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness, and Employment: The Challenges and Ways forward into the 21st Century[2]; the Green Paper Living and Working in the Information Society: People First[3]; the other White Paper released in the European year of education and lifelong learning: Teaching and Learning. Towards the Learning Society[4], and lastly the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning[5].
In different ways and to different extents, implicit references are made in these documents to the educational function performed by the school library and the school documentalist, thereby confirming the importance of education as a "catalytic factor" in a continuously changing society[6]. Moreover, attention is drawn on innovation pedagogy[7] and learning strategies[8] aimed at providing citizens with those tools that prove to be indispensable to manage the complexity of the learning society.

---

[1] Commission of the European Communities, *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning. Commission Staff Working Paper,* Brussels, 30/10/2000, p.15.

[2] Commission of the European Communities, *White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness, and Employment: The Challenges and Ways forward into the 21st Century,* Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxemburg, 1994.
[3] Commission of the European Communities, *Green Paper. Living and Working in the Information Society: People First.,* Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxemburg, 1996, Supplement 3/93, see p.23 in particular.
[4] Commission of the European Communities, *Teaching and Learning. Towards the Learning Society. White Paper on Education and Training,* Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxemburg, 1996.
[5] Commission of the European Communities, *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning. Commission Staff Working Paper,* Brussels, 30/10/2000.
[6] See *White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness ...,* cit., p.137.
[7] See , *Teaching and Learning....* cit., p.29.
[8] Ivi, pp.23 and 31.

2. The school documentalist "in" the team of teachers-mentors

As I have already said, a repeated appeal has been launched in the various documents mentioned above for the innovation of teaching-learning methods. What is interesting to highlight is how *these changes in the relations between teachers and learners are conceived.* For example, in the *Memorandum,* in the third key message[9], teachers' professional role is redefined by acknowledging their function of *guides, mentors, mediators[10].* Therefore, learners can act as protagonists[11] and are given a central role in their learning process [12]. The function of *guide, mentor, mediator* is certainly to be attributed also to the school documentalists, given the educational function they perform in the specific *learning environment* represented by the school library.

Bianca Maria Varisco, an expert in experimental pedagogy, underlines that a learning environment is - according to the definition given by Brent Wilson, representative of the psycho-pedagogical approach of the social constructivism - "a place where students can work together and help each other in order to learn to use a variety of tools and information resources, so as to jointly achieve learning objectives and perform *problem solving* activities"[13]. Moreover, she defines the characterizing elements of the learning environment by deriving them from the definition provided by Gavriel Salomon. These elements are:

- a *physical space;*
- a *group of actors*: learners, teachers, instructor, mentor, experts, who activate interactions within the group itself;
- a *set of behaviours* agreed upon;
- a series of *rules* or *ties* cooperatively set or adopted by the actors;
- *practices* (tasks or activities) assigned or agreed upon;
- *operational times;*
- a *set of tools* or artefacts for the operative/cognitive observation-argumentation-manipulation;
- a *net of relations* among the actors;
- a *climate* related to the type of relations and to the modalities of development of the practices;
- a whole of *expectations* and *interpretations;*
- *ways of considering oneself* (as learners, teachers);
- *mental efforts* put forward in the learning processes [14].

---

[9] The third key message out of the six mentioned in the Community document entitled *Innovation in the teaching and learning techniques* refers to the much more fundamental dimension of the qualitative relationship in the education process, rather than the superficial and automatic adoption of more developed tools.

[10] Ivi, p.16.

[11] "…learners who, as far as possible, take charge of their own learning", ibidem.

[12] "Active learning presupposes the motivation to learn, the capacity to exercise critical judgements and the skill of knowing how to learn", ibidem.

[13] B.G. Wilson, *What is a Constructivist Learning Environments,* in B. G. Wilson (edited by), *Constructivist Learning Environments,* Englewood Cliff, Educational Technology publications, 1996, pp.3-8, cit. in B. M. Varisco, *Costruttivismo sociale e apprendimento a scuola,* in B.M.Varisco; V.Grion, *Apprendimento e tecnologie nella scuola di base,* Torino, UTET, 2000, p.40.

[14] See: G. Salomon, *Studying Novel Learning Environment as Pattern of Change,* in S.Vosniadou et al., *International Perspectives on the Design of Technology-Supported Learning Environments,* Erlabaum, Mah and vah, 1996, pp.363-377, cit. in B. M. Varisco; V.Grion, *Apprendimento e tecnologie…,* cit., p.41 (italics is in the text).

In this way an environment is created which, in our case, specifically recalls the features of the space-library: place of relations and mutual responses among the individuals, which are knowingly aimed at defining-*solving an* informative/cognitive *problem*[15] and, simultaneously, educational space to develop abilities - motivational, cognitive, meta-cognitive, hermeneutical, heuristic, relational-ethic-social-affective, of convergent thought (conceptualisation-deconstruction-reconstruction) and divergent thought (creation-invention of original-new solutions).

The education of the learner, who is *autonomous* in the process of acquiring knowledge, and *critical* in valuating and choosing materials and sources of knowledge, is indeed the prerequisite for that "lifelong" learning that is described in the EU documents mentioned above, which has its foundation in the process of *active construction* of knowledge and of *shared construction* of the meanings that especially formal education can guarantee, and that can take place especially in the school library.
Acquiring knowledge, learning to think, mastering competencies in whatever field of experience in a mature and critical way lay particular emphasis on the quality of both the thinking process and the procedure, and also the *social dimension* in which the said processes are developed.

The active dimension and the central role of the individual in the construction of knowledge, and simultaneously the cooperative and social dimension in the co-construction of knowledge, as the constructivist-situational approach of cognitive psychology teaches us, make reference to that methodological-didactical innovation described in the *Memorandum,* in which any kind of exclusively *ex cathedra,* directive and one-way teaching practice aiming at the simple transmission of knowledge, as well as any kind of exclusively receptive-passive learning practice by the learner[16], become obsolete.

The constructivist-situational perspective, instead, attaches great value to the research process, the processing of knowledge, those processes leading to the "ability to think", to that mature and critical thinking in which "attitudes and abilities are involved … [which] include, among the others, open-mindedness (retaining the judgment, taking into account the viewpoint of a person who disagrees), the ability of doing a systematic analysis of a situation or a reasoning, the ability of using and citing reliable sources, looking for alternatives, adopting or changing a stance, when there are sufficient elements to do so … the sensitivity to understand the way of feeling and the level of knowledge of the others …[which is] a social rather than a cognitive disposition"[17].

Against this background, the school library can be considered as a special learning environment, owing to the *pedagogical climate* which can be created in it (in general, more easily than in the classroom). This climate proves to be more favourable to obtain, from the students' questions and need for answers, though in the different competence **levels within**

---

[15] Besides the *problem solving* ability, the *problem finding* ability is very important: see B. M. Varisco, *Innovazione metodologica…*, cit., p.16.

[16] It is the didactic approach stemming from the objectivist-positivist conception, whereby knowledge is "immutable, objective, decontextualized, universal truth …": see B. M. Varisco, *Costruttivismo sociale e apprendimento a scuola,* in B.M. Varisco; V. Grion, *Apprendimento e tecnologie nella scuola di base,* Torino, UTET, 2000, p.9.

[17] P. Boscolo, *Psicologia dell'apprendimento scolastico. Aspetti cognitivi e motivazionali,* Torino, UTET, 1997, pp.347-348.

the working group[18], a cognitive and meta-cognitive mental *habitus*, that is to say "a general attitude to pose and deal with problems"[19], and the capacity of pointing out those "organizational principles enabling students to make links with their knowledge and attach a meaning to it"[20], besides the behavioural patterns based on solidarity, corporation, democratic coexistence.

3. The professional training of the school documentalist: why is it essential?

The reason *why* the presence of the school documentalist within the school is essential is inferred from what has been said above.

Now, it is necessary to define *what kind* of professional training is required in order to take on the complex educational role of the school documentalist, and *how* this training can be obtained.

First of all, I would like to point out that *the professional role* of the documentalist teacher should be present from the nursery school or, at the latest, from the infant school - in that case they would be called *librarians educators -,* and should accompany the learners until the conclusion of their compulsory education and, therefore, on the verge of their university studies.

Obviously, the role of the librarian/documentalist school teacher is diversified according to the *age bracket* of the users with whom they work. However, it is necessary to point out that, if their educational function, especially with regard to the first and second childhood (namely from 0 to 6 years of age), deals with making learners familiar with books, focusing on the animation of reading and children's literature pedagogy, this function shouldn't be neglected not only during the third childhood (during primary school), but not even in preadolescence and adolescence.

Indeed at that age the research and the construction of one's own personal identity are particularly important, and especially in that period literature acquires a strong *educational* value through the identification and *substitution* processes that it favours in the young readers. Against this background, I believe in the importance of greeting (and emphasizing) what is stated in *The IFLA/UNESCO School Library Guidelines* (2002) with regard to the school library *mission*: "The school library equips students with lifelong learning skills and *develops their imagination*, thereby enabling them to live as responsible citizens" (p.3).

---

[18] In this respect, it is possible to talk of a " discourse community ", namely that particular organization of work based on the research and exchange of information, thanks to a "climate marked by discussion and constructive criticism, in which the meanings of the concepts that are learnt are not set by the teaching authorities or in the books, rather they are negotiated, investigated, précised and enriched as learners develop their knowledge": see P. Boscolo, *Psicologia dell'apprendimento…,* cit., p.93. Simultaneously, it is possible to talk of a " practice community ", since they *act* on learning, knowledge, that are object of *actions* implying the *poiein*-production of processing-constructs-objects as a result. See B. M. Varisco, *Innovazione metodologica…*, cit., p.16; M. Santi, *Verso una "comunità di lettura"…,* cit., p.32;   A. Braga, *Educare alla ricerca…*, cit., p. 27. Braga states: "For this reason, a research didactic method acquires a greater educational value if it leads to the construction of tangible, functioning and publicly shareable entities (be it drawings, posters, written reports, films, multimedia hypertexts or objects of different kind)" (p.27).

[19] E. Morin, *La testa ben fatta. Riforma dell'insegnamento e riforma del pensiero,*Milano, Raffaello Cortina ed., 2000,. p. 15,[La tête bien faite, Seuil,1999].

[20] These are the prerequisites for a *well done head:* ibidem. "Knowledge is such only since it is organization, and it is related to and contextualized in pieces of information… The wide spreading of knowledge is increasingly more beyond human control", ibidem, p.9.

This pedagogical perspective, which includes the commitment to develop imagination, creativity and aesthetical taste among the tasks performed by the school library and the school librarian, is also shared by the documents issued by IASL and Unesco.

As far as the former is concerned, the document entitled *A Policy Statement on School Libraries* (1993) points out the *cultural* and *recreational* functions of the school library:"

…its goals [of the school library] could be expressed through the following functions:…*3.cultural*: to improve the quality of life through the presentation and support of the aesthetic experience, guidance in appreciation of arts, encouragement of creativity, and development of positive human relations; 4. *recreational* to support and enhance a balanced and enriched life, encourage meaningful use of leisure time…" (in *School Librarians: Guidelines for Competency Requirements,* by Sigrùn Klara Hannesdottir, 1995, p.43-44). As far as Unesco is concerned, reference is made to the *School Library Media Service Manifesto* issued in 1995, where it is stated at letter d: "Resource services should provide…*d.* opportunities for personal enjoyment, recreation and stimulation of the imagination (in *School Librarians: Guidelines for Competency Requirements,* by Sigrùn Klara Hannesdottir, 1995, p.40).

3.1 What *kind* of training? *How* to train?

Teacher among other teachers, the school documentalist is to receive training during a two-year master degree and one-year practice, following a three-year university course in whatever discipline.

The so-called *initial* education of the school documentalist will totally last 6 years: 3 years at any university faculty + 2 years at university faculties were teachers are trained (in Italy infant and primary school teachers are trained at *Facoltà di Scienze della Formazione* (*Faculty of Educational Sciences*), whereas secondary school teachers are trained at *SSIS (*Secondary Teaching Specialization Schools) + 1 year of *practice* at the libraries of the *school level* where the documentalist teacher/librarian teacher shall take up his/her job (nursery school, infant school, primary school, secondary school).

Cyclic refresher courses attended *during active duty* (for instance, every 5 years)*,* or periods of special assignment at the University shall also be taken into account, which would enable the school documentalists to acquire educational credits to get on in their career.

The two-year specialization course shall be devised, so as to enable the future documentalist school teacher to acquire the three competences that have already been defined by IFLA:

- librarianship;
- managerial;
- pedagogic-didactic.

At present, the new ICT – Information and Communication Technologies - help relieve the documentalist school teacher of his/her task of cataloguing, thanks to the opportunity of *deriving* the catalogue-compiling data from other repertoires, but simultaneously they require greater competencies in the information-technological and digital fields.

Indeed, the widened offer of information as a consequence of the spreading of multimedia and *on-line* resources implies not only the need for the documentalist teacher to master these new tools, but also their capacity to *transfer* these new competencies to students and teachers, and to make them acquire the *critical capacity* to select and choose among the *on-line* information.

Therefore, specific commitment is required for the two-year *librarianship* specialization course, in order to acquire the abilities concerning derived cataloguing, the utilization of web resources, the use of Opac and MetaOpac, the exploitation of the Internet. In any case, ICT *competencies* prove to be *transversal* to the three fields mentioned above.

As far as the *pedagogic-didactic* competencies are concerned, I believe that, besides specific courses on the main psycho-pedagogic theories, a special emphasis is to be placed on *reading and literature pedagogy*, on the one hand, with specific knowledge of the reading and literary production related to the various age brackets and the different narrative genres. On the other hand, as much attention is to be given to the *information research methodology*. In this regard, it is necessary to define the psycho-pedagogical epistemological theories leading to the related different methodological models (the *"six big skills"* devised by Eisenberg and Berkowitz, "les 6 étapes" of Québec, the "référenciels" of the French FADBEN …, models which Paulette Bernhard has so accurately described). The periods of practice will be useful also to assess the applicability of the models studied.

Great importance shall be attached to *documentation:* the documentary function at school as a learning resource, the handling of indexing by means of thesaurus and abstracting, the documentation of the best practices in the school and of their products.
Lastly, I believe that special emphasis is also to be placed on modules of *communication pedagogy*, along with modules of *teamwork methodology:* this is related to the particular *pedagogic climate* that needs to be created in the library, and to the establishment of *positive relationships* among the students, the documentalist teacher and the teachers of the subjects that the *mission* of the school library involves.