



## TEACHING IDEAS THROUGH THE CLASSICS

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### ABSTRACT

The history of ideas has reached a considerable epistemological and methodological maturity, which has also influenced the studies in the history of education. The interaction between the “old” history of philosophy and the new trends of twentieth-century historiography accompanied a renewal of studies in the history of education, in the development of which the overall renewal of the sciences of education was also important. In this renewal, the need to adequately define the nature of ideas and, in particular, of educational ideas, has become central. Similar considerations can be made with regard to the “classics,” one of the most discussed notions also in view of the scholars’ training. The proposal put forward in Italy by Salvatore Valitutti (an important liberal politician and pedagogue linked with the Montessori movement) to promote the study of “ideas” through the reading of Western classics in schools and universities, following the perspective of Mortimer Adler’s *paideia proposal*, may be useful today to clarify some of the main lines of research and training in the field of the history of ideas.

KEYWORDS: core curriculum; paideia; Montessori

### 1. THE RENEWAL OF EDUCATIONAL STUDIES AND THE HISTORY OF EDUCATION

The history of pedagogy has undergone a profound change in its disciplinary structure in the last fifty years, in correspondence both with the transformations that took place in twentieth-century historiography (Bourdé & Hervé 1997; Burguière 1986; Burguière 2006; Burke 1991; Burke 1996; Delacroix, Dosse & Garcia 1999; Dosse 1987; Poirrier 2000; Poirrier 2004) and with those that gave rise, alongside philosophical historiography, to a new history of “ideas”. The origins of the changes in historical and educational environment are closely linked to the evolution which took place in the same

pedagogy intended as a theoretical discipline among the many sciences of education (Bevir 1999; Bianchi 1989; Boas 1969; Garin 1959; Horowitz 2004; Piovani 1965; Rossi 1969; Wiener 1973).

The history of pedagogy was, at the beginning and for a long stretch of history, a “sector”, so to speak, of general pedagogy; if we take into account the fact that pedagogy itself has been (and still is today, in various respects) influenced by the directions of philosophical research, it is easy to deduce that the history of pedagogy itself was conceived by its scholars as a discipline closely related to the history of philosophy itself. In many cases, the manual of the history of pedagogy for high schools was drawn from a pre-existing manual of the history of philosophy through the collaboration between a philosopher and a pedagogue who shared the same cultural orientation. In Italy, during the period of the positivist hegemony and, subsequently, of the neo-idealist one (but also later, for a long time during the history of the Republic), this case was the most frequent, also because the manual of the history of pedagogy was a school textbook which entered the university as a basic text for the preparation of the “institutional” part of the pedagogic courses.

Even in other countries (France, Germany, Great Britain), apart from organizational and formal differences, given the variety of articulations of the higher education system, it can be said that the history of pedagogy has known for a long time a condition of close relationship with pedagogy and especially with philosophy and the history of philosophy studies.

The “turning point” that led to the emergence of a more marked autonomy in the history of pedagogy took place in relatively recent years in the wake of distinct “phenomena” which have, however, profoundly affected the structure of the whole panorama of the educational research (in a broad sense), on the one hand, and of the historiographic research, on the other (Bowen 1972-1981).

The impetuous development of the researches regarding the developmental age gave the way, starting from the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, to a profound restructuring of “pedagogical knowledge”, which has led pedagogy both to assume an increasingly independent physiognomy with respect to its philosophical matrix, as well as to set up a process of marked internal differentiation, articulating itself in a set of distinct sectors and disciplines. Thus, especially on the level of academic recognition, the “sciences of education” took place, a set of knowledge very articulated internally and made up primarily of psychosociological disciplines. Pedagogy itself has profoundly transformed, so much so that in many countries it has even disappeared from the lexicon of university institutions, variously replaced by professorships and courses in “theory of education”, “philosophy of education”, etc. However, the idea

that a “central” core of knowledge can be articulated in order of cementing and harmonizing the results of research in the multiplicity of sectors of the educational sciences remained strong and, in this sense, it is still used, especially in countries such as Italy, where the idea of a “pedagogy”, mostly specified with adjectives (in Italy we speak of “general pedagogy”) still conveys the idea of the character of this field of knowledge as a “mediation” between fields and perspectives different (Cives 1973). Further branches of “pedagogy” thus identified (special, comparative, etc.) have been introduced over the years and new ones continue to be born (for example, the “intercultural” education and pedagogy – a questionable diction, corresponding to an area of research that is increasingly needed in contemporary society).

The history of pedagogy has also found new spaces and, above all, a new physiognomy and extensive processes of restructuring have affected the whole of pedagogical knowledge, which soon have seen a proliferation of research labels and dictions to indicate the new fields of studies in university institutions. These were not merely “aesthetic” transformations; instead, they reflected the actual evolution in several directions and even new objects of study instead of an old and outdated history of pedagogy of a predominantly philosophical nature.

The same history of pedagogy thus came to differentiate itself, and was accompanied by the raise of other “stories” (of the school, of educational institutions, of the family, of education, etc.). The reason for this differentiation was originally the dissatisfaction that had been nurturing for some time with a history of pedagogy interested only in the development of the idea of education typical of the main cultural movements of the West. It was inevitable, in this perspective, that the history of pedagogy strongly resembled a history of philosophy, while almost nothing was known about the concrete reality of educational practices. Philosophy and literature have been for millennia elements of man’s formation and themes of reflection only for restricted *elites* of Western societies (and when the historiographic perspective was joined with the comparative one, this observation also extended to oriental civilizations); consequently, the great documents of the Western philosophical tradition could no longer be the privileged elements of a historiographic reconstruction that had, and intended to, turn to other questions and other sources.

First of all, a distinction between the history of *pedagogy* and that of *education* was drawn, reserving to the former the character of history of pedagogical *ideas*, not without further specification of method which aimed to differentiate it from a history of ideas of a philosophical matrix, and opening up to the latter the new space of research regarding what can be defined as educational “practices” (in the broadest sense).

Actually, this path had been partially opened since the 1920s by histori-

ans of pedagogy who had grasped the distinction between “ideas” and “practices” and who had attempted reconstructions that took this distinction into account (Boyd 1952); the work of René Hubert is central in this regard, with his distinction between “facts” and “doctrines” (Hubert 1949). In any case, much more radically than these anticipations, the turning point was made through the real transformation of contemporary historiography initiated by the editors and collaborators of “*Les Annales*”, the famous French review, programmatically called “new history”. It can be said that the renewal of the history of pedagogy was made possible by the sometimes “sensational” outcomes of the new history, which called into question consolidated interpretations, started the analysis of previously neglected or even unknown sources, expanding the very scope of the historian’s work and proposing fascinating and unusual reconstructions.

## 2. A NEW HISTORY OF EDUCATION

The first relevant distinction in the field of the “new” history of pedagogy concerns the relationship between theories and practices, reflected in the rise of a differentiation in the titles of the works that appeared starting from the 1950s (after about twenty years of work by the historical “annalists”) and, therefore, also in the disciplines taught in European universities – a distinction between the history of pedagogy and the history of education; the first, as we have said, today deals with pedagogical ideas and theories, the second with actual practices, on the basis of the assumption, now widely consolidated and confirmed by historiographical research, that the diffusion of a theory can only partially affect, or even have no repercussions on educational practices. Indeed, there would be a considerable discrepancy between the variation in the short and medium term of different theories and ideologically differentiated justifications of educational practices and the practices themselves, which are much more resistant to change and indeed inclined to a very effective and all-pervasive closure to anything new.

The history of education has highlighted how the sphere of theory reached and concerned only the social and cultural *elites*; if the historiographical research wants to offer a complete cross-section of the overall situation of a society, of a training system, in a given period, it should broaden the gaze and study those documents which illustrate the actual development of the training courses. Family letters, devotional and exhortative texts, testimonies of various kinds that can be deduced from literary works, etc. – all have become a privileged field of research, which has enriched the whole of knowledge even regarding the most distant past (the first historical civilizations).

In this perspective, the “silences” of history have also emerged; marginalized categories, such as women, and the lower classes in general, have no “history” of their own, because the mentality of the time considered the life of these social groups not worthy of memory. It has been the subject of extensive controversy and, in general, an extremely hard work to reconstruct a history of the family, for example, or of childhood, the private life and that of the very young, previously conceived as devoid of public meaning and, consequently, useless to remember (Ariés 1960).

In fact, it can be said that the process that led, in contemporary historiography, to the relativization of diplomatic and military history, which instead constituted up to about a century ago the almost exclusive horizon of research and also of the teaching of history, has led in the history of pedagogy and education to a relativization of the history of ideas and training systems aimed at *elites*.

The question of how the history of education fits into the perspective of the history of ideas represents a relevant question in the context of the pedagogical historiography of the last century, in the sense that, if still in the mid-twentieth century a philosophical matrix, conceiving the history of education and pedagogy itself as parts of the history of thought (pedagogy was, incidentally, the theory of education that was the glue of all the methodological baggage available to teachers and educators and had, in turn, a strongly philosophical imprint), now, with the transformations that have taken place in contemporary historiography, starting with the French-speaking “new history”, even the history of education studies have been oriented towards new methods and new objects of study (Mialaret & Vial 1981).

Beyond the centrality of the philosophy of education, expressed above all in the reflection and study of the works of the main philosophers, who have almost all written extensively on education, from Plato to the present day, starting from the 1950s new research trends, more autonomous with respect to philosophy or, in some cases, completely innovative, were promoted and affirmed.

Thus, historians began to speak of the “social” history of education, in analogy with the affirmation of a social and material history which, in the field of historiography, wanted to reduce the importance of political and diplomatic history (Leon 1977-1978; Bairoch 1997). In this field of study, the importance assumed by researches promoted by scholars of different fields, for example by economists and economic historians, was very important; in particular, we could quote here Carlo Cipolla, author of fundamental texts both in the field of European economic history and historical literacy (Cipolla 1969).

The rise of the “history of ideas”, in turn, was able to influence the historical and educational context, a new way of conceiving the same pedagogical

ideas. The history of ideas is today a discipline in its own right also with respect to philosophy and the history of philosophy; somehow, it embraces a wider scope, trying to grasp the connections between the intellectual and cultural life and social reality in the culture of a society, of an era, in their “mindset”, which inspires, even in case of pedagogical historiography, ideas and educational practices. From this point of view it could even be said that the whole culture is, in some way, the object of the “history of ideas”, offering an airy perspective both to scholars and students.

There have been, and still are, great difficulties in all this renewal. It is possible to study the history of pedagogical ideas, in fact, focusing attention on an approach that does not aim to reconstruct the thought of the great pedagogists, but on the ideas that have influenced society, politics, economy, technology.

The history of education, in the past, has not only focused attention on the history of great thinkers, but also on the history of educational institutions (for example, on topics such as the birth of the university) rather than examining the changes in society that they have given rise to these institutional transformations. In fact, it is necessary to investigate the causes of the changes without ignoring the contribution of individual thinkers (Lawton & Gordon 2002).

### 3. THE CASE OF “ACTIVE” EDUCATION AND “PUEROCENTRISM”

A few examples can help to better define this point of view. The whole culture intervenes in the formation of the human being and, as such, we cannot limit ourselves, in the historiographical gaze (and, in my opinion, not even in the practical and applicative one), to the pure and simple clarification of methods and to the choice of good or best practices. It is necessary to grasp the depth of the implications that the same practical choices presuppose. Pedagogical ideas are those particular ideas, in the universe of “ideas”, of presumptions of meaning, of attitudes, of attitudes, which constitute the mentality of an era; and on the historical level it is useful to reconstruct these mentalities and discover continuities and fractures in a process of evolution which is anything but linear.

A pedagogical idea of great importance, which today dominates the contemporary mentality (exercising a guiding function for about a century) is the idea of the child’s free activity: the child must be left free to move from an early age, to develop that ability to move, that exploration of the environment which is considered by all scholars to be the basis of mental and personality development. This idea took its form during the modern age, and

we can say that it coincides with the very rise of pedagogy, starting with a great writer like Rousseau.

When it was formulated for the first time, however, it created a stir, and lively discussions, so much so that its first supporters (Rousseau himself almost three centuries ago, but also, in the last century, Maria Montessori, John Dewey, etc.) were the subject of controversies that led only with difficulty to the affirmation of this idea, to its diffusion in public opinion, to the acceptance, by the majority of experts and educators, of all that it implies – not without a lively confrontation that can be said still in progress even in the present – and today we still find supporters of educational practices and a school organization that do not correspond to the regulatory ideal of the child's free activity, of the respect for her spontaneity, the so-called "puerocentrism".

This idea is an example of what can be understood by "pedagogical idea", inserted in a vision of the world and of humanity, which becomes, in turn, essential for a study in a historiographical perspective to understand the same educational practices in their deep meaning. Understanding pedagogical ideas in this way implies a continuation of what in the past, but still today, was understood as a philosophy of education, not just "philosophy" in the strict sense of the term, but rather a set of attitudes and beliefs, based on assumptions of an anthropological and ethical character, on which the educational practices of all historical societies, and also those of the "globalized", "postmodern", "liquid", contemporary ones, are grounded (Noddings 1995).

It is in this perspective, then, that it is possible to carry out an epistemological and methodological reflection on the relationship between these ideas and their history, on the one hand, and, on the other, the educational sciences. Also in the same cultural background of educators and teachers it is necessary today that there is an adequate knowledge of history, not only of the specific field of educational practices and institutions, but also of history *tout court*, of the history of ideas: a solid cultural formation, based on the "classics", often forgotten and neglected even in the school system (I am referring in particular to the Italian situation, but I believe that these considerations may be valid, to some extent, also for other situations and school systems).

Today it is difficult for a student to leave a secondary school with an adequate knowledge of the history of European literature; the preparation is limited to little more than an initial and instrumental knowledge of one or two languages other than Italian, and in any case an overall knowledge of what the history and culture of the West are is often lacking.

#### 4. THE QUESTION OF THE CLASSICS AND THE *CORE CURRICULUM*

But what are the “classics”? The question does not find an easy answer, as shown by the numerous “lists” of authors and classical texts that circulate in various forms in the programs of secondary schools and universities, as well as in the catalogs of publishers who offer collections of “humanistic” culture. The problematic of establishing a “canon” of great books dates back to ancient times, when Alexandrian philologists felt the need to compile “lists” of the greatest poets, theater writers, etc. And today, even in the climate of contemporary postmodernist culture, scholars such as H. Bloom have set their hands on the enterprise of proposing a “Western canon” (Bloom 1994). Bloom’s attempt, which can be joined by Tarnas’s (Tarnas 2005), is in my opinion particularly significant, not only for the dissemination of the ideas of these scholars, but also because it shows all the difficulty inherent in the very definition of what is a “classic”. The very partition of the history of Western culture into distinct epochs on the basis of the “political” trend – which, in Bloom’s view, means an entire conception of the world, of man, of the divine – highlights the desperately insuperable difficulty of establishing a criterion that could be not only subjective.

On the other hand, provocations in this direction also come from some of the most well-known academic and editorial initiatives widespread in the scholastic and university world in the last century: the attempt to create a “universal anthology” (Garnett, Vallée & Brandl 1899), during the positivistic era; the proposal of a collection of works, or pieces of works, of the greatest writers to promote a multi-year training course, also aimed at adults in their free time (Delphian Society 1913); the famous “Harvard classics”, born from the proposal of an almost “portable” tool for personal study and a “liberal” education throughout the life span (Eliot 1909); and what could be considered the longest-running of all initiatives of this kind, with its presence on the book market for about seventy years, the series of Western “Great Books”, still in circulation (Adler & Hutchins 1952).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, especially in the United States, the need to extend the patrimony of humanistic “paideia” to all citizens began to be perceived; hence initiatives such as that of Charles W. Eliot, famous president of Harvard, aimed at providing tools suitable for US citizens for a wide cycle of “classic” readings in their free time, and that, more ambitious, of another famous protagonist of American academic life, Robert M. Hutchins, who together with the philosopher Mortimer Adler created the series of the Encyclopaedia Britannica which offered the tools to develop, at school and in personal study, the “great conversation” between the reader and the “great authors” of Western tradition, that represented an updated version of the liberal and humanistic education pursued in the most prestig-

ious universities, including the one of which he was himself president, the University of Chicago.

Hutchins and Adler's initiative is interesting in many ways. First of all, it is a systematic attempt to teach the classics with the intention of making reading them the tool for personal reflection. Above all, Adler emphasized repeatedly that the study of the great authors serves to form "a well-made head", originally reflective, and he developed a synoptic framework of the "great ideas" present in those authors and in their main works which, however questionable on the epistemological and methodological level, characterizes a certainly not pedantic way of understanding humanistic education. The idea of "crossing" remarkable places and ideas appears to be a viable way in school work and university studies, and it is for this reason that, beyond the criticisms that Adler's repertoires have, even rightly, attracted in over half a century, the list of "ideas" identified by him (Adler 1952) and the "classics" proposed for the study of readers, although inevitably "indefensible" like all "canons", remains a significant testimony that has also attracted the attention of supporters of "active" teaching and learning methods such as the Montessori one.

Adler returned several times on describing the way in which, at school and during leisure and free time, the classics should be approached, speaking of a "dialectical" and "dialogic" study, in which reading does not only serve to appreciate and memorize famous passages and expressions, but to reason on the ideas transmitted by the texts, to relate different points of view on crucial issues; in schools and universities, the Adlerian method has been adopted by many institutions, with the creation of curricular and supplementary courses, in which the discussion among peers about the pages they have read becomes a fundamental and innovative teaching tool.

Moreover, the long discussion on the so-called "core curriculum" is also linked to initiatives like those of Hutchins and Adler, that is to say on the ground of an increasingly perceived need to provide all higher-level students with a common cultural base that allows them to integrate into an organic and harmonious knowledge specialist skills otherwise increasingly fragmented. Even today, the programs of great institutions such as the Columbia University go in this direction and pose the basic question of the placement of the classics in the history of ideas (and of the history of ideas in the educational baggage offered by contemporary culture to the younger generations).

In particular, those institutions that have adopted, for over a century, the practice of the "core curriculum", have tried to offer students opportunities for critical dialogue in small groups, in which scientific rigor is combined with the possibility of deep experiences through a personal and group reflection on the great questions of man, from the identity of the human being and

the citizen to the meaning of culture, from the nature of good to the rules of good governance, developing a reflection on existence and on the contemporary world in comparison with representations and models of the past.

Beyond the concrete choices, quite variable from institution to institution (such as the number of courses that are part of the core curriculum, their temporal collocation in the sequence of activities, etc.), all the main experiences seem to have focused on uniform courses for all students, in which literature is always primary, the class is small and the main activity is discussion, in the context of a work that refers to interdisciplinary organizational structures.

##### 5. SALVATORE VALITUTTI'S PROPOSAL - BETWEEN MONTESSORI AND ADLER

In 1985 the Italian translation of a famous book written by Mortimer J. Adler, already well known in Italy for his reflections on education and schools in a humanistic perspective, appeared by the Armando publishing house (Adler 1982), which decided to offer it to the Italian teachers, just three years after the appearance of the text in the United States, with an introduction by Salvatore Valitutti, an important figure in the political and pedagogical life in Italy during the 1970s and the 1980s. A few years before Valitutti had been the minister of public education and he was responsible for some important reforms in the Italian school and university system, including a deep reform of university teaching.

Valitutti was politically a member of the Liberal Party and supported the Italian pedagogical reforms that had introduced in our country, at least theoretically, views and practices of "activism" especially in the Montessori version; in the same years of his interest in Adler's works, he was the Vice-President of the Opera Nazionale Montessori, the organization founded by Maria Montessori and devoted to the diffusion of her method in Italy, which had the help of significant political figures, such as Maria De Unterrichter Jervolino (a prominent figure of the Italian main party, the Democrazia Cristiana, longly Vice-President of AMI (Association Montessori International) and President from 1947 to 1975 of the Opera Nazionale Montessori) and Valitutti himself.

Valitutti, in his activity as a politician and pedagogist, characterized his work by some significant studies concerning the condition of the young (he recognized the tendencies to protest that will be typical of young people in the Sixties) and the reform of Italian educational institutions (Valitutti 1955; Valitutti 1996). Also in this regard it should be noted its consonance, on the one hand, with the Italian pedagogical tradition which had tried to combine the requests for a renewal, even in a libertarian sense, of school life in our

country with still strong trends in the panorama of national culture, in particular with the neo-idealism, which had as major exponents, not only philosophers such as Croce and Gentile, but also pedagogues such as Giuseppe Lombardo Radice and Luigi Volpicelli. The vast work carried out by Valitutti on the political and pedagogical front, includes the choice to present to the Italian teachers, a tradition of studies, at the same time “humanistic” and, in a broad sense, promoting an “active” school such as that emerging from Adler’s school proposal; in the early 1980s, Valitutti conceived the school described by Adler, in his ambitious proposal for a reform of the American school system, as an application to secondary and higher education of principles similar to those formulated by Maria Montessori herself, and by other great exponents of activism, for childhood education and primary school.

The pedagogy of Maria Montessori, in fact, has acquired a worldwide fame and influence, but a weak point of her proposal consists in the limitation to the primary school of the materials and practices devised by the famous Italian educator. There is no organic Montessori proposal aimed at higher education, and the few indications and suggestions found in the writings of Maria Montessori are insufficient to articulate a complete and adequate curriculum (Montessori 1948). For this reason, the Montessori followers who have dedicated themselves to developing the high school curriculum have often chosen to integrate those indications with other methods and guidelines. Valitutti, a consistent supporter of the principles of pedagogical activism and in particular of the Montessori method, probably saw in Adler’s proposal a coherent continuation of her method, believing that the history of ideas, deepened in dialogue and discussion among peers, constituted the set of “development materials” suitable for continuing the education of Montessori school pupils who have come out of primary school and, in general, for a new school open to the principles of active education and creative learning.

These were probably some of the relevant reasons for the choice to publish Adler’s text by a publisher like Armando, who for decades had promoted publishing initiatives thanks to which so much an up-to-date pedagogical humanism had entered our country, expressed by figures such as the philosopher Hessen, as well as some of the most significant voices of scientific research in the scholastic-educational field (psychologists such as J.S. Bruner had been translated for the first time in Italy for the types of Armando), following proposals and suggestions coming from the Italian scholars who had committed themselves to the cultural orientation of this publishing house, among which was also Valitutti himself.

When the translation of Adler’s essay appeared in Italy in the mid-1980s, the American philosopher was no longer a stranger in the Italian cultural world; Armando had already published since the 1960s the Italian translation of his best-seller on reading and other texts of his philosophical production.

An original thinker, detached from the main trends of contemporary American culture, he had nevertheless conquered a place of first magnitude, on the one hand, with a critical rethinking of Dewey's ideas on the relationship between democracy and the educational system, on the other with an assiduous industriousness as a journalist and popularizer.

In the same book presented by Valitutti to the Italian public, *The Paideia proposal*, Adler recognizes important merits to the philosopher of democracy and the democratic school and, at the same time, to Robert M. Hutchins, praising his long lasting chairmanship of the University of Chicago and promotion of a way of understanding humanistic culture that aimed at an update of the classical *paideia* with respect to the needs of the American nation in the middle of the last century. Adler will support, in fact, along with Hutchins, the humanist ideal of a school made not only to teach a culture, to pass it from one generation to another, but as a place where young minds are trained to exercise their critical skills, to solve problems, to discuss the great ideas that constitute the backbone of Western identity, especially in the context of the way of life that democracy had made possible in the advanced countries of the West after the tragic experience of the world wars and the struggle against totalitarianisms thanks also to the concomitance of a period of great economic development.

#### 6. THE *PAIDEIA* AS A REQUIREMENT OF MODERN DEMOCRACY AND THE STUDY OF "IDEAS"

On the basis of this "democratic" motivation, Adler will develop his vision of school and education, meeting, moreover, in the United States itself, critics and detractors. His idea of an active school based on the humanistic ideal will encounter opposition both from supporters of a more traditional humanistic ideal, more anchored to the knowledge of the classics as such, conceived in itself as a driving force for a harmonious formation of the mind and person, and from those who will see in the active school above all a school of *doing* rather than a school of *discussion*. The very motivation that will push some supporters of Adler, such as Valitutti in Italy, to see in the proposal of a twentieth-century *paideia* advanced by the American thinker a continuity with the methods of activism (which was, after all, a strong pedagogical movement especially in the elementary education) will be, instead, the recognition of the value of discussion and debate, of the confrontation between ideas as fundamental elements of the growth and maturation of young people to democratic life.

This ideal continuity with activism, based on the open and free discussion of the great ideas and great "classical" texts by the students, outside the

guidance and influence of the teacher, and also outside a strictly curricular dynamics, will give breath to an idea of humanistic education based on the same values of pedagogical activism, which still offers interesting ideas today, in an era in which we are experiencing very strong tensions (there is no need to refer to the tragedy of the pandemic in progress) for the structural contradictions of our political and social system.

The uncertainty that even in the “progressive” sphere is felt today regarding the challenges of education can find a ground for comparison in this proposal, in the values on which it is based, in the practical perspectives it points to; the “principles” enunciated by Adler in his book can constitute a useful ground for comparison in this regard.

In fact, Adler himself had come to the formulation of his proposal after a long experience of almost forty years of work, which had led him to two main achievements: on the one hand, the definition of a method for the study of the classics in some of the main US university institutions (from Columbia to the University of Chicago), which subsequently found application in schools and for which Adler had developed the teaching instructions described in one of his most important books, *How to read a book*, a best-seller, but also the bearer of heated debates – since it appeared, it represented one of the most significant literary cases, a true bestseller in the pedagogical field during no less than eighty years (Adler 1940; Adler & Van Doren 1972); on the other hand, the publication of the series published by the Encyclopedia Britannica publishing house of the so-called “great books”: edited by Adler together with Hutchins, the Great Books of the Western World have been the fundamental instrument of this same pedagogical proposal, which Adler originally had promoted in the idea of strengthening the study of the classics as a central tool for the education of young people.

Adler recalls another prominent culture organizer in the early twentieth-century United States, John Erskine, who at Columbia University introduced a major innovation by holding seminars in which students and teachers gathered around the same table, engaging in critical conversations about ideas expressed by the texts taken into consideration, studied and commented on by the seminar participants themselves.

This American scholar came up with a list of about sixty “great books” (his expression) that college students should have read. It was a break with the past, in which this kind of study was mostly conceived as a specialized study reserved for doctoral students, but which, instead, Erskine had conceived as, at least, one of the essential components of the training of all the students. Above all, the list of classics remained a feature of similar seminars promoted not only by Columbia, his University, but also by the University of Chicago and other important institutions of American culture and university life.

In the 1930s this idea was also developed through major funding from organizations such as the Carnegie Corporation and the implementation in major cities of seminar courses on great books that continue even in our times, as evidenced by the longevity of the foundation set up by Adler and Hutchins, still at work today with programs carried out all over the world.

In one of his writings from the 1970s, Adler traced the history of his educational project in the perspective of defining the link that unites this educational practice to democratic life (Adler 1977a). Hutchins himself, after all, became passionate about the cause of teaching the classics, the great books that were the fulcrum of a humanistic education, in full continuity with the ideal of the fifteenth and sixteenth-century humanists, noting his personal unpreparedness and recognizing that in his training the reading of those books had stopped at no more than three or four great authors and titles, while instead the program he had developed together with other important figures of American culture, gravitating around the private foundations that supported Adler and Hutchins himself, was much more extensive and intensive (Hutchins 1952).

Over time, these projects were joined by numerous other significant figures in American cultural life, especially after the publication of *How to read a book*, during the years of the Second World War, continuously widening the circle of those who, in universities and schools, were convinced of the validity of this approach, which is still applied in an otherwise variegated set of schools that reaches about one million students. The publishing success of *How to read a book* was also followed by the publication of numerous didactic manuals for teachers and guides for these newly conceived seminars, in which the center of the activity was reading and debate on the texts examined, even though the series published by the Encyclopaedia Britannica, Great Books of the Western World, had the function of constituting a vast reservoir of documentation for the activities of these seminars.

In fact, the series met with considerable success far beyond what would have been its intense didactic use; this work is found in the libraries of many private individuals and has been sold in continuous reissues for decades, so much so that it is still on the market as one of the great works of Britannica. Other major US research institutions also gravitated around this project: the Ford Foundation, for example. It is very significant that from the interaction of this plurality of subjects around the creative work of Adler and Hutchins a new and original awareness was developed in the 1950s with respect to the close link among the humanistic tradition in which it was placed, the values of Humanism, the ideal of freedom (“liberal-libertarian”) typical of American society, and the exercise of democracy itself.

It was an application of the idea according to which democracy is not only a system of government, but a way of life, fragile in itself, belonging to

the maturity of its protagonists, which cannot be maintained over time, if not through the preparation of the younger generations for democracy itself. The school, therefore, must itself be the first environment of democratic life, in which young people prepare for democracy and the exercise of democracy in adult society (Dewey 1916; Maritain 1943).

Democracy, both in society and in schools, can only be nourished through democratic educational practices, first of all, the free discussion, on an equal footing between students and teachers about “great ideas” – ideas that the great books, beyond all the risks of mythicization that Adler and Hutchins have really run, offer as a peculiar contribution to the life of contemporary society, even today in an inter- and trans-cultural perspective<sup>1</sup>. In this sense, the 1982 book on the new proposal of a “democratic” *paideia*, of a humanistic education for all, represented a real educational manifesto based on the belief that the fundamental tool of democracy in schools was free discussion.

## 7. A CONCLUSIVE PERSPECTIVE VALID FOR THE STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF EDUCATIONAL IDEAS AND CLASSICS

The proposals that aimed to update the classical ideal of the Greco-Roman *paideia* and offer training models that privilege the overall dimension of the individual personality, open to the world and in contact with others and with a larger reality than that available to the senses in space and time seem to respond to the needs of contemporary complexity, suitable, at the same time,

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<sup>1</sup> A schematic enumeration of the basic principles of *paideia* inspired by the ideas of M. Adler is today the following: 1) *all* are capable of learning; 2) consequently, *everyone* is entitled to the same quality of education and not just the same quantity; 3) school, in its best form, is preparation for a general education throughout the course of life; 4) the three needs for which the school should prepare citizens are: to have the skills to obtain the economic resources necessary for a life worthy of a human being; be a good citizen for your nation and for the whole world; and make one’s life good in itself; 5) the main cause of authentic learning is the activity of the mind of the learner, sometimes with the help of a teacher who acts as a concomitant support of this personal learning; 6) there are three types of teaching that should be practiced in schools: the teaching of “canonical” subjects, training that produces skills and abilities useful for learning, and Socratic dialogue in seminar discussions; 7) the outcomes of these three types of teaching should be the acquisition of organized knowledge, the formation of new habits and skills and the growth in the intellectual understanding of fundamental ideas and problems; 8) the learning of each student and the acquisition of these results must be evaluated in terms of the competences of each student, and not only in an almost exclusively comparative sense; 9) whoever directs the school should never be a simple administrator, but always a teacher with guidance functions, who should engage collaboratively with the entire staff of teachers, in the planning, reformulation and continuous re-organization of the school, intended as an educational community (see the many documents contained in the websites [paideia.org](http://paideia.org), [thegreatideas.org](http://thegreatideas.org) and [greatbooks.org](http://greatbooks.org), which illustrate the ongoing activities of the foundations set up by Adler and Hutchins).

to broaden and deepen the person's awareness of herself and of the meaning of her life, which is also one of the main purposes of education (Jaeger 1933-1947).

The emergence of these new proposals of didactic practice can be read as an expression of the discomfort perceived by contemporary man; beyond a certain rhetoric that sees globalization, the enlargement of spaces and the mixing of cultures as the positive factors of a change of age, these same aspects of contemporary life imply disorientation and precariousness.

It is not surprising, therefore, that educators all around the world continue to explore ways to mitigate the negative consequences of the postmodern way of life focusing on the need to give young people a stronger personal identity by proposing those ideas and those values that appear universally shared. In the case of the *Paideia Proposal* the reader is faced with the explicit proposal of one of the longest lasting ideas to be found in the history of Western education.

That of *paideia*, updated and adapted to the needs of our time, is an educational ideal that, to some extent, tends to exceed undesirable dichotomies such as those between the "humanistic" and the technical and scientific training, between a "liberal" and "vocational" training. Beyond its limits, Mortimer Adler's proposal made it possible to develop, on the one hand, a complex argumentative path through Western culture that led to important editorial and scholastic initiatives, and on the other, a training method through dialogue and confrontation which constitutes one of the most significant achievements in the field of contemporary teaching.

Adler, in the middle of the last century, already perceived the risk that Western man would lose the awareness of his cultural and moral-religious roots, and proposed a recovery of historical knowledge in the training baggage of Anglo-Saxon schools, preparing a series of tools for schools and self-training, a significant synoptic framework of the main ideas that constitute the essential Western culture, and a method of group work that has become famous and applied to the various school grades with the reading of classical works and group discussion of the main ideas set forth in them.

Adler's pedagogical proposal has met with many criticisms, including that of a prevalent attention to English-speaking literature and thought, but the undoubtedly weak points of his historical perspective do not make his work obsolete. The didactics of dialogue, which he proposed as the main methodology in teaching humanities, is, moreover, one of the most interesting proposals in the panorama of recent methodologies, applicable to the specific sector of the history of educational ideas, of a history of education in the perspective of the history of ideas. Even in this case, the main need today appears to be to define precisely and in a shared manner what and which the "ideas" and "classics" of this sector of historiographic research are.

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