

SCHOOLS WITHOUT QUALITY?

ELEMENTS FOR A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF THE CONCEPT OF QUALITY IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper is a phenomenological exploration to develop an alternative understanding of the concept of quality of school education. My claim is that the quality of education in schools depends fundamentally on the link between intersubjective relations at school and the self-shaping of students. The paper proposes phenomenological descriptions of pages in school notebooks and biographical stories. These descriptions, enriched by the notions of participation and exemplarity, make the

quality of the school emerge from a specific way in which intersubjective relationships make studies and school subjects meaningful, allowing students to experience leaps in quality with respect to self-shaping, aiding them in building a personal and new perspective about the world.

Keywords: quality, school, intersubjective relationships, students, self-shaping.

Šole brez kakovosti? Elementi za fenomenološko raziskavo koncepta kakovosti v izobraževanju

Povzetek

70 Pričujoči prispevek je fenomenološka raziskava, ki želi razviti alternativno razumevanje koncepta kakovosti šolskega izobraževanja. Zastopam trditev, da je kakovost izobraževanja v šolah v temelju odvisna od povezave med intersubjektivnimi odnosi v šoli in samo-oblikovanjem šolarjev. Prispevek predstavlja fenomenološke deskripcije posameznih strani v šolskih zvezkih in biografskih zgodb. Tovrstne deskripcije, obogatene z idejami sodelovanja in zgledovanja, omogočajo, da se kvaliteta šole prikaže glede na specifičen način, na katerega intersubjektivni odnosi osmišljajo učenje in šolske predmete, pri čemer šolarji z ozirom na njihovo samo-oblikovanje lahko izkusijo kakovostni preskok, kakršen pripomore k izgradnji osebnega in novega pogleda na svet.

Ključne besede: kakovost, šola, intersubjektivni odnosi, šolarji, samo-oblikovanje.

1. Introduction

What do policymakers mean when they use the concept of school quality? They usually refer to quality in terms of effectiveness and efficiency in relation to the performance and results of a school system, measured through standardized tests and controls (Ehren, Perryman and Shackleton 2015; Lingard, Martino, Rezai-Rashti and Sellar 2015). Some studies (Andersen, Dahler-Larsen and Pedersen 2009; Chapaman 2002; Croxford, Grek and Jeelani Shaik 2009) also use terms such as “quality,” “quality control,” “good education,” “improvement,” “efficacy,” using them mostly uncritically.

Academic literature has asked the question about the notion of quality in education and has begun to examine its meanings. Hart (1997) argues that the notion of quality refers to the practice of controlling the goodness of educational action in ways borrowed from industrial activity; consequently, quality is conceived on the basis of standards, indicators, and measurements: procedures that would certify the quality of a school. This quality assurance apparatus in the educational field, argues Hart, would be unrelated to value judgments on education. That element that allows us to verify the basis upon which we say that something is of quality is therefore missing.

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Alexander (2015), on the other hand, recalls that the concept of quality has been circulating for almost twenty years in international educational policies: since the year 2000, through the UNESCO “Education for All” program, quality is presented as the element that represents the heart of education. In these documents, quality refers to the increase in enrollments in compulsory education, learning outcomes, and the reduction of the school dropout rate. However, with regard to the process of teaching and learning itself, quality remains an elusive concept; Alexander concludes his analysis by claiming that the term “quality” is manifested as a mantra: it is repeated frequently, but paradoxically, we find ourselves disoriented and confused with respect to understanding what qualifies the school in terms of quality. That is to say, what makes it rich in values and what are the precise elements that compose its quality, a bit like the society described in Musil’s novel *Man without Quality*.

This problematic element is not only related to a semantic aspect of the concept employed. Simons and Masschelein (2006) showed, through a

philosophical exploration based on the Foucauldian approach of the ontology of the present,¹ the systemic and procedural implications of educational policies based on the concept of quality: they involve a conception of the work of educational institutions that leads to mere performance and production of results.

From these premises, a problem regarding the concept of quality in education emerges: on the one hand, the direct relationship with the phenomenon to which it refers is absent, and at the same time there is no reference to the value criteria that help to identify school quality; on the other hand, the pragmatic dimension of the concept of quality shows limits with respect to the complexity of the educational phenomenon (Biesta 2014). It is as if the concept of quality in school education would ultimately be empty.

A recent paper (Anagnostopulos, Lingard and Sellar 2016) claims that quality in education would be a notion in dispute with respect to the different *orders of value*² that emerge in the arguments that animate the debate on school policies. In this way, the authors help to bring the discussion around the

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concept of quality back to the normative dimension of educational policies. To focus on the dimension of this value it is worth addressing the issue of quality in schools by first asking “what is at stake in school education?” Biesta opens up a problematization of the concept of quality by way of provocation: “Do we value what we measure or measure what we value?” (Biesta 2010; 2014).

In the first part of the question—“Do we value what we measure?”—what is considered valuable is determined by the results of measurement. For example, when a score obtained by standardized tests is meant to account for the quality of education provided by each school. In such a case, the results of measuring seem to become the focus of what to expect from education. The second part of the question—“Do we measure what we value?”—refers to a way of

1 It is an approach that proposes not to proceed too hastily with a critique of the present on the basis of some assumptions or ideals. Rather, it directs attention to what is familiar in everyday practices and that becomes invisible because of its everyday occurrence. Cf. Simons and Masschelein 2006, in particular pages: 293–294.

2 The authors refer to a theoretical elaboration that provides a taxonomy of the various orders of value that may be at stake in argumentative disputes regarding public policies to be adopted.

conceiving the measurement of criteria in education which is subordinated to an act of valuation. In other words, it contemplates the possibility that what is judged, discussed, and agreed upon as valuable precedes its measurement. This does not de-authorize measurements, but it does put them in the perspective of being tools with the pretension of saying something about an eminently complex and intersubjective phenomenon.

This way of approaching the measurement of school quality can benefit from the phenomenological principle of going “to the things themselves.” In this case that would mean going towards the thing to which the term quality refers to in the context of this paper: education at school. The present article then develops arguments in favor of a shift from taking an approach based on the quantity of quality (tests, indicators, standards, and procedures) to a phenomenological approach to the quality of school education.

The purpose of the paper is to develop a beginning of a phenomenological description that better explains the meanings and values of the concept of quality which precede and transcend quality assurance policies at school. In particular, the thesis of this paper is that the quality of school education is fundamentally linked to intersubjective relationships that are lived at school and to their contribution to the self-shaping of students.

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I will develop this thesis in the following way: first, an account will be given detailing the type of phenomenological approach that supports exploration; I will indicate which are the methodological criteria that guide the phenomenological descriptions provided, and I will declare which primary and secondary phenomenological literature will help me to make explicit the meanings of the examined educational phenomena .

Secondly, a phenomenological description will be given of intersubjective relationships in scholastic situations that express specific aspects of the quality of school education: to do this, I will resort to a page of school notebooks and excerpts from the essay *Lora di lezione (The Lesson Time)* by Massimo Recalcati (2014).

Finally, I will show the ways in which intersubjective relationships at school contribute to the personal education of the student. Here, the phenomenological evidence will be a further excerpt from Massimo Recalcati’s essay. In light of the descriptions of school quality, I will propose a brief critical exploration of

school quality evaluation, using a text from the autobiographical novel *Teacher Man* by Frank McCourt (2006).

This phenomenological exercise in the philosophy of education involves exploring the meanings of the concept of quality of education in schools that are not sufficiently taken into account by school policies, and that also want to contribute to the philosophical debate with respect to understanding what good education is (Biesta 2010; 2014; Ingold 2018; Masschelein and Simons 2013). It is then an exploration that begins to formulate the creative ontology of school (Simons and Masschelein 2006) which intends to propose other ways of conceiving school and its quality: a quality that has very little to do with the premises of policy highlighted in an article by Simons and Masschelein (2006), but which shows, starting from what can happen in the lived experience of school education, its ontological and normative aspects.

2. Methodological framework

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The development of this thesis involves a particular exercise of phenomenology as a philosophical discipline in at least two ways: on the one hand, it is an effort to describe the educational phenomenon, to stick to the thing itself of school education. On the other hand, I will use theoretical elaborations of phenomenological literature, both primary and secondary.

The epistemological attitude that feeds the descriptions that I will carry out can be expressed with the following sentence: “A subject is facing a real world, he refers to it in acts in which he captures this world, takes a position with respect to it, reflects on it, etc [...]” (Geiger 2000, 232; my translation). In facing something, the position that the subject assumes is an evaluative one—the quality shown allows us to say if something has value, to what degree it has value, or if it is worthless. Thus, phenomenology helps us to understand the notion of quality: it emerges from that position with respect to the phenomena that recognizes in them what is good, valorous, and valuable.³ The quality of a

3 Phenomenological literature addresses this question by developing the analysis of the state of affairs as “referents of propositional attitudes, such as assumptions and judgments [...] states of affairs are the referents or semantic values of declarative sentences.” (Salice 2015b) This implies an analytical attention to the “value instantiated

phenomenon to be described needs, *a parte objecti*, the appearance of things and, *a parte subjecti*, the subject's experience with the thing in question. To describe the quality of a phenomenon it is necessary to look at that specific phenomenon and its manifestation. In this way quality can be, not so much defined (as is done only through logic, or through a merely conceptual exercise), but described, remaining faithful to the phenomena themselves (De Monticelli 2018).

The first important point, then, is to clarify the descriptive character of the phenomenological exercise. What distinguishes this approach, its philosophical nature, is the will to describe the essential features of the phenomenon in such a way that they are valid both for those who describe it and at an intersubjective level.

I will take some methodological ideas from the reconstruction of the methodological position of Alexander Pfänder, carried out by Moritz Geiger.⁴ These ideas represent, for the exploration that will take place in this paper, real working tools, understood as ways of proceeding in the description of the phenomena that develops the central thesis of the article.

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The first aspect is the cognitive dedication to the thing itself; it is a matter of letting the thing and only the thing express itself, without any previous construction. In the case of the exploration that we intend to conduct, it means dedicating ourselves to the knowledge of the quality of school education by letting emerge what is more and more specific to school education. To argue the thesis of the paper, the thing that cognitive attention will be devoted to is intersubjective relations at school. This option is justified by what the literature has emphasized as one of its distinctive features: the relationality and dialogicity of educational acts in school (Biesta 2014; Ingold 2018), aspects that lead to a formulation like the one offered in the paper “It’s all about relationships” (Sellar 2012).

The second aspect of the phenomenological exercise is the rejection of the principle of *nothing more than*. To describe phenomenologically what is given or manifests itself, we must not resort to previously established reductions. To

by that unique combination of experiences or *Erlebnisse* which determined a given state of things.” (Salice 2015a, 260).

explain this aspect of Pfänder's methodical position, Geiger gives the example of the State to show the error of adopting the principle of *nothing more than* in the analysis of phenomena: "The State is nothing more than a legal organization" (Geiger 2000, 223; my translation), when, rather, the State is the bearer of a series of lively relationships, of a cultural and social nature, which are rooted in time. Similarly, the methodological intention is to start from a position that excludes reductions like those of the following proposition: quality is *nothing more than* a series of results that can be objectively measured, as well as certain indicators and standards established by a Ministry.

76 An attentive reader could use this methodological principle against the thesis that I want to argue, arguing that it identifies quality in *nothing more than* the way in which intersubjective relationships contribute to the personal self-shaping of the student. I reply that the exploration that I will begin later indicates that the link between intersubjective relationships and personal self-shaping is a fundamental component of the quality of education that must be explored and clarified in its richness and that this analysis opens up to further similar investigations regarding other fundamental components of the school; for example, the educational project, the curriculum, the relationship between directors and teaching staff, etc.

A third aspect is related to the indication that the concepts with which we are dealing reproduce the essential traits of something, but do not create them: "phenomenology is convinced of the fact that the essence can be given on the same level as the immediate concretion [...] the universal essences and the relationships of essence are found in the singularity and in a certain sense completely in the singularity." (Geiger 2000, 226; my translation) This means that the analysis of an aspect regarding educational phenomenon opens up a wealth of data that can illuminate the meaning of the quality of education at school. This implies that the quality, for example, of a lesson, an educational project, or informal activities carried out at school is shown through those essential traits of their quality or through what makes them good educational activities and proposals.

The way in which Pfänder specifically helps us to grasp the quality of the thing is his descriptive use of analogies. For example, he speaks of "clarity," "transparency," "splendor," "tenacity" to describe the acts of the human soul. It

should be noted that it is not a question of mere literary resources, as it might seem at first sight. To legitimately use an analogy, a link is needed between the phenomenal appearance of the thing being described and the terminological expression that comes from other types of experience, otherwise it falls into an empty homonymy (Geiger 2000). In accordance with this approach, some of our descriptions will use this procedure, using expressions such as attention, generosity, and presence with the other.

The realization of this phenomenological exercise therefore implies specific things that must be done. First of all, I will describe, based on the principles and criteria outlined above, some examples and cases related to the world of school life: analysis of specific school objects (notebooks and their content), and of secondary literature (i.e., non-phenomenological) which accounts for the experience at school. In particular, I will refer to school notebooks collected on the website *Quaderni Aperti* and excerpts from the book *L'ora di lezione* by Massimo Recalcati: this essay offers a look at the role of the school as an educational agency and a place of subject formation. This text has a peculiar feature that justifies the choice: it uses the author's scholastic experience, the experience that took place in a high school in a suburban district of Milan. It is therefore a scholastic experience that took place in socially complicated contexts, which has the added value of describing the educational phenomenon not in a romantic or idealized way. The examples chosen are an expression of a possible type of school quality in contexts considered difficult and have been selected precisely because of the connection they show between the intersubjective dimension and the self-shaping of students. Furthermore, I will resort to classical phenomenological literature (especially Scheler) and contemporary (secondary) literature on the subject of intersubjectivity and how it contributes to the formation of the person (Bellini 2017; 2018a; 2018b; Cusinato 2011; De Warren 2017).

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Scheler's analysis (2009, 2011) of the exemplary will also help to enrich the exploration of the quality of school education because the notion of exemplarity has been taken up in philosophy of education (Bruzzone 2015; Puolimatka 2008). Finally, De Warren (2017) with his description of participation experiences, Cusinato's (2011) essay on the concept of exemplariness, and Bellini's studies on the link between intersubjectivity and

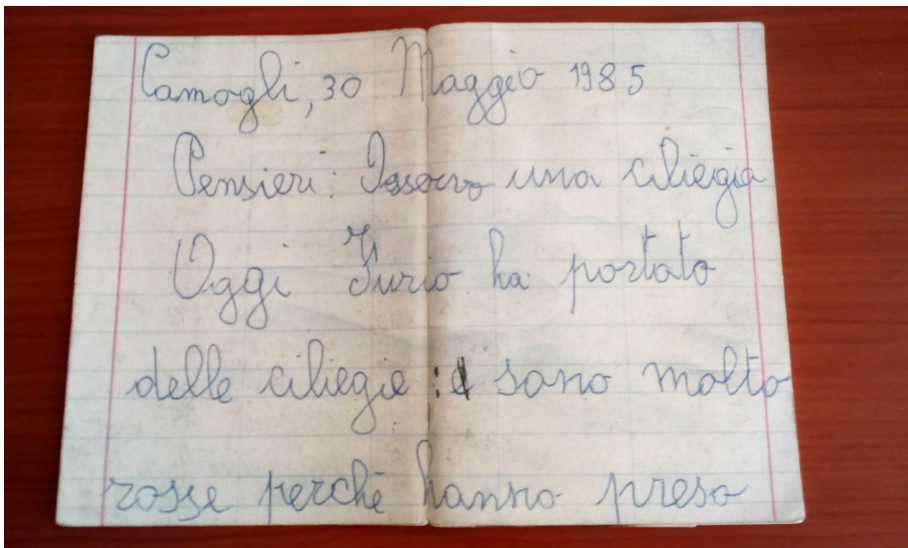
the concept of exemplariness will offer further phenomenological elements for the understanding of school quality as the link between intersubjectivity and the self-shaping of the student.

Through these instruments, the contribution I want to offer is not so much a theoretical deepening of the contributions of phenomenological thought to education, and of certain notions elaborated by it, but, rather, I propose to show cases that phenomenologically describe and illuminate in a particular and enriching way the understanding of the quality of education at school.

3. Intersubjective relationships at school

3.1. *Intersubjective relationships at school according to manners of participation*

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A school pupil writes about his observation of a basket of cherries in a notebook. He shares with his teacher the fact that Furio had brought home many cherries; expresses his astonishment at the color of the fruit and attributes it to the fact that they have been exposed to a lot of sun. In this handwritten text, in which the date and the city when and where it was written can be seen, the entry is written in airy calligraphy with large letters. We can also note the corrections of the teacher who adds some points and deletes a

conjunction that is not necessary in writing the text. The teacher, as an adult, helps children express their story properly. In this short text the student tells about his experience of the world starting from their encounter with a cherry. We can also imagine that this text was read aloud to the whole class.

The phenomenon shown in this notebook page emerges as an opportunity for students to hear, think, tell, read, write. In the example shown, the student of this notebook has discovered, thanks to the task assigned to him by teacher, an ability to express and share a personal experience; the teacher's corrections help the child learn the appropriate expressive modalities, and require particular attention towards, not only the form of writing, but also to its content, to better help the student's expressive capacities. Furthermore, the subject of the description in the notebook lets in both the professors and the classmates who have heard it enter in the student's world.

This page of notebook shows, then, an intersubjective relationship between student and professor, but also between student, professor, and other pupils. A relationship that unfolds around an assigned task which concerns, on the one hand, an exercise in the Italian language, linked to the taught school subject; on the other hand, the intersubjective relationship and the task feed upon the student's vital experience. I call the intersubjective dynamics, following De Warren (2017) and Bellini (2018a; 2018b), with the term "participation." A part of recent phenomenological literature has developed an understanding of original and useful participation experiences to illuminate what happens at school through everyday intersubjective relationships.

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Bellini (2018b) offers us a description of participation based on the thesis that the formation of the person is a phenomenon that occurs in a co-constituted way with others. This thesis has an important impact on the understanding of quality in education, since it implies that education (understood as a process and phenomenon that in one way or another contributes to the formation of the person) is a phenomenon that emerges from a relational dimension; therefore, we do not educate ourselves, but are always educated with others starting from intersubjective relationships.

But how can intersubjective relations at school manifest an educational dimension? The phenomenological analysis of the experience of participation linked to what was written in the student's notebook and read aloud in front

of the class, opens a path towards this understanding and offers us a starting point to explore an aspect of the quality of the school. Participation is that phenomenon in which the subject recognizes the necessity of the others in his life. More precisely, in which “we need the Other in order to achieve our own proper self-constitution and the Other needs us to likewise achieve her own self-constitution” (De Warren 2017, 218, 222). Education that takes place at school finds in this description one of its fundamental pillars: here the intersubjective relationship of the educational type is played both between teachers and students, and between companions. At school, the teacher needs the student to make sense of his being an educator and the student needs the teacher as a figure that offers new ways of exploring the world; at the same time, in the relationship between classmates, perspectives are discovered that were not included in one’s own personal horizon.

80 Bellini comments on the passage from De Warren cited above: “Participation is the idea that other persons perform a reorchestration of myself and such a reorchestration gives me an *Ich kann* that I could not imagine as possible for myself.” (Bellini 2017, 84–85) This definition can be clarified and better understood in its educational meaning referring to the experience itself shown on the school notebook page. The growth of a person, the development of the ability to describe and share a personal experience with others, as well as other things that can happen at school. For example, the adoption of a new perspective on the world, or the discovery of pleasure or the difficulties of working in a group, happen not so much because this was a direct goal, but precisely through the relationality of the relationships between teachers and students, and between students themselves. In particular, the relationship between teacher and student, which develops around a disciplinary topic, such as the text of a description in one’s notebook, but also an equation, a musical score, the problem of global warming, requires the presence of the one with the other, and represents the beating heart of school education.

There is also another aspect that the notebook page written and read to the classmates shows us. The attention that the teacher places on the child’s text, but also the attention that the teacher requires from other pupils, leads us, in some way, into the life of the other. This experience can be described in the way De Warren does when he says that “wives, husbands, partners, children,

friends, and companions – these are various forms in which the Other lives in me, as participating in the constitution of my own being.” (De Warren 2017, 223–224). In light of the description offered we can imagine that the *companions* are just the schoolmates, but we could also add the teachers. At this level of description, we can say that at school one begins to experiment and learn that education of the subject is linked to concrete participation, actively recognized, welcoming, and judgmental, that one lives with other human beings.

Therefore, the experience of participation in school, in agreement with the analysis I have carried out, means the involvement in intersubjective relationships that lead to discoveries of new possibilities for the students and for the sharing of life.

3.2. The role of exemplariness in intersubjective relationships at school

You had made your entrance among us brutalized by a boring and stupidly severe School, like a celestial body that came from another universe. What were you doing there? I have asked myself many times. Here among us, in Quarto Oggiaro, in the extreme suburbs of Milan. I still remember your face lighting up in the reading of the poets in the classroom. During your lessons I did physical and mental experience of knowledge as nourishment for the first time. [...] You taught us that Desire without commitment is only a whim and that insecurity increases with knowledge and not vice versa, because there is no knowing that it can fully absorb life, because authentic research increases doubts without ever having the claim to solve them. You taught us that words carry with them an unknown power that exceeds any explanation and that we must learn to respect and learn to enjoy. With sweetness you introduced me—a rebellious young man as I was to every form of control—to the patient and severe discipline of the study. (Recalcati 2014, 135–136 and 139; my translation)

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The student remembers his teacher as the encounter between two worlds: that of a suburban school (which does not fascinate students, but rather treats

them with stupid severity) with this very special teacher. A meeting with the students of a class. Recalcati recounts the encounter using the “us:” the memory of the relationship with this teacher is his very personal memory, but Recalcati knows well that it was not a private experience but concerned an enlarged intersubjectivity. The first thing he describes about the teacher is her face that lights up when he reads poems. A teacher of literature, in high school, who strikes her students for how she treats her teaching subject. A trait of the intersubjective relationship that is realized in this scholastic experience emerges: its exemplariness. Max Scheler’s analysis of the concept of the exemplary can help the description of this type of intersubjective relationship at school.

82 Exemplariness concerns a way of being that can shape others; we are not dealing here with a question of moral example or leadership. “While the effectiveness of the command takes place in the wide and visible field of public life, in the tumultuous market of the so-called history, the efficacy of exemplarity is on the contrary obscure, mysterious: exemplarity moves and changes in the depths of the soul of every man and every human group.” (Scheler 2011, 20; my translation). Exemplariness, according to Scheler, is offered as experience, as a mixture of positive value elements and a specific empirical embodiment with which one enters into a relationship.

In this sense, the teacher described by Recalcati becomes “exemplar for me on the condition that the eidetic of possibilities that they might exemplify have an impact on my own process of self-shaping by making me aware of something crucial regarding my individuality” (Bellini 2018a, 222). This professor manifests herself to her students as a “dynamic center of personal and unrepeatable orientation” (Cusinato 2011, 24; my translation). Her enlightenment with respect to her subject is a sign of it, as well as what succeeds in bringing its lessons to life: it offers its knowledge as a food that nourishes, that supports students on the path of opening themselves to the world in an emotionally colored way according to perspectives hitherto unknown.

This is an intersubjective and exemplary relationship between the teacher and the subject that takes the form of an innovative force (Cusinato 2011). The teacher and the teacher at school have been able to say that the students have come to know about it: in this intersubjective experience, they experience school quality.

In fact, it is through this particular strength, charisma, or ability of fascination that the exemplary relationship teaches; it performs one of the educational tasks of the school: “exemplars’ strength embodies a space where I can maieutically shape and reshape my self” (Bellini 2018 b, 225). Indeed, the student Recalcati recognizes the effect of this strength his own self.⁵ We can think that the student comes to recognize the value of this experience, consciously, only many years later. But this is one of the traits of the exemplarity of educational action in general and of scholastic action in particular: it acts explicitly and at the same time makes a karstic action. The quality of this educational work shows itself many years later, moving on a long-term axis over time. Even the exemplary, according to Scheler’s analysis, does not act, unlike the figure of the leader or the model, in a conscious way, placing the explicit intention to exercise this type of charisma. Rather it is in the intersubjective relationship that someone recognizes the traits of the exemplary that speak to his ego, and it is this subject that interacts with the exemplarity and chooses to begin a journey that leads to changes in his own personality.

The author-student Recalcati then shows that the exemplary educational relationship is manifested in a concrete way through gestures and attitudes that are emotionally connoted: generosity in presenting the subject of teaching, gentleness, and discipline. These traits do not operate in a magical way, but challenge the individuality of the students, calling them to the study, the importance and taste of cultural preparation, in this case through the role of the literary word, but it could be through any other form of teaching: a musical exercise, a mathematical formula, a history investigation.

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5 Recalcati in his essay already offers accurate analysis of the quality of lesson time, which creates tension between the school as a place of formation and the institutionalized school that uses various evaluative procedures. His descriptions are mainly based on a psychoanalytic perspective. In this paper, I show an enrichment of Recalcati’s analysis in an explicitly phenomenological perspective.

4. Self-shaping emerging from intersubjective relationships at school

In this section I intend to explore the ways in which the notion of quality school education can be enriched and understood, making explicit the connection between intersubjective relations at school, described according to participation methods, particularly exemplarity, and the personal training of the student.

84 You came to see our theater show on a Saturday afternoon at Quarto Oggiaro. The principal had granted permission to keep the school open and there was a festive air. I had written an unlikely script in a visionary style and with strong political tension. At the time for me, writing was like shooting; it was called *The Baltic in the eye of the overseer*. Three quarters of an hour of monologues, fragments of dreams, quotations, fragments of life of the movement [...] But it was the first fruit of our meeting. You had just arrived among us. [...] I would no longer have been the idiot of the family, the different, abnormal, crooked child who threw his parents into distressed worry. I could sign something with my name that I had generated since our meeting. (Recalcati 2014, 140–141; my translation).

This scholastic scene describes well the effects of the encounter between the exemplary nature of the teacher and her student. Here, the exemplary shows its more precise educational and formative traits. The description given above, explicitly recognizes that the theatrical work that was about to be staged in that suburban school was a consequence of the encounter with the exemplary as described in the previous section. The exemplariness and the intersubjective relationship in which it lives is very different from the type of relationship between the leader and follower. In the exemplary case it is not a matter of copying the person who embodies the sample, but, rather: “the exemplar makes herself the concrete personal presence of the opportunity to reorchestrate myself” (Bellini 2018b, 225).

In this scene, Recalcati, the former student, describes a concrete form of the reorganization of his own person like an experience of a leap: from a severe

and negative judgment that others made about him to a new and positive evaluation of his being in the world. This leap was possible thanks to this intersubjective experience at school that in the forms of exemplariness acts as “forerunners who push us to listen to the call of our person” (Cusinato 2011, 18; my translation).

This process of change, and the concrete sign of the theatrical work written and staged in front of a school community, takes shape starting from an experience lived at school. The teacher’s way of addressing the freedom of the students he or she meets. In this capacity to provoke, in the etymological sense of the word, that is, to call towards something and in its favor, the intersubjective relationship with the exemplar unfolds its educational role even at school. In this case, the educational contribution consists of the abandonment of political positions that favored violent protest towards the channeling of those same concerns through cultural modes learned at school, into positive and constructive expressions; and for this very reason they represent a rediscovered subjectivity.

In the case of the school, then, the relationship is intersubjective, but it also includes a third element that is part of the educational relationship: the disciplinary topic. The disciplinary topic is that element around which the intersubjective relationships move, we could say that it constitutes the working tool of the intersubjective scholastic relationship. But school disciplines are not something inert, they are ways of accessing the world, ways to explore their meaning.

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It is from this participatory dynamic that aspects arise which, as I have illustrated in the previous section, the person could not imagine possible for himself. Participation in this particular type of educational relationship is what reveals the personal “I can” of the student. The discovery of the “I can” shows the quality of the intersubjective relationship at school.

The discovery of the “I can” that characterizes the quality of school education could be described by the words of Gustave Thibon when he speaks of the educated man. “The educated man is one who establishes new and personal relationships between the data of the education.” (Thibon 1965, 170; my translation) The quality of school education is seen in the varying ways in which pupils’ personal responses to data are proportionate to school subjects,

for example in writing about a subject, conducting research, or participating in a school project. These responses express the culture that is being formed in students and can vary, not only based on personal skills, but also on the type of intersubjective relationships experienced at school, particularly with teachers.

It could be argued, then, that intersubjective relationships at school, traversed both by the exemplary, but also by the modality of participation, allow us to experiment with quality leaps. When an athlete improves their athletic abilities, or a musician improves their musical performance, it can be said that a “qualitative leap” takes place—the way in which something is done changes for the better. In educational terms we could say that the success of an exercise is not only something that is learned after having been studied, but is also an improvement in attitude: personal resources, heightened perspectives about the world that have been discovered and matured thanks to certain experiences at school configure quality leaps. It is a metaphor that captures well the *life-giving effect on the subjectivity* of an educational experience prolonged over time.

- 86 The approach to the quality of standards and quantitative measurement of results thinks of quality as being placed on a continuum that moves, gradually increasing or decreasing the levels of results. In the understanding of quality as a process that leads to quality leaps, such as, for example, the writing of a theatrical text to be presented at school, and the result of the intersubjective experience of exemplariness, the extent of the qualitative leap was not possible to predict and calculate in advance. What is possible to put in place is the unfolding of intersubjective relationships that lead to “an increase in qualitative differences [...] only through the strength of this exemplary, however small it may be, which can hope to perform some form of non-authoritarian formative function, capable of producing differentiation” (Cusinato 2011, 10–11; my translation). The quality of educational action is therefore properly seen in the subjects that embody it, through the intersubjective experiences made during the school years, each in a unique and particular way, rather than exclusively based on pre-established standards to be achieved.
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5. Implications for the assessment of school quality

The concept of quality school policies, as I reported in the introduction, is linked to procedures for evaluating and controlling school activities. In the light of the arguments presented in the previous sections, the following question arises: how can the previously described quality be assessed within the school (which is, in any case, an institutional apparatus)? And by what criteria is it possible to formulate an opinion on this type of quality?

Addressing these questions goes beyond the purposes of this paper. However, it is worth dwelling on some implications of this question, showing a possible way to weigh quality evaluation criteria. The phenomenological evidence I want to present regarding this aspect is offered by a novel by Frank McCourt, in which the Irish writer retraces his years of teaching in peripheral New York schools. I would like to describe this scene because it allows me to conclude the exploration carried out, on the one hand, taking up and reformulating the question with respect to the understanding of quality in school education, and, on the other hand, showing the complexity of the question of evaluation:

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The big puzzle at the end of the term is how does the teacher arrive at a grade?

I'll tell you how I arrive at a grade. First, how was your attendance? Even if you sat quietly in the back and thought about the discussions and the readings, you surely learned something. Second, did you participate? Did you get up there and read on Fridays? Anything. Stories, essays, poetry, plays. Third, did you comment on the work of your classmates? Fourth, and this is up to you, can you reflect on this experience and ask yourself what you learned? Fifth, did you just sit there and dream? If you did, give yourself credit.

This is when the teacher turns serious and asks the Big Question: What is education, anyway? What are we doing in this school? You can say you're trying to graduate so that you can go to college and prepare for a career. But, fellow students, it's more than that. I've had to ask myself what the hell I'm doing in the classroom. I've worked out an equation for myself. On the left side of the blackboard I print a capital F, on the

right side another capital F. I draw an arrow from left to right, from FEAR to FREEDOM.

I don't think anyone achieves complete freedom, but what I am trying to do with you is drive fear into a corner. (McCourt 2006, 253)

88 It would seem that the evaluation of the quality of school experiences is a question that the protagonists of the lessons and activities carried out at school can face with greater knowledge of the facts, compared to the standards established externally by both national and international governmental organizations. McCourt's literary description reminds us of the convenience of asking the student about the meaning of the lesson he attended. This formulation of the question poses a critical question to quality assurance policies: how do individual schools recognize and facilitate their internal capacity to evaluate their educational offers without oppressing them with bureaucratic and standardized procedures? How do they achieve a balance between the need for evaluation and the impossibility of giving an immediate and complete account of an educational action that, as such, operates in the long term? Asking these questions is one of the fruits of phenomenological exploration conducted on the concept of quality.

On the other hand, McCourt's words return a question of the genuine philosophy of education, about purposes and what is in play, after all, in the educational experience of a school. McCourt seems to tell us that maybe they can give technical-professional lessons, propose excellent curricula for the integral training of students, put emphasis on techniques and methodologies to achieve certain learning: they are important and necessary elements. However, the quality of the scholastic experience is measured in the discovery of one's freedom and uniqueness in the folds of intersubjective relationships; freedom and uniqueness that emerge with difficulty, in a tortuous and almost never linear way, that coincides with new possibilities of one's self and of living with others.

6. Conclusions

The phenomenological descriptions reported in this article show how intersubjective relationships are the field in which the quality of the school's

educational action unfolds. This field can be described through the experience of participation and exemplariness. Both play an important role in the experience of intersubjective relationships typical of the school environment and that bring out what the school can offer.

These experiences of intersubjective relationships help us to maintain that the school educates in a quality manner, so we can appreciate how good its actions are through the way they contribute to the education of students.

A further question also opens up, starting from the analysis of intersubjective relations at school: how do teachers learn from these relationships? How do teachers themselves draw new thoughts and questions, ideas and develop human, cultural and professional education based on the quality of intersubjective relationships that live at school?

In this paper, it was shown that, to take up the words of McCourt, the quality at school as a path from fear to freedom manifests itself through self-shaping of the student that is realized as a cultural education, understood as the ability to discover relationships, personal and new, starting from the knowledge of school subjects and the relationships that are lived at school.

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