

Centesimus Annus Pro Pontifice Foundation  
Ethos, Education and Training – Avenue toward equality and ethical behaviors in the  
digital era  
Milan; Catholic University of Sacred Heart  
Milan 30<sup>th</sup>-31<sup>st</sup>, 2020

Discussion of the paper by H. E. Msgr. Angelo Vincenzo Zani  
by Elsa Fornero – University of Turin and Former Minister of Labor

Nelson Mandela once said that “*education is the most powerful weapon to change the world*”. As simple and as assertive as that. Of course, he meant not only “to change” but “to improve” the world from the perspectives of equality of opportunities (the so-called level playing field), reduction of existing inequality, inclusion and also general social wellbeing. Certainly much progress has been made all over the world but a lot remains to be done in order to assure that every child, boys and girls alike, has equal access to education, to guarantee high quality teaching to all schools of all levels, to ensure that education is not just the main activity of the initial part of the life cycle but goes on, as the “*life long learning*” refrain proclaims.

So we must be grateful to the Centesimus Annus Foundation for its commitment in support of the strategic goal “*Re-inventing the global compact on education*” that Pope Francis has recently launched<sup>1</sup>, requesting all persons and all institutions of good will to contribute. I am personally also grateful to His Eminence Angelo Zani for his penetrating and profound reflections laying down solid foundations, i.e. the high principles and Christian values on which the pact can indeed be reconstructed. I like the expression “*pact for education*” as it stresses its intergenerational aspect, the implicit contract by which the young receive from the older generations the heritage of culture, knowledge, art and science with the commitment to care for and possibly increase it. And I also like the concept of *education in transformation* as it underlines the complexities of the structural changes we are immersed in.

In Europe education is hardly an issue, in the sense that it is considered if not a public good in the strict economic sense, a social value (or “merit good”) and access to school is indeed universal, compulsory up to certain age and (mostly) free. In “re-inventing” the pact, however, one should not forget that, in a large part of the world, children – and girls, in particular – are still excluded and often have to fight for attending school (I want to mention a moving BBC film that I have recently seen, “*The boy who harnessed the wind*”, based on the true story of a Malawian boy who craved to go to school and who was able to profit from the few lectures he was able

---

<sup>1</sup> See the message from Pope Francis for the launch of the global compact on education, the Vatican, 12 September 2019.

to attend, to build a wind turbine which saved his village from famine; he was later awarded a scholarship to continue school attendance).

Apart from single successful stories – and Malala is probably the most famous one - from a research perspective, returns from education have long been recognized and estimated, mainly from an individual point of view, with empirical estimates, for example, of what an additional year of schooling, up to a point, can add to an individual's earnings. From a macro perspective, models of growth have long recognized (and offered a basis for empirical investigations of) the role of human capital accumulation (i.e. education and training) on the rate of growth of the economy. Last year's Nobel Laureate in Economics, Esther Duflo, from her part, has widely and convincingly documented the crucial role played by education of girls in rural India to promote development and community values, and to reduce inequality.

If education is an essential element of growth for developing countries, the new pact, however, is crucial also for the richer ones and for Europe in particular. Indeed, the feeling is spreading, particularly among the young that education is no longer useful to improve life chances, reward merit, find a satisfactory job, earn a decent and increasing income, climb the social ladder and be better integrated in society. In a word more and more young people are convinced of an impoverishment of returns from education. While it is almost natural to attribute it to the Great Recession, it is difficult not to see that the process goes back much before this started, in 2008. And that it manifests itself in productivity slowdown, low wages and increasing inequality between a tiny minority of very affluent people and the largest majority of the population, including the middle class.

So Europe cannot simply rest on past achievements, but has to emphasize the role of equal opportunities to access educational services and programs allowing students, both young and adult, to acquire knowledge and competences as well as culture, the ability to understand world complexities, to promote individual, community and social values, i.e. to be an engine of “social capital” increase.

These goals are still far from being reached; just consider that national accounts – an insufficient but solid framework guiding economic policy – do not include education among “investments” but rather as a component of “consumption”, completely neglecting its role as a major input in the accumulation of social capital. So, the risk, for Europe, is to consider the acquired results as sufficient and leave the rest to individual preferences, efforts, perceptions and, to a certain extent, the financial resources of would-be students. A way to increase inequality, not to reduce it.

Education breeds more education, in the sense of Socrates: “the more one learns, the more he/she becomes convinced of his/her ignorance”. So, you need basic education (literacy) to understand the value of education itself, to support the ability to understand the complex trade offs implicit in the decision to continue to study

after compulsory education. Without this awareness, short-term costs of studying are overvalued and long-term benefits are undervalued.

Time and risk are two key elements of this decision but they are generally little understood. Choices imply trade offs and these require the ability to compare and somehow balance their different intertemporal aspects, and of course not only from an economic point of view (returns versus losses).

As His Excellence Zani writes in his paper “*an essential part of education will be educating on how to deal with trade offs, emphasizing a balance between equity and freedom, autonomy and solidarity, innovation and continuity, efficiency and respect for the democratic process, tensions and dilemmas*”. In a word: education to responsibility, both personal and social, according to what is right and what is wrong from a moral point of view.

The objective is not only to form or to train but to implement the wider Unesco perspective – as identified in its “2030 objectives for education” document - based of three fundamental spheres: the cognitive, the socio-emotional and the behavioral sphere, to prepare not only competent individuals but emphatic individuals endowed with adaptability and trust (in others and in the future).

I was struck by the assertion that rebuilding education is required “*to oppose the exclusive rigidity and dehumanization of neo-positivism*”. I must confess that I felt some uneasiness as if the words contained an implicit accusation: is economics, the discipline I was trained in and that I have practiced my whole life, part of this “dehumanizing school of thought”? Can economics be put on trial for the rigidity of its models where rationality is the main, if not the only, principle guiding human choices and action? Or because it assumes perfect markets, if only as a reference point, against which to compare reality and its “imperfections”? Or because it has ignored the influences of perceptions and “narratives” on individual behavior and on the effectiveness of policy making and reforms? Or – more importantly – because in the trade off between equality and efficiency it has traditionally valued the latter more than the former?

To a person who has devoted time and energy to basic economic-financial education the “accusation” is particularly bitter. Is it true that the joint engine of science/technology/economy has threatened independent thought (“thinking openly”) and “produced” an augmented man but not a better man?

I am not here to deny the accusation or to defend “orthodox” economics, or indeed the economists’ arrogance. Instead, in the perspective of constructive dialogue, both interdisciplinary and social, I would like to point to a possible convergence path which has to do precisely with the “solidarity and fraternity” principle which his Excellence recalls, at the end of his talk, as one of the three offered by the Social Doctrine of the Church to rebuild the educational pact (the other two being the acknowledgment that the world suffers from *lack of thoughts* and that there is *no true humanism if not open to the Absolute*).

We live in an era of deep structural changes and, in parallel, of narrowing temporal horizons. So not only the educational/cultural heritage is at risk of degradation if the transmission of education is not renovated, but this narrowing of horizons comes at a moment where other aspects of the intergenerational compact are being threatened. Just think of the *public debt* and of the *crisis of the welfare state*: the refusal of older generations to accept reforms that are needed in the face of demographic and economic change implies a growing burden on future ones. And one is reminded of Ezechiel: “*In those days they shall say no more, The fathers have eaten a sour grape, and the children's teeth are set on edge.*”

So one can argue that economics helps the understanding of the intertemporal aspects of solidarity. Solidarity is relatively easy to accept, when it is intragenerational because it entails greater emotions, but when it involves an intergenerational dimension, it needs a wider comprehension, which is lacking at present. An increased awareness of this responsibility towards young and new generations is an essential tile of the educational compact that Pope Francis asks us to redefine.