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Co-constructing *Good Projects*: the Functions of Sociological Knowledge in Educational Projects

ABSTRACT

Come può un progetto educativo dedicato alla prima infanzia contribuire a suscitare modi di pensare e di agire democratici?

Seguendo la tradizione sociologica pragmatica, l'autrice indaga le condizioni istituzionali che possono promuovere un *buon progetto*. Il caso studio è offerto dal progetto *I suoni della natura. La natura dei suoni* rivolto a bambini tra 0 e 6 anni e realizzato in una cittadina dell'Italia del Sud, a Cefalù, durante l'anno 2022.

La tesi proposta ruota intorno alla formazione di un sapere collettivo teorico ed esperienziale nella cui produzione la conoscenza sociologica svolge due funzioni. La prima contribuisce alla comprensione storico-sistemica dei bisogni sociali locali, la seconda connette la qualità del progetto a una teoria della giustizia sociale non meramente redistributiva ma emancipativa, aperta alla scoperta del mondo e alla costruzione di relazioni educative attenzionali.

Parole chiave: Qualità dei progetti educativi, conoscenza sociologica, relazioni educative attenzionali

How can an educational project dedicated to early childhood contribute to eliciting democratic ways of thinking and acting?

Following the sociological-pragmatist tradition, the author investigates institutional conditions that could promote a good project. The case study is offered by the project called *The sounds of nature, the nature of sounds* aimed at children aged between 0 and 6 years carried out in Southern Italy by the municipality of Cefalù during the year

2022.

The proposed thesis revolves around the formation of collective, theoretical and experiential knowledge in the production of which sociological knowledge plays a critical-comprehensive function and a participatory function. The former contributes to the historical-systemic understanding of local social needs, while the second links the quality of a project to a theory of social justice that is not merely redistributive but emancipatory, open to the discovery of the world and the construction of attentive educational relationships.

Keywords: Quality of educational projects, sociological knowledge, attentive educational relationships

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Introduction

The history of European design delivers to the social sciences an enormous harvest of project experiences: stories of best practices, project models, interregional imitations and emulations, and in some cases, even institutional failures.¹

After many years and various researches conducted in disciplinary fields ranging from economics, to pedagogy, psychology, sociology (just to name a few), the time seems ripe to understand what legacy we can draw from the heterogeneity of project experiences and the rich scientific literature that has analyzed them.

In particular, from a sociological perspective and with reference to educational projects dedicated to early childhood, this study aims to understand which elements characterize a *good project* and what contribution sociological knowledge could offer to their identification and analysis.²

Educational projects, especially those dedicated to early childhood, are of particular interest to political sociologists for several reasons. Firstly, they provide an opportunity to understand institutional responses to societal issues. Secondly, due to their specific democratic tension, they propose, from the earliest levels of education, the theme of the social construction of democratic societies.³

How can an educational project dedicated to early childhood contribute to eliciting democratic ways of thinking and acting?

Following the sociological-pragmatist tradition⁴ and with the fundamental intent of exploring how the relationship between education and democracy takes form, in specific situations, the contribution aims to bring to light the institutional conditions that could potentially generate democratic educational experiences.

1 For a selection of project experiences related to cohesion policy, you can consult D. Cersosimo, *Dai Patti ai PIT. Lezioni dall'esperienza*, in *Governance e Sviluppo Territoriale*, a cura di D. Deidda, Roma, Formez, 2004. Furthermore, a case study analysis is also present in *Patti territoriali. Lezioni per lo sviluppo*, a cura di P. Magnatti, F. Ramella, C. Trigilia, G. Viesti, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2005. Information on sociological literature regarding the project experiences that characterize cohesion policy can be found also in F. Vinci, *L'efficacia dei fondi strutturali europei al vaglio della sociologia dell'azione pubblica*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2013.

2 For further insights into the sociological analysis of the elements characterizing best practices and good case study please refer to R. Boudon, P.F. Lazarsfeld, *L'analisi empirica nelle scienze sociali*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1969; regarding the field of educational social research, Nisbet J.D., N.J. Entwistle, *Metodologia della ricerca educativa e della sperimentazione*, Roma, Armando, 1975.

3 J. Dewey, *Democrazia e educazione. Una introduzione alla filosofia dell'educazione*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 2018, (1 ed. 1916).

4 The main reference is to J.H. Mead, *Mente, sé e società*, Firenze, Giunti Editore, 2010 (1 ed. 1934). Regarding especially the educational research, see E. Wenger, *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998. With regard to research applied to social work, T. Tarsia, *Praticare la ricerca collaborativa. La produzione di conoscenza nel lavoro sociale*, Roma, Carocci, 2023. In reference to the experiences of co-planning and territorial governance, a pragmatic approach is present in L. Cataldi, *Le sfide delle nuove politiche sociali. Riflessioni a partire da una ricerca empirica sui Piani di Zona*, Acireale, Bonanno, 2012.

In particular, the aim of this research is to understand the social mechanisms that, in specific context such as that of a Sicilian town, contribute today to the construction of education projects that are democratically meaningful. The case study is offered by the project called *The sounds of nature, the nature of sounds* aimed at children aged between 0 and 6 years carried out in Southern Italy by the municipality of Cefalù during the year 2022.

The research is presented in three moments. The first is dedicated to understanding the contribution that the sociology of public action offers to the sociological analysis of an educational project. The second focuses on the project description, and finally, the third aims to clarify the functions of sociological knowledge in the construction of educational projects for the early childhood that are potentially generative of democratic experiences.

Educational project through the lens of the sociology of public action

The analysis of an educational project through the sociology of public action has multiple implications. Among them the social and historical-processual dimension of project activity, understood as *public action*, appears particularly relevant.

According to this research tradition, the project is not merely an output, but it is a *public action*,⁵ an inter-institutional co-participated process, often public-private, which owes its effectiveness and efficiency to convergences of political-economic interests but also to shared systems of ideas, common ways of perceiving the world and perceiving ourselves in it.⁶

Analyzing planning activity in the light of the sociology of public action reveals both the epiphenomenal dimension of the activity, its conjunctural and contingent dimensions (e.g., participation in call for proposal), and its structural dimensions, the sociogenetic processes in which project activity participates (e.g., the systems of interests that it protects and aims to reproduce or modify). In addition, this tradition places great emphasis on the cognitive and normative dimensions of analysis.

The possibility of considering the educational project as public action allows for the recovery of the social roots of public action, the recognition of the social interface of political action, and the appreciation of existing interpenetration between politics and society.⁷ This activity appears sociologically significant not only for its structural and cultural dimensions but especially for their interdependence and for the unexpected effects that it can generate, for its transformative potential.

5 P. Duran, *Penser l'action publique*, Paris, LGDJ, 1999.

6 G. Moini, *Interpretare l'azione pubblica. Teorie, metodi e strumenti*, Roma, Carocci, 2013.

7 A. Costabile, P. Fantozzi, *La politica come società*, in *Nuovo Manuale di Sociologia*, a cura di R. Cipriani, Maggiori, Rimini, 2016, pp. 201-211.

In the design activity, the recording and interpretation of local needs appears to be a particularly delicate task: a kind of hinge mechanism between structure and culture, a mechanism through which to reassert the social validity of traditional systems of power legitimization or introduce mechanisms of social adjustment.

The educational project originates from a specific democratic form of public action, from a specific collective legitimization of the public-private governance that contributes, sometimes unintentionally, to redefine through its implementation. The democratic form of public action is shaped by systems of shared interests, collectively widespread and cogent beliefs and values, socially shared ways of considering social co-participation and, when necessary, social cooperation. It is also influenced by shared ways of evaluating the social acceptability of social inequalities and engaging in effort to reduce them. The project action is therefore a social action influenced by locally shared social logics of participation in public life, but it can aim to reproduce or to adjust and modify.⁸

Highlighting the contribution that the sociology of public action offers to the analysis of an educational project is useful for understanding the space of social innovation within the project and the mechanisms of social morphogenesis that it can contribute to activate. In such an interpretation, the educational project appears socially conditioned by the collective representations that, especially at a local level, structure society and that the project group likely shares. However, the educational project also appears, at the same time, as a potential mechanism for social transformation, a vector of a new way of relating to the common world and contributing to its generation.

The social innovation that is always present, more or less implicitly, in project activity is particularly interesting in the case of educational projects due to the specificity of the community contexts created and the professional experiences that characterize these contexts. The fact that the context includes young children in their early years of life, social workers, preschool teachers, and parents qualifies the project context in political-experimental sense. The latter does not configure exclusively as a multi-agent context, by definition founded on learning, but as a context based on the first political socialization of new generations.⁹ It is a context in which reflective learning is experienced, where pre-established ways of practicing professional knowledge are intersubjectively validated or questioned, primarily among adults. It is also a context in which to contribute to the constitution and/or re-interpretation of human participation in social life, collectively shared by both adults and children.

In the analysis of the sociogenetic mechanisms to which the project activity contributes, the sociology of public action pays specific attention to the analysis of the professional roles of the various actors involved in project development, particularly, to their professional relationships. In particular, the relationships that teachers establish

8 R. Boudon, *La logique du social. Introduction à l'analyse sociologique*, Paris, Hachette, 1979.

9 Insights into political socialization during childhood can be found in M. Macaluso, G. Tumminelli, *Socializzazione politica e potere quotidiano*, Milano, Mimesis, 2017.

with younger children activate particularly innovative social logics, as if the child and the teaching methods dedicated to early childhood were capable of attracting the adult into a permanent logic of discovery. This dimension, in the ideational phases of the project, contributes to the formation of internal cohesion characterizing the project group, while in the implementation phases it constitutes one of the most promising paths for analyzing the social innovation potentially generated.

The sounds of nature, the nature of sounds: “a good project”?

The sounds of nature, the nature of sounds is a project promoted by the social services of the Municipality of Cefalù in collaboration with a social cooperative and a third sector association.¹⁰ The project is aimed at preventing and combating educational poverty and stands out for the innovative character of the project idea inspired by outdoor education and combination of experimental pedagogical methods.

The project, carried out in 2022, was aimed at children living in vulnerable families experiencing various forms of social distress. It was developed through numerous educational initiatives conducted in contact with nature and based on active listening of various musical instruments.

The project originates from the convergence of two specific pedagogical approaches: the exploration of nature as an elective educational environment and the learning of music as a universal language particularly suitable for promoting multicultural integration among children.

This project strikes the analyst first and foremost for its aesthetic profile. At its conclusion, the project garnered much appreciation. In particular, the social workers involved in its implementation appreciated the innovative nature of educational approaches and emphasized the positive response that the project was able to elicit both from children and families.

But is it enough for an educational project to be based on an innovative pedagogical approach to be a *good project*? How can a sociologist of public action decline the aesthetic profile of the project?

To address this question, the sociology of public action encourages considering two analytical directions. The first concerns the political-professional nature of the partnership. The one put in place in this project appears to be a *competent* and above all *reflective partnership*, opened to design changes that could emerge during its development¹¹ and, above all, to other new knowledge, which can potentially enrich one's definition of problems.

10 In particular, the project was born from the collaboration among the municipality of Cefalù, the Iside Cooperative (a social cooperative) and the Solidanime association (a third sector association); more information about this project can be found in *Povert  educativa, comunit  educanti ed empowerment dell'infanzia. Prospettive e riflessioni*, a cura di V.D. Di Lorenzo, Carini, Edizioni Iside, 2022.

11 For an evaluation of the design capabilities to manage changes, see F. Jullien, *Pensare l'efficacia in Cina e in Occidente*, Roma, Laterza, 2008, (I ed. 2005).

The second direction concerns a political-normative theme, that of the forms and levels of social inequalities that the actors involved in the project consider *normal* or *acceptable* and the complementary one of potentially feasible strategies for their reduction.

The goodness of the project does not seem to coincide with its effectiveness and instead introduces a fundamental political question into sociological analysis, that is, the question of socially acceptable inequalities in specific historical period and context. In this research perspective, sociological knowledge does not seem to be able to evade the question of the quality of an educational project. Instead, it appears to outline paths for sociological research that are useful for reflecting on the quality of educational projects.

The first instruction provided by the public action sociologist is an invitation to adopt a historical-political analysis perspective. It is crucial to understand which factors and social processes generate the social vulnerability that the project aims to combat or prevent, but it is also fundamental to understand the *political perspective on the problems* and the *solutions* that the actors involved in the project share. This means that it is not relevant to understand an objectively defined problem, but rather the intersubjective and shared interpretation of a problem, that is, the sociological significance of the political formulation of the problem.

Accordingly, at the center of the analysis is the political action of the involved actors, their agreements, and their motivations. The political dimension of the project activity does not exclusively concern political actors but also involves professionals, the actors who are engaged with various professional roles in the implementation of the project. In particular, the focus of sociological knowledge revolves around the existing relationships between political actors and professionals, concerning the degree of autonomy granted by the former to the latter and around their rationality, their way of interpreting the dialectic between their power and their knowledge.

The generative grammar of a good project seems to be composed by a democratic tension that runs through public action. This tension aims to erode positions of power, political and professional hegemonies, creating shared systems of decision making. Furthermore, it has a specific purpose aimed at stimulating processes of social participation, above all to make the actors, to whom the projects are aimed, co-authors of their development. The project under study could be considered a good project not simply because it substitutes an innovative pedagogical method for a more traditional one, but in the extent to which the adopted method questions the standardized nature of political and professional practices.

In the project *The sounds of nature, the nature of sounds* the goodness of the project is fueled by two interdependent processes. The first concerns the construction of a collective professional knowledge capable of recognizing the myriad forms in which, in the cities of southern Italy, educational poverty manifests itself. The second is represented by possibility of providing democratic responses to its various manifestations.

The challenge seems to lie in the ability to look beyond social stereotypes, to deconstruct the cognitive filters that often allow social workers and teachers to perceive only certain indicators or forms of educational poverty. At the same time, it involves the capacity to promote new educational alliances, new professional solidarity, and *new poietic approaches*, new ways of relating to the educational environment and cohabiting within it.¹²

Given these theoretical premises, the evaluation of the goodness of an educational project takes shape as a sociological-political problem.

According to Renaut,¹³ we define a good educational project as one that embeds the educational intervention in broader theory of social justice. In line with Rawls, the latter does not appear to be merely a redistributive theory of social justice but one that, starting from a renewed attention to the needs of individuals, manages to create mechanisms for personal enhancement aimed at ensuring to community members chances of involvement and social participation as similar as possible.¹⁴

The pursuit of quality in educational projects reveals the multiple functions that sociological knowledge plays in these projects. Among them, two functions appear particularly significant. The first is a heuristic function that we define as *critical-comprehensive*, while the second is a political-pedagogical function that we define as *participative*.

The critical-comprehensive function of sociological knowledge

In investigating sociological knowledge, Mannheim had already emphasized how it consists of a fundamental *pars destruens*.¹⁵ In project activity, this capacity translates into the activation of a *historical attention*,¹⁶ the ability to develop projects suitable for specific categories of users inhabiting defined territories. The historical attention prompts situating the educational project within a broader analysis of social reality with the aim of bringing to light what Weber referred to as the «connections of problems», the causal connections existing between a particular problem and other social issues.¹⁷ Historicization can be understood in both temporal and spatial terms. It involves acknowledging that a specific social problem evolves over time, influenced

12 For an analysis of poietics as teaching methods that foster creativity, see J. Dewey, *Arte educazione creatività*, a cura di F. Cappa, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2023.

13 A. Renaut, *Qu'est-ce qu'une politique juste? Essai sur la question du meilleur régime*, Paris, Editions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2004.

14 J. Rawls, *Una teoria della giustizia*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2008, (ed. orig. 1971). The interpretation of Rawls's theory of justice evoked here is shared by M. Nussbaum. In particular, see M. Nussbaum *Creare capacità. Liberarsi dalla dittatura del pil*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2014.

15 K. Mannheim, *Ideologia e utopia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1999, (I ed. 1929).

16 M. Gauchet, *La condition historique*, Paris, Gallimard, 2003.

17 M. Weber, *Il Metodo delle Scienze Storico-Sociali*, Torino, Einaudi, 1958, (I ed. 1922).

by macro-social transformations, and at the same time, it presents territorial specificity. The comprehensive function of sociology of public action is configured as a historical-systemic approach, it pushes us to consider in the social problems analyzed the most superficial dimension of the problem and its deepest social roots, the causal links that the specific phenomenon analyzed has with other phenomena. But the critical knowledge that Mannheim describes is not limited to an attention to the spatial-temporal and systemic dynamics that characterize knowledge. It also has, one could say with Pareto, a «logical veneer».¹⁸ The recognition of the relevance of the «logical veneer» requires clarification.¹⁹ In Mannheim's conception, critical-comprehensive knowledge is awareness of the constant cognitive work of institutional structures. There is no separation between institutional structures and the collective ways in which they are perceived, both elements constitute the social world of individuals. For example, one can assume that there is an interdependent relationship between the availability of public nursery schools in given town and the way in which public early childhood education is collectively perceived in that town.

The critical-comprehensive dimension of knowledge is configured, consequently, as a need to identify and unmask *les choses allant de soi*.²⁰ One of the main objectives of the critical-comprehensive function of knowledge is that to move away from culturalist postures and recognize the constant connection that exists between structure and culture, how the absence of essential public services, or their exclusively private offer, influences the way of thinking of individuals, the way to collectively accredit the request for those services.

How could a similar instruction be expressed today in reference to an educational project?

First, critical-comprehensive knowledge encourages considering both ancient and new educational challenges.

Since the post-World War II era, the democratization of educational processes has aligned with increased access to education for the population, the territorial spread of schools and educational services, and the simultaneous reduction of material barriers, primarily socio-economic, that once limited access.²¹ These processes, which we could define as structural, for reasons that can only be briefly mentioned here, have

18 V. Pareto, *Una teoria critica della scienza della società*, Milano, Rizzoli, 1996.

19 Insights relating to the cognitive and normative dimension that characterizes the critical-comprehensive function of sociological knowledge can recently also be found in decolonial approaches, in particular we can see C. Satta, *La sfida (mancata) della sociologia dell'infanzia in Italia. Ritardi e potenzialità di una prospettiva «dal» margine*, in «Meridiana», n. 127, 2023, pp. 139-160.

20 R. Boudon, *L'Art de se Persuader. Des idées fausses fragiles ou douteuses*, Paris, Fayard, 1990.

21 L. Benadusi, A. Censi, V. Fabretti, *Educazione e socializzazione. Lineamenti di sociologia dell'educazione*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2004. For a historical reconstruction of the educational challenges that promoted the democratization of the national education system during the twentieth century, read F. Peruzzo, *Chi è dentro e chi è fuori? Usare l'approccio decoloniale per ripensare le politiche pubbliche di inclusione*, in «Meridiana», n.107, 2023, pp. 57-88.

not seen complete realization in Italy. Moreover, their implementation has revealed profound territorial differences.²² The southern regions are those where the provision of educational services, particularly those related to services for early childhood, has struggled the most to expand. This is likely hindered by the lower presence of women in the labor market and, consequently, their greater willingness to exclusively fulfill educational commitments during early childhood.²³

With the end of the twentieth century, new challenges have been added to these ancient ones. As Inglehart²⁴ underlines, the cultural revolution of the last decades of the previous century, with its growing needs for personal self-realization, shifted the social center of gravity from the family to the individual. This process, accompanied by the neoliberal turn, led to the progressive tertiarization of the economy and the explosion of individual consumption. However, the consequences of these processes have not been the same in all regions. In areas where employment was more precarious, welfare systems less developed, and individual subjectivity weaker, the negative effects were more significant, and economic and social contradictions more intense.²⁵ Social equality induced exclusively by the expansion of consumption together with an individualism not supported by concrete job opportunities for self-realization have not expanded the processes of democratization of society, on the contrary they have strengthened phenomena of stratification and social segmentation. What has resulted is a *democracy of facade*, often fueled by financial cuts to public education which have affected, in recent decades, the entire country, but which have had even more important consequences in the southern regions. In these regions, the identity and corporate definitions of many communities, political as educating, appear more pronounced, and phenomena of resistance to social innovation are often more widespread.²⁶

As illustrated by Eisenstadt,²⁷ these phenomena, especially when analyzed comparatively in relation to global social dynamics, take on multiple configurations and present complex morphologies. In some cases, they tend to reproduce, in an almost defensive manner, traditional systems of social regulation of interests. In others, they are potentially more prone to generating social fragmentation and cross-cutting phenomena of discontent and social resentment.

To the old educational challenges, those of an economic nature, new ones are added. The urban maps of Sicilian towns change. Young people, following historical

22 G. Gili, M. Lupo, I. Zilli, *Scuola e società. Le istituzioni scolastiche in Italia dall'età moderna al futuro*, Napoli, Edizioni scientifiche italiane, 2002.

23 C. Saraceno, *Il welfare tra vecchie e nuove diseguaglianze*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2021.

24 R. Inglehart, *La transition culturelle dans les sociétés industrielles avancées*, Paris, Economica, 1993.

25 For a comparative analysis of the different economic and social development of the Italian regions please consult G. Viesti, *Centri e periferie. Europa, Italia, Mezzogiorno dal XX al XXI secolo*, Roma, Laterza, 2021.

26 For an analysis of the institutional dimensions of these processes see F. Dubet, *Les places et les chances. Repenser la justice sociale*, Paris, Seuil, 2010.

27 S. Eisenstadt, *Civiltà comparate: le radici storiche della modernizzazione*, Napoli, Liguori, 1990.

destinies that have never been completely redefined, begin to emigrate again not only towards the North of the country but also towards other States, the urban territory is inhabited by new arrivals, new needs for social integration emerge. The sociologist observes old and new educational poverty.

There are more traditional forms of educational poverty, such as those experienced by children born without a family or in families where adults are unable to take care of them. Some children may be exploited for illegal purposes, becoming victims of illegal circuits even before their prime. However, there are also children born into families where adults experience daily joblessness and precariousness resulting from occasional work. In some cases, these families may still be on the fringes of illegal activities, and this often contributes to phenomena of school dropout. However, alongside these, there are also other forms of educational poverty. These emerge in single-parent families or in families where children become, in the context of many separations, goods disputed between ex-partners. Finally, there are parents who are unable to exercise their parental role, because the daily challenges of life are too burdensome in society where work, especially for women, is scarce, often different from what is desired and not supported by adequate welfare systems.

In these family structures, the time that parents can dedicate to caring for their children is residual and, often, it is not of quality: it becomes commodified and often filled with compensatory consumption.

The sociologist of public action observing the new forms of educational poverty is struck by their polymorphism and, in some cases, by their overlap.²⁸

Compared to a similar context where social peripheries become mobile, redefine city centers and expand even among the wealthier social classes, critical-comprehensive knowledge emerges as knowledge suitable not only for identifying differentiated systems of social needs but also for understanding their genesis and social dynamics.

As Ramella reminds us about young people, sociological analysis often forgets that young people are first and foremost *children*.²⁹ The perspective of generational analysis proposed by the sociologist encourages the development of a systemic and interconnected knowledge of social needs. This knowledge is not only suitable for identifying the contextual specificity of social needs but also for understanding how the social distress of parents often gets transmitted to their children and how the adults' inability to recognize it hinders the identification of economic, political and associative forms of solidarity within society that could address and alleviate it.

This type of knowledge is *practical knowledge*. On one hand, it is functional in putting adults, especially teachers and personnel involved in educational actions in position to understand *le point dont ils parlent*, their historical condition and the

28 S. Curti, S. Fornari, E. Moroni, *Sociologia della povertà educativa. Concetti, metodi, politiche e pratiche*, Milano, Meltemi, 2022.

29 F. Ramella, *Genitori e figli in La generazione invisibile*, I. Diamanti (eds), Milano, Il Sole 24 Ore, 1999.

interpretations of social needs they share in their various professional roles.³⁰ On the other hand, it is a knowledge that is aware of its limits and functional to the design of project whose efficiency derives from being part of broader territorial project systems.

The participatory function of sociological knowledge

The knowledge necessary for designing systemic project actions is collective, interinstitutional, and interprofessional. It manifests itself at different phases in the project activity, and at each of these, it assumes a specific function. In this context, we will limit our analysis to understand how the critical-comprehensive function becomes a prerequisite for the *participatory* function in two distinct phases of an educational project: during the project's elaboration and during its implementation.

In the project development phase, the participatory function of knowledge is evident through the active and engaged involvement of a variety of institutional subjects and professionals. Promoting professional pluralism is crucial, and it involves engaging professionals and actors who bring their expertise from diverse professional experiences, sometimes drawing on their tacit knowledge of the issue.

The involvement of these stakeholders is fundamental for seeking new interpretations of social needs. Their participation carries an implicit democratic significance, acknowledging the inadequacy of a single form of knowledge, including academic knowledge, in addressing the complexity of contemporary social issues. It underlines the insufficiency of exclusive theoretical knowledge.

Individuals directly involved in social problem, such as associations of families of people with disabilities, bring not only a deep knowledge of disability but also *personal knowledge*, experienced in their own lives. This connotation of knowledge has unexpected effects on the entire cognitive process, it adjusts, modifies the institutional hegemony of some subjects and, through this path, allows the creation of new professional relationships within the project group.

Furthermore, the possibility to share a direct knowledge of a specific social problem also modifies the more general purposes of knowledge. On one hand, knowledge becomes modest, very contextual, anchored in certain situations and professional roles. On the other hand, it becomes functional to the creation of a new *participatory style*, a polyphonic style that replaces the autopoietic primacy of the knowing and acting subject with a relational subjectivity, gradually constituted through common research and shared discoveries.

In the implementation phase of educational projects, participatory knowledge carries out additional functions. In this phase, it takes the form of knowledge functional to the redefinition of pedagogical knowledge. It develops within an environment that,

30 M. Gauchet, *La condition politique*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005.

borrowing the term from recent technological tools, could be defined as *augmented*.

In this perspective, the augmented environment is not just an environment that incorporates technological tools, but rather an environment that enables new social relationships. It is an environment that, following Donati,³¹ could be defined as *attentional*, shaped for the discovery-knowledge of uniqueness of each child by social workers and teachers. It involves the exploration of a physical-virtual space equipped with specific educational tools and aims at children's discovery of their place in the world. This environment is a relational and communicative space, consisting of gestures, looks and communicative silences. It is a setting in which the role of teachers, their way of teaching and their vocation to teaching play an essential function.

The sociology of public action helps us remember that teachers, like other professionals and parents, are all historical individuals belonging to specific social systems.

People who share educational roles, in projects dedicated to early childhood, in Sicilian towns, are today asked to take part in the formation of a less unequal society.

Concretely, this type of knowledge translates not only into the preliminary deconstruction of many social stereotypes regarding the social background of children, their potential diversities, and not least the self-referentiality of one's own professional knowledge, but into understanding their vital and emotional worlds. It involves the willingness to co-construct a common emotional world together.

This world is composed of emotional availability, affective learning, and the domestication of knowledge in discovering the proximity of the Other.

Such a pedagogical program, centered around the discovery of the social and political function of love, finds its extraordinary activation function in the observation of nature, in the experience of the proximity of nature. From this point of view, the project initiative carried out with the project *The sound of nature, the nature of sound* appears particularly appropriate. The possibility of learning, observing nature, listening to its sounds, learning to recognize and imitate them, learning how they vary with the changing seasons is an extraordinary creative experience. It teaches not only children but also adults to recognize themselves as equal, to recognize nature, according to Spinoza's lesson, not as opposed to history or culture, but as coinciding with *human life*, with a life fundamentally oriented towards harmony, nourished by the possibility of loving, noticing others, and taking care of them.

As if, nowadays in Sicilian towns, the structural inequalities that run through society and generate many educational poverty, became visible and therefore treatable through new perspectives, new vocabularies, new social relationships similar to what Descola defines ecological social relations.³² For the anthropologist, ecological social relations are not only relations that allow us to perceive ourselves as part of a much

31 P.P. Donati, *Sociologia della riflessività. Come si entra nel dopo-moderno*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2011.

32 P. Descola, *Une écologie des relations*, Paris, Cnrs Editions, 2019.

larger natural world, of which the human species constitutes only a small segment, but they are also historical-political relationships. Through these relationships it is possible to discover the universality of the natural condition of man and the historicity of his cultural condition. Through them, it is possible to unlearn the distrust that frequently structures professional relationships, even in educational environments: mutual hostility, competitiveness, often arrogance, and complementarily, learn a new way of conceiving community bonds. A way based on the mutual recognition of the value of each individual and the contribution that each, in their professional role, can make to the constitution of a human community.

Conclusions

Faced with the proliferation of many projects in many schools of all levels, it seems appropriate to reflect on the elements that characterize a good project and on the contribution that the sociology of public action can offer to their identification.

The opportunity for this study was offered by the project *The sounds of nature, the nature of sounds* carried out in 2022 in a Sicilian municipality of Cefalù and aimed at fighting educational poverty. This project attracted us for the particularity and beauty of its project idea and pushed us to ask ourselves if it was sufficient to develop an innovative project idea to build a *good project*.

The possibility of reflecting on the institutional conditions that allow the construction of a good educational project, using categories and analysis methods widespread among sociologists of public action, has led to identifying the democratic potential of sociological knowledge. This latter seems to emerge from two main functions of sociological knowledge, the first is connected to a critical-comprehensive interpretation of social reality, the second to a participatory interpretation. The first aims to deconstruct the intersubjective validity of an epiphenomenal professional knowledge, which is not aware of the historical-social dimensions of urban contexts and their generative social dynamics. The second, instead, aims to evoke new forms of social participation, human-oriented forms that allow both adults and children to discover, within the project environment, the beauty of human nature, its historical-cultural traits, and its universality.

The first function of knowledge unmasks social distress and structural and cognitive-normative mechanisms that socially conceal it. It brings to light the conditioning exerted by institutional structures on the ways of perceiving public services, the self-referentiality of professional knowledge, the weakness of its interpretative capacities, the tendency to reproduce, often even within educational communities, widespread social stereotypes, and traditional forms of social stratification.

The second function, the participatory one, raises the possibility of social

emancipation, the possibility for the subjects involved to discover their own and others' value, to be appreciated and recognized not so much because of an antagonistic social process, but on the basis of a social process of personal co-constitution, based on the Arendtian awareness of sharing the same human condition, of having the same fundamental needs for care and the same universal rights.

The critical-comprehensive and participatory functions of knowledge make intelligible the multiple forms that educational poverty takes in Sicilian towns and allow us to better identify old and new educational challenges.

Among these, particularly relevant is the possibility of defining the educational project as a transformative public space, a space in which to bring out and experiment with forms of reflective learning dedicated to the constitution of attentive social relations.

The challenge for sociological research is primarily to promote distancing from pre-established forms of knowledge, from analyses of predefined social needs, and to accept the formation of *practical knowledge*. This means knowledge that is formed in plural and participatory manner and is open to transformation through discovery a potentially new way of understanding social needs and designing universal paths of social participation.

A similar challenge builds educational alliances among political actors, social workers, teachers and parents, taming nature and technology in the pursuit of social relationships rich in care and love.

An educational project for early childhood can transform nowadays Sicilian towns into a democratic social space to the extent that it becomes a place to unlearn self-referential forms and practices of knowledge and to learn new, more plural and polyphonic forms of constituting human subjectivity.