

Introduzione

di Sandra Potestà*

We see empowerment as a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own private and public environment. It is a process that fosters power in people for use in their own lives, their relationships, communities, and in their society by acting on issues that they define as important. There are many factors in societies, governments, economies and cultures that contribute to systemic lack of empowerment across the world. And education is considered by most parties to be the main toolbox for developing empowerment for individuals, which may lead to social and possibly political empowerment.

Also, empowerment can sometimes be a challenge to understand and contextualize. Social scientists often draw upon empowerment theory as a means to counteract feelings of powerlessness among particular groups of individuals including women, certain ethnic populations, and individuals with disabilities (Conger & Kanungo, 1988).

In the field of education, empowerment theory is often associated with the classic work by Paulo Freire (1972/1986), in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In this seminal text, Freire expresses the need to empower individuals who are disenfranchised by taking control over their own learning and developing a deeper understanding of one's own position within a community through active participation and engagement.

The concept of education also presents interpretative challenges, as often Education and Training appear to be interchangeable semantic fields to

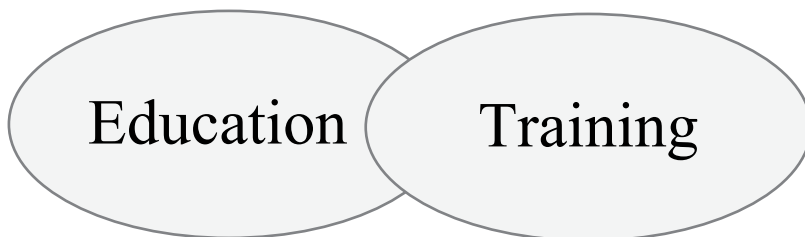
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some people, whilst for others there is a clear size difference and space distance between the two fields, with a small amount of overlapping.

Education is defined by many as a formal system of learning that is long and is aimed at allowing the individual to gain conceptual understanding. Education aims at creating a permanent behavioral change in the individual through imparting knowledge.

Training, on the other hand, is a method that makes a person skilled in a particular job or task only. It is focused upon gaining a particular skill, although sometimes concepts can be understood through training.

In the world of work, in some professions education alone is insufficient. Some professions are highly training dependent, where education alone cannot make a difference, but it creates the backbone for the training, as in the case of doctors, accountants, graduate engineers, industrial design, and reserchers in any field. These professions do not rely on education OR training, but they overlap the two.



In this issue, we will be looking at education and training and its relation to empowerment through three strands: in the first strand, Sandra Potestà concentrates on the theoretical framework, which looks at the different and often contrasting positioning of various philosophical schools of thought on education and training and their huge impact on the socio-political framework as a potential historical tool for social, ethnic, political and gender inequality and *engineering*. One important aspect of this analysis is the consideration given to the growth of populism as one of the potential outcomes of the neo-Marxists' view of schools as lately having increasingly become sites of ideological struggle by different classes and by different ethnic, religious and cultural groups, struggling to ensure that education provides the things they wish, which may be different from the norms and values supported by the traditional institutions identified as the establishment, demanding different forms of personal, political, social and economic validation. Digital skills are a substantial part of such economic validation, and

Hannah Bailey's paper looks at the challenging questions around what it means to be empowered to operate successfully as a digital citizen, at the role of culture in compounding the distance between the included and the excluded, the new thinking skills required to feel empowered in order to survive in an increasingly digital world including thoughts on digital geography as a way of getting a better handle on just how wide the gap has become between the digitally included and excluded. It concludes with the summation that lack of progress needs to be understood as flaws also belonging to institutions and organizations, not just social actors left behind by an increasingly complex world – if the past is a foreign country, then a digital present is too.

The second strand looks at two aspects of empowerment which are usually marginalized: the relevance of the role of the school as an educational agency, and the gender empowerment issue in a sports coaching environment. The role of the school as an educational agency in the Italian school system and the empowerment both for direct users (students) and for indirect users (nuclear and extended families) is the subject of Annalisa Frigenti's research, which shows that there is a new discourse about families – and specifically grandparents, in this case – being needed to teach young people the «rules to the game of real life», in order to stop perpetuating the existing cycles of disempowerment in the world, including, but certainly not limited to poverty. As Amy L. Carrier states (2012), «without teaching children how to navigate the challenges of adulthood they will soon face, each student is essentially spending 12 years in the education system building a vehicle we never teach them how to drive». Annalisa Frigenti's research shows the perception that young people have of their *growing up* and *growing old*, within the framework of their current circumstances and social context.

Within this strand, Lee M. Bell and Paul A. Rimmer's paper looks at one of the most disempowering aspects of female sporting life: menstruation, which appears to be the last great sporting taboo. They dare to ask the question: is there a lack of understanding between male coach and female athlete? The answer appears to be 'yes, but we are ready to learn'. So, education is taking on a very powerful task, as this is a challenge as old as the world, which has impacted on religion and societal mores throughout millennia, but it has now taken on a new aspect, which stems from the gender-based ideological struggle which has increasingly brought women in the world of sport as fully fledged participants. They are empowered to participate and succeed, but may lack layers of shared practice with male coaches (and, let's face it, most coaches are male, because of the history of sport positioning within society). It may seem odd that the subject of menstrua-

tion in sport comes up so rarely. Perhaps if more women's sport were televised, periods would come up all the time. The evidence which emerges from this study suggests the importance that the coach is able to address the cycle with their athletes, and that male coaches in particular could benefit from improving communication with their athletes to improve both health and performance in the female athlete. Many old wives' tales and cultural or religious beliefs overshadow solid medical knowledge. So, it is important that male coaches understand what menstruation really is, how it works, and why it is important. Women in Sport commissioned its own research (in 2010) and found «that in some circumstances, reduction in aerobic capacity and strength were exhibited», says Ruth Holdaway, the charity's chief executive. «It is important that sport understands and is sensitive to the potential impacts of the menstrual cycle for female athletes. This is not an issue that should be taboo for sport».

The third strand compares various aspects of the Italian and English (not British) school system, with specific focus on the Alternation and the fight against loss of engagement (ESL, Early School Leaving), as well as looking at the initiatives taken by schools and evaluating their impact, as well as listening to the voice of the people who operate within the system, that is, the teachers.

Loredana Cerbara shows a model for the implementation of a school-work alternation, as experimented at the Liceo Scientifico *Ettore Majorana* in Latina, supported by CNR-IRPPS. The model was obviously so successful that it is being discussed in the Senate to provide a modification to the relevant Bill.

Sonia Pozzi, on the other hand, looks at strategies and actions to fight ESL (Early School Leaving), a phenomenon which impacts greatly on the most vulnerable group of students. She reports on the *Below 10* Erasmus Plus project, run in Cuneo and Verona, aimed at identifying paths for reducing ESL and fostering positive journeys leading students more easily and directly towards jobs and as part of the social inclusion plan.

The next two papers cover aspects of the National Operational Program *For the School - Skills and Learning Environment 2014/2020* aimed at reducing educational poverty. Samuele Calzone, David Grassi, Patrizia Lotti and Rosalba Manna explore the initiatives undertaken by participating educational institutions to fight against social hardship and to educate community to work towards self-empowerment.

Rosalia Delogu, Nicola Malloggi, Valentina Pedani and Eniko Tolvay propose a descriptive model to evaluate the impact of the initiatives implemented by the schools participating in the National Operational Program.

The area of impact is specific to students' performance and their relationship with the school.

Antonietta Bellisari provides a contextualised institutional and normative framework for the school world in Italy and in England – not the UK, as, although the four home countries (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) follow a broadly similar school structure, there are significant variations between the school systems, ranging from the age that children start school to the curriculum and the type of tests they take. For example, the Scotland Act 1998 gives the Scottish Parliament legislative control over all education matters, and the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 is the principal legislation governing education in Scotland. The education system in Wales largely resembles the structure set up in England, with maintained schools (most state schools) following the National Curriculum. However, since the 2011/2012 school year, the entire curriculum for Key Stage 1 has been replaced in Wales by the Foundation Phase for all three to seven-year-olds and the curriculum in Northern Ireland is somewhat different from England, as it includes a compulsory foreign language. Within the context of reviews, changes and updates to the institutional and normative situation, the author brings in the comments on the system made by Italian and English teachers, which are so important to understand the impact that the institutional and normative framework has on the operators and the users. The issues that emerge from the teachers' words refer to the policy of inclusion, project work, recruitment of teachers and their ever increasing workload outside the classroom, the school curricula, the funding systems and the relationship between the stakeholders – teachers, students and families.

The themes of Education and Empowerment have been explored in this issue in many contexts, historical, social and geo-political. As the International Conference on Population and Development programme of action states: «Education is one of the most important means of empowering [...] with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process». But experience has shown that the relationship between education and empowerment is more complex than it may first appear; while education is undoubtedly a key element contributing to empowerment, the two do not necessarily go hand in hand.

Many educational programmes will focus on students' acquisition of formal knowledge and training, and will often equip them with the technical skills necessary to take up paid employment in a specific sector. Vocational training is obviously fundamental as part of students' *educational journey*, but it should be embedded into a wider-scope and more holistic approach, with a strong emphasis on enabling students to develop a wider awareness of themselves and the external context in which they live. This is

also vital not only to place students, when leaving formal education and entering the world of work as free-standing individuals, in a better position to deal with the multiple challenges that entry into the labor market can pose, but also to empower them to define and act upon their ambitions.

While it is important not to lose sight of the huge challenges many will face while trying to become engaged in economic activity, leaving school/university with a reinforced self-belief means they have already overcome a huge hurdle. As a result, they will be better able to control their own destinies and participate more meaningfully in development, which is firmly rooted in the notion of empowerment.

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