



Breaking Boundaries

Radical Innovation in Education

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Innovation beyond the reforms: Acknowledging schools' expertise

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Innovation is a deliberate search to find ways of understanding and carrying out the art of teaching, which are then used to help children and young people find their freedom and improve their lives. The aim is to go beyond the reforms rather than work against them. Those of us who, through study and research, endeavour to contribute to the creation of pedagogic thought of a useful nature, should pay special attention to the expertise in schools, expertise that is developed and personified by the teaching staff; it should be recognised as an authority in itself and its valuable contribution should be acknowledged. Pedagogic thought should be enriched by this hands-on knowledge based on real and singular situations that are ever-changing - never predictable or controllable. Beyond the importance of creating conditions which favour innovation, we know that the only way to bring about and sustain profound and lasting changes in the education system is through the commitment and the personal implication of the teaching staff. It is important to adapt research methods to be able to take heed of this wisdom, to interpret it adequately, to acknowledge its relevance and not to submit it to criteria which deprive it of its meaning and explanatory and evolutionary potential.

Neo-liberal politics and educational reforms

Over the last few decades, there has been a growing concern to bring about changes in the education system. This has come about through the development of an important field in academic specialisation, by the creation of institutions specifically dedicated to the study of these possible modifications and through the search for key issues which allow for both the generation and application of change.

This concern is closely linked to the proliferation of educational reforms which, as we all know, are always related to the social needs and objectives which politicians consider a

priority. However, and this has been sufficiently documented, they inevitably seem to end in disaster (Sarason, 2003).

In recent years there has been a continual process of reforms in Spain, also seen in other European countries and in the world in general. This at times only leads to confusion, as just as the authorities are looking to develop a new reform, a further modification to this reform, or even its replacement by a new idea, is announced.

Recent experience has clearly demonstrated the governmental character of educational reforms, but it is also evident that reforms are increasingly adhering to supranational guidelines laid down by international organisations (OECD, IMF, World Bank), which promote and legitimise neo-liberal and global policies that actively seek to control the education system as an effective form of social control.

Some of the most critical analyses of these policies agree that the debates and methods being promoted are based on the concept that schools are institutions that deal with an essentially private asset whose value is, first and foremost, an economic concern.

Schools should provide individuals with skills which will be valued in the future market place. For Nico Hirtt (2003) neo-liberal policies are at the service of capital needs and accordingly their priority lies in “helping Europe to become the most competitive skills economy in the world”, in line with European Community objectives; to achieve this a school’s main aim should be “to prepare human capital to enable the development of economic competitiveness”. For his part, Christian Laval (2004) points out that the predominant concept of education is at the same time utilitarian and liberal. Utilitarian in the understanding of knowledge as a concept – a tool which serves individual interests – and liberal in the way schools are organised – seeking to copy business and market models.

If the education system has been converted into an indicator of competitiveness, neo-liberal reforms are then shaped by the role that knowledge plays in economics as well as by the demands that systematic competitiveness imposes on different economies. The main factor taken into account before introducing any new measures is whether or not they contribute to competitiveness, or its growth, and it is this very competitiveness that gives it its ultimate meaning: decentralisation, standardisation of both method and content, emphasis on both the performance and management of schools and on making teachers into professionals. Reforms then become indispensable to schools as they have to continually adapt to the changes enforced by ever-changing societies where both information and knowledge are considered to be the most sought-after of assets and the height of achievement.

The desire to achieve and then institutionalise global changes

One, if not the only, reason why schools are under pressure to adapt to social and economic needs is that the education system is undergoing a general process of re-enlightenment, restructuring, innovation and improvement. Despite everything we have learnt over decades of research, this process is still generated by those at the top of the education system

pyramid – management and experts. They laboriously strive to find ways of making the teaching staff accept the proposals and to convince them to adopt these changes on a personal level, hoping to institutionalise these processes along a linear and progressive trajectory.

Theoretical discussions about the education system – its efficiency and the need for improvement – provide the foundations of the search for the keys to furthering the process of change in schools. Over the last four decades of research development, the emphasis has gradually shifted from the idea that “schools are the focal point of change” to the concept of creating a culture which enables teaching centres to devise and sustain autonomous processes of change without being subjected to external pressure or without needing outside support. Recently, great relevance has been given to issues relating to teaching and learning methods as well as to those connected to equality and social justice¹ (Murillo, 2004).

Both inside and outside these theoretical discussions, research into the reasons for innovation or into the characteristics of innovative centres has provided us with important reference points which help us to understand the complexities of the process of change (Fullan, 2002; Hargreaves et al. 2001). The general consensus is that it is the teaching institutions that are the breeding ground for change but that this would not be possible if the institutions did not suggest or put their own ideas into practice in order to create a favourable atmosphere for change (MacDonald, 1999); in other words, innovative ideas put forward by academics are more likely to be successful and long-lasting than any ideas that come from external sources. This does not mean that external stimuli, support or resources are not necessary; they are necessary and the people in educational management are responsible for providing them.

However, there is a common desire to institutionalise, that is to say, to uphold the idea that change is an integral part of the teaching world. Within this context it is generally agreed that isolated cases of improvement are not enough in themselves; although they do serve a purpose and play a valid role in setting a precedent, they lose their strength if they are not institutionalised, “ they are destined to last as long as the goodwill of those who sustain them” (Muñoz-Repiso, 2004, 73). So “reforms on a large scale” are still the way to achieve this aim (Fullan, 2004).

In 1987 I took part in the evaluation process of the experimental reforms propitiated by the first socialist government, which the most forward-looking teaching staff in Andalusia

¹ To a certain extent, this is an attempt to reply to the criticism it has received which is based on two fundamental aspects: a) The lack of theory regarding curriculum changes; this is revealed by the fact that many aspects have been listed as weak points because they fail to take certain issues into account or omit the contextual aspects. b) The simplistic and technological nature of its proposals which has permitted and given rise to a more than often manipulative and perverse interpretation of policies. If contextual, social and economic factors are not taken into consideration, there is then a tendency to blame schools and teaching staff for any failures. As Rea and Weiner (2001, 33) point out “by blaming individual centres for below average results, we reassert and reinforce the reasons for creating an education market and introducing competition between schools”.

supported in idea, practice and through their voluntary participation. I witnessed the hopes and aspirations of the management staff, of the academics themselves and of all of us who took part in the evaluation process and in the subsequent promotion of the changes within specific contexts. I also learnt how to consolidate these changes and how to accept the disappointment that ensues when these plans fail. However, in recent years I have also witnessed situations where the changes have been long-lasting and involved the whole institution – whilst at the same time important changes were also being made to the teaching staff within the school – as happened at Totalán College (López Castro et al, 2004). In the IES in Fuentevaqueros I also witnessed how all the staff were gradually incorporated into the project devised by a headmaster and trainer who were determined to “invent” procedures which, whilst being careful to take all the implications of such changes into account, would guarantee the quality of teaching for each and every student in their centres, adapting itself to their individual needs to ensure the personal success and development of the boys and girls in high risks situations in which they faced the possibility of both scholastic and personal failure (López Ocaña and Zafra, 2003). More recently, I met a group of teachers who left their schools to embark on a joint project in very difficult circumstances, where absolutely all the students came from gypsy or immigrant families who lived in marginalised communities rife with delinquency and family problems.

In general terms, and as Juana M^a Sancho (2002, 124-125) states in her summary, it could be said that the schools I refer to above have the characteristics typical of innovatory teaching centres. As Félix Angulo (2002) states, all of them combine curriculum changes, professional development and school improvements. Although this is true, in my experience, the success and durability of these initiatives depend on one essential element: the daily involvement and dedication of the teaching staff who work on them. This personal involvement, on an individual level, is sustained by the relationships with fellow colleagues both in their schools and in other education centres.

This does not mean that the organisational and material aspects, institutional support or the availability of sufficient resources are not important. They are very important, above all because future projects can be stymied or existing plans ruined when these conditions are either non-existent or unsuitable. However, these factors are not actually decisive in the process of change, they cannot provide or sustain the impetus for improving teaching methods; they merely create the right environment to allow for the full involvement of the teaching staff. It is up to them, after all, to welcome and sustain changes in educational methods. Furthermore, full involvement of the teaching staff depends on there being an atmosphere of trust, which gives them free reign to carry out their desire to teach (Contreras, 2004), as it is this desire that gives teaching its true meaning. Rules and structures can either favour or restrict this freedom, but they cannot actually create it.

The desire for constancy in the face of inconsistency

“The perception of any given presence depends whether it is clearly visible or concealed, and the play between the two is what defines its specific form of spatial and temporal existence” (María Zambrano).

A few years ago, the Diótima women’s way of thinking and practices lead them to question how the tradition of sexual differences should in fact be treated, how to guarantee the “profit” gained by women’s politics (by both its practices and its ideals), how to ensure that their achievements do not just melt into thin air and that we are not faced with the feeling that we have to start over and over again. During this whole process they began to see that in fact the link between women and history is riddled with inconsistencies, that there is no real sense of continuity or means of predicting events, that women’s position in the world lies somewhere between the realm of the visible and the invisible, as Chiara Zamboni (undated) puts it. Thus we should rethink this quest for consistency, the natural desire for longevity.

This desire for longevity forms part of basic human behaviour in as much as the concept of transforming reality, of modifying all existing things around us, is seen to be driven by progressive linear and cumulative processes; it is a desire that has a great deal to do with the vertigo kindled in the male mind by all living things, by all things beyond our control, by the unpredictable – although of course we can choose to hide, ignore or pour derision on this fact. Faced with this desire for longevity, Anna Maria Piussi trusts “in the general move to innovate, in the ever-open and risky game of exchanging words and things, the interchange between the reality of what makes up our own personal experience (which is always unique) and the search for a thought or word to give meaning to this reality without diminishing it in any way, and even if this means having to ignore what has already been said and classified by ourselves or by other women” (2002, 136)².

I feel that implicit in her words is the need to think about the quality of the process of changing education, of what is to be expected from the idea of seeing innovation as a process of global transformation of the school system, as a process that is controlled by the academics and management who implement the planned changes. Finally, taking into account there are widely differing points of view behind the variety of theories regarding innovation, what specialised literature seeks is a model which can be used to implement changes in the education system as a whole, throughout all schools and in all given circumstances.

Perhaps the reason for the high rate of failure experienced when trying to institutionalise these processes of change and innovation, which occur despite all the efforts made in research and in spite of everything we have learnt to date, is that we are trying to achieve the impossible. By the same rule of thumb, these failure rates are not really failures.

Maybe changes to the education system are inconsistent by definition, which means they need to be continually “re-worked”. This is a job that can only be done by the teachers

² Nuria Pérez de Lara translated this text into Spanish.

themselves, i.e. on an individual basis, taking their own experiences into account as well as their particular ever-changing circumstances. There is nothing to be gained from trying to propose or apply changes if you disregard those who are responsible for their implementation, those who have the power to administer them, not for the teachers themselves, and even less so as far as the education system is concerned.

In my opinion, the risk inherent in all theories and methods that seek to guarantee the successful application of change create conditions, frameworks and norms that are based on research, that only appear to be the ideal. This does not mean that such frameworks and conditions are not important; they play a significant role because they can either create opportunities or hinder plans of action. However, they are not conducive to freedom of action, they cannot dictate what needs to be done or what path this plan of action should take. Frameworks can create the right conditions but are not actually responsible for bringing about any significant changes, as each and every teacher and situation has to be fully involved in the process and given new resources, methods and meanings.

Having said this, it does not necessarily follow that everything comes down to the good will or judgement of the teaching staff; they are not always able to offer their full dedication, they are not necessarily free of managerial constraints and they are not always focused on improving their students' lives. Some do indeed show this level of dedication and the point here is not actually how many there are, but rather to understand that they are what we consider to be the most suitable reference point as they have a practical, i.e. real, approach to what really matters.

The very nature of the education system implies that it is immersed in a constant process of "unlearning", of looking at things from a different angle, of temporarily putting aside what we know. On other occasions it has allowed us freedom from the constraints of previously acquired knowledge and given us the chance to approach each new situation according to its particular needs in a quest to find the right way to deal with what is really needed in each case. If our aim is to be truly efficient, in the sense of doing what is right in any given situation, we cannot rely on old solutions to new situations as this could mean that we miss out on valuable experiences or that we fail to succeed. A foster mother tells us of her experience and I believe makes a valid point in relation to other areas of education. "In my case, true wisdom lies in knowing how to forget everything you already know each time a new child arrives. This does not mean that you should disregard previously acquired tactics which help you in your work, but rather that you should forget any pre-conceived ideas from earlier experiences with other cases. It means that you must take your time, observe and listen with a clear mind. It means that you should be asking the same questions as you did the first time round" (Manenti, 2002, 173-174).

The aforementioned idea of inconsistency leads me to reinterpret what has happened, for example, with the Movement of Change to Pedagogic Thought in Spain and also to give new meaning, a solution, to the frustration felt by many teachers who were part of this movement, who suffer from the fear that their "legacy" will be lost if it is not documented.

In the 70's Spain went through a process whereby a large number of teachers joined forces on a voluntary basis, outside institutional constraints, to organise self-regulating collectives such as Summer Schools, which created links and exchange schemes based on innovative ideas and practices. The repercussions of this on the education system were far-reaching, at least in qualitative terms. In Jaume Martínez Bonafé's account of the origins of this movement (1998), we can see examples of inconsistency: the roots of the reformation of Spanish pedagogy that emerged at the height of Franco's dictatorship are to be found to certain events that occurred during the Second Republic, in certain approaches adopted by the Institute of Free Education, in the Ferrer Guardia Rationalist Schools and in the teaching policies of the First Republic. These roots have remained hidden for long periods of time, for decades even, waiting for some individual or organisation to unearth them and make use of them in the present.

Many of the academics of the time were able to face their reality and were eager to transform what they saw as an unfair social system. They worked with the conviction that they could bring about changes by forming close relationships with their pupils and by striving to give them a better life. Their tactics were not based on rules and regulations – although they did not oppose them – nor were they based on criteria imposed by the experts; rather they worked by involving themselves on a personal level and by exercising their free will. They constantly organised meetings with colleagues and furthered their knowledge in an atmosphere of professional exchange. In the Summer Schools and during other meetings they exchanged what Ana Mañeru calls recipes: “tell everyone how you do it, speak for yourself, base your work on other's experience” (Sofias, 2002, 84), tell them what you are doing, make it accessible to others who should try it out, if they so wish, but in their own way. These ‘recipes’ set out one way of doing things but could not or did not in any way claim to be norms, as they bore the stamp of the unique situations from which they arose and of the people involved, whereas an abstract formula is quite the opposite as it is “repetitive and does not allow for individual creativity”.

However, as José Contreras (2004) points out, “the reform which started in the mid-80s proved to be the driving force behind the power to change the education system as a whole. The hands-on and individual methods used by teachers to change specific situations were replaced by the desire to establish institutional policies, which vowed to improve the education system through changes in legislation. The accuracy of these new policies and laws made many existing methods redundant because they now depended on what had always been rejected up to then, which were precisely systems based on management-driven decisions”. The move to change the entire system, and to ensure that these new ideas were to have long-lasting effects by turning them into policies, came at a price: it meant that the hands-on methods at the time became void of content, as the new system was now governed by a different approach and by different interests. Moreover, there was an even higher price to pay: the symbolic and real strength that these methods had enjoyed in the 70s was weakened or sometimes lost altogether.

Having attended Rema (Renovation of the Education System in Malaga), a group of academics from all levels within the education system, I can bear witness to the concern felt

and fear expressed at the possibility of losing the continuity of the pedagogic legacy which these academics see as their own, many of them having taken part in the historical process of renewing the education systems. I also saw that some of them wished to convey their own experience, which they saw as knowledge which should be passed on, convinced that this would guarantee its continuity in a progressive and uninterrupted flow of learning. Considering the pedagogical qualities and social content of their ideas, they want to “pass the torch” to someone to ensure that these ideas and methods that they have helped to create do not disappear, thus hoping to ensure their survival. What is the *modus operandi* in this case? They want to ensure that younger generations pick up the “torch” and so they aim to approach students in Teacher Training Centres.

There is a great deal of sense in this aim as it is clear that they do indeed hold the future of schools in their hands. Yet it seems that they have forgotten something, they have failed to realise that the survival of these ideas and methods that they wish to “keep alive” depends on the teachers themselves and that these ideas have to be put into practise today. It appears that there is no indication of the fact that this legacy is not based on what has already been done but rather on what they are doing right now. Some of these academics have failed to activate and rework these assets; their commitment and personal participation has fallen by the wayside. I believe that sometimes this frustration and inefficiency is due to our failure to understand that it is not beyond our capabilities to keep these ideas and methods alive, it is not up to others to ensure their survival; it is up to each and every one of us to keep using them in our daily teaching practice, if we so desire.

This also helps us to understand that if we want students to join us on this quest, if we want them to feel a part of what we believe is a desirable task, we must make sure that they make it their quest too. It would then become their own creation rather than our legacy. Can we do something to encourage this? Yes, but it rather depends on the relationships they have with academics in the future, relationships where the ideas we wish to share should be clearly expressed and where students could take part in all those practices we deem suitable. Thus the focus of attention is no longer on the idea of longevity itself, but on trusting the abilities of the trainee teachers to go their own way, reusing “old” knowledge in their present-day context.

To perceive change in terms of inconsistency is to stress the importance of dynamism, rather than seeing thoughts or methods as static concepts. This is more often found in the feminine mind where their thoughts are “based on and continually reasserted through experience – experience which is always new and different. The masculine thought process, on the other hand, tends to be over and above any personal experiences, leaping beyond experience to the point where it becomes abstract. So the male psyche is more prone to establish traditions and settle for them, anchoring itself in tradition” (Piusi, 2002, 175).

I feel that some of the theoretical debates and research carried out on innovation and change bear a strong stamp of masculine thought, and I wonder if José Contreras (2000) might not be right when he says that Didactics “through its scientific ambitions, through its ambition to achieve totality, has actually reduced its objective because it fails to accept that

the only meaning it has is if the wisdom has been gleaned from experience: wisdom that recognises the disproportion between truth and life, that knows that it is both relative and fragmented, it is beyond all constraints of time and can provide a constantly renewable source of truth and new experience”.

The meaning of change: from inside to outside

Etty Hillesum, a Jewish woman who died in a concentration camp, wrote in her diary, “I don’t think we can improve anything in the outside world without having first found ourselves within. It is the only lesson from this war: we must search within ourselves and not anywhere else” (Tommasi, 2003, 74).

I have learnt from women’s politics that it is important to change your outlook and to concentrate your efforts and our intelligence on changing our relationship with the world instead of insisting on changing the world itself. This is not renunciation but a shift of approach based on the understanding, as Anna Maria Piusi puts it, that “the first and most important move to change the world and also the world of education, is to change our relationship with it” (1999, 52). This does not imply running away from reality – but rather becoming better and more effectively involved with it. The author goes on to say that this is a process through which we, alongside others, learn how to set symbolic operations in motion and how to eliminate superfluous aspects, thus turning our attention to what is really important. And this is how “we have sought to learn from simplicity and to unlearn simplification” (53).

Some teachers, working both within and outside groups involved in renewing pedagogic thought, use innovative methods and have been instrumental in changing schools from the inside, relying on the knowledge gained in the school itself as their springboard for action. As Ana Mañeru relates from her personal experience, during the process they attained important symbolic independence and great freedom, which meant they no longer had to seek approval for their methods from external bodies (from the academy, amongst others) but could compare them with the methods used by other women in a real-life and trusting environment, though not without the occasional conflict. It was something that “arose from the necessity to discuss personal experience, that was neither a whim nor some pedagogical protocol dreamt up in a laboratory or ministerial department. It was never questioned, it was and still is a basic necessity” (159).

This is the case of an important movement in Italy known as the ‘autorriforma gentile’, a reform movement of the entire education system - from play school right up to university. The movement has already brought together over 60,000 participants and their approach is based on making changes from within – changes which they have implemented themselves fuelled by the desire that many teachers, students and parents’ have to improve their own schools. They do not wait for external reforms, specialists’ acquiescence or expert intervention before acting themselves. “Continuing with the premise that pedagogical thought stems from the differences between the sexes, this is already the case in Italy as seen in the work of female teachers and students, where the process is also open to both

confrontation and contribution from the male population. This movement proposes reform from within the school, based on each school's real situation and on what works best for them. It is particularly based on the personal changes that students and teachers undergo during their quest to improve the quality of their schools. Their competence and vitality and above all the quality of their working relationships, make school life a more enjoyable and balanced experience" (Piusi, 1999, 55). All this enables them to find the right methods and applications for their schools.

This movement has initiated its own process of change, with no support from governmental reforms but also without entering into any form of conflict with them. It is based on "the relationship between those who live in the school and the evaluation of the knowledge obtained during the teaching process. We want to let people know about the good quality of the teaching that is already available, to share the most relevant experiences, to build up a network of relationships and innovative ideas – not only amongst schools but also with anyone else in society who has an avid interest in this area - in order to improve the quality of student-teacher relations, a necessary prerequisite for any positive change". So, they make use of all the knowledge that they have gained about their schools and use it as an effective means of "responding to the profound changes in society without having to mould themselves to the dominant workings of the business and organisational worlds".

They have established an open exchange network and hold periodical meetings during which they use their own work methods to forge their teaching theories and define the purpose of their schools³. Their last meeting took place in Milan on the 25th of September 2004 and focused on the consideration and exchange of the different ways that people experience their time at school, a topic which is closely linked to the purpose of schools and to their role in society. Beyond the idea of time in educational reforms, an aspect which is increasingly fragmented and impoverished – a reflection of a society that is modelled on flexible work hours – is the need and desire of teachers, children and parents to "make the school years an opportunity for generations to meet, a time to learn about everything and to experience life alongside your fellow citizens. In the present and in person".

Anna María Piusi sees this as a movement that is founded on a separate premise, a third methodology that works from within the schools, as opposed to the two existing systems to which European policies appear to have reduced their possibilities. On the one hand, there is the nihilist and alarmist imposture which leaves no room for any change and leaves schools at the total mercy of the market; and on the other hand, the imposture which promises to apply all-encompassing global reforms from above, changes that are both out of context and of a technical nature. Both options lead to the obstruction or concealment of what should be the very driving force for change and they might even cause its total destruction. This force lies in "the sense of responsibility, in our personal aptitudes, in the pursuit of quality which is still very much alive, in all that we can achieve as individuals

³ The movement's webpage can be consulted at: <http://autoriformagentile.too.it>. There are also two publications available about their periodical meetings: Lelario et al. (1998) and Cosentino and Longobardi (1999).

now rather than in some imaginary future, in the conviction that we are citizens of a world that we observe with concern and which we would like to improve” (1999, 56).

This same driving force is the reason why a various female teachers in Spain have grouped together to form a liberal and open association which we have called the Sofias, and which is an authority in itself. We are united in the conviction that “we are education” and are thus willing to do everything in our power to make schools and universities civilised places. Our aim is not to be omnipotent but neither are we willing to wait for changes to be made by either the authorities, the students, our work colleagues or families. We are motivated by a desire to make all our schools, wherever they may be and at any given time, into a much needed and often unique place where different generations can meet and where our cultural relationships are renewed, an aspect which we believe to be of vital importance. Using our own experiences as a starting point during our annual meetings, we try to build up our knowledge, and combine and study our different work methods and ideas in depth. We never simplify reality, or try to deny the existence of possible contradictions or conflicts, or even our own frustrations. As stated in our two publications (Sofias, 2002, 2004) we are not proposing any specific changes, nor do we have a special project in mind, but I believe that we clearly demonstrate our desire to make changes – even if we are not always successful or cannot guarantee their longevity. Our proposals are based on the real-life situations we all face in our schools and on the search for the real reasons behind educational methods which we understand as the right to exercise our freedom and that of our students, to make school life and the world in general more enjoyable and civilised.

Research which keeps abreast of reality: taking schools’ expertise into account

The most widespread pedagogic theories and their associated investigative methods are not “local knowledge” (Cochran normally based on real life sources) nor do they consider teachers to be the providers of valuable knowledge worthy of attention, recognition and dissemination. However, such knowledge does indeed exist and is referred to as “knowledge gained from experience” (Tardiff, 2004 or -Smith and Lytle, 2002). It is gleaned from our everyday practical experience and is also ratified by this experience, as the roots and relevance of this information are directly linked to the nature of the teaching methods and specific situations in which they occur. This local knowledge, which is closely connected to specific situations, to the unpredictability of both relationships and particular contexts, is circulated amongst schools alongside the other ‘expert’ knowledge. This ‘expert’ knowledge is hardly ever based on practical issues and is often unaware of the real problems at hand. All knowledge gained from the schools themselves can, and should, be used to enrich pedagogic thought as it gives the subject a real-life context, it is based on real people’s experiences. Also, I agree with Anna Maria Piussi when she says that this is precisely what enriches scientific knowledge, “as this is exactly how the idea of science can and should be expanded, to include the variability and dynamism of human beings and of their relationships. These are aspects that cannot be reduced to simple fluctuations above or below an average or standard value” (1999, 57).

We need research methods and strategies that are suited to the characteristics of this kind of knowledge based on real-life situations and we should approach this valuable knowledge with the respect it deserves instead of reducing its contribution. As Van Manen (2003) points out, we need to find research methods which base themselves on an interest in the unique, on looking to connect with the world around us instead of trying to elaborate a theory which merely explains or controls the world. These research methods should make the researchers look for answers from within themselves, to be in touch with the world around them instead of distancing themselves from it; a form of research which is affected by and reacts to the world around it and which therefore requires, “not only techniques which can be taught and specific knowledge but also skills which encompass the ability to judge for yourself, to be intuitive, to be practical and tactful” (17).

This research work can and should include teachers’ expertise in its methods, representing and recognising it where appropriate. As Cristina Mecenero (2003) points out, it can, “make the biggest contribution to academic research in order to attain theoretical knowledge which is effectively rooted in real-life school situations. This would be knowledge reciprocally enlightened by current practical methods and theoretical thought within a context of mutual recognition, thus making headway into the mechanisms which undermine its authority and value, mechanisms which up to now have dominated the relationship between academics and schools” (109).

Educational research must contribute to the understanding and exposure of this knowledge which, as Luigina Mortari (2002) admirably states, needs to be welcomed, by attentively taking heed of its wisdom, by being careful not to submit it to external criticism and to foreign codes. Research methods can and must have this approach, redefining its reasoning and adapting its procedures and especially understanding that the practical methods used in schools and by the teaching staff are not objects of research to be viewed at a distance; there is a link between researchers and those they base their research on, between academics and teachers which should adopt an approach of authoritative relationships and not of power.

Finally, I would like to borrow the words of María Zambrano (1986) in order to explain the reasoning and impulse behind the thought process I have followed here: “This is an attempt to put into words what we all know to be true but have never expressed, to formulate what we had premonitions about, to reflect upon what we suspected, to give life to and shed light on everything that needs to be reconsidered”.

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