

Making them equal in front of perils: Some suggestions from Gramsci for the education of XXI century society of competition

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Renderli uguali di fronte ai pericoli: alcuni spunti di riflessione da Gramsci per l'educazione della società competitiva del XXI secolo

According to Gramsci, one of the most important tasks of educators should be to make children equal in the face of peril (1918/2023, p. 23). Gramsci would argue that educators should be to empower every child and adolescent, regardless of gender, socioeconomic background or ethnic origin, to acquire, recognise and express the resources necessary to confront and overcome peril. However, given that we have evidently failed in this mission, and considering the malaise experienced by our teenagers, this study aims to explore the nature of the perils perceived by our youth, what we as educators should do to help them overcome these challenges, and, above all, our responsibility in making them so vulnerable. Three hypotheses are put forward and discussed: *i*) perceived dangers for adults and children change over time; *ii*) our parents were emotionally stronger than we are now; *iii*) and we have allowed the neoliberal ideology of competition to influence our educational intentions, whereas our parents did not. Critical pedagogists could suggest us how to free ourselves and our children from the oppression of competition.

Secondo Gramsci, uno dei compiti più importanti degli educatori dovrebbe essere quello di rendere i giovani uguali di fronte al pericolo (1918/2023, p. 23). Gramsci sostiene che gli educatori dovrebbero dare a ogni bambino e adolescente, indipendentemente dal genere, dal contesto socioeconomico o dall'origine etnica, gli strumenti per acquisire, riconoscere ed esprimere le risorse necessarie per affrontare e superare i pericoli che incontrano. Tuttavia, essendo evidente il nostro fallimento in questa missione, e considerando il malessere vissuto dai nostri adolescenti, questo studio mira a esplorare la natura dei pericoli percepiti dai nostri giovani, cosa dovremmo fare noi educatori per aiutarli a superare queste sfide e, soprattutto, capire quale possa essere la nostra responsabilità nell'averli resi così vulnerabili. Vengono avanzate e discusse tre ipotesi: *i*) i pericoli percepiti da adulti e bambini cambiano nel tempo; *ii*) i nostri genitori erano emotivamente più forti di quanto lo siamo noi oggi; *iii*) noi adulti abbiamo permesso all'ideologia neoliberista della competizione di influenzare le nostre intenzioni educative più di quanto abbiamo fatto i nostri genitori. I pedagogisti critici possono darci qualche suggerimento per trovare il modo di liberare noi stessi e i nostri figli dall'oppressione della competizione.

Keywords: Education; Adolescence; Fears; Competition; Neoliberalism.

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According to Gramsci, one of the most important tasks of educators should be to make children equal in the face of peril (1918/2023, p. 23). Gramsci would argue that the authentic role of educators should be to empower every child and adolescent, regardless of gender, socioeconomic background or ethnic origin, to acquire, recognise and express the resources necessary to confront and overcome peril. In other words, all the children, adolescents and young people should have the chance to acquire in their lifetime the cultural capital able to let them understand the peril, to count on a social capital which make them sure and protected within their social bound (Bourdieu, 1986/2015), and to count on something we can call an emotional capital which can make them face frustration without leaving the target. Only in this way, we could have made them the same in front of the peril.

But, if we agree with this, we must admit that, as educators of the XXI century, we have failed in our mission: not only are our adolescents and young adults not the same in the face of peril, but it is also unclear about what peril we are referring to.

This contribution aims to explore the nature of the perils our youth perceived, what we as educators should do to help them face them but, above all, the responsibility we have in “having made them the same in front of the perils” for only one aspect: the most of them are fragile.

1. The spreading malaise

If we could be truly fulfilled the mission Gramsci had assigned to us—when he outlined a social project for a future Italy characterised by peace and democracy—, all our youth could possess the resources which are necessary to face the perils they perceived without uncertainty. But in this scenario, we wouldn't see all the malaise they experience every day. The latest global report by UNICEF states that one in seven adolescents aged 10 to 19 has a diagnosed mental health condition. The highest rates of diagnosed mental disorders were recorded in North America and Western Europe: it means that the conditions are most prevalent in two of the world's richest regions.

Anxiety and depression account for 40% of diagnosed mental health issues. In some cases, the distress is so severe that young people feel they have no alternative; suicide is the second leading cause of death for boys aged 15 to 19 in Western Europe, after road accidents. In Italy, the prevalence of mental health problems was around 18–20% of the population before the pandemic, equating to between 1.8 and 2 million children and teenagers. In 2019, it was estimated that approximately 956,000 boys and girls aged 10 to 19, or 16.6% of this age group, suffered from mental health problems, with incidence rates increasing with age.¹

According to Arcovio (2025), the most common symptoms are permanent sleep disorders, emotional dysregulation, and deficits in attention and communication skills, particularly in relation to peers, but in the recent years, the increasing incidence is accompanied by the disorder becoming more complicated as multiple problems manifest simultaneously.²

The 2024 World Mental Health Day Report states that too many young people miss work due to stress:

A majority (54%, Global Country Average) of Gen Z say they have felt stressed to the point that they could not go to work during the past year; the figure for Millennials is slightly lower (47%) [...] Among the Boomer generation, the rate decreases to 25% for women and 19% for men.³

1. <https://www.unicef.it/diritti-bambini-italia/salute/salute-mentale/> (ultimo accesso 27/11/2025).

2. Referred to V. Aarconi's contribution in the newspaper *Quotidiano Salute*, entitled “In Italia 2 milioni di minori con un disturbo neuropsichiatrico. SINPIA: ‘Impatto su salute mentale’”, available at <https://www.sanitainformazione.it/in-italia-2-milioni-di-minori-con-un-disturbo-neuropsichiatrico-sinpia-impatto-su-salute-mentale/> (ultimo accesso 8/10/2025).

3. <https://www.ipsos.com/en-id/ipsos-world-mental-health-day-report-2024>.

Beyond the statistics, we are all aware of the malaise spreading among our youth: a silent suffering that sometimes manifests as deep sadness and sometimes as senseless violence against others or themselves. Literature evidences the spreading of many disturbs, such as anxiety disorders (Rapee, Creswell, Kendall, Pine, & Waters, 2023), different form of digital addiction, as nomophobia⁴ and phubbing⁵ (Ding, Li, 2023; Tomczyk, Lizde, 2022); non-suicidal self-injury (Jiang, Ren, Liu, & You, 2021), substance addiction (Nawi *et al.*, 2021; Volkow, Wargo, 2022), eating disorders (Hambleton, Pepin, Le, Maloney, Touyz, & Maguire, 2022; Meneguzzo, Meregalli, Collantoni, Cardi, Tenconi, & Favaro, 2023) and different kind of perpetuated interpersonal violence: violence acted against their peers (Beckwith, Lou, Michielsen, Mafuta, Wilopo, & Blum, 2022) or other form of interpersonal violence, above all directed to their past, actual or potential partners, such as stalking, harassment, sexual assault, and physical or digital dating violence⁶ (Sessarego, Siller, & Edwards, 2021); besides these, there is also the InCel movement⁷ (involuntary celib) (Barcellona, 2022; Lindsay, 2021; Zimmerman, 2024).

Withdrawal and refusal are another serious consequence of adolescents' fears. Many adolescents try to avoid the real world, which seems too difficult and demanding to them, pushing them to find rest living another life on the internet, where everything is supposed to be easier. This withdrawal, that sometimes can be the origin of the so-called Hikikomori syndrome,⁸ is the first sign of a more general disengagement (Tayfur, Prior, Roy, Maciver, Forsyth, & Fitzpatrick, 2022), which is another source of young people's fragility.

According to paper or tv press, this malaise is due to the uncertainty of our time, characterised as it is by wars, climate change, unemployment and poverty. However, as adults, we know that our own childhoods and youth were no more certain. Until 1989, the world was divided into two opposing sides in the Cold War, and the threat of humanity's extinction in a final nuclear war was ever-present. In our home country of Italy, we grew up during the "Years of Lead", when right-wing and red-wing terrorists⁹ repeatedly attempted to establish a dictatorship. They carried out numerous terrorist attacks, leaving dozens dead, and even kidnapped one member of our parliament, Aldo Moro, a party secretary and ex-prime minister. After two months of negotiations, they returned his body. In 1976, northern Italy was shocked by the Seveso ecological disaster; ten years later, the whole of Europe was frightened by the explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear plant's central core. For many years, radiation contaminated our countries and our lives. In the early 1990s, a war erupted in the heart of Europe, leaving Sarajevo littered with the bodies of men, women and children killed by snipers. It was hard to count how many persons were killed, and how many girls and women were raped. During that same period, our currency

4. Nomophobia is a state of anxiety experienced by adolescents when they are unable to use their smartphone for a few minutes or hours. Those affected by this disturbance constantly feel the need to browse online resources and think about their phone while doing other offline activities. These young people often hold their phone in their hands, even in inappropriate situations (Tomczyk, Lizde, 2022).
5. Phubbing refers to the use of a mobile phone in situations where it is inappropriate, for example when adolescents ignore other people in favour of using their phones (Tomczyk, Lizde, 2022).
6. The physical or digital dating violence refers to a violent behaviour consisting of slapping and shoving, as well as psychological abuse such as controlling the other person's mobile phone, that occurs in the early stages of romantic relationships between adolescents.
7. The Incel movement refers to a group of male individuals with different age who feel they have been victimised by feminism, since they believe that the world we live in is a feminist gynarchy. Initially a misogynistic online social group, the movement gained popularity thanks to the Netflix series "Adolescence", which tells the story of a young boy who, after being persuaded by an online group that he had been wrongly rejected by a girl he liked, killed her. The Incel movement is an online space in which many adolescents freely express their hatred towards girls who reject boys based on their appearance or personality. Even though it is still only a social commentary online nowadays, according to Zimmerman (2021), it is becoming a real political movement that is spreading beyond the web and calling for a world in which patriarchal masculinity regains its superiority.
8. Hikikomori is a form of pathological social withdrawal or social isolation in one's home, which can include the physical withdrawal in one's own place of residence and the absence of active participation in academic and work settings, as well as the limited involvement in social relationships, lasting longer than 6 months, associated with a significant functional impairment or distress (Kato *et al.*, 2019).
9. The most famous group of red-wing terrorist was the Red Brigades, who claimed responsibility for the kidnapping and murder of Aldo Moro; the right-wing terrorists were organized in different groups called New Order, National Vanguard or Black Order. They were found to be responsible for the Piazza Fontana bombing on 12 December 1969 and the Bologna bombing on 2 August 1980, both of which were part of a strategy known as the "strategy of tension".

continued to be devalued, compromising the spending power of many working-class families and leading to continued mass strikes. Perhaps we adults have forgotten the perils that characterised our past because of that “death of history” so well described by Giroux (2018, p. 5): all we are persuaded to leave the past behind focusing to look forward and believing that any future experience could be better than any past one, being dragged by the positivistic illusion of innovation.

Aware of this, we realise that to understand the true causes of our teenagers’ distress, we must face an evidence: we, when we were adolescents, have been stronger than our sons are now, as well as our parents have been more severe and inflexible than we are now in their same role, despite any kind of war, unemployment or environmental disasters. It is difficult to understand what, forty years ago, make us stronger than our kids, but it is evident that we were expected to be able to cope with life’s frustrations, particularly because our parents did not offer us any mediation, protection or justification when we made mistakes. Our parents, especially our fathers, were probably the last generation embodying the role of *paterfamilias*: a father who had total authority over his wife and children; a man who worked hard all day; who loved his children, but was not their friend; and whose words were orders that could never be questioned by his wife, who supported him unconditionally. These fathers expected their children to cope with their mistakes using their own strength, because they had raised them to do so (Quilici, 2013; Iaquinta, 2018; Polenta, 2018). Are we doing the same with our kids? Probably not. Regarding this, it is possible to make some hypothesis: the first is that the perceived perils, for adults and children, are changed throughout the times; the second, that our parents were emotionally stronger than we are now, probably because their roles were well-defined and recognised by the whole society (Iaquinta, 2018); the last, that we have allowed the neoliberal ideology of competition to influence our educational intentionality, whereas our parents did not.

2. The peril threats as sources of distress for young people and adults in the recent years

Today, the fear of missing out (FeMo) seems to be the most reported concern among adolescents. It is also the fear which is most widely analysed in literature. FeMo is “a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent” (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013, p. 1841). This kind of concern makes young people want and need to stay constantly digitally connected with their peers, so they don’t risk to miss out on opportunities and can find out if their friends are trying to exclude them (Astleitner, Bains, & Hörmann, 2023; Fioravanti *et al.*, 2021; Marengo, Settanni, Fabris, & Longobardi, 2021; Riordan, Flett, Hunter, Scarf, & Conner, 2015; Ritcher, 2018; Trong Dam *et al.*, 2023). As it is clear from the cited literature contributions, this kind of fear is globally perceived, and it push young people to a pervasive use of social networks. Besides FeMo, social appearance anxiety (SAA) is another fear experienced by adolescents (Caner, Efe, & Başdaş, 2022; Trompeter *et al.*, 2018) directly linked to the anxiety to be negatively evaluated by others (Geuken *et al.*, 2022; Iqbal & Ajmal, 2018). Clearly, our adolescents suffer very much from real or potential frustration regarding their need to be accepted by their peers. Even if it can be considered a transgenerational fear, the use of social networks in our time is able to amplify it. Nevertheless, the need to belong to a group struggle with the social appearance anxiety, which is linked with the fear of intimacy, a phenomenon also reported by young people (Anand, Sinha, 2024).

Even if young people also reported being scared by the possibility of becoming victims of crime. (Cops, 2010), there is another type of fear experienced by teenagers that seems more scaring for them: that is the possibility of failing in life projects relating to romantic relationships or professional/educational goals (Sagar, Stoeber, 2009). Although studies concerning this kind of lived experience date back till to 1972 (Hermans, ter Laak, & Maes, 1972), it seems that this fear is still present today particularly focused on the professional goal:

young people are having to make sense of, and navigate, a transition in a complex and changing world, a world that is characterized by disjuncture between formal education and the labour market; these amount to an unpredictability of vocational integration in a radically

restructuring labour market that offers little more than an impermanence and insecurity (Smyth & Hattam, 2004, p. 38).

Adolescents living in our times seem particularly vulnerable to the possibility of failing to be, live and show their talents and beauty to their peers and be recognised for them. This vulnerability perhaps stems from an incomplete sense of self: it's as if they need to be part of something to exist, as they can't be alone. They are never truly alone as they are always connected and post everything they do, see and hear. This continuous display of their fragments of lives is a way of sharing them with others, as if everything they do is meaningless unless they receive a "like". But not to be able to stay alone is the sign not to be able to stay with themselves, that probably derived from the perception lived by adolescents they are "not enough for themselves".

This kind of fears, this perceived inconsistency of their own identity, as described above, sometimes have some serious consequences for their mental health and this is well documented in many studies (as cited above). However, these studies do not address why adolescents feel such a strong need to be constantly connected with others or why they are so concerned about their life commitments. Rapee *et al.* (2023), suggest that specific circumstances and experiences may create a sense of threat and/or diminish confidence in one's ability to cope with challenges, as well as parental overcontrol can increase a child's fear by limiting opportunities to develop confidence in their abilities. But parents overcontrol often comes from their fear of perils: at this point, it seems necessary to explore the kinds of dangers parents fear their sons and daughters are exposed to.

Studies stressed as most reported peril perceived by parents those risks related to the possibility that sons can become victim of some crime in the social or digital reality: in the social context of daily life, particularly parents are scared by the eventuality they kids, or teens could be injured or murdered, above all, in a car incident (DeGraf, 2008; Sneider, 2006; Tulloch, 2004; Vozmediano, 2017; Wadda, 2018). This kind of fear leads parents to try to reduce their sons' and daughters' independent mobility (Bennett *et al.*, 2018; Foster, 2014; Francis, Martin, Wood, & Foster, 2017), driving them to school and to any other activities they might attend, even if it means waiting for them in the car outside a dance venue until the early hours of the morning.

Another parents' fear regards the ways in which their children use and abuse the internet. Even in this area, parents' fears of crime stem from the many cases of cyberbullying and other crimes reported in the press and on television. This has led many parents to activate the "parental control app" to monitor their children's internet usage without consulting them first. But, according to George & Odges (2015), the most common fears associated with the use of internet is that related to the possibility that mobile devices can prevent children from living a real life, leading them to miss out on many social and educational opportunities, damage their cognitive abilities (due to multitasking and lost sleep), and lose their sense of self by adopting other identities in the online world.

As describe above, the fear that one's children or teenagers could become victims of crime reappears across all other anxieties, probably stemming from an ancestral survival mechanism inscribed in our DNA. The fear that a child could be lost or murdered probably stems from ancient times when children, left free to explore the territory lonely, sometimes were victims of beast assaults or any other kind of incidents, or when imperfect children were abandoned (i.e. lost) in the woods because they could not cope with the difficulties life would bring; or, even, they were murdered by the enemy in a genocidal intent in a war between different groups. Fairy tales are full of these kinds of scenarios because, in the past, they represented a real danger to the survival of a community (Lepri, 2022; Hahn-Holbrook, Holbrook, & Bering, 2010). Today, we might think these kinds of worries are irrelevant, but something in our genetic sense of self-protection makes us afraid in the same way as our ancestors were. Even if our streets are full of police officers and our houses are all equipped with alarms, our doors are reinforced and our gardens are fenced, the wars that have devastated regions not too far from ours—with children being kidnapped or killed by the enemy, or dying of hunger—as well as the pandemic that has left millions of our loved ones dead, can only have reactivated these fears. So, the ogre lives on in our collective memory as well as in our present lives: the constant news of murders, cyberbullying and sexual assaults that fill our lives through television and print media could not make us feel confident.

Just as medieval parents were, 21st-century parents are scared. But, while the loss of a child was considered a fact of life in ancient times, today it is perceived as an unthinkable catastrophe that must

be avoided at all costs. The reason of this so deep difference probably lies in our own fragility as adults who have invested our entire sense of life in our few sons (often one single son). This is probably the same investment that causes parents to consider the possibility that their sons and daughters fail in their life project as another intolerable catastrophe. This kind of fears primarily focus on the possibility that their sons will be unable to afford school fees, succeed in sports activities, make friends, or find love (Elliot, Thrash, 2004). All these fears are closely linked to another very common fear: that they will not be able to obtain a bachelor's or master's degree, which parents identify as the key to a successful and wealthy future (Sullivan, 2004). Sometimes, these kinds of fears stem from parents' own experiences of failure, making them afraid that their child might suffer the same fate. Some parents may expect too much from their child too soon (Elliot & Thrash, 2004) and often be dissatisfied with their child's results. In other cases, parents lack the skills to manage their child's emotional suffering resulting from a frustration. They know they cannot diminish their teens' difficulties, but they were triggered by the possible consequences of that suffering (Iaquinta, 2018), whereas our parents did consider every failure as part of our growth ("What doesn't kill you makes you stronger" was the frequent mantra of parents in the 20th century). The actual parents know that, to love their children, society expects them to pay attention to the quality of their relationships with their sons, as well as to their children's development of learning attitudes, life skills and behaviour management skills. They are also expected to protect their children's health and safety (Epstein, 2010). Above all, they must protect their children from being excluded from the best that society has to offer, that is economic success. Postmodern psychology and pedagogy suggest few rules, few limits and no punishment, educators and parents have mainly to support the full development of children, such as this could be a sort of instinctive and autonomous process. But Freire states that it is merely an encounter, not necessarily peaceful, between individuals that can give meaning to life (1968/2018, p. 99).

3. Parents and sons: a vicious cycle distorted by competition

As educators, we should ask ourselves how it has become possible for young boys and girls to think that they are not enough, that they fear, day by day, to be out of the "circle", a circle which too often are made by weak connections constructed and legitimated by the web and not by persons. We should ask ourselves why they search for a bond in the web to contrast the sense of inadequacy they feel. But, above all, we should ask when the fragile line between protection has become overprotection and over-control. It is probably this the key point from which derives the pervasive dynamic in the parent-sons relationship which can give replies to many of our questions. The dated but robust theory of attachment (Bowlby, 1968) could give us one of the possible explanations: it states that children can develop good self-esteem and self-efficacy when their caregivers allow them to explore the world independently, while maintaining a silent presence. The faith that these figures express in the child's abilities time and time again is internalised by the child, who learns to think that there will always be someone available to help him/her if necessary—first his/her parents, and then his/her friends or partners. But to develop this kind of self-confidence, children need parents who are willing to let them make mistakes while exploring the world independently and let them make choices that may not always be the best option. In other words, they need to be allowed to take risks and potentially fail while their parents stay nearby, ready to help if needed, but avoid preventing them from making mistakes. Another topic of our dissertation is how the idea of competition pervades and distorts any hopes that parents may have for their children. Indeed, competition nowadays is a process of selection that divides people into winners and losers: it is, at the same time, an economic organisation that makes profit the only measure of success and an agency of social and individual development that encourages people to strive for the best position in society (Hearn, 2021). The result is an increasing number of overprotective parents and, at the same time, of fragile young people.

This is the vicious cycle in which parents' fears can make their sons uncertain, causing them to fear not being good enough, not being beautiful enough or not being successful enough to be accepted by or loved by others. Without the opportunity to demonstrate their worth, abilities and efficacy—as there was always someone ready to take over their responsibilities, fix their mistakes and fulfil their obligations—adolescents cannot have confidence in themselves. Without the opportunity to be ac-

cepted for who they are and what they can do and constantly being asked by adults to be better than everyone else, they cannot understand their strengths and weaknesses and constantly feel inadequate, that is exactly what their parents try to avoid.

Concerning, instead, adolescents fear of loneliness, having never been left alone, they never learned to be with themselves, so when it can be possible, they try to fill the void of loneliness with virtual relationships on the web. Their desperate need, their abuse of internet connection is the sign of an inability to stay alone, to remain free from external stimuli so long to be able to empty themselves and turn inwards to discover the immensity of their being. But this insight skill needs to be learned, to be accompanied, in order not to find a void that threat more than future do: a skill that to be taught has first to be possessed and this is not taken for granted in the case of many adults.

All the possible explanations of this state of things conduct us to the evidence of the fragility of adults; regarding this, Zagrebelsky (2016) asks:

Where are adults, men and women, those who have left behind the turmoil, contradictions and fragility of youth, along with its lifestyles, fashions and body care routines, yet are not tormented by the thought of an inevitable end? What has become of the time of maturity, when one faces the present for what it is without fear? (kindle loc 473).

Adults probably disappeared in the mid-1980s, when the neoliberal paradigm began its triumphant rise and the sexual revolution had already made the *paterfamilias* obsolete in favour of a new kind of father: kindly and present in the lives of their children but not well defined in his role. Zoja (2016) states: “His psychological corruption was accompanied by a complete disappearance; his renewal by a limited reappearance” (p. 278). Meanwhile, their wives or female partners were already moving towards a different kind of identity that did not include that of a mother. Those of us who are baby boomers or Gen Xers (those born in the 1960s and 1970s) did not know the father described by Lamb because of the widespread idea of patriarchal family prescribed by the Catholic religion, which shaped the identity of most Italian fathers and mothers until the new millennium (Zoja, 2016, p. 296, Quinci, 2013, Kindle loc. 9205). But our children instead know the maternalisation of the father, after his symbolic execution inspired by the sexual revolution (Quinci, 2013, Kindle loc. 9494).

4. A weakness which makes the same parents and sons in front of perils

Before becoming concrete facts, perils are expected lived experiences and subjective perceptions depending on persons' previous experiences, social position and cultural background (McClish, Bacon, 2002; Burnett *et al.*, 2016). For this reason, they differ from person to person, emerging from the way we view the world and our life, and our chance to flourish in it, since “a human being is not just something you automatically are, it is also something you must try to be” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 5) while you exist in the world and day by day take a reflexive re-living and appropriation of any experience meaningful (Van Manen, 1990, p. 36). So, as suggested by Hammond and colleagues, we can state that to understand the real meaning of a challenging experience it is necessary to go forward the empirical data about our teenager's malaise, to understand the human experience of the world as it is experienced by individuals within their unique position in the world (Hammond, Howarth, & Keat, 1991).

But in our world, existence is already defined by a new ideology which has been able to define and influence any gaze on the world. Neoliberalism, indeed, has “...insinuated itself into every social relationship, such that the specificity of relations between parents and children, [...] teachers and students has been reduced to that of supplier and customer” (Giroux, 2006, p. 22).

Neoliberalism approach to life has make every experience a competition in which each of us are supposed to do our best to surpass the others to become rich and powerful (Connell, 2010; Savage, 2017). According to Baldacci, even school has become a training ground to learn to compete with others, with that classmate who can be no longer focus of any solidarity (Baldacci, 2019, p. 155). The new wave is recalling the social Darwinism approach to life, as stressed by Giroux.

Social Darwinism has risen like a phoenix from the ashes of the nineteenth century and can now be seen in full display on most reality TV programs and in the unfettered self-interest that now drives popular culture. As social bonds are replaced by unadulterated materialism and narcissism, public concerns are now understood and experienced as utterly private miseries (Giroux, 2006, p. 24).

Economic wealth, autonomy, egocentrism and a life orientation focused on personal growth are the only possible connotations of a state of success and well-being, but someone's well-being is often the result of an exercise of power (to do, desire, obtain, control, etc.) that falls on others who have no power, have not managed to acquire it or, more simply, do not wish to have it but who, because of this absence, are forced to conform to the will of others (Freire, Macedo 2004, p. 122). For this reason, we are all threatened with failure and with ending up in the losers' sector (Bobbo, 2024), a possibility that parents and children seem to fear greatly.

Another point to consider is that our lives are too hectic. According to Zagrebelsky (2016):

It is a relentless race in which one must at least keep pace, and if possible, pull ahead of the other participants in the global contest. It is also a nihilistic race because the goal—the vision of a just society—recedes in direct proportion to the acceleration of this race of all against all. However, this hyperactivity is accompanied by hypoactivity: resignation, marginalisation and renunciation. These two identities, success and failure, are nevertheless similar in their shared meaninglessness (kindle loc 577).

We are constantly running to reach a goal, and once we have achieved it, we are ready to plan the next one, sometimes we are achieving, planning and achieving different goals at the same time. Consequently, we believe that we have no time to rest, stop and reflect, or time to look inside ourselves to try to understand the meaning of our lives. It's unclear whether we're running because we don't want waste time, or if we don't have time because we will run faster than everyone else. But it is possibly that we run every day faster only to avoid looking inside ourselves and find anything meaningful. Parents, adolescents, adults and young people fill their time with commitments so that they don't have time to stop and think in order to prevent to find that void which can paralyse every new path.

However, we, as adults, are responsible for young people and for this reason we should do something to give them the chance not to make our same mistakes.

5. To conclude: some lessons from critical pedagogists to overcome the fear to be looser

As adults, educators and parents, we are giving to our youth all the resources they need to accumulate a great cultural capital, we make their social capital stronger and safer than ever, but we make very little for their emotional capital: we want them to be better than everyone else, but we rarely asked them what they want to be, leaving them lonely with their fears. In a neoliberal society, people are expected to be competitive and outperform others, but as parents we can't become just another set of demanding people in their lives. We should remember that the full development of a person is a long process of victories and defeats, made up of laughter and tears, which must be shared, accepted and legitimised by adults. It consists of small, sporadic achievements supported by the ability to recognise our strengths and limitations. Physical, emotional and cognitive effort is the real driving force behind development. It is not always motivating or exciting; sometimes it can be tedious, tiring and unpleasant. Our emotional intelligence, our ability to regulate our emotions and look inside ourselves and accept our feelings, makes us people who are able of coping with failure, learning from our mistakes and rejoicing in every achievement. But emotional intelligence is something that has to do with love, affection and acceptance, not with learning, degree or competition.

For this reason, the first step in taking responsibility is talking with our teens, asking them what they need to know, what they think and what they are afraid of in order to help them to become what they wish. According to Peter McLaren (2015)

we need to understand how experiences produced in the various domains of everyday life produce the different voices adolescents employ to give meaning to their worlds and, consequently, to their existence in the larger society (p. 178).

Paulo Freire's lesson can help us here: starting from the premise that the purpose of education is "to provide individuals with organised, systematic and enriched access to the knowledge they desire" (Freire, 1968/2018, p. 104), we need to start talking to the new generation, focusing on topics that encourage them to express how they perceive their life, their future, and their opportunities. By finding a generative topic,¹⁰ we can challenge their perception of life, helping them to overcome their limitations and learn from their mistakes. However, the real question is whether we are ready to do so, whether we are ready not to be swallowed up by neoliberalism's logic of competition and success. Whether we are ready to accept that our sons may not be the best, richest, most famous or most successful people in the world. Whether we are ready to accept that our son can become intelligent, critical, righteous and empathetic, even if he/her will be not rich or famous? Concluding, whether we are ready to help them develop the intellectual self-discipline and ethical autonomy that Gramsci identified as the goal of human development, even if it makes them aware of their responsibilities in this world. If we can replay yes to these questions, then we can confront our fears and theirs.

This is not only an educational concern, but also a moral and political one. It can provide the basis for rebuilding a fair and democratic society (McLaren, 2015, p. 180). Protecting our children is not enough; we must help them to understand that they, as well as us, are an active part of the contradictions we live with because of our historical essence; so, we should empower them both to rule society and to be ruled by it (Gramsci, 2022/1929-1935, p. 53); we should give them the chance to believe in themselves as able to be human, before to be successful; we should help them to reach the awareness that they can be everything they wish, but not necessarily what society and driven market economy is expecting from them (Freire, 1968/2018, p. 156). All that is significant in their life, indeed, is what they choose it is, because we are the creators of our life and the meaning it has for us. As Giroux states, recalling Bourdieu,

Power of the dominant order is not just economic, but intellectual—lying in the realm of beliefs—, and it is precisely within the domain of ideas that a sense of utopian possibility can be restored to the public realm (Giroux, 2006, p. 31).

10. Freire explains that the generative topic plays a key role in education, presenting people with certain fundamental contradictions that reveal their existential situation as a problem, challenging them to respond not only intellectually, but also through action (1968/2018, p. 109).

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