



Breaking the Mold: Educators as Agents of Change

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Abstract

Educators, including those who are involved in education for sustainability (EfS), are not always aware of their role as agents of change. Yet education is not only a fundamental drive for creating and/or transmitting the values that shape a society, but also for its transformation, since it helps to build worldviews, values, competences, and actions that can lead society in the direction of a sustainable future. Educational literature focuses mainly on the role of students as future citizens and agents of change and on the competences they must acquire. To achieve this role, educators need to be aware that they are change agents themselves and therefore need to acquire relevant competences. This chapter reflects on the experience of four competence-based training courses carried out in Italy, involving both formal and non-formal educators through both face-to-face and distance modalities, and explores the way in which the use of an integrated framework helped to enhance the educators' awareness of their own role as agents of change.

Keywords

Change agents · Non-formal educators · Action research · ESD competences · RSP

...he views the world as a 'system of systems' where each system conditions the others and is conditioned by them. (Calvino 1988, pp. 105–106)

Introduction

“Educators are powerful change agents who can deliver the educational response needed to achieve the SDGs. Their knowledge and competencies are essential for restructuring educational processes and educational institutions towards sustainability” (UNESCO 2017 p. 51). This restructuring process implies a whole paradigm change which encourages a shift from a transmissive expert-based teaching to a transformative community-based, learning.

The above concern inspired the Rounder Sense of Purpose (RSP) project, which sets out to develop and test a framework of competences that an educator capable of promoting such a transformation should have (Vare et al. 2019; see also Chap. 5).

Although education for sustainability (EfS) widely recognizes that educators themselves are 'agents of change', the challenge remains on how to break the educational system's "mold" and convince the educators of their role: to be the innovators themselves and not only the transmitters of innovation. Educators could fully perform this role.

As underlined by Sterling (2011), the change that is required is not just doing what we do better, i.e. substituting one element with another, or improving one or more aspects, but it is changing the way we think about our world and society, a

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'second order change' which involves a "*Deep structural shift in the basic premises of thought, feelings and actions, a shift of consciousness that dramatically and permanently alters our way of being in the world*" (O'Sullivan and Morrell 2002, p.18). For that to happen Education itself needs to change and educators have to become agents of change themselves and contribute to social transformation.

This chapter reports on the experiences of four different competence-based training courses, carried out in Italy, involving both formal and non-formal educators, through both face-to-face and distance modalities, and explores the way in which the use of the RSP integrated framework helped to enhance the educators' awareness of their role as agents of change.

Who Are the Educators Promoting Change?

By the term educators we mean both teachers and educators of the non-formal sector. When one talks about change agents, it mainly refers to learners as future citizens and changes are mainly those related to behavior. However, in order to promote transformative changes among their learners, educators need to be and act as agents of change themselves. But on what occasions do educators become conscious agents of change?

Where education literature talks about agents for change, it tends to focus on innovation, generally in the technological and/or digital sense: a rather limiting definition. In present-day schooling, teaching is conceived more as an 'adaptation' to the current society, even if, on the contrary, society is in continuous evolution and the agent of change is therefore only a carrier of technological or disciplinary innovation. Even in this limited conception of change agent, it is recognized that teachers need other competences such as communication skills, empathy, and/or leadership.

In our vision educators, instead, are agents of change when they propose themselves as a facilitator, providing food for thought on society and on the planet and by unpacking and negotiating

that very same knowledge that is now considered indisputable (e.g. what is considered Science or progress, as proposed by post-Normal science, see Chap. 8).

Even though they are not always aware, teachers, or non-formal educators, are both agents that promote a change in their learners as well as subjecting themselves to change: in this 'structural encounter' (Maturana & Varela 1987) and by playing the role of a facilitator, educators inevitably change and alter themselves, "in a process of transformation in coexistence during which previous participants' conditions and context are altered as a result of their interaction," (Souza et al. 2019, p. 1609) and as expressed by Calvino in our opening quotation.

The courses reported in this chapter were aimed at triggering, among in-service teachers and educators engaged in EfS actions, an individual and then collective reflection on their role, on the change they would like to induce in their learners and on what they themselves are experiencing, by not only being aware of living in a 'system of systems' but by being able to impact on it.

The Italian Context for Education for Sustainability

Over the last 20 years in Italy, the changes in the education system toward EfS have been conflicting and not effective. Starting from the 1990s up to the first decade of 2000, and mainly thanks to the input of the Ministry of the Environment, a national plan (Italian National System on Environmental Information, Training and Education—INFEA) was launched to support the creation of a 'system' that could connect and foster the implementation of the many experiences existing all over the country. Since that positive experience, unfortunately, many 'threads of the network' have been severed, threads that have somehow flowed back into non-communicative fragments; nonetheless professionalism and a widespread interest in the evolution of EfS remain. The INFEA System had in fact allowed a common evaluation on the 'quality' of education

for sustainability and also a methodological debate on the necessary competences of EfS practitioners, a confrontation that has been lost over time.

This does not mean that, currently, in Italy there are no peaks of excellence—such as highly innovative schools and networks of schools—or that there is no strong interest in EfS. This is especially strong in compulsory education, finding confirmation in an abundance of proposals for educational activities, offered both by local institutions (regions and municipalities), Park Authorities and Environmental Agencies, and finally by national and local associations.

In general, however, the Italian context (cultural, political, and institutional) does not recognize teachers and educators as change agents and they are often asked to play an 'adaptive role' for the maintenance of the knowledge transmission chain for what society considers to be valid and useful to the preservation of a social, economic and cultural *status quo* avoiding, as much as possible, a real change in how we think and act.

In Italy the mastery of disciplinary knowledge has always been considered more important than pedagogical and methodological competence: for lower secondary school teachers (11–14 years of age), and upper secondary school teachers (15–19 years of age), no specific degree is expected, except for the disciplinary Master's degree.

This situation is also partly shared by non-formal educators—whose methodological and pedagogical professionalism, built through individual or associative paths, is often unrecognized. Educators present schools and citizens with educational activities, both in the environmental field (for example, outdoor education) and in the field of sustainability (e.g. lessons or activities on waste or renewable energy), as well as authentic educational projects to be integrated with school work. However, their actions are often strongly conditioned by the appointing body (the schools themselves, but also the public administrations or companies that manage the services such as water, waste, energy) that often fails to ask them to carry out transformative educational processes but rather to focus on random interventions on specific content.

Insufficient investment in education, an increased bureaucracy over the last 20 years, and above all a weakened social image—i.e. school no longer guarantees more or better job opportunities—have made the work of teachers more difficult and teachers themselves have been less and less interested in the role of change agents.

The main point of contact between the challenges that teachers and non-formal educators face in their commitment to a 'sustainable education' is that of having to fight, as Sterling (2010) suggests, a highly resilient organizational and cultural context; one that is resistant to change, which does not require educators as 'conscious builders of the future' nor 'cultural mediators' between knowledge and society, but as disciplinary experts, capable of transferring specific contents in any situation. And this, in spite of the fact that the European document on key competences (Council of Europe 2018) has been disseminated in all schools, and that the national strategy toward the 2030 Agenda considers as an 'indicator', precisely the 'transition from knowledge to competences' (Italian Strategy for the 2030 Agenda, 2017).

Hence the 'professional discomfort' experienced by both teachers and educators, finding in the RSP competences a useful tool for reflection and research that can support them while abandoning the role of 'experts' in which they have been confined.

In this rather disheartening institutional framework, an important step in 2019 was the recognition of the '*educational mission for the environment and sustainability*' of SNPA¹ (consisting of ISPRA—National Institute for Environmental Protection and Research and the Regional Agencies for Environmental Protection—ARPA). ISPRA and some ARPA staff members were also key players to the INFEA system. A possible strategic element of transformation, to which a proposal to spread the RSP competences in Italy immediately connected.

¹SNPA: National System for Environmental Protection.

Piloting the RSP Competence Model

The existence of a shared context and problems at a national level allowed us to offer fairly similar paths for the four training courses we devised—two in 2017/2018 and two in 2020—to validate and disseminate the RSP model and to identify a common goal: building, among educators and teachers, a greater awareness of their role as agents of change, thus proposing an action and reflection path on the necessary competences. In Table 11.1 we have summarized the main objectives and characteristics of the four courses.

In the first two courses, carried out between 2017 and 2018, the main objective was to test the validity of the RSP model, discussing it with experienced teachers and educators. The course had the additional aims of developing, with participants' help, data collection tools as well as reflecting on the professionalism that education for sustainability requires as well as on their acting, sometimes not consciously, as agents of change.

The first course was designed together with the University of Florence (working with Professor Giovanna Del Gobbo) and carried out at the Villa Demidoff Environmental Education Center (a center that carries out EfS activities for schools and teachers in the metropolitan city of Florence). The course, formally recognized by the school authority as in-service training, was

aimed at teachers of different levels and types of school, from primary to upper secondary: almost all were experienced teachers, interested in EfS, often with roles of coordination of the EfS activities in their school. The course did not include a formal final assessment, only a certificate of attendance.

For the second course we involved an environmentalist association, Legambiente, that has a high profile nationally, in particular the division that deals with education and training with participating educators in different parts of Italy. Again, in their case no final assessment was required.

The third course, held between March and September 2020, was very different: the goal was no longer to validate the RSP model but to test its effectiveness on a national level. The National System for Environmental Protection (SNPA) had seen the RSP model presented publicly at the end of Phase One of the project in 2018; they saw in this an opportunity for a national training and professional development course on EfS based on the RSP competences framework with funding requested from the Ministry of the Environment. The course was open to regional officials dealing with the organization of EfS activities as well as communication on sustainability, to active educators in the environmental education centers, and to technicians from Regional Agencies of Environmental Protection who operate in schools when needed. The course,

Table 11.1 Key characteristics of the four courses

Main aims	Participants	Hours	Partner Institutions
Validation of the RSP palette	15 teachers from various school levels	40 h including remote work	Florence University and Villa Demidoff EE Center
Validation of the RSP palette and the evaluation of levels	15 experienced environment and sustainability educators	40 h including remote work	Legambiente national association
Testing the effectiveness of the RSP proposal at national level	84 educators, technicians, supervisors	6 modules, remote work, and 4 lab hours, dedicated to RSP competences and action research	SNPA
Design a collaborative action research on RSP educator competences	20 educators, video makers	8 h interactive face-to-face training, 2 remote focus groups	ARPA Friuli Venezia Giulia—Environmental education Laboratory of Friuli Venezia Giulia Region (LaREA)

available for a maximum of 100 people with participants from each Italian region and designed to be carried out remotely, also included face-to-face meetings. The COVID emergency transformed face-to-face meetings into four remote labs for the entire day, each aimed at 20 people coming from all over the country and with different job positions.

The fourth course, held between November 2019 and December 2020, was aimed at exploring how a collaborative action research on RSP educator competences could be designed and carried out with a heterogeneous group of participants and whether this experience could enhance the quality and the effectiveness of educational proposals made by them, as well as improving the collaboration within the group, in this case the local educational network promoted by LaREA (see Table 11.1). Participants on this course were educators from local cooperatives and video makers who work with schools to promote 'image culture' in the media context. The main challenge was how to design a collaborative action research with people who share the same values, visions, overarching aims in Education while using different tools and 'languages' in their practices.

Despite the differences in specific objectives including specific requests from teachers/educators themselves, some elements remained the same in all four courses:

- Firstly, the choice to present EfS as a Transformative Education (Wals 2007) within the overarching framework proposed by the 2030 Agenda, and to consider RSP competences as a constant thread, that can link visions of the world and concrete actions for sustainability, in a training path that focuses on self-reflexivity
- The starting point (including on remote learning courses) is always making contact with oneself, with one's own values, experiences, professionalism, as people and as possible agents of change. For this purpose, we used an 'environmental autobiography,' asking participants to get in touch with one's inner self through metaphor and image. When it was possible to share the autobiographies (both on site and partially via the remote lab), the comparison allowed us to also share our personal "mission" and therefore different visions of one's own professionalism
- The competence model was presented as a whole, in order to show its potential to offer '*a rounder sense of purpose*' to the many practical activities often considered as EfS. We never lost track of the RSP palette as a whole (see Chap. 5), although we examined in depth certain competences in the on-site courses (and all of them in the online courses), offering ideas for reflection but also asking for individual and group working on concrete activities. We experimented with and reflected on each competence's learning objectives and tried to use the underpinning components as clues, traces that would allow us to follow the path of the development of competences
- We asked participants to create an individual portfolio in which to collect, in addition to one's own autobiography, starting point to follow the transformation, the "stories" to write and present: significant experiences of the competences "acted on" in their own classes or in their own working groups (Farioli & Mayer 2020)
- We dug into what was already there (many of our 'learners' were experienced educators) and invited them to look within themselves and compare their own practices and thus their own theories. *Looking at oneself and reflecting and engaging with others* was the focus of the work for gaining awareness that we proposed in all four courses. Different tools and activities were used: group discussion; portfolio; self-evaluation; peer evaluation—but always with the same goal: to explore one's own vision of the role of change agent and compare it with those of others
- The first three groups were asked for a final self-assessment on the 12 competences, following the three levels of competence proposed by the RSP project (Vare et al. 2019). In the final discussions, held at a distance both

spatially and temporally, and in the final questionnaire we asked, we collected *evaluations and judgments* on how participants perceived the course but also reflections on *what had been learned*.

What Have We Learned?

The first two courses in 2017–2018 were set up as a collective action research where experts, educators, and teachers gathered data and reflected together on the RSP model. On the path of researching together, the activities we carried out were, at the same time, shared examples of data collection (on educational methods, values, management of actions and emotions, capabilities, etc.) and opportunities to think about one's role as agents of change. We asked participants to use competences as a 'magnifying glass' to examine one's own professionalism (self-evaluation) and to compare it with that of others (peer-evaluation). From the work we did together, we collected material to reflect on as well as to suggest future action. Two years later, in 2020, we asked participants what remained of that joint work experience, what changes it had triggered; the following are some of the answers we gathered:

It allowed me to 'systematize' the concepts I had acquired in my experience as a teacher, and also give importance to non-disciplinary, 'transversal' aspects, ... enhancing this type of approach... (AD, Teacher)

During the planning and development of my educational activities, I tried to pay more attention to some competences that I had underestimated before the course (MS, Educator)

In these two years I have turned my attention to the sustainability of my teaching, revisiting it in light of competences such as: 'empathy', 'values', 'transdisciplinarity' (MT, Teacher)

Obviously the RSP model should not be applied rigidly, but it should work as a background within which you can move, even with freedom and cre-

ativity, so as to avoid it becoming a cage (TD, Educator)

All the competences proposed by the RSP project challenge me daily. I must say that being able to actually put them into practice is an ongoing process, (and not always a successful one) (ES, Educator).

Even in the remote course we tried to maintain a researching approach, but the involvement of the learners was unavoidably reduced: we collected the satisfaction data at the end of the course, we tried to follow the learning path through the 'assigned tasks', we also tried to understand what the learners' 'starting competences' were, both through CVs and autobiographies, and by building a Likert scale that would highlight the 'educational beliefs', i.e. attitudes toward more transmissive or more transformative educational approaches. Within the four remote labs carried out at the end of the course, we conducted focus groups of about ten people where we discussed the RSP competences and their possible use as 'drivers of change', using, in small groups, assigned tasks as food for thought. After making these tasks anonymous, we used them as case studies relating to the use of the RSP competences, discussing the possibility of recognizing the competences when they are acted on and the need to use them if one is willing to be an agent of change.

To conclude, the RSP competences were an important research and reflection tool not only for IASS but for much of the environmental education and sustainability world in Italy: the collaboration established in these 2 years with SNPA, with INDIRE—National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research— and with other national and regional bodies, testifies to the interest that the proposal has aroused and to the possibilities of future impact both on the national school system and on the regional networks as well as on the environmental education centers. Our experience can be summed up in the words of Paulo Freire (2007):

No one educates another, no one educates himself alone: people educate themselves together throughout the world.

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