

A School for Children of the Twenty First Century

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Twentieth century: my name is Ephraïm Naana

'My name is Ephraïm Naana, I have already told you on one of these many occasions when you have come here before closing time to speak about my school.¹ In my village, since you ask me, there are not all the things which are to be found on the market here, there are only those which grow there: mangoes, potatoes, maize, bananas, papayas. And my primary school teacher told me that in other places there might be even fewer things; he said that in the market in Khartoum, in Sudan, the nation is vast but on the stalls there are only onions and white and red beans; and even though they were nicely arranged in piles, they were still only white beans, red beans and onions; and then he said that the world was big and that the hunger we experienced was not the worst of famines.

'If someone said to me, "If you could write an essay on the subject, 'Who are you and what do you do in your life?'" , I would reply that I go to school and that I am a *jua kali* boy. These words mean "under the sun". All the boys and children who stay outside to do a job are called *jua kali*.

'These words mean tiredness from the sun which burns the head and scorches the skin when one spends long hours working outside and sweating: this is what the words *jua kali* mean. Almost all the afternoon I have to stay outside and work for the master, Pathel. In the mornings the law rescues me, because the law makes school compulsory, but in the afternoons I am *jua kali* in the warehouses of this market.

'There are boys you call parking boys, who help with car-parking, who wander through the town in the service of various men and who, as you say, do not go to school. But they are lost and without any real family, God protects them – that is what my teacher says – but not the law, because they escape it. And if you ask me, I would say that these are children who do not go to school and who are not *jua kali* any more. There are all sorts among them. Their parents are far away, or they have fallen ill with malaria or AIDS, or with the paludism which comes from the humidity and which one catches very young, and which one does not recover from except with very expensive medicines, with injections. They have no one to guide them, they don't learn numbers, or words or prayers, they have no one who insists that they say their prayers in the morning, when they are scarcely awake. They are of this world, my teacher says, and God protects them – that's what he says – but I don't understand at all how he can really protect them. They suffer from hunger and they catch eye infections; palmer-flies hound them constantly, they have dysentery in the street, and they are ashamed. There are – since you ask me – such people. How many of them there are, I do not know, it's a sum that Ephraïm doesn't know how to do, it's a beastly sum, that one. Death is on them, it is on them from the outset, and it is a scourge of the nation – that is what my teacher explains.

'Me, though, I've got a family, and I obey the law of compulsory school in the mornings; I know that I'm lucky, and not everybody has a father like mine who is a joiner and works skilfully, and I have a roof over my head under which I can shelter from the great rains and I thank Allah. There are some who go to school in the morning and the afternoon, but not me,

because I am *jua kali* in the afternoons. But I am a lucky *jua kali* because my tiredness is not exhausting; I don't have to beat iron sheets, bend tin or aluminium, I don't work with hard wood, I don't make bricks, I don't load lorries with sand and sacks of cement for building, I don't unload barrels and iron bars from lorries and trains, I don't straighten out nails with a hammer, I don't solder with fire. I sell watermelons, the melons you see there, cantaloupes, strawberries, medlars, figs, things which I came to know in the town because they didn't exist in my village; I weigh, I make a note of it, I wrap it up, I hand it over and I thank the customer – this is my work with fruits, straightforward and in the open air, outside, yes, but not tiring like that of those other *jua kali* who don't have the opportunity to learn anything and whose life is a whole lot more exhausting than mine. The only thing is that I have to smile at everybody, always smile at each customer, as *buana* Pathel tells me.

The people who buy here live far away, they are people who come by car; I carry their provisions to the car, and they give me small change, that's my pay, nothing else. *Buana* Pathel is not the only one to act like this. They all do that with the *jua kali* boys who do this kind of work. But now I've already been learning another kind of work. And if I go on doing this other work well, *buana* Pathel will give me the minimum wage. Now I'll tell you all about my other work, which is the best for me. For this other work, I don't yet earn a single centime. Sometimes a generous customer happens to give me a little coin. But it's very little: I get the big tips for carrying the packets to the cars, and arranging them inside.

My real work, the one I like, is selling spices, herbs, flavours and scents. No, not fresh vegetables, that's easy, that's no big deal; they're pointed out to you, you're told their name and you quickly put them in paper bags and it's done: carrots – carrots and parsley – parsley and white onions – white onions. I shan't tell you about what is easy, like the fruits. I am telling you about spices, real spices. Because you have seen, ever since you arrived from your distant country, that the real treasures of the shop are the spices in their big glass pots, in jute and cotton sacks. I sell the spices which are used for seasoning and preparation. For the fruits and the fresh vegetables you don't have to do any more than smile, simply smile, weigh and hand them over. But for the spices, no, for the spices you have to be clever, you have to think, measure, like with the geometry that the teacher teaches us at school: formulas, order, measure, calculation. For the spices, the customers are more attentive and very demanding, because it's a lot more expensive. They come from houses where they are big families, they come from the restaurants all over the town, they come from inns which have very big kitchens – that's what they tell me – and they come to prepare celebrations, banquets for the ceremonies.

I'll give you an example. They come in and ask for 20 or maybe 35 ounces of cumin. I take the cumin, I put it into bags, of paper or fabric, I weigh it on the scales with little weights. And then I do the multiplication sums: the number of ounces multiplied by the price which appears on the stall or the bag, or if it isn't, then what's written there on the green board where changes are written with yellow chalk when there's any need to change anything. I am very quick, I am the quickest of all at multiplication, and the most accurate, the boss says so; that's why it's me he calls: "Ephraïm, go to the spices at once!" No seller, from among those who are old but who don't go to school, can do sums like I can. Of course, for sure, I learnt it at school. It's only at school that you can learn like that.

In my school the Koran instructor also teaches mathematics, which includes – he says – geometry, arithmetic and algebra. These two subjects, the Koran and maths, he muddles them up; he's the teacher and he knows how to make this mixture, he does it by measuring, as we do with the spices here in this shop. My father learnt like that, too, and he thinks a lot of it, and he always asks me: "Have you learnt your verses, have you learnt mathematics, can you do your sums without mistakes?" When it's a holiday, I go with him to the kiosk, where he discusses things with his best friends while he drinks beer and laughs, then he introduces me and all of a sudden he says to everybody: "This is Ephraïm, my son, who knows his verses and can do his

sums". And they all go, "Ha, ha!" and nod their heads in approval. And later, when he takes me aside to speak to me, or when we are walking together and talking familiarly, my father always says: "Ephraim, you belong to Islam, although your mother is from the Luo lake tribe which converted to the religion of Christ, who is a prophet, what is more, and although I respect him, like I respect your Luo grandparents, you belong to Islam and Islam should dedicate itself to the Koran and to mathematics". That is what my father says. That is also what he learnt and he is proud of it. It is why he respects the law and pays to send me to school; of course, it's free, yes, but there are the clothes, chalks, satchel, rulers, books, pencils, the sacred compass – that's what my teacher calls it – pens, fruits for the teacher, that sort of thing, you know, it's my father who pays for all of them.

'Yes, we learn the two things together, the Koran and mathematics, I'll show you how now. We learn a *surah* by heart, and we write it from memory, and the *surah* has its own number: then we take the factors of this number, which is indicated in the Book, and we mix them and then suddenly we have to do multiplication, divisions and all the other sums. Do you want to know how my teacher questions Ephraim and what Ephraim replies about the numbers and the *surahs* of the Koran? The teacher asks us one by one, and we stand up one by one. The teacher says: "Your turn to recite *Surah* 18, Ephraim". It's afterwards that we have to write it down, the *surah*, first of all we have to recite it. But before reciting the *surah* there are the numbers that identify it. And that's why I reply: "*Surah* 18, eighteen is the number of the *surah*, and eighteen can be divided into equal parts, once, twice, three times, six times, nine times and once by eighteen itself; I cannot divide eighteen into four equal parts, or into five, or into seven, or into eight". And then the teacher asks me to do quickly and in my head the multiplication of all the numbers the eighteen of the *surah* is divisible by or not, and, always in my head, I have to do all the possible sums and calculations. And it's like that, by heart, that I make a chain of numbers and I say them aloud in front of the whole class, which has to check each of my sums: once nine is nine, which times six makes fifty four, which times three is one hundred and sixty two, which times two is three hundred and twenty four, which divided by nine makes thirty six – and I go on like that. And each time I have to explain in English and in Swahili, in a loud clear voice, aloud and without any hesitation – without any hesitation in the voice, that's what my teacher says – and in the two languages of our country, both of them – it's like that that my teacher wants it and that we do it.

'Yes, I can also write an essay in which someone asks me who I am, and what I have learnt in my life until that day. This is what I would write. Ephraim is a young person of the masculine sex born of two races: Luo of the great lake and Swahili from the ocean coast. Ephraim Naana will be a man of the world and a man of his country, there are many like me, and the God Allah is the same with us as with all people. Ephraim Naana can do multiplication, division, addition, subtraction, fractions and calculations with fractions, arithmetical expressions and those which involve fractions, proportions and geometrical formulas and lots of other things outside school, like spices, fruits and vegetables of the region, and their names as well as the numbers, the days of the week, the formulas for politeness and good manners. In Swahili, in Hindi, in Gujarati and in English. I take the ginger, for instance, to give you an example. I spoon it out, I measure it, then I put it through the spice-mill, dry it, and I show it to you, and then I write down the exact calculations for the client; or I prepare the little fat kind of ginger which I cover with a cloth so that they don't sprout. These are the things that Ephraim has learnt in his life up to this very day. In English, in Swahili, in Hindi and in Gujarati; and with the correct accents and inflections for all these languages, in just one year, Ephraim has learnt the names of the spice. Madras spice, *cinnamome*, cumin in "jeera", garam masala and masala for fish from the sea or the lake, for white or red meat, for mutton, for strong, medium or mild curry – it's me that does it, because it's me that makes the blends. It's me who mixes the spices for Chinese five spice, measured close to a tenth of an ounce; exactly weighed parts of pepper flowers, aniseed, lemon peel,

liquorice and cinnamon. But it's true, you are right, because you are accurate like my teacher, like all those whose job it is to teach, you are right to say that you can call them either *cinnamome* or "cinnamon", because the same thing can have lots of names.

'All these things Ephraim Naana has learnt in his life. There are many languages, I understand some of them, little of others, nothing of others; not Chinese, I don't understand that. But I know the name of other spices in different languages from what I'm using here: coriander, sesame, allspice, nutmeg, sage, tarragon, thyme, mustard, cucumber.

'For you, I could also relate what we did in the school called the "elementary school", and which I went to in my mother's village on the great lake, when I was little; yes, I can write an essay on the subject, "What did you do when you went to the elementary school you went to before?" This is what I would write. Ephraim Naana, when he was littler, had a green uniform which he wore every morning, bought by his father Abdul, and he always arrived at school before the bell rang. The teacher said the Father Evangelists' prayer in English, those of the religion of my grandfather, my grandmother and my mother; it was a sung prayer, it was a song of praise that began with the words, "Onward Christian soldiers". Immediately afterwards, the teacher collected the provisions which we brought as presents, that was the practice in these schools. He taught the same subjects as my teacher: geography, the history of Africa and of our country, reading and writing, English and Swahili grammar, the exact sciences, the study of the planets and the solar system, religion, life sciences, the science of animals and of plants; everything was the same, but it was much easier because I was little. He was very keen on English, on correct pronunciation and writing, on new expressions which had to be written down in our notebooks, and to explain them every time he would take down the big class dictionary and read the meaning and the signification in a high, clear voice: one meaning, two meanings, three meanings, in succession – that is why I speak such shining English.

'There was only stupid maths at the Evangelists' school, like these frogs in the ditch who wait to be caught: tables and calculations without geometry with everything I was just explaining, without the least question or a single doubt, no direct or inverse formula to learn by heart to calculate areas and volumes, no parallelograms, no rhomboidals, no trapeziums, rotation volumes or circular volumes like for cubes, cones, pyramids – yes, that, or near enough, is what my teacher calls them – no square or cube roots, no algebra with letters, no binomial and polynomial rules, no solutions for equations, no theorem explained aloud step by step, no axiom and corollary to learn, nothing of any use at all. Even a silly girl could do these little sums, without decimals, everything was already laid out in pretty columns prepared in advance in the book which had to be filled in with nicely sharpened pencils, without having to discover, observe nor write the reasoning which led to the reply – as is the case with the Islamic school I go to. When my teacher saw the evangelists' mathematics, he laughed six whole days and it was only on the seventh day that he rested from laughing, like God rested from creation – that's what my father says. No, it wasn't because I was little; I see the children at the school I'm at now in the little classes, they are little, but even though they're little, they have to encounter numbers, and the teachers tell them again and again like a chorus: "You must wish the numbers well, you must, because if you wish them well, they will then wish you well".

'When I lived near the great lake, and I went to the evangelists' school, I wasn't yet *jua kali* in the afternoon, and I didn't know how to do all the things that I do now. And no small child in the village had to work, because it was said that otherwise they would take a turn for the worse, degenerate, forever. Instead of that, I sailed on the big lake, with my little brothers, cousins and my uncles, and with grandfather who was in charge of the fishing boats at one end of a muddy beach, and everyone said it was his because it was he who set out the boats, who laid out the nets and the ropes to dry. Now, I, Ephraim, I'm different, I need all my time, because I work and I study, and I know the things which you learn in the town. I use all my time, because I'm almost a man. And a day will come when I will thank the Lord that I know how to write, and I will

write a book about the times I lived in, and I'll remember you, Marco, the teacher at the Italian school, who asked me questions about myself, and questioned what I was doing and I will tell it all in order and logically, and this book, I'll give it the title of *The Finest Book of My Life*.'

I talked so much and so often like this with Ephraïm, and with other boys like him, a bit older and not so lucky, not so ready to speak either, or to argue about the whole world. In an Italian school on a high plateau far from Italy, I taught children, Italian or otherwise, who were 'nicely brought up' and lived here, and who had nothing to do with Ephraïm's world or his life. With the sisters, female cousins, girls who were playmates or girlfriends, with the women of Ephraïm's world, children or adolescents who would suddenly become women, I was never able, as it were, to speak.

Here, on the high plateau, Ephraïm asked me: 'Why are you a teacher?' Just like that! A boy from the high plateau in the process of becoming a man, black as ebony, with powerful hands and long, elegant fingers, who is *jua kali* in the afternoons under the sun, and who goes to school in the morning with forty seven other boys like him, in a room under the burning corrugated-iron roof, with beaten red earth on the ground, a boy with shining eyes with forty seven other boys, sitting up ramrod straight for five keen hours, attentive on their benches, in uniform, busy learning three languages, and to read, and to write, to do calculations as God desires, and agriculture and agrarian techniques, and verses from the Koran and the rivers and the mountains, and the capital cities, and the flora and fauna, and the history of his immense continent unwavering between two oceans, a continent from which we all originate: and he fixes you with a gaze that is still gentle, but resolute and curious, and he asks you: 'Why do you do what you do?'

Why choose to teach?

Who are the teachers? Why do they choose their profession, what was it that determined them?

I wish there was a book, and that I could read all its pages, straightaway – on that high plateau on the Equator where it is day in a few minutes and where night falls from an immense sky almost without dusk – yes, a volume bound in the old-fashioned way that would bring together the stories of at least a hundred teachers in response to the question, 'Why did you choose your profession?'

Today, it is a clear day, after much rain: the red-necked falcons focus on the dragonflies that have suddenly invaded the sky, and devour them mercilessly, and the wings of the dragonflies – wings that are light and transparent – float in the air, then fall slowly, very slowly, to the ground in their thousands, the body eaten, the wings pitilessly separated from one another. They float on the air currents. At certain points in one's life, something happens to come from outside, as if by magic, revealing itself, to express deeper truths. When that happens, in ways and at times that are perhaps never fortuitous, although unexpected, then an occasion presents itself, an opportunity to look more deeply inside ourselves. And if we do so, it is the start of an inner work; then you truly seek – perhaps feeling your way but also propelled by a sort of relentless determination akin to that of the red-necked falcons – to know why you took one path and not another in this world. I do think that this work on the self is not, in general, compulsory, and that one can either

do it or not do it. I think there is no predetermined way to make it come into being, nor guaranteed certainties and perhaps even no conclusions. But I also think that this inner work is – for every teacher as for every parent and educator of any kind – an effort that has nothing excessively inward-looking about it, as far as the finality of the work which one undertakes when one educates smaller and younger persons is concerned. For teaching is a deadly serious profession, and one which has to do with who we are in a very serious manner: above all, it is a question of encountering, of a human relation, and the quality of the encounter between the person who teaches and the person who learns, between the one who educates and the one who is educated is certainly two-way, but, above all, what is at issue is what, from inside ourselves, has pushed us to teach. Sooner or later, in front of the smallest and youngest, one is brought back to the question: ‘Who am I?’, and one is helpless when faced with oneself, one asks oneself the question once more – as one did when one was a child or an adolescent, looking at oneself in a mirror, in those trying days.

For the moment, on that high African plateau, I wished that there was an inventory of the thoughts formulated by teachers in the rare moments of truth which happen to each of us in the course of our lives; I wanted to be able to read a book which gathered together the most sincere accounts of what, at the most intimate level, pushed each one of us to choose teaching. ‘We need an honest emotional statement. An emotional statement’ – we could also say we need an emotional declaration, preferably written and quasi-formal, in few words, direct and honest.

Give them the capacity to act

In which world are we called to exercise our profession? Perhaps we all need some degree of disorientation which would relocate our work in a broader framework. If only once, we would like to be able to give an account of our problems as educators here, the successes and setbacks that we experience daily, together with others which are more global, in order to evaluate our own work with a greater degree of relativity and a certain distance.

There are more than 4 billion parents the world over.

A distinctive characteristic entirely specific to the human species, by comparison with other species, is the lengthy parental care that is found in all cultures.

Some hundreds of millions of people in the world deal professionally with the education of children and adolescents: paediatricians and other doctors, teachers of all kinds and all levels, nursery nurses, psychologists, psychoanalysts, uncles and aunts, grandfathers and grandmothers, brothers and sisters, researchers, educationalists, welfare employees and assistants, trainers, cultural mediators, judges, lawyers, tutors, baby-sitters, cultural interpreters, priests and members of religious orders, and so on. It is a case, quite literally, of a whole army of men and women who devote themselves to helping people grow up, so much so that one could have observed that this is one of the largest economic sectors and the most important in the labour market in a large number of countries.

Scientific knowledge about the first stage of life has expanded and deepened in an impressive fashion, technical literature about childhood and adolescence is very widely

diffused, the field in question and international debate are vast and very intense, and they concern the rich countries as much as the poor, and often unite them both in tackling the questions and issues that are emerging. The corpus of rights intentionally sanctioned, in all countries, for the protection of childhood and adolescence – and to which appeal can be made at the time of the continual struggles for their defence – has expanded a great deal and become very much more precise and developed. The supranational organizations and agencies with ambitions for their guardianship and empowerment in the first stage of life have multiplied. For years, almost everywhere in the world, there has been a huge work of ‘empowerment’: in itself, this English term indicates a whole range of concrete actions and practices which aim at effective protection, participation, decompartmentalization and the strengthening of opportunities of young boys and girls. Give them the capacity to act: schools, children, teachers, institutions. Make human resources available. Each year billions of dollars are invested to this end, which are not enough, some say, but which are billions of dollars none the less.

And all that is not without fruit: above all, it is true that the rate of infant mortality is, you might say, clearly decreasing everywhere, even in the poorest countries, while life-expectation – an indicator of primary importance – is clearly increasing; schooling and the elimination of literacy are also growing, even at a very different and much slower pace in comparison with the preceding statistics. The rights of children, boys and girls, often denied, even formally, for years, are now almost everywhere accorded *de iure* recognition, starting with those relating to safety, food, housing, parental care, identity, health and education.

But whatever the power and expansion of these positive forces before one, it is equally acknowledged by all experts and practitioners that, corresponding inversely to this progress, there are reversals and new crisis factors are continually produced. And everyone is in agreement we are now facing a gigantic and growing crisis in relation to the early stage of life, a macroscopic crisis of the world’s poor South, but one which will certainly not spare the rich North.

Moreover, my shared and direct experience of teaching over many years in a socially disadvantaged district of Naples confirms that x steps forward are always counterbalanced by y steps backwards, setbacks, standstills and crises.²

A brief description of the situation

According to the United Nations’ data on population, we numbered 6 billion persons on Earth shortly before the year 2000. In the year 2005 more than half the population will live in towns, and the majority of this part of humanity in megalopolises of over 10 million inhabitants, where we know it is more difficult to obtain water and food, where conditions are more insanitary and there is a greater risk of disease and epidemic: children are those first and worst affected.

Those who live in the big cities are additionally cut off from their own origins and traditional cultures; thus, the suppression without appeal of numerous values and a large number of practices, to which education can make reference in every culture, will be quicker and more radical.

Each traditional world was closed, deprived of numerous possibilities, bounded by known and very limited, narrow horizons and futures, often founded on class and caste discrimination and violent discrimination between the sexes. It also carried within itself unbearable material poverty and cruelty. We know that it is unjustified to imagine the traditional world as something good or acceptable for humanity for evermore. It is unreasonable to extol its values in the face of a world like our own. And, moreover, it simply no longer exists.

In today's global world, what is happening is what happened in England in the Industrial Revolution and to mainland Europe in the course of the last century. The final planetary unification of modes of production and of markets in conformity with the chaotic logic of the profit motive also overturns aspects of living, simultaneously parades riches and denies goods and opportunities, threatens the equilibrium and the material, affective and psychological security of entire communities, beginning with its least structured constituents: children and young people. The accelerated urbanization of huge masses of men and women affects above all individuals in education who are also the most fragile, for it overturns the frameworks in which growth takes place in accordance with the modalities shared by one community.

The whole urbanized world is very similar to the city of London described by Dickens.

The places where responsibility is still taken for childhood by the village in its entirety, as was the case in human society for thousands of years, are virtually no longer to be found in the global village. And new or better modalities have not yet been discovered.

Golden dust: the light of the past

A number of us, teachers, parents and educationalists, have had the opportunity of encountering on the ground what someone called 'God's dust'. They are the last gilded rays which reach us from the age-old past, and which perhaps seek to indicate something precious which has been destroyed. But it is a weak light, which does not pass itself on to others, which we recognize to a certain extent but which we are unable to take over for ourselves, because it is foreign to us for good and all. We will never enjoy its rays again, and in our world they are no more than a residual powder. What are these rays? It is everything which humanity, in thousands and thousands of different ways, has slowly built and wisely conserved to give a shared meaning to the growth of their children. It is the stability of the adult reference figures, the games repeated and passed down from generation to generation, the rites of initiation and passage at each stage, and life's trials and challenges – protected yet real – lying at the very the heart of childhood and adolescence: these are the liturgies taken seriously and the entirety of gestures repeated to the slow rhythm of days, weeks, months and years. And it is the opportunity to listen to the stories and the memories recounted at the heart of a cyclical time-scale, based on numerous reassuring repetitions, by individuals from different generations, the narration of which to the very young and to children is something naturally established and accepted by everyone, marked with the seal of constancy. These are the things which probably structure the personality, which give each individual an identity and a place in the world, and contribute to creating in each one an interior space sufficiently large to contain life's hopes and pains. This is what they are. And these are things which no longer exist in a

'natural' and general manner for all the children and adolescents who grow up in the thousands of the world's towns; things for which we are now often intensely, desperately and inconsolably nostalgic. And although we even try to recreate them forcibly, these things are reborn with difficulty. And in the places in the world where they have held out until now, they are starting to die out. Powerless, we happen to be attracted and dazed by the last grains of dust of all things. This golden dust of the past which crumbles everywhere should tell us something about the educational, community and scholarly arrangements which are in the process of dying out for ever, and about their function, at once so rich and so difficult to replace. But it cannot do so any longer. And we are assailed by a sadness which we often cannot even recognize and for which a remedy apparently no longer exists.

We sense that – more than everything else – the young generations throughout the world will have to live with this loss, this mourning, for a long while to come.

However, we are adult and we can face the reality of our world; we are educators faced with a world different from that which has passed. That is why we should recognize that, with the final disappearance of the old, something important, probably something fundamental, has gone for ever. We should do so with sorrow, but without falling into a demented longing for its return or a frenzied desire to bring everything back to life. To play and feign the now-dead acts and processes that were child-rearing practice for thousands of years is a dubious exercise. At best, with humility, caution and workmanlike care, with a great sense of respect for the past, for the present, for the children and for ourselves, by means of the laborious work of introspection which should accompany every delicate and complex breakthrough, we might be able to preserve, in the new world of education, fragments of the gold dust, which we must nourish and transform: the art of narration, minimal preservation of rites, concern for stabilizing constants in our offspring's reference to adults . . .

But what is concrete, but also difficult to define, concerns the values and reference-points necessary for education, of listening to boys and girls growing up, of not forgetting or pushing back into the shadow the significance of the gross raw facts which impact on hundreds of millions of children and adolescents.

Some figures on childhood at the end of the twentieth century

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) the number of undernourished persons in the world is of the order of 822 million, and while this was a slight reduction, according to the World Development Report published by the World Bank in September 1999, 1.5 billion persons – 60 per cent of whom already live in towns – survive on less than a dollar a day. Almost half are children. In 1987, 1.2 billion persons lived on less than a dollar a day. It is also true that in some areas of recent development, such as South-East Asia, the percentage of the poor as a proportion of the whole population has decreased, going from 45.5 to 43.1 per cent in a few years. But in other regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa, this percentage has gone from 38 to 39 per cent.

The gulf between rich and poor in the world grows constantly: although in 1987 the average revenue of a poor country was valued at 3.1 per cent of the average revenue of a rich country, this percentage has now fallen to 1.9. The expectations, needs and perceptions

of the world of children from rich and from poor countries are increasingly divergent; it becomes increasingly difficult to find common parameters and languages.

Throughout the world more than 6 million children die each year from hunger and malnutrition: 17,000 every day. And 2 million more die from thirst and dehydration: 6,000 a day.

In Latin America alone, 60 per cent of the deaths from malnutrition, which affect 44 per cent of the total population, are children. Every day 3,000 children die from malnutrition in this continent.

It is worth juxtaposing this appalling tragedy with the cost in dollars which would make it possible to avoid it and give the hope of a future to millions of children. The development programme of the United Nations has made these calculations, when in 1998 specialists submitted a report which quantified the annual costs of the minimal possible human development, while also relating them to some patterns of private consumption in the rich world. Water and sanitary infrastructures for the entire world: 9 billion dollars a year. Basic care and food for everybody: 13 billion dollars. Expenditure on childbirth: 12 billion dollars . . .

Annual expenditure on perfume in Europe and the United States: 12 billion dollars. Expenditure on ice-cream in Europe alone: 11 billion dollars. Expenditure on food for dogs, cats and domestic animals: 17 billion dollars. To say nothing of the drug-related expenditure world-wide: 400 billion dollars, or the total world expenditure on armaments: 780 billion dollars.

According to an estimate by the World Health Organization, world-wide at least 11 million children a year die from trivial infectious illnesses that are perfectly curable and directly linked with poverty: more than 30,000 a day. It is a question of pneumonia, diarrhoea and malaria in 70 per cent of cases. In 1990 the United Nations summit on childhood fixed reducing deaths of this kind by 50 per cent as an objective for the year 2000, without succeeding in this, or eradicating polio, which remains in many countries: they also failed to reduce the mortality rates from malaria and tuberculosis. It should be added that a number of illnesses which had disappeared have returned and affect children above all, even in rich countries. And new illnesses or old illnesses in new guises affect children everywhere before anyone else.

Every year 40 million children are not even registered at birth, as a result of which they have no official, acknowledged and recognized identity: they grow up without a name, with no date of birth, no paternity, no maternity, nor nationality. There are 23 million of them in Asia, 9 million in sub-Saharan Africa, and so on. Often, for the same reasons, they cannot have access to what few health services there are, or to welfare and education.

All sources agree that material poverty is the prime cause of illiteracy, but the tally of illiterate children reveals very different estimates. In general, the lack of exact estimates says much about the level of attention directed to the object of estimation, in this case, the children. According to UNESCO, in the countries located in the poorest region of the planet, there are 93 million children who are totally illiterate, and according to UNICEF 130 million receive no teaching; 70 per cent of illiterates are women and children. Everywhere, in poor countries girls are disadvantaged in relation to boys as far as their rights to basic teaching are concerned. The Catholic Conference of Bishops in the Americas states that the effective drop-out rate from school in Latin America is as high as 50 per cent of the entire school-age population.

And there, too, very little would be enough to do something. According to the UNICEF Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1999, it would be sufficient to invest 7 billion dollars a year in teaching for ten years in the poorest areas of the world: that is the equivalent of the annual expenditure on cosmetics in the United States.

According to the United Nations' estimates, nearly 50 million children have had to leave their country, 12 million are homeless, 10 million seriously psychologically traumatized by the violent death of their parents, acts of violence and atrocities; at least 6 million are disabled and invalids.

Several hundred thousand children are subjected to torture each year and held without charge or trial, often in illegal conditions of detention and in situations of serious sexual abuse. Two million boys and girls in the world are subject to various forms of sexual exploitation connected exclusively with tourism from rich countries. But in Latin America alone, sexual exploitation of various kinds affects 2 million young girls.

There are no precise statistics on the number of recent deaths of children in the course of civil warfare; it is certain that since the end of the Second World War several dozen million have died in local wars, and that they are the highest percentage in relation to the rest of the civil population deceased as a result of armed conflict. But wars imply all kinds of horrors. To take just one example: in the Algerian civil war, since 1992, 3,000 children have been killed and 27,000 wounded. Moreover, of the 50,000 adult deaths, more than 80 per cent were murdered and often tortured to death or mutilated in front of their own children. According to the international tribunals and United Nations observers, such phenomena are very widespread. After the war there come other sufferings. The embargo against Iraq has resulted in a considerable increase in the infant mortality rate per thousand inhabitants, from 24 to 92. For the year 1999, calculations show that 60,000 Rwandan children were responsible for their family because of the death of their parents in the war, that 300,000 were forced to beg, and that 90 per cent of them had no access to health care or education. The war was followed by new preparations for war. There are no fewer than 250,000 combatant children, according to the United Nations, and the number of child soldiers wounded and killed in local wars is rising sharply in all poor countries at war. In the Congo 18,000 are enlisted between 9 and 16 years; in Uganda, 10,000. UNICEF recorded 4,000 children forcibly enlisted in Sierra Leone in 1999.

There is no model of society nor economic system which today, or in the course of the economic development of the century just passed, would have stopped these attacks on children.

Children forced to work: one of the most significant characteristics of the work of minors, denounced by the Global March Against Child Labour, lies in the fact that an important number of multinationals in the rich countries demand products destined for the world market from entire communities in the poor countries, with the result that it is these communities themselves, in the poor countries, which impose a form of slave or semi-slave labour on their own children, to guarantee on the one hand additional profits for the holders of economic power in these communities, and on the other hand by thus safeguarding the immunity of the multinationals who can be guaranteed huge profits for themselves without taking direct responsibility, or having violated international legislation banning work by minors. The line followed by the multinationals then extends to small and very small American and European businesses, who exploit the labour of minors and also children, above all in Asia and Latin America. It is difficult to

ascertain the real number of working children world-wide. UNICEF's estimates give a figure of 250 million, but that is undoubtedly a rough estimate in the absence of specific figures.

The rich countries devote enormous resources to childhood, which plays a large part in the market and represents an active part of the immense flux of private consumption. Our rich countries only make up one-fifth of the world's inhabitants, but we account for 86 per cent of private expenditure world-wide. We only constitute 20 per cent of the inhabitants but, together with our children, we consume 60 per cent of global energy, 46 per cent of the animal protein, 84 per cent of the paper, and so on.

However, in the rich countries as well, admittedly in smaller proportions, there are new deprivations which affect children and adolescents above all, and other acute causes for anxiety.

According to the Children's Defense Fund, the North American agency for the defence of the child, in the United States itself, which is the premier world economic power, 14 million children live in poverty, that is, almost 20 per cent of the total child population. The phenomenon is growing slowly but constantly, notwithstanding the favourable economic situation: in 1969 it was 14 per cent. According to the Fund, of these poor children almost 2.6 million live in extreme poverty.

In the United States the rate of homicide, rape and violent assaults has gone from 161 for every 100,000 inhabitants in 1961 to 757 in 1999. Many affect children, and here too the percentage is growing all the time. Between 1979 and 1991 almost 50,000 children and adolescents in the United States lost their lives as a result of the use of fire arms. Every day, thirteen children die as a result of a firearms attack; this is also the cause of death of one adolescent in four, and the majority of these murders took place within the walls of their own homes or in their neighbourhood. It is a figure equivalent to all the American soldiers killed in the course of the Vietnam War. On average, children in the United States watch 28 hours of television a week. The National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the United States has estimated that at the age of 18, they will have seen on television an average of 200,000 acts of violence and, more specifically, 10,000 homicides in which, in 58 per cent of cases, the perpetrator appearing on the screen is not punished. Minors held in detention number 100,000, a very high proportion for this age group in comparison with other rich countries. In several States of the Union the death penalty remains an option for crimes committed by minors: a status shared with Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Iran, the Yemen, Nigeria and Pakistan. The suicide rate in the United States among children between 14 and 18 years' old was 11.1 per 100,000 in 1992 and is constantly rising.

According to rough estimates, the number of homeless girls and boys in Europe is over 1 million and growing constantly, above all in Russia, Rumania and Germany, but also in France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and so on.³

Seven hundred years ago, Maimonide . . .

While I was collecting these facts, a passage written by Maimonide more than seven hundred years ago often came to mind. He said that, 'since there aren't prophets any more, or they aren't recognized, and prophecy does not reveal itself clearly, the art of prophecy will be entrusted to children and madmen and attention should be paid to them.'

It seems to me we should pay profound attention to these statistics, for – in a period that has no prophets – the life conditions of children and the destructive folly which operates around and against them, truly achieves, in one way or another, the function which was that of prophecy. It is a revelation and a warning. This demonstrates that, too often, they are commoditized, and too often they are overrun by commodities. *This shows that we are a species that attacks its own children*; we no longer really protect them, we do not help them to grow up, and we can neither prepare nor secure a better world for our descendants.

It is a warning against a catastrophic destiny for our civilization. If we want to read these facts as a prophecy, we see that they contain a powerful signal, which – unless we want to remain indifferent or impotent towards it – calls for some reaction, a redemption of some kind. This redemption can be imagined or should have taken place in the world of the possible.

The twenty first century: what should be done?

As people of our time, we can be indignant at a dominant global economic and social system which produces a reality that is often terrible and too frequently without any perspective on our own species; we can study it to understand the how and the why and, perhaps, to involve ourselves in a global exit route, if we believe in this possibility.

But, meanwhile, we are called to follow our work as educators. And as educators, perhaps, a brief description of the situation can, in some way, serve to locate our difficulties in a wider frame and to reflect while making use of categories which go well beyond the simple contingent debate in our own country or practices current in our own school. Perhaps we might be able to give greater meaning to our profession, to our action, if we set out from more universal categories, that is, transculturally utilizable world-wide and in various contexts. Perhaps we might be able to decide to teach in a way – which would spread throughout the world and, above all, in the places of poverty and exclusion – which had as its point of departure requirements, needs, problems to be solved and not the foundations of the school already in place.

Many of us do not believe that there are predefined ways, certain and reassuring formulas. We need new categories to refer to.

The category which I would like to propose here is that of ‘empowerment’. Here is a brief definition: it is a complex construct which establishes the totality of knowledge, relational modalities, competences enabling individuals and groups to set their own objectives and develop strategies for achieving them by using existing resources. This transcultural definition offers us the necessary ingredients to set in motion an active process aiming to confront a situation of great hardship, for example, in Uganda, Colombia, the inner-city areas of Liverpool or in my own country (at Naples or elsewhere).

And this implies that we should always see the small boys and girls as potential protagonists, active and creative participants, and not as objects or mechanisms to be measured. Moreover, each time we should ourselves imagine, put together and build with the children a field for shared action, an activated common power.

The notion of empowerment does not side-step the educative function of adults, but forces them constantly to take stock of themselves against what the really children are,

what they express, their aspirations and abilities, and their needs and their sufferings, as well as the way they come into play in the educative relation, and not according to ideas and plans determined before any encounter and independently of the living work of education.

Admittedly, we can and we should develop strategies, we can and we should think up plans and design models, but on condition that we are prepared to measure them to the tasks which follow on from the action fleshed out in the joint field.

Empowerment implies a reactive course. And it has the advantage of lacking any totalizing ambitions: we, or our Ugandan, Colombian or English colleagues – when we face a process of empowerment – should not set ourselves the objective of constructing an omniscient riposte to an unjust world, but act in objective proportion at the very centre of the world of education which is ours, in a given situation, and in the effective activity of the educative situation.

We should simply use the resources available, realistically, in the best way possible, as professionals in our own field or, if you prefer, as experts in our own trade, by concentrating the impact on the major problems, by reproducing all the practices which are demonstrably effective and, to make our action as economic as possible, renouncing those which are less so.

In the face of the suffering, simultaneously acute and chronic, of our own district, and in the face of the exclusion of the majority of its children from life's benefits, we have to construct a new empowerment to which we will attribute a primordial value – beyond the directives which arrive, the practices which we should have consolidated or wanted to consolidate as we passed, the pressures or external distractions – to make our first priority dedication to our decision with our attention focused on the children.

It is time to describe my work with the children, to 'tell' school from the children's perspective and not from that of the school.

The logic of empowerment forces a reversal of perspective: what is Pasquale doing? What can Francesca read? Why does Anna spend her time going to the toilet? Where does Abdul spend the afternoon? What can Mario do that he has never done at school? What do Antonia and Mara write in their diary? What do the schoolchildren do when they organize a fantasy football championship ('fantacalcio')?⁴ How is it that Salvatore never speaks when he is questioned and then tells the story when he does role-play with his contemporaries? How do I introduce myself, how do we introduce ourselves, into this very lively and motley fabric? Put differently, what intermediary space do we submit in which to proffer the culture, learning and knowledge, which we want to bring?

The answers to these questions and to a thousand possible others fit us into a chain of new questions and, above all, discoveries which will, in their turn, accurately suggest an intermediary space and strategies and true trajectories in which we can exercise our function. And we shall once again be educators and creative workers capable of communicating their knowledge.

There is still more: let us think of something closer still. Let us think of a sixth-year class in a district in Naples. It is the start of the school year. By referring to the checks for this level – and sticking to the so-called traditional areas of competence – the teachers learn that, out of 20 children, 18 speak dialect all the time, 16 continually make mistakes in spelling and syntax when they write, 11 read in a mechanical fashion but only understand simple texts, while 7 others read poorly, even when they do so mechanically and

even have difficulty understanding easy texts, 8 have not understood the four fundamental operations of arithmetic and 13 do not know their multiplication tables. Thanks to other factors which begin to emerge from the account, the teachers learn that they all watch many hours of television every week and have a good passive knowledge of their national language, that many of the girls dance, sing with friends or at church, that 5 cook, while all the boys are good at ball games, and 9 say that they are interested in moped mechanics. What possible procedure would the logic of empowerment suggest?

Before everything else, we must be able to involve the children in an emotive process: the relationship, whatever it may be, precedes comprehension, or at least considerably conditions it. On this point there is total scientific agreement. Whether it is at Liverpool, Bogota, Dar Es-Salaam or Naples – henceforth we shall speak in transcultural terms – if the educative relationship begins to function, then the transmission of knowledge also functions better, and if a good relationship is established in the class group then, by means of a domino effect, the learning processes are reproduced and become increasingly rapid. At this point there is often a 'but': the relationship is important, but . . . Quite to the contrary! It is the relationship which is the keystone, the centre. The logic of empowerment gives the ingredients, it helps to activate the resources, it makes it possible to determine an order of priorities, but with the relationship as the starting-point.

In the case of the sixth-year class in our district, it is, for example, possible to watch the soap opera, *Beautiful*, on television and then proceed to the decoding of the language, the study of the characters, the reconstruction of the story; one can construct a territory which will serve to start the school year on a level of immediacy that is favourable to the relationship; you can unleash a whole gamut of orchestrations, including those relating to mechanics and cooking, and from that starting-point formalize logical algorithms, written and oral descriptions in both the first language (the dialect) and in the second (Italian). In general, it is possible to make choices starting from existing areas of competence, for instance those focused on manual skills, or on dance and song, or sport, or on the use of a video camera actively to construct and manipulate images rather than passively to be subjected to them. It is from these things and from many other possibilities that one can set out in order subsequently to achieve the much wider capabilities which are necessary for reading, writing and arithmetic. But, meanwhile, other capabilities have begun to make themselves evident – physical, manual and multimedia skills which, just as in the contemporary world, extend the children's capacities for participation and communication well beyond the traditional model of verbal transmission. Then we can work together on the group's interdependent cohesiveness, teachers with teachers, teachers and children, children and children, devoting a lot of time to free conversation or to walks in the countryside or in the town, or in little self-help groups, guided or not, in which the children feel themselves protected by the reciprocity and can speak about themselves at school.

But, people will say, with what resources can that be done with the sixth-year class in our district? With those that are already there. There is a classroom and various shared spaces at school, there is the district and in it various associations and resources for educational purposes, and then there is the town. There are *x* batches of teaching material that are easy to absorb, *x* specialized areas ready and waiting, like the gymnasium or the computer room. From the perspective of the group teaching this class there are 11 hours' teaching a week on literary subjects, 6 hours of mathematics and science, 3 of foreign

languages, 3 of technical education, 2 of music, 2 of physical education, and so on. We have 30 teaching hours at our disposal, with possible additional hours. And outside their specific subject, the teachers also have second and third areas of competence: everybody knows Italian, everyone has a minimal knowledge of mathematics, some can dance or at least sing, or know how to cook, and so on. The group of teachers, together, classifies the problems to be resolved and decides to concentrate the separate and combined efforts of everybody who works with that class – following the logic of empowerment – on the points which the teachers consider crucial: acceptable behaviour, group cohesion, the gradual but constant development of linguistic competence in Italian, the formalization of logical procedures, basic arithmetic. It is starting from these foundations that the children's school timetable, the specific activities and their contents, should be established. And based on these activities and contents a course develops which progresses from specific initial effective capabilities. Of course, some constants will continue: the annual timetable which is the teachers' responsibility and the children's duty is a component of every disciplinary project, even if it lies at the centre of a truly revitalized framework. If, on the contrary – as is almost always the case – the teachers do not formulate an educational course on the basis of the logic of empowerment, if they do not take the children as their starting-point but the teaching hours by subject, free days, fixed locations, educational ministry programmes, the programme written during the current year or three years' earlier, from the idea of what one ought to know in the sixth-year class as already established by skills tests, or by abstracting from their results, relying on patterns of the time spent in school based on the general timetable already established, then the fundamental question disappears: where are the boys and girls, what is their position in the school? At this level of reasoning, it is legitimate to think that a school which does not attempt to encompass empowerment is a school which is in the business of representing itself rather than looking for solutions, a self-referential institution largely based upon the adult pole alone of the educative relation and one which excludes the question of knowing why it is in this district. With a minimum of non-judgemental factual cultural observation – which characterizes the process of verification according to the logic of empowerment – if 9 out of 27 children do not know three words of English at Dar Es-Salaam, and if 70 per cent of our sixth-year class display antipathy or difficulties, the thrust of this account alone should be to say that we should change direction, that it is not possible to take general timetables or ministerial programmes as starting-points in order to do what we are there to do.

Where, then, can we start our process of empowerment?

Things that we know from lived experience of our work on the spot: the effective conditions of social exclusion and cultural exclusion which we others, teachers at this school, have the knowledge and capability to recognize. But also from our children's many areas of knowledge and from both their material and their linguistic culture, their relationship skills, all their areas of competence; so many resources, energies, scope for participation on which to build.

What can be the point of departure? It could be, for example, implementing a rights charter. This is an empowerment procedure that is often employed throughout the world. It links the right sanctioned at both international and national level to the concrete battle against a specific difficult situation experienced by a certain number of children in a particular context, puts it in touch with the needs, the aspirations, the sufferings and

acquisitions which the children carry within them as a result of a right which is unapplied, obscure or unknown. Yes! a rights charter on which we would all work together:

The *right* to welcome, hearing, observation and continuous responsibility by a group or by one adult alone; the *right* to real contracts of individual education; the *right* to play, to regular sport and creative expression with the use of all the senses and in different languages; the *right* to socializing appropriate to their age, without adult interference; the *right* to independence, to assistance in the gradual construction of a life project and to responsibility for one's own actions; the *right* to specialized psychological attention when the need is recognized or when a demand of this kind is made; the *right* to life in the open air and to frequent experience of natural environments; the *right* to personal, family and collective memory, sorrowful as well as joyful; the *right* to sorrow and regret; the *right* to norms and limits set continuously and calmly by adults, without any high-handedness; the *right* to experience trials of passage, guided but not simulated, based on shared work and among which periods of early but protected work experience can be enriching and supportive for development rather than a humiliation; the *right* to the full acquisition of a national language as second language and, as a result, as a language to be learnt by means of active, experimental and intensive study, with long phases of consolidation, taking great care in all situations, including teaching and for long periods.

Empowerment is a process of rebuilding the educational presence in an area: all the practices employed hitherto will be examined together. Those which correspond to the objectives of emancipation from acute and chronic social malaise will be selected and retained for the effective acquisition of rights denied.

As a result, we should all contribute to a shared work which takes responsibility, and which offers true adult support, from 0 to 16 years at least, within our district as a whole and which, consequently, also involves the homes, families, parents – and especially the mothers – our colleagues in the nursery schools, those in primary school and compulsory instruction, as well as the active and creative workers and educators in the private social sector, who have for a long while followed a model for action that is open, flexible and closer to that of empowerment. The model of empowerment, which consists of constructing strategies and trajectories within a social and educative situation, is a model in partial conflict with that which considers the school as relying above all upon the rigidity of its system.

Consequently, in order better to tackle the rights charter but without, however, renouncing its teaching objectives, the school should make itself more discreet, at least at the outset, take a step backwards, make reference to wider categories – always acknowledged at the international level and transculturally – as for example those of 'life skills', such as the World Health Organization and UNICEF's intercultural workshops propose: have creative thought; have critical thought; be able to verbalize one's thought; be capable of decision; be self-aware and have the capacity for self-evaluation; be able to handle one's emotions; be able to resolve problems; be able to handle stress and manage one's anxieties; be capable of empathy.

It is not on prioritizing ministerial programmes, or conforming to directives or pre-existent school rules that we should depend. Quite the contrary, it is the rights charter and life skills that we should take as our point of departure, overturning all traditional set-ups, as has been done for example in the popular schools in the shanty towns of Brazil.

Detailed courses have to be constructed and different curricula proposed – and that is not so straightforward – as valid in the field of general education as in the specific field, appropriate for the school, for capabilities in subject syllabuses. It is a question of re-nouncing protective and reassuring customs and behaviours. The same organizational solutions, the use of space and time, the decentralization of powers and the use of capabilities, prioritizing the use of financial resources and the handling of administrative practices should all start from criteria of efficiency and effectiveness that no longer have consolidated practices as their corner-stone but the fixed objective of empowerment: challenge the critical nexuses around the chosen objectives in those children's lives, that is what should be done, always, in every hidden nook the world over. Of course, it is a case of joining a long-running battle to subject to this perspective the numerous opposing forces of conservatism: in the administration, in the unions, among the educationalists themselves and in each of us, in the families, and so on. But how otherwise can we give the lie to such a *dark* prophecy, which has long cast its shadow over us as well, on our concrete gift to work in areas of exclusion. And perhaps it is only like this that we might be able to achieve for ourselves – who bear the responsibility, and give full meaning to this expression – a true autonomy of schooling.

Marco Rossi-Doria

Naples

(translated from the Italian by Denis Trierweiler)

(translated from the French by Juliet Vale)

Notes

1. The author, a teacher at the Italian public school in Nairobi in 1988, often had conversations with a young African schoolboy who was thirteen years old, and with his school friends, about their life and school. This article is inspired by the book, Marco Rossi-Doria (1999), *Di mestiere faccio il maestro* (Naples: Ancora Editore).
2. On this point, see Rossi-Doria (1999), pp. 51 ff.
3. For estimates for Italy, see Rossi-Doria (1999), pp. 35–39.
4. *Fantacalcio*: a 'virtual' game in the course of which each participant forms their own team by selecting (within the limits of a budget decided in advance) footballers playing in the Italian championship. The total number of points attributed to each player by the sports daily, *La gazetta dello sport*, match by match, determines who wins. (Italian translator's note)