

From ASSEFA to Europe – towards a Gandhian education in the XXI century

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How the adventure began

I try to remember how the adventure began... it was at the beginning of the eighties. My two children, Luca and Chicco, were 9 and 4 years old; my marriage had recently come to an end, and I was sensing the desire to explore new paths of knowledge, of study and of social commitment.

Some friends told me about a small group of people in Turin who were periodically reading and commenting Gandhi's texts. The name of the group was 'Gruppo Sarvodaya'. I joined them and felt comfortable amongst them, and it was them who introduced me to the Association For Sarva Seva Farms, and the developing collaboration to support rural communities in Southern India. I appreciated the Gandhian approach of this movement, and the relationship of respect and trust between the Indian partners and the Italian group. The theoretical and ethical reflection was integrated in a coherent way with the action: small projects, adapted to the context; involvement of 'beneficiaries'; periodic checks of effectiveness; and a holistic look, which takes into account the complexity and interdependence of the problems to be faced.

I was lucky, I had the opportunity to visit the Farms: the first trip took place in 1983, the last (the seventh!) in 2006. At each visit - always accompanied by our partners Loganathan and Vasantha - I discovered new places, new initiatives; and returning to places already visited, I noticed the changes. Not only were the schools better kept and bright, the fields well-cultivated. It was the people who had changed: women who did not dare to speak, after a couple of years, will talk about their activities in a relaxed manner. Badly-dressed and shy children became protagonists of theatrical performances which were not only beautiful, but also witty: they performed in traditional dances, recovering with pride the local culture, organizing competitions of skills ...

With Franco and other friends we set up an Association, "Gruppo ASSEFA Torino", that is still active after many decades.

University research and experimentation

Gradually my involvement in ASSEFA became deeper: the ideas and activities of ASSEFA, and more generally the Gandhian vision (the writings of Gandhi, but also of Vinoba Bhave and Kumarappa) began to influence, shape and model my professional work, concerned with research and experimentation in science education.

I was looking for answers to some questions that seemed crucial to me: what is the purpose of education? Is there only one science, or many possible sciences, that express the ideas and values of a society? How can science education provide young people with critical analysis tools, and can offer them a profoundly lived knowledge and reverence for the natural world hosting us?

How important is the relationship between teacher and pupils in fostering the development of critical and autonomous thinking? What happens when the conventional model of the 'expert' teacher portraying the 'truth' is replaced by a participative dynamic relation where students and teachers together are involved in 'action-research' processes? How a nonviolent approach can shape ideas, choices and behaviour in science education?

Thanks to my evolving experiences with ASSEFA and to the exploration of new theoretical approaches to the ideas of science and of science education, I had the opportunity to propose within the academic context some educational paths, characterized by a transdisciplinary approach: epistemological aspects were considered alongside participatory methodologies in learning, teaching and research; attention was given to help students overcome misconceptions and cognitive obstacles, and to the practice of shared assessment of the educational process.

But I could not have gone on alone. I found support, participation and new ideas in some students of Natural Sciences who courageously decided to undertake their thesis with me, despite the lack of academic consideration given to this field of research in Italy. It was with them, and thanks to them, that we could develop an idea of scientific education that was different from the conventional one. This approach to education was based upon the enhancement of the students' role, reverence for nature, nonviolent relationships and consciousness of the critical aspects of the techno-scientific challenge and endeavour. Despite the obstacles and resistance – we finally succeeded to express this view, from within an 'academic' position.

Nonviolence is the root

Gradually we have succeeded in giving voice in Italy, but also internationally, to a way of understanding, practicing and evaluating scientific education starting from a Gandhian vision, which emphasizes the ethical component of any idea of science: nonviolence - in thought, in relationships, in the construction of knowledge, in individual and collective choices - is the basis upon which all our work emerges and develops.

The idea of development, which in the Western world has been misinterpreted and pursued as 'economic growth', is easily dismantled if we take into account the biophysical limits of the planet and the need for socio-environmental justice: this means bringing the ethical dimension to light, as Gandhi had expressed in two simple sentences a century ago: *““Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs, but not every man's greed.”* And from this it follows: *“Live simply so that others may simply live.”*

Among the research and teaching materials that we have developed over time, there were some role-plays centered on issues of development and interdependence. One in particular concerned the nonviolent struggle carried out by a Gandhian activist, Sri Jeganathan, in defense of populations of fishermen against industrial aquaculture facilities in Tamil Nadu. Defense of natural systems and social equity are the foundation of the nonviolent approach applied to this and to many similar problems, which are now in dramatic growth. Another role-playing game that we recently published in Italy concerns the case of the high-speed train Turin –Lion. Here again, the conflict is between two world visions: one pursues the search for power and domination of a minority upon people and nature; the other one asks for inclusiveness and sharing of places and resources between humans and all other living beings. Role-plays about socio-environmental conflicts provided the basis for our reflection on nonviolent and participatory methodologies based on dialogue. In line with Sarvodaya's prerequisites, classroom education in the formal school context can also offer a privileged space for young people to deal with the complex world; to experience oneself not in competition with others, but in open dialogue, where communication stimulates linguistic creativity and shared imagination.

The international context of a nonviolent approach to science and science education

Our research on nonviolent education has been developed in the international context thanks to the academic activity of the members of our Research Group, as witnessed and documented by publications and participation to conferences (see References).

In Italy, Anna Perazzone – teacher of Didactics of Biology for future primary school teachers – encourages students to develop a reflexive attitude towards scientific knowledge and in the teaching / learning processes in the life sciences, and declares that this professional choice expresses a precise ethical guidance, which is linked to a model of sustainable and equitable society. It is no coincidence that her forthcoming book begins with an excerpt from Vinoba Bhave: *Thoughts on Education*.

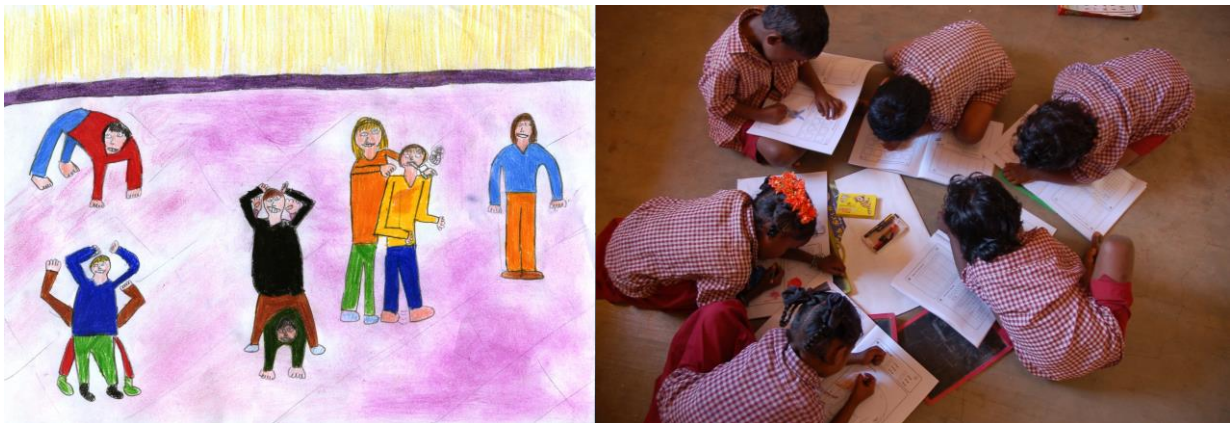
In UK, and in the international research context, Laura Colucci-Gray working at the University of Edinburgh, is developing pathways of research and practice in teacher education which include awareness of the 'environment' as a vital and agentic context, in which people can express and define their sense of self in relation to the more than human world. Her research looks at the role of teachers in supporting children growing their food in school gardens but also to the changes of perspectives required of both teachers and pupils: from a transmissive position on learning to a reflexive, critical and creative position towards knowledge which is produced collectively in dialogical and experiential settings.

Twinships between schools

Thanks to the commitment of school teachers – both in Italy and in the ASSEFA villages - since 1983 some 'twinning' between classes have been carried out: in the early stages it was only elementary school pupils who were involved, but later, with the expansion of secondary schooling in ASSEFA, also teenagers.

On the Italian side, all twinings have been realized by taking care to include this experience in a general educational project, aimed at promoting an attitude of openness, curiosity and respect towards other peoples and cultures. The exchange of letters, drawings and small objects built by hand has promoted childrens' awareness of the different ways of life (countryside /city, temperate / warm country, ...) and of the different linguistic tools: the complexity of the Tamil alphabet has aroused interest and appreciation, and the effort of a double translation from and into the English language made the children reflect on the importance of overcoming communication obstacles.

The publication by ASSEFA of booklets about nonviolent education was highly appreciated by Italian teachers, who in turn published similar documents.



The first twinning began in 1983, and lasted 4 years: the children of a small school in Gerbole (a village in the hinterland of Turin) in contact with the ASSEFA school of Viraliipatti carried out the entire school program by putting in parallel their story with that of their Indian friends, thus achieving the goal of a global education that led them to know and appreciate the diversity of food, nutrition, nature, traditions.



This twinning was followed by many others, gradually made easier by the improvement of postal services. Some books and videos in Italian and publications in English have accounted for the wealth of these exchanges and their ethical and educational value (see References).



The most recent twinning, still underway, began in 2008 between a middle school class at the Comprehensive Institute of Gassino (TO) and the ASSEFA secondary school in Andipuram. The 'Italia - India Project: a meeting between cultures' sees the students of the two schools as protagonists, who pass the baton to their younger partners every three years.

The vast documentation collected, for 35 years now, offers an extraordinary testimony of the importance of having met ASSEFA, and having had the opportunity to establish an increasingly intense and friendly relationship with this Gandhian movement over time. The personal and professional life of many people have been shaped profoundly, and gained knowledge and inspiration from the encounter of ASSEFA India.

And now... what about technology?

From two opposite poles the social and environmental conditions of India and Italy are approaching: the socio-economic situation of the ASSEFA villages is considerably improving, thanks to the commitment of the staff, the hard work of the farming communities involved and the economic support offered by multiple channels. Meanwhile, in Italy the socio-economic situation is deteriorating, while environmental pollution makes us more aware of the importance of protecting the natural ecosystems that feed us all. Moreover, the problems caused by a rampant and invasive use of Information Technology Communication (ICT) raise increasingly hard questions about the role of such new tools in the lives of people, societies and environment. In this period, together with other friends in Turin, we are engaged in a reflection on the opportunity to reduce the use of information technology, while in the ASSEFA villages there is an extensive computer literacy initiative aimed at women in self-help groups. It could be very interesting to discuss together the meaning and the opportunities that - after a century - the appropriate technology that was dear to Gandhi (and which is now mainly in the form of information technology) can offer to promote the self-development of communities globally. Our working group's name in Torino is '**slow tech**', aiming to a just, equitable and sustainable use of ITC ... According to Gandhi, *"There is more to life than simply increasing its speed."*

References

We write down some articles that were published in English, and are downloadable from the web.

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