

Introducing Bertolini and his pedagogy as a rigorous science

Massimiliano Tarozzi

University of Bologna

ABSTRACT

After a brief outline of the profile of Piero Bertolini in the context of the Italian phenomenological thinking in the sphere of education, the A. will focus on two main areas in which Bertolini conceived of phenomenology being applied to education: Phenomenology as an approach for understanding educational experience and on Bertolini's phenomenological thinking aiming at building the pedagogy as a rigorous science, by conceiving phenomenology as a theoretical framework for a pedagogical epistemology. Finally, some recent developments in Bertolini's legacy are summarized.

Parole chiave: *Piero Bertolini – Phenomenological pedagogy – Epistemology of Education – Phenomenology*

Introduzione a Bertolini e alla sua pedagogia come scienza rigorosa

Dopo aver tracciato brevemente il profilo teorico di Piero Bertolini nel contesto della riflessione fenomenologica in campo pedagogico, l'A. presenta due ambiti di applicazione dell'approccio fenomenologico in educazione: la fenomenologia come prospettiva per comprendere l'esperienza educativa e il pensiero di Bertolini circa la possibilità di costruzione di una pedagogia come scienza rigorosa attraverso la fenomenologia intesa come un orizzonte teorico possibile per una epistemologia pedagogica. Infine vengono presentati per cenni alcuni recenti sviluppi del pensiero iniziato da Bertolini.

Keywords: *Piero Bertolini – Pedagogia fenomenologica – Epistemologia pedagogica – Fenomenologia*

Piero Bertolini (1931-2006) was born in Torino and grew-up in Milano, he spent almost all his academic life in Bologna, where in 1969 he was given a professorship in General Education at the University of Bologna Faculty of “Magistero”. He was the originator of the phenomenological movement in education in Italy as well as one of the leading figures of the Italian Educational theory after World War II. He was also the founder of this same journal, “Encyclopaideia”, in 1997, but his scholarly reputation and his scientific recognition never go beyond the Italian borders. His books have not been translated into other languages, he have not published anything in international journals, with the only exception of an article authored by myself and by him on the *European Journal of Teacher education* (Tarozzi & Bertolini, 2000); very few studies about him have been published outside of Italy (Boselli, 1998; Tarozzi, 2007, in press).

10 years after his death in this paper I would like to briefly introduce the work and legacy of Piero Bertolini especially for non-Italian readers.

After having briefly sketched the profile of Piero Bertolini and contextualized the origins of phenomenological thinking in the sphere of education in Italy, I will narrow my argument by focussing on two main areas in which Piero Bertolini conceived of phenomenology being applied to education: Phenomenology as an approach for understanding educational experience and the phenomenological contribution to an epistemology of pedagogical knowledge. Due to space limits, I will concentrate mostly on the latter, based on his seminal book *L'esistere pedagogico*, and only briefly address the former.

Finally, I will conclude by briefly outlining some recent developments in Bertolini's legacy.

Piero Bertolini. A brief profile of an Italian phenomenologist

Phenomenology (Husserlian phenomenology) arrived in Italy largely thanks to the distinctive interpretation carried out by the philosopher Antonio Banfi, who studied in Berlin in 1911 and 1912 and authored the first two articles introducing Husserl's thinking to Italian readers in 1923¹ (Mocchi, 1990). For Banfi, phenomenology represented a third way between the culturally prevalent neo-idealistic approach, on one hand, and positivism on the other hand. Through the work of two main Italian philosophers, Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile, neo-idealism was the leading discourse in that period, dominating philosophical and cultural space in Italy. Banfi held up phenomenology as an alternative, finding in its transcendental

¹ Banfi, A. (1923). La tendenza logistica della filosofia tedesca contemporanea e le 'Ricerche logiche' di Edmund Husserl, *Rivista di filosofia*, XIV, 2, 115-133, now Banfi, A. (1961). *Filosofi contemporanei* (pp. 67-87). Firenze: Parenti; La fenomenologia pura di Edmund Husserl e l'autonomia ideale della sfera teoretica, *Rivista di filosofia*, XIV, 3, 208-224, now in A. Banfi, *Filosofi contemporanei*, pp. 88-106.

perspective a way of overcoming both the metaphysical foundations of reality characterizing idealism and the scientific objectivism characterizing positivism. In particular, he referred to phenomenology in multiple spheres including education (Banfi, 1961) in an anti-idealistic way, asserting an autonomous space for educational science from mainstream philosophy, but within a scientific rigor distinct from the positivistic approach.

A second wave of phenomenological studies occurred in the late Fifties, together with Existentialism and the discovery of *Crisis* and Husserl's unpublished papers; at this point, thanks in large part to Enzo Paci (University of Pavia, then in Milan), phenomenology represented an alternative to Neopositivism in the human sciences (Paci, 1973, see also Erbetta, 2006; Madrussan, 2005).

At the end of the decade, in 1958, Paci's student Piero Bertolini made his first attempt to apply a phenomenological approach to education with the book *Fenomenologia e Pedagogia*. [*Phenomenology and Education*], (Bertolini, 1958), which was reorganized 30 years later and published as *L'esistere pedagogico* [*Pedagogical existence*] (Bertolini, 1988). At the beginning of this century, Bertolini summarized his personal journey and the development of the Italian phenomenological movement in education in a new book *Pedagogia fenomenologica. Genesi, sviluppo, orizzonti* [*Phenomenological pedagogy: Genesis, development, horizons*] (Bertolini, 2001). Finally, his latest book on phenomenological education is *Per un lessico di pedagogia fenomenologica* [*Towards a lexicon of phenomenological pedagogy*] (Bertolini, 2006), which he completed few months before his death in the form of a comprehensive dictionary of the key words associated with phenomenological education.

Bertolini combined his philosophical fellowship with Paci with practical educational experience: in the same period that he was carrying out an intellectual conversation with Paci, he also directed Europe's largest juvenile prison, located in Milan, for ten years. In addition to phenomenological thinking, this extraordinarily rich and challenging experience laid the foundations for an original perspective on phenomenological pedagogy as a rigorous science and educational approach.

At the end of the Sixties, Bertolini was given a professorship at the University of Bologna, where he taught until he passed away in 2006. Throughout his career he combined theoretical and empirical research with practice and interventions in the field (of education). For many years he was particularly committed to developing the pedagogical organization of the preschool system in the Municipality of Bologna, one of the most significant examples of pedagogy in our country². At the same time, he also acted as educator and mentor for several generations of scholars. He was able to bring together a large group of scholars and collaborators who shared a common interest in the phenomenology of education and

² In the 70s Bertolini founded the journal "Infanzia" [Childhood], now edited by Roberto Farnè and Franco Frabboni, still a widely recognized journal in early child education.

educational research (Dallari & Tarozzi, 2001; Tarozzi, 2006). I will return to his legacy shortly.

The main themes of Bertolini's thinking on phenomenological pedagogy

In his most complete book, *L'esistere pedagogico*, Bertolini devotes the first part to examining the contributions Husserl's thought made to pedagogy, finding that the philosopher's main impact has been on pedagogical epistemology. At that time, Bertolini was engaged in a political and scientific struggle to define the boundaries of autonomy for pedagogical knowledge, which had traditionally been included in either philosophy or the social sciences and therefore politically marginalized. In this context, Bertolini sought "to give pedagogy a theoretical framework and a social-political power" which until then had been very limited. He found in phenomenology the possibility to establish pedagogy as an autonomous science, but based on a different paradigm than the one characterizing the natural sciences. The main purpose of his theoretical reflection and educational action thus became the possibility of locating a rigor that would make it possible to think of pedagogy as a phenomenologically based science and not a mere science of facts.

As a consequence, Bertolini argued that phenomenology offered a key contribution in two main fields:

1. Phenomenology as an educational approach offering an original phenomenological interpretation of educational experience.
2. Phenomenology as the theoretical framework for a pedagogical epistemology.

In this introduction I focus in particular on the latter, which was the core of Bertolini's phenomenological thinking. First, however, let me make a few comments about the former.

Phenomenology as an Educational approach for young offenders

Bertolini, in keeping with his biography, always invited his students, including myself, to get their hands dirty with practice; in his opinion, educationalists should never close themselves up in the ivory tower of academia. Before entering university, I myself worked as an educator with young offenders and adolescents for many years. This is evident in his most practical books on social education such as *Per una pedagogia del ragazzo difficile* (*For a pedagogy of the difficult child*, 1965), then again in *Ragazzi difficili* (*Difficult children*, with L. Caronia, 1993), where he applies an educational approach explicitly inspired by a phenomenological perspective to both read the phenomenon of social distress, and develop a pedagogical intervention to deal with it.

Young deviant, misfits and child offenders are "difficult" not because they have social difficulties, but because they have difficulties becoming subjects. In helping them achieve subjecthood, Piero Bertolini overcomes psychological or sociological approaches or, more generally, all the causal or cause/effect logics that Husserl had likewise criticized that aim to identify the linear causes of social problems and propose appropriate behaviours for interiorizing them. For Bertolini, the subject in relation to the world and others is at the very centre of educational intervention. Here the Husserlian concept of intentionality as the ability to make sense of the world is vital: discomfort is a failure or incorrect functioning of intentional capacity; a distortion of intentionality due to either an "excess of the world" (resulting in cutting themselves, distrust or failure) or an "excess of I" (resulting in omnipotence, rebellion and violence). Therefore, the objective of educational intervention is not to address incorrect behaviours but to impact on the subjects' everyday lives. The educator should facilitate a transformation of the worldview, not teach "correct" behaviours. However, the process of constructing a renewed worldview is not free. There are constraints: the first is the very existence of the other, who limits and defines the self at the same time, and the body, which simultaneously unites and separates subjectivity and reality (Husserl's passive genesis of the construction of ego). The 1993 book offers some strategies and progressive stages for this educational process that is obviously focussed on the relationship between the educator and the educatee, and on fostering educational contexts that serve to broaden children's fields of experience, which are usually limited and oppressive. After gaining an adequate knowledge of children, educators should support them in deconstructing their closed worldviews and accompany them in reconstructing new ones, positive and full of existential optimism. To this end some strategies are useful, such as *beauty education*: An exposure to aesthetic experiences in both natural and artistic beauty, or even the *education to difficulty*: The dimension of the adventure is truly educational because it helps children to move away from the usual intentional capacity and builds new lived experiences (Bertolini, 1989): in this sense, camping, hiking, trekking, survival courses etc. are very suitable activities that challenge children and push them to make new meanings of unexpected experiences. Bertolini clearly outlines strategies of educational intervention which he practiced during his time as director of the juvenile prison and are largely derived from previous experience in Scouting, about which he has written some important texts (Bertolini, 1957; Bertolini & Pranzini, 2001; Bertolini et al., 2011).

Piero Bertolini has also applied a similar approach to early school education. Beyond an adult-centered perspective, for children 0-6 years old what are important are "fields of experience"³ rather than objects of knowledge. It is important to empathically approach children's visions of the world with the understanding that they are subjects capable of intentioning the world, and to create pedagogical contexts for them in which they are free to have meaningful experiences (Bertolini, 1984).

³ Within the current national law governing the pre-school system the phenomenological expression "fields of experience" is prevailing, also thanks to the influence of Bertolini's pedagogy.

Epistemology of Education

The subtitle of Bertolini's main book is "Reasons and limits of pedagogy as a phenomenologically based science". His phenomenological pedagogy was aimed at identifying the meaning of educational experience and building a pedagogy as a rigorous science. With this project, Piero Bertolini sought to counter two trends. On the one hand, the focus on spontaneity and improvisation, to consider educational practice as a technique that depends on the capacities and spontaneous or natural qualities of educators and, on the other hand, ideological or techno-scientific dogmatism: in Italy, the former has always been rooted in the strong ideological opposition between Catholic and Marxist pedagogies, the latter traditionally grounded in the neo-positivist paradigm. Hence the need to carve out epistemological autonomy for pedagogy as the "ontological region" of education and to provide a solid foundation for educational professions.

Bertolini's analysis begins from late Husserl, the Husserl of *Krisis*, relating his thoughts on the contemporary conditions of his times and the European Sciences. Piero Bertolini starts by outlining the "crisis" of culture and society and its relation to pedagogical action and thinking. In my opinion, this is perhaps the most dated and least interesting part, closely linked to the crisis of reason, a late existentialist vision typical of Enzo Paci's thinking in the late 1950s.

The second chapter outlines the "Main sources of Husserl's thinking", which is followed by a chapter on the educational significance of Husserl's contribution. I do not have the space here to present over 100 dense pages in detail, so I am obliged to summarize. From Husserl in particular Bertolini takes up the rational-critical need of *Logische Untersuchungen* and *Ideen I*, the idea of reason as opposed to the dominant perspective of psychological and logical positivism, which he uses to found a philosophy as rigorous science.

The Husserlian notion of regional ontology (*Seinsregion*), then, provides Piero Bertolini with a framework to rigorously establish a phenomenological (eidetic) science of education that corresponds to the ontological region of educational experience. Finally, after a somewhat approximate discussion of the phenomenological-transcendental method drawn from *Ideen*, he presents the themes of the *transcendental constitution of I* (active and passive genesis) and of *Otherness*, as well as an outline of the notion of *empathy* (*Einfühlung*) to identify the elements that can reveal the educational value of Husserlian rationalism.

However, the main contribution made by both the 1958 text and, above all, the one published 30 years later, is the attempt to build a pedagogy as a rigorously founded science by conducting a phenomenological analysis of the educational experience and referring to an epistemological paradigm and idea of science that is consistent with phenomenology. The central, denser chapters of the book are devoted to this attempt.

Bertolini's phenomenological interpretation of the crisis highlights the need to reappraise subjectivity, placing autonomy against alienation and an inauthentic and other-directed life. However, phenomenology is not reduced to subjectivism. Every subjectivity (what Piero Bertolini calls "weak subjectivity") is found in intentional relations with the other and the world. Relationship is therefore at the very centre. The subject's consciousness is always "consciousness of..." something, "opening to..." someone, and the object should be understood as "revealing to..." somebody. Within this framework, Piero Bertolini asks, what is the ontological region (*Seinsregion*) of educational experience? How should we delimit the *Lifeworld*, that is, the place in which subjectivity meets the outside world, in order to find the *proprium* of educational experience from which to begin to delineate a rigorous science?

What follows is a phenomenological (not empirical) analysis of educational experience, aimed at identifying its "basic structures", the meaning units, which are intersubjective, always historical axes and not metaphysical ones. On the basis of this analysis, Bertolini proposes the following schema of the educational experience, which systematically combines the four main dimensions of the educational relationship: the individual dimension, the educator(s), the social community, the educatee(s), the culture, the object of the educational process, the instrument, and the way of communicating the content.

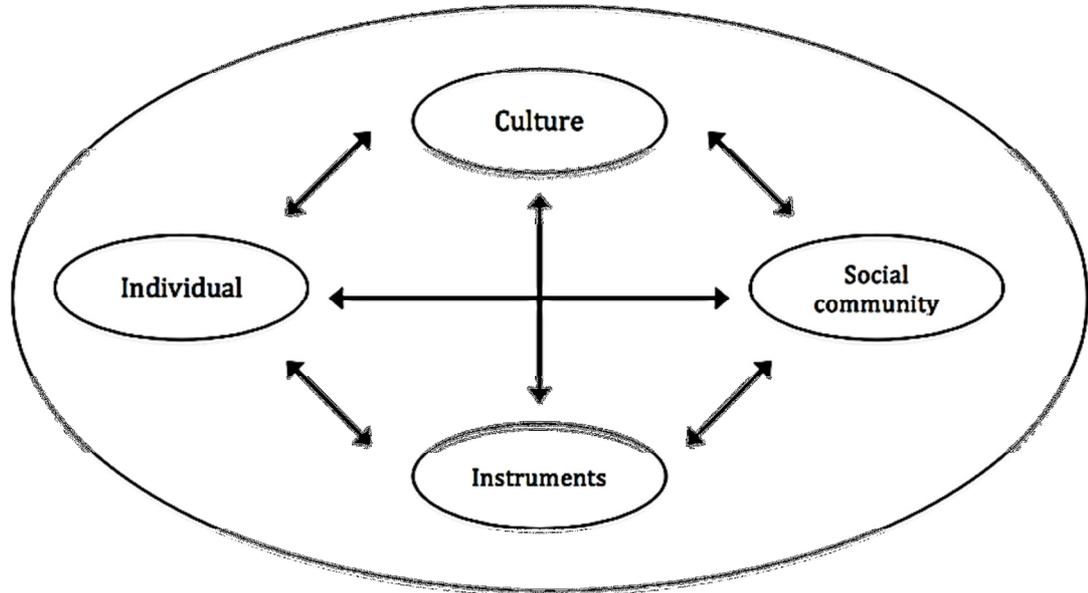


Image 1 - Bertolini's scheme of educational experience

These basic structures are ontological dimensions, constitutive of educational experience, the "things themselves" of education, which Piero Bertolini calls meaning units or the *intentional original directions* of educational experience that underlie the pedagogical discourse. These axes emerge from the above scheme, its elements, their implications and

meanings, and the relationships among them. According to Bertolini these correspond to: Systemicity, mutual relationship, possibility, sociability and irreversibility. I will not go into a careful examination of each of them here, suffice to say that each one has a “cognitive” function, to ascertain whether the forms of education are truly pedagogical, and a “methodological and praxical” one, indicating directions for action and guidelines for education practice. Along the path formed by these intentional directions Piero Bertolini builds a rigorous pedagogical discourse, a pedagogical science that he defines as an “empirical, eidetic and practical” science. He then goes on to thematize the characteristics of this autonomous science in order to identify the pedagogical skills and characteristics that make up the educator’s professionalism.

The epistemological autonomy of pedagogy also has immediate practical consequence in the field of educational policy. It offers a scientific foundation and recognition to educational professionalism, its knowledge, practices, methods, pre-service training paths, professional roles etc. Moreover, Bertolini expected that, by standing autonomously, a rigorous pedagogy would be able to move from the margins of social sciences to the mainstream and, although it has traditionally been marginalized in part due to its epistemological feebleness, it should now be able to dialogue “on equal terms” (this is the title of his last 2005 book) with other human and social sciences as well as natural sciences such as medicine and psychiatry (Bertolini, 2005). Unfortunately, Bertolini’s goal of strengthening the role of education among other sciences and enhancing the professionalism of educators and teachers by recognizing the epistemological roots of education as a science appears to represent an overambitious instance of wishful thinking in light of the current trend of systematically delegitimizing the scientific character of education.

The Italian phenomenological legacy: Encyclopaideia

Over the years, many researchers and scholars in education have engaged in the epistemological debate around the issue of phenomenology and education, following autonomous paths and developing original topics and approaches. At the end of the ‘80s Bertolini established a very diverse national group of scholars and school practitioners that meet regularly at the University of Bologna, and launched a journal “Encyclopaideia. Journal of phenomenology and education”, founded in 1997, which I currently edit, as well as a series of books, covering more than 20 titles, aimed at promoting the phenomenological approach in education. Among this group, some have emphasised more existentialist directions (Erbetta, 1978, 1998; Iori, 1988, 2006), some hermeneutical ones (Malavasi, 1992; Dallari, 2000), and others socio-constructivist approaches (Caronia, 1997). Over the years members of this group have been involved in a wide range of subjects within the sciences of education: Philosophy of education (Bertolini, 1988; Iori, 1988; Dallari & Bertolini, 1991; Erbetta, 2001), adult education (Demetrio, 2000), schooling and curriculum (Bertolini, 1994; Boselli 1991, 1998; Farné, 2002), aesthetics education (Dallari & Francucci, 1998), research methodologies (Caronia, 1997; Mortari & Tarozzi, 2010), intercultural education (Demetrio,

1997; Giusti, 2001; Tarozzi, 1998, 2005), playing and sport education (Farné, 1989, 2008), care in education (Mortari, 2002, 2015), emotions and feelings in education (Iori, 2006), embodied theory (Francesconi & Tarozzi, 2013).

Although his phenomenology was rooted mainly in Husserl's works, Piero Bertolini never proposed a unique and orthodox phenomenological perspective. For Bertolini, phenomenology was more a philosophical horizon or theoretical viewpoint rather than a precise philosophical tradition or systematic set of procedures. In thinking about the way he introduced us to the phenomenological pedagogy, I am reminded of a statement by Merleau-Ponty who, in *Qu'est ce que c'est la Phénoménologie?*, considered this philosophical approach first and foremost a stance or posture assumed by the researcher, a style of thinking: "phenomenology can be practiced and identified as a manner or style of thinking that it existed as a movement before arriving at complete awareness of itself as a philosophy" (Merleau-Ponty 1945/2002, p. VIII). This highly typical non-dogmatic approach that has always characterized phenomenological movement across the 20th century made it possible to take on different perspectives at the same time, but it also paved the way for the eventual dispersion of the group.

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Massimiliano Tarozzi was Bertolini's student and then he collaborated with him for about 15 years, is currently teaching General Education at the University of Bologna. He has been the editor of "Encyclopaideia" since the death of its founder.

Contact: massimiliano.tarozzi@unibo.it