

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Colleagues,

I have not come to bury the Conference, but to praise it. It was indeed a very successful and a very rich one, as we all expected. Its wealth of contents and of themes well reflects the diversity and the complexity of education.

For those of you that attended it, the ESLN course was a very special experience: it was about the moral dimension in leadership. This is a great issue and a great challenge, because the increasing demand for school autonomy raises immediately the question: who owns this autonomy? Who is responsible for it? It's a great temptation for our community to answer: "we", the teachers and heads of autonomous schools. But, at the same time, we must be aware that we are not elected and that we are not representatives. And, when it comes to leading minds, that is to say to gaining control over the liberty of thought of individuals, then democracy is not optional. We are the professionals, we are the technicians: and hence we are not entitled to own the educational goals. Since then, the problem of finding out the means for linking the school leader's vision and the moral dimension of his or her leadership becomes a fundamental one.

Our keynote speakers, during the plenary sessions, gave us a wealth of stimulating inputs: most of them about quality of education, success for every pupil, assessment. And, neither last nor certainly least, some consciousness about the mythical and mysterious nature of some very spread ideas about those themes. We all have been well aware, for a long time now, that quality is not easy to obtain: but we become more and more conscious that it is also difficult to identify and to define. There is a quality that is measured after the school goals, another that is set by national standards and still another that is related to each and every pupil's needs and possibilities. So, before discussing about the best practices for getting quality in our schools, we have to wonder about what kind of quality we are looking for: and, perhaps, about what kind of quality we are asked to head to, although it might not be the one that we would have liked to choose.

The workshops, on the other hand, were the domain of questions and answers, and also of many debates and doubts: this is the reason why they exist. It is normal that, at the end of one session, you can find yourself with more question marks than when entering it. But this is also their priceless advantage: because there is no good decision process that is not started and fed by a good brainstorming.

I do not know how many of you are going back home with *the* answer: probably not so many. And this is a good thing: because when you have got a simple and straightforward answer to a complicated problem, there is some danger in the air: maybe the answer is not right or the problem was misunderstood.

I am convinced, and many of our speakers also suggested it, that raising the right questions is more important and more useful than looking for an immediate solution whatsoever: because there is no right answer to a wrong question.

From the origin of school systems, educators have had to face three different challenges when confronted to each of their pupils. They have had to develop at the same time:

- the human being
- the future worker or professional
- the citizen in his or her community

Nowadays, the solutions to these challenges have become more uncertain, because:

- there is no longer a unique model for the human being, since religions and ideologies have lost a great part of the appeal that they used to have in the past
- school is expected to prepare *now* for works and activities that probably will not exist – or will anyway be very different – in ten or fifteen years, when the children of today will be grown ups
- and, finally, for building citizens, you must know for what city you are preparing them. The notion of citizenship is already now much wider than it used to be: not only have we to deal with supranational entities, like the European Union, but within the boundaries themselves of our antique nations, an increasing number of new citizen have come from abroad and are inspiring themselves to traditions and values that are utterly unfamiliar for us. What is then *citizenship* now? And for what kind of city have we to prepare our children in view of the coming fifteen or twenty years?

And, in addition, while problems are rapidly increasing, in number and in complexity, on the other hand, the resources available to schools, in terms of budget, but not only, are shrinking year after year. There is always, of course, an international crisis or an economic conjuncture to account for that: but how not to imagine that there could also be some other kind of explanation? For instance, that school results are visible in fifteen years whereas politicians have to look forward to the next elections, in a three-four years term?

Our job is not an easy one, also because of the fact that we are working today for an objective that many of us will never see: we are seeding for our children and someone else will get the crop. That's life: and it is perfectly right. But looking forward, to a future that is not known to us, is something that can generate uncertainty and anxiety.

This is not a reason for being negative: if anyone in this world has to trust the future, *we*, educators, are those who must, and can, do it. Because – as it has been said – there is no way to know about the future other than creating it.

That's exactly what we are doing, all life long, when working *with*, and *for*, the children. In them we trust.

Thank you.

Antonino Petrolino
ESHA President