

Beyond the “person”: Secular pedagogy, subjectivation, and reflexive educational practice

Oltre la “persona”: pedagogia laica, soggettivazione e pratica educativa riflessiva

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Abstract

This article argues that secular pedagogy requires more than pluralism or generic antidogmatism: it must criticise the anthropological naturalisations through which educational discourse treats the person as a pre-given ontological centre. Drawing on the Manifesto della pedagogia laica, Marx's VI thesis on Feuerbach, Luporini, and a materialist reading of education, the paper proposes a shift from person to subjectivation. The subject is thus understood as historically constituted within material, institutional, discursive, and conflictual relations. This perspective reframes pedagogical supervision and other second-level reflexive practices as secular dispositifs of critique and collective re-signification, contributing to the democratic formation of subjects capable of judgment and dissent.

Keywords: secular pedagogy; subjectivation; critical pedagogy; educational supervision; person.

Sintesi

Il contributo sostiene che la pedagogia laica richieda più del pluralismo o di un generico antidogmatismo: essa, al contrario, deve criticare le naturalizzazioni antropologiche attraverso cui il discorso educativo assume la persona come centro ontologico. Muovendo dal Manifesto della pedagogia laica, dalla VI Tesi su Feuerbach, da Luporini e da una lettura materialistica dell'educazione, il saggio propone uno spostamento dalla persona alla soggettivazione. Così, il soggetto è pensato come storicamente costituito entro relazioni materiali, istituzionali, discorsive e conflittuali. La supervisione pedagogica e le pratiche riflessive di secondo livello diventano dispositivi laici di critica e risignificazione collettiva, contribuendo alla formazione democratica di soggetti capaci di giudizio e dissenso.

Parole chiave: pedagogia laica; soggettivazione; pedagogia critica; supervisione pedagogica; persona.

1. Introduction: secular pedagogy beyond generic antidogmatism

To affirm the antidogmatic character of secular pedagogy is already to take a decisive step away from all educational doctrines that ground themselves in unquestionable truths, pre-political certainties, or transcendent legitimations. The *Manifesto della pedagogia laica* (Movimento della pedagogia laica, 2026) insists, with good reason, on this point: “In questo senso, la laicità si esprime innanzitutto nel principio della *libertà del pensiero*. Libertà da impedimenti e imposizioni; libertà di critica e progettualità nel campo della ricerca e della discussione pubblica¹” (pp. 2-3). At this level, secular pedagogy appears as an indispensable democratic safeguard, because it protects educational work from confessional closure, epistemic censorship, and authoritarian moralisation, while making room for heterogeneous subjectivities and plural forms of life (Canguilhem, 1991, p. 162).

This formulation, however, remains insufficient if secular pedagogy is understood only as a broad ethical-political orientation (Iori, 2025). Such an understanding is necessary, but it does not yet reach the level at which pedagogical categories themselves become objects of critique. A secular pedagogy worthy of the name cannot confine itself to opposing external dogmatisms while leaving untouched the internal naturalisations that often structure educational discourse from within (Ford, 2022, p. 21). Indeed, one of the most persistent forms of dogmatism in pedagogy is not always doctrinal in the overt sense. It frequently operates through apparently benign (Riva, 2006) and universally acceptable categories that present historically produced forms of subjectivity as if they were anthropological givens². Under these conditions, the critique of heteronomy remains incomplete, because it contests imposed contents while leaving unquestioned the conceptual forms through which the human is pedagogically prefigured (Foucault, 1995, p. 164).

The issue is especially evident when the educational subject is tacitly conceived as already present in the figure of the person. Here, secular pedagogy risks reproducing an unexamined substantialism at the very moment in which it seeks to affirm freedom, plurality, and democratic openness. The problem, then, is not simply to defend the secular space of education against external encroachments, but to radicalise secularity, in a critical-reflexive way, as a methodological and epistemological posture. This means treating no pedagogical category as self-transparent, no anthropological premise as immune from historical inquiry, and no educational language as exempt from the need for demarcation (Backer, 2022, p. 54). From this perspective, secular pedagogy does not merely reject dogma; it secularises pedagogy itself by exposing its categories to critique, historicisation, and conflict.

¹ “Secularity is first expressed in freedom of thought, in resistance to coercive imposition, and in the defence of critical and projective activity within research and public discussion.” (traduzione dell'autore).

² On the notion of “anthropological given”, we draw here on Emmanuel Terray’s ethnological critique of humanist, historicist, and essentialist ideology, which problematizes any immediate, naturalized, or transhistorical understanding of social forms (Terray, 1972).

2. The person as a pedagogical presupposition

If secular pedagogy is to remain faithful to its own critical (Conte, 2023) and antidogmatic vocation (Baldacci, 2026), it cannot limit itself to contesting external forms of heteronomy while leaving intact the anthropological grammar through which educational discourse often secures its legitimacy. Among the concepts that perform this legitimising function, “person” is arguably one of the most influential (Movimento della pedagogia laica, 2026, p. 3). It appears to guarantee, all at once, dignity, educability, moral regard, and the possibility of democratic recognition. Its pedagogical effectiveness largely depends on this semantic density. Precisely because it seems to protect the irreducibility of the human, it is frequently invoked as a concept that can stabilise educational action without coercing it and universalise moral concern without emptying singularity of meaning (Cambi, 2008).

Yet such apparent equilibrium comes at a theoretical cost. In much educational discourse, the person functions not merely as a descriptive category, but as a presupposed centre of intelligibility. It designates an already constituted subject whose depth, coherence, and intrinsic value are assumed prior to the relational, institutional, and historical mediations (De Giorgi, 2025) through which educational life actually unfolds. The effect of this operation is not always explicit. The category often appears in benevolent or normatively elevated forms, and for this very reason it more easily escapes critique. However, once the person is treated as the originary bearer of educational meaning, pedagogy tends to be organised around a human essence that precedes conflict, mediation, and formation itself (Althusser, 2005, pp. 228-229). Educational relations are then implicitly read as relations addressed to a stable interiority, rather than as sites in which subjectivity is produced, displaced, and transformed.

This is not to say that the category of person should simply be discarded as if it were conceptually useless or politically reactionary in every context. Such a gesture would be both historically simplistic and theoretically unproductive (De Giorgi, 2002). The point, rather, is that secular pedagogy must interrogate the conditions under which the category operates, the anthropological assumptions it carries, and the pedagogical effects it authorises. What is at stake is not a nominal dispute over preferred vocabulary, but a more radical issue concerning the way educational thought conceptualises its subject. If the person is tacitly installed as a substantial and self-grounding centre, then pedagogy risks reproducing precisely that kind of hidden dogmatism that secularity, in principle, is meant to resist (Manacorda, 2008, p. 26). For what appears as a universal guarantee of dignity may also function as a device of naturalisation, shielding the human from historical inquiry by presenting it as already complete in its essential determination³.

From this standpoint, the question becomes distinctly pedagogical. What happens when educational practice addresses subjects as if they were already there, already morally formed in principle, already intelligible through an interior essence awaiting recognition or development (Papi, 1978, p. 28)? The answer is that the material and conflictual character of formation tends to be displaced by a more reassuring image of education as accompaniment, unfolding, or fulfilment. In such a framework, contradiction is softened

³ At this point, it is crucial to return to Riccardo Massa’s anti-humanistic reformulation of pedagogy, insofar as it makes visible the technologies through which subjectivity is constituted, organized, and mediated, thereby displacing every substantial and self-grounding image of the human subject (1986, p. 481).

into misunderstanding, power into guidance, and institutional mediation into a secondary environment surrounding an already meaningful core. Secular pedagogy, however, cannot rest upon such reassurance⁴. If it truly seeks to think education without metaphysical guarantees, then it must ask whether the human is ever given in advance to educational action, or whether educational action is one of the places where the human is historically constituted as a problem (Rancière, 1991, p. 6)⁵.

2.1. The normative function of the category of person

The pedagogical force of the category of person lies precisely in its capacity to bind together description and prescription. It does not merely indicate a human being; it tends to confer a normative status upon the being it names (Broccoli, 1978, p. 64). To speak of the person is often already to presuppose a centre of value, intentionality, interiority, and moral consistency. In educational language, this presupposition proves especially powerful because it seems to offer an immediate foundation for respect, care, responsibility, and development. The person is what must be welcomed, protected, guided, and allowed to flourish. Yet this normative elevation is inseparable from a conceptual simplification. For the person, once installed as foundational category, easily becomes the form through which pedagogical discourse bypasses the question of how subjects are produced within historically determinate relations (Papi, 1978, p. 26).

This is the point at which the category reveals its naturalising function. It transforms what should be an object of inquiry into a starting point. Instead of asking how subjectivity takes form through practices, discourses, institutions, material constraints, and asymmetrical relations, pedagogy begins from a subject already endowed with ontological centrality (Massa, 1987). The result is a subtle but decisive reversal. Educational processes no longer appear as conditions of emergence and transformation, but as secondary interventions upon an already constituted moral nucleus. Under these conditions, the complexity of formation is reduced to the development, expression, or support of what is presumed to be there from the outset⁶.

Such a move has several consequences. First, it weakens the historical intelligibility of the educational relationship (Granese, 1991, p. 26). If the subject is already given in the form of the person, then the relation no longer appears as a constitutive field, but merely as an occasion for actualising latent capacities. Second, it neutralises conflict. Contradiction, dissent, and dislocation tend to be read as contingent disturbances affecting an otherwise coherent personal core, rather than as dimensions intrinsic to the very process through which subjectivity is formed (Santoni Rugiu, 1975, pp. 76-77). Third, it moralises educational interpretation. Situations are more easily read in terms of individual dispositions, intentions, or deficits, while the broader material and institutional

⁴ Althusser identifies this humanist schema as the reappropriation of an alienated essence by a subject that becomes ‘total man, true man’ (2005, p. 226), thereby recoding historical formation as loss and recovery.

⁵ Rancière’s claim that explanation first shows the learner that they cannot understand by themselves (1991, p. 6) is relevant here because pedagogical action may actively constitute the incapacity it claims merely to address.

⁶ Biesta notes that humanistic education may specify what the learner ‘must become’ before allowing them to show who they are or will be (2016, p. 79), thus prefiguring subjectivity in advance.

determinations that traverse them remain under-analysed (Ford, 2021, p. 67). A secular pedagogy, therefore, must preserve the normative seriousness of education without grounding it in an anthropological substantialism that silently immunises its own premises from critique⁷.

2.2. Why secular pedagogy must criticise anthropological naturalisation

The antidogmatic character of secular pedagogy requires more than openness to plurality. It requires vigilance toward every conceptual operation that presents a historically produced form as if it were natural, self-evident, or transhistorical. Anthropological naturalisation is one of the most resilient forms of such operation. It occurs whenever pedagogical discourse treats a determinate image of the human as if it were simply given, and not itself the effect of a history, a language, an institution, and a field of social relations. In this respect, the category of person occupies a privileged position because it condenses, in a particularly persuasive form, the illusion that pedagogy may rely on a universally shared anthropological ground without interrogating the historical conditions of that ground (Pêcheux, 1982, p. 91).

Secular pedagogy cannot accept this illusion without contradiction. If secularity means freedom from imposed foundations and commitment to critical inquiry, then pedagogy must also become capable of questioning the anthropological premises that organise its own discourse. Otherwise, it will denounce dogma only at the level of explicit doctrines while preserving it at the level of conceptual form (Banfi, 1953, p. 18). A hidden essentialism will continue to structure educational interpretation, even where pluralism, democracy, and emancipation are explicitly affirmed. In this sense, the critique of anthropological naturalisation is not external to secular pedagogy; it is one of its internal conditions of coherence (Balibar, 1995, p. 29).

What this critique makes visible is that educational discourse often oscillates between two unsatisfactory alternatives. On the one hand, it may embrace a moral universalism grounded in the person, thereby securing dignity at the cost of historical opacity. On the other hand, it may abandon normative ambition altogether, retreating into descriptive relativism or technical proceduralism. The wager of a secular pedagogy of subjectivation is that a third path remains possible (Biesta, 2016). It is possible to affirm the political and ethical significance of education without presupposing a metaphysical subject, and to defend democratic formation without reinstalling an essence of the human beneath history. To do so, however, pedagogy must shift its conceptual focus from the person as origin to subjectivation as process.

This shift is decisive because it relocates educational thought from the register of anthropological reassurance to that of historical production. Instead of asking how education addresses the person, one begins to ask how educational relations participate in the constitution of subjects. Instead of taking the individual as a moral centre already there, one asks how singularities are formed within networks of mediation, institutional constraints, discursive practices, and uneven distributions of power. Instead of treating conflict as accidental to formation, one recognises that subjectivity emerges through

⁷ Backer, drawing on Hall, rejects an ‘essential, unitary “I”’ in favour of the ‘fragmentary, contradictory subject I become’ (Hall, 1985, citato in Backer, 2022, p. 170), displacing normativity from essence to subjectivation.

tensions, displacements, and contradictions that no substantial anthropology can pre-emptively contain (Malott & Ford, 2015).

A pedagogy that undertakes this shift does not become less democratic, less ethical, or less attentive to human vulnerability (Riva, 2006). It becomes more rigorous, because it ceases to confuse moral intention with conceptual adequacy (Papi, 1978). It acknowledges that the struggle against dogmatism must also pass through a transformation of pedagogical language itself. In this way, secular pedagogy can move beyond a merely programmatic antidogmatism and assume a more demanding task: that of rethinking the subject of education without naturalisation, innocence, or metaphysical guarantees.

3. Subjectivation, relation, and conflict

Once the category of person is displaced from its foundational role, secular pedagogy is confronted with a more demanding task. It must elaborate a conceptuality capable of thinking educational formation without recourse to a substantial anthropology, yet without dissolving singularity into anonymous structural effects (Luporini, 1978). The concept of *subjectivation* is introduced here in response to this demand. Its relevance lies in the fact that it allows pedagogy to think the subject neither as an originary centre nor as a passive residue of external determinations, but as the historically situated result of processes in which material conditions, symbolic mediations, institutional forms, discursive practices, and practical tensions are condensed. Subjectivation names the becoming-subject of those who are never simply outside the relations that form them, but who are also never exhaustively reducible to those relations (Leonardo, 2003).

From a pedagogical standpoint, this shift is decisive because it redefines the educational relation itself. If the subject is not already given in advance, then the relation cannot be conceived as a secondary encounter between pre-existing interiors. It becomes instead one of the places in which subjectivity takes form, where positions are assigned and contested, where recognitions and exclusions are organised, and where capacities for judgment, speech, and action are differentially produced. Educational life appears, in this light, as a field of mediated emergence (Papi, 1978, p. 139). What matters is no longer the presumed essence of the one who is educated, but the ensemble of relations within which a subject may or may not become capable of critique, participation, and transformation.

This approach also entails a different understanding of conflict. In pedagogical languages shaped by substantial anthropologies, conflict is often interpreted as disturbance, deviation, or pathological interruption of a more originary harmony. Within a theory of subjectivation, by contrast, conflict acquires constitutive significance. This does not mean that every conflict is intrinsically emancipatory, nor that pedagogical work should romanticise rupture. It means, rather, that no process of formation can be fully understood apart from the tensions, contradictions, resistances, and displacements that traverse it. Subjects do not emerge in a neutral medium. They emerge in structured relations marked by asymmetry, normativity, unequal access to speech, and divergent investments in the meanings at stake (Bianchi & D'Antone, 2026). Critique, dissent, and even refusal therefore belong to the internal dynamics of subjectivation, because they reveal the unstable and contested character of the positions through which subjects are formed (Movimento della pedagogia laica, 2026).

3.1. Marx's VI thesis and the relational constitution of the subject

The theoretical displacement proposed here finds one of its decisive formulations in Marx's *VI thesis on Feuerbach* (1964). Its importance for pedagogy lies less in a generic appeal to sociality than in the precision with which it refuses to locate the essence of the human within the isolated individual. In its effective reality, Marx writes, the human essence is "in its reality the ensemble of the social relations" (Marx, 1964, p. 646)⁸. The force of this formulation lies in its capacity to interrupt every attempt to treat the human as an inward abstraction lodged in the single subject. What is at stake is not the denial of individuality, but its de-naturalisation. The individual is not abolished; rather, individuality itself becomes thinkable only within a field of relations that precedes it, traverses it, and is reproduced through it (Althusser, 1995).

If the human essence is not an inner and self-grounding abstraction, then educability cannot be guaranteed by an ontological property of the individual. Educational formation must be understood through the relational and historical conditions in which subjects are constituted (Morfino, 2017, pp. 54-55). This does not reduce the subject to its social environment in any empirical or deterministic sense. Marx's thesis does not replace one essence with another, as if "society" were now to function as a superordinate substance. What it makes possible is a non-substantialist account of subjectivity, one in which the subject is grasped through the structured relations that make its formation possible.

This is also the point at which the pedagogical significance of relation becomes clearer. Relation does not designate an external bond between already completed units, because it designates a constitutive field. To say that the subject is relationally constituted is to say that educational life cannot be adequately described in terms of encounters between self-sufficient entities. Rather, institutions, norms, languages, rhythms, material spaces, collective practices, and social contradictions enter into the very constitution of educational experience (D'Antone, 2025). The subject is shaped within these mediations, and the educational relation is one of the modalities through which such shaping is enacted, negotiated, and transformed.

A similar line of argument can be found, with a distinctive inflection, in Luporini's reflections on subjectivity⁹. What is especially valuable there is the insistence that subjectivity cannot be thought either as the immediate property of the individual or as the simple reflection of an external totality. Such a perspective helps pedagogy avoid two symmetrical reductions: psychologism and sociologism. The first treats the subject as an inward centre whose educational difficulties or possibilities are primarily personal; the second dissolves singularity into the mere effect of objective structures. A relational and historical account of subjectivation instead permits a more rigorous approach (Massa, 1987). It allows educational thought to preserve the specificity of singular trajectories while understanding that such trajectories never unfold outside institutional forms, symbolic mediations, and collective conditions.

⁸ The VI Thesis displaces human essence from an inner substance to historically specific social relations; pedagogy thus encounters no pre-given human core, but "subjects constituted within material and practical mediations" (Marx, 1964, p. 646).

⁹ Luporini writes: "l'individuo quale lo conosciamo (a livello umano) è sempre sociale" (Luporini, 1978, p. 375): 'the individual as we know it (at the human level) is always social' (author's translation).

3.2. Subjectivation as a pedagogical problem

If subjectivation is taken seriously, it cannot remain a philosophical backdrop to pedagogical discourse. It becomes a specifically pedagogical problem (Foucault, 1995). The question is no longer only how subjects are socially constituted in general, but how educational processes participate in that constitution in singular and historically dense ways. Pedagogy enters here as the field concerned with the conditions under which subjects are formed, recognised, displaced, and enabled to act (Backer, 2022). This means that subjectivation is not an abstract process occurring elsewhere and merely observed by pedagogy from the outside. Educational practices, institutions, settings, and discourses are among the terrains in which subjectivation is organised.

Such a view changes the status of educational analysis. A pedagogical situation can no longer be read primarily as the interaction of already formed individuals with differing intentions or competencies (Fabbri, 1996): it must be approached as a structured configuration in which norms, expectations, time regimes, spatial arrangements, institutional mandates, linguistic codes, embodied dispositions, and differential recognitions are operative. What is educationally decisive often lies precisely in the way these elements arrange possibilities of speech, silence, initiative, dependency, visibility, and exclusion. Subjectivation, in this sense, is not an invisible supplement to educational practice. It is one of the names for what educational practice materially and symbolically does (Lewis, 2026).

This also clarifies why conflict has such a central place in the present argument. If educational processes are implicated in subjectivation, they are necessarily traversed by contradictions. The norms that constitute subjects are never simply interiorised in a homogeneous manner. They are negotiated, resisted, appropriated unevenly, and at times openly contested (*ibidem*). Educational life therefore includes a constant tension between institution and emergence, regulation and initiative, reproduction and transformation. To ignore this tension in the name of a pacified image of formation is to deprive pedagogy of one of its most important objects. A secular pedagogy attentive to subjectivation must instead learn to read such tensions as constitutive expressions of educational reality.

At this point, the pedagogical relevance of critique, dissent, and conflict becomes more precise. Indeed, they are forms through which subjects encounter the instability of the positions they inhabit and the possibility of reconfiguring them (Ford, 2019):

- critique marks the interruption of naturalised meanings;
- dissent indicates the refusal of a given arrangement of speech, authority, or recognition;
- conflict names the structured friction through which educational relations reveal their historical and political density.

Taken together, they show that subjectivation is inseparable from a struggle over how subjects are named, governed, and enabled to participate in common life.

This struggle is especially visible where pedagogical discourse is tempted to personalise what is in fact relationally and institutionally produced. Many educational impasses are still described in terms of fragile persons, difficult personalities, resistant individuals, or damaged interiors. Such language may contain an element of experiential truth, yet it remains insufficient as long as it isolates what should be interpreted relationally. A theory of subjectivation does not deny psychic suffering, moral difficulty, or singular vulnerability. It asks how they are organised, intensified, or displaced through settings, mandates, discourses, and collective histories. It thus enables pedagogy to move from the

individualisation of educational problems toward the analysis of the configurations in which those problems take shape (Dozza, 2000).

For this reason, subjectivation should be understood as a genuinely pedagogical concept (Pesare, 2012). It allows educational thought to hold together singularity and structure, agency and mediation, critique and formation, without collapsing one term into the other (Althusser, 2005; Loporini, 1978). It offers a way of conceptualising education as a process neither of simple development nor of unilateral determination, but of historically situated emergence within fields of relation and contradiction.

Such a perspective prepares the ground for the final step of the argument. Once educational situations are understood as configurations rather than as isolated personal dramas, second-level reflexive practices such as pedagogical supervision can be reinterpreted in a new light (Riva, 2021). They appear no longer as auxiliary techniques of support, but as privileged secular dispositifs for analysing the processes of subjectivation at work within educational life.

4. Reflexive second-level practices and secular pedagogy

The theoretical shift from person to subjectivation remains incomplete unless it modifies the way educational practice is read. This is especially evident in reflexive second-level practices, where educational situations are not lived immediately but reworked through collective analysis, demarcation, and interpretive labour. It is here that secular pedagogy reveals one of its most concrete and rigorous forms. For if secularity entails resistance to naturalisation (Madrussan, 2021, p. 40), then second-level reflexive practices become crucial precisely because they interrupt the immediacy of educational evidence. They suspend the spontaneous tendency to read situations in moral, psychological, or merely individual terms, and reopen them as historically and institutionally mediated configurations (Vasquez & Oury, 2000).

In this sense, reflexive second-level practices do not occupy a marginal or merely technical position within educational work. They are privileged sites in which pedagogy can exercise its critical function upon its own material. They do not simply accompany practice from outside, nor do they offer an external metalanguage of correction. Rather, they constitute spaces in which educational action becomes thinkable as action. What is brought into analysis is not only what happened, but the ensemble of conditions through which something could happen in that particular way: the norms at stake, the institutional constraints, the arrangements of authority, the asymmetries of speech, the temporal rhythms, the expectations sedimented in the setting, the affective investments that organise recognition and refusal (D'Antone, 2023b). A secular pedagogy attentive to subjectivation finds here one of its most consequential terrains, because the work of analysis no longer proceeds from the assumption of self-evident personal causes, but from the attempt to render educational processes intelligible in their material and symbolic density. This is why second-level reflexive practices are not simply methods of support: they are, indeed, forms of critical pedagogy in action.

4.1. From individual correction to the analysis of educational configurations

One of the most persistent tendencies in educational discourse is the reduction of complex situations to problems of individual disposition. Difficulties are attributed to fragile personalities, inadequate motivations, deviant behaviours, or insufficient competencies.

Even when such descriptions capture part of the experiential surface of educational life, they often produce a serious narrowing of analysis. By personalising what is relationally and institutionally organised, they transform configurations into characters and contradictions into traits. The result is not only an impoverished understanding of educational reality, but also a weakening of pedagogical agency itself, since intervention becomes oriented toward correction, compensation, or adaptation of the individual rather than toward the intelligibility of the situation (Meirieu, 1997, p. 31).

A theory of subjectivation suggests a different approach. Educational situations should be read as configurations in which multiple determinations are condensed (Althusser, 1995). What appears as an individual difficulty may in fact be inseparable from the structure of the setting, from conflicting expectations inscribed in institutional mandates, from tacit hierarchies in the distribution of speech, from temporal pressures, from contradictory evaluative regimes, or from unresolved tensions between formal norms and lived practices (Canguilhem, 1991). To analyse such a situation pedagogically is therefore not to deny the singularity of those involved, but to situate that singularity within the field of relations that constitutes it. The problem is no longer “the individual” as isolated bearer of a deficit or resistance. The problem becomes the configuration in which the subject is being formed, constrained, addressed, and rendered intelligible.

This displacement has important methodological consequences. It requires educational analysis to become less diagnostic in the narrow sense and more configurational. Instead of producing immediate explanations, it must reconstruct the conditions under which the situation became possible. Instead of identifying a person to be adjusted, it must interrogate the relational field that organises positions, investments, misrecognitions, and exclusions. In this framework, contradiction acquires a different status. It is no longer treated as a contingent disturbance to be neutralised as quickly as possible, but as an index of the structural tensions that traverse educational life. Contradictions reveal where norms collide, where institutional logics overlap unevenly, where expectations cannot be reconciled without remainder, and where subjectivation is taking place under conflictual conditions (Backer, 2022).

4.2. Pedagogical supervision as a secular dispositif

Pedagogical supervision can be understood, from this perspective, as one of the most significant secular dispositifs available to educational practice (Ferrante, 2017).

This claim should be read with precision. Supervision is not secular simply because it is non-confessional, nor because it takes place within professional rather than religious institutions. Its secularity lies at a deeper level: in the fact that it interrupts naturalised readings of educational experience and subjects them to a collective labour of demarcation and re-signification. In supervision, educational evidence is no longer allowed to speak in the immediate language of personal certainty, moral intuition, or institutional habit. It is displaced, reopened, and reformulated as material for critical inquiry (D’Antone, 2023b).

This critical function depends on the specific position of supervision as a second-level setting. Educational practice, when lived in its immediacy, is necessarily traversed by urgency, implication, affective pressure, and institutional demand. These dimensions are not accidental; they are part of the reality of educational work. Yet they also tend to compress interpretation, making it more difficult to distinguish between what belongs to the singular event and what belongs to the broader configuration that sustains it. Supervision creates a different temporality and a different discursivity (ibidem). It does not

abolish implication, but suspends its immediacy sufficiently to render educational material analysable. In doing so, it establishes a space in which the educational relation can be thought not from within its spontaneous self-evidence, but through the mediations that organise it.

This is why supervision should not be conceived as a neutral technique of professional support. Its epistemological and pedagogical function is more demanding (Oggionni, 2013). It offers a setting in which the case ceases to be the expression of a problematic individual and becomes legible as a condensed configuration of practices, norms, memories, institutions, contradictions, and affects. The supervisory dispositif does not ask primarily who the subject is, but how the subject is being positioned and produced within the educational scene. Nor does it seek only more effective solutions in the managerial sense. It seeks a more rigorous intelligibility of the educational process itself, including the institutional and symbolic conditions that may be reproducing the impasse under examination (Massa, 1992).

If subjectivation is relational and conflictual, then the educational case cannot be grasped through immediate moral or psychological attribution. It requires a setting capable of bringing relation and contradiction into analysis. Supervision performs precisely this task when it resists the temptation to become either a space of emotional ventilation or an instrument of institutional normalisation (Riva, 2006). At its most rigorous, it works by displacing personal certainty, decentring individualised explanations, and reconstructing the educational field as a structured and contested whole. It is this operation that warrants calling supervision a secular dispositif: it secularises educational interpretation by depriving it of innocent foundations and obliging it to pass through critique.

Such a conception also clarifies the democratic significance of supervision. Democracy in education cannot be reduced to explicit values or declarative commitments. It also depends on whether the settings through which educational practice is reflected upon permit genuine demarcation, the articulation of dissent, and the analysis of contradiction (Ford, 2019). A supervisory space becomes democratically relevant when it enables practitioners to read the educational scene beyond adaptation and blame, and to recognise the extent to which their own practices are implicated in broader institutional and social determinations. In this sense, supervision contributes not only to professional refinement, but to the formation of educational subjects capable of judgment. It is one of the places in which pedagogy learns to think itself critically, and therefore one of the places in which secular pedagogy becomes operative rather than merely programmatic¹⁰.

5. Conclusions

Secular pedagogy cannot be satisfied with presenting itself as a generic defence of pluralism, tolerance, or freedom of conscience. Such commitments are indispensable, yet they remain theoretically insufficient as long as pedagogy continues to rely on

¹⁰ Supervision becomes democratically significant when it suspends action's immediacy and reads conflict as an institutional and relational configuration, opening an *écart* between subject and situation in which judgment and dissent become thinkable (D'Antone, 2023a, pp. 196–197, 201–203).

anthropological categories that naturalise the subject it claims to emancipate. The category of person, when treated as a self-evident foundation of educability, performs precisely this naturalising function. It stabilises the human in advance and, in doing so, weakens the historical intelligibility of educational formation.

The argument developed here has proposed a different path. Starting from the antidogmatic vocation of secular pedagogy, it has suggested that the subject of education should be rethought not as an originary essence, but as the effect of processes of subjectivation. This displacement makes it possible to understand educational life through the mediations that constitute it: relations, dispositifs, institutions, norms, asymmetries, and conflicts. What thereby comes into view is not a diminished image of the human, but a more rigorous one, stripped of metaphysical reassurance and restituted to history.

From this standpoint, critique, dissent, and conflict belong to the very field in which subjects are formed and democratic capacities become thinkable (Movimento della pedagogia laica, 2026). For this reason, reflexive second-level practices, and pedagogical supervision in particular, appear as privileged secular dispositifs. They interrupt the immediacy of educational evidence, suspend moralising and individualising reductions, and reopen practice to a collective labour of demarcation and interpretation.

A secular pedagogy, then, is not neutral. It is secular precisely to the extent that it resists every naturalisation of the human, including those sedimented within pedagogy itself. Its task is not to protect an essence, but to make educational formation thinkable in its historical, relational, and conflictual reality. Only on this condition can secular pedagogy fully assume its democratic meaning: not as the custodianship of a pre-given subject, but as the critical elaboration (Frascari, 2025) of the conditions under which subjects may come to judgment, dissent, and transformative participation.

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