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Children's voices through teachers' stories

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Abstract: We understand our lives through narratives, and the form of these narratives is appropriate for understanding the actions of others, writes MacIntyre (1981). Meanwhile, narratives and our understanding of them also inform our understanding of our own actions. In this article, student kindergarten teachers share anecdotes from their teaching practice assignments. These preservice teachers (PSTs) relay stories that are serious and important from a child's perspective, and which they themselves experienced as serious and important while spending time with children and listening to children's voices. Our aim here is to give even very young children a voice in their own everyday lives and to discuss how PSTs might listen more closely to what children are saying. Our narrative analysis of stories (Van Manen, 1997, 2014; Clandinin, 2013) offered by Norwegian and Italian PSTs presents a range of perspectives on life management and a desire for conversation in children aged 2–8 years. The stories are told through the student kindergarten teachers' voices, and they were shared with and reflected upon with the children's in-service class teachers. The article sheds retrospective light on children's telling of, and thinking about, stories.

Keywords: narratives, childrens voices, early childhood teacher education

Introduction

The Norwegian framework plan for the content and functions of kindergarten education states that "kindergartens shall promote democracy, diversity and mutual respect, equality, sustainable development, life management, and health" (Udir, 2017, p. 7). In the chapter on life management, it further affirms that kindergartens must "contribute to children's well-being, joy of life, mastery and sense of self-worth and avoid abuse and bullying" (p. 11). If a child experiences offence or bullying, the kindergarten teacher is obliged to intervene in defence of the child's rights. Hence, a key focus of kindergarten teacher education is how to listen and capture children's accounts of their everyday lives, and thereby to assess their everyday thriving and mastery skills.

In Italy, the Ministry of Education recently completed a regulatory framework for education and care for 0–6-year-olds; applying the provisions of Law No. 107 of 2015, it has recognised the fully educational status of early childhood services, which – in keeping with a traditionally welfare-oriented and custodial perspective – had previously been viewed as an "individual requirement". In 2022, the document *Orientamenti nazionali per i servizi educativi per l'infanzia* (MIUR, 2022) targeting nurseries and other supplementary services for children aged 0–3 years were issued. Together with the *Indicazioni nazionali per il curricolo per i prescuola e le scuole primarie* introduced in 2012 (and expanded in 2018) (MIUR, 2012, 2018), these form a regulatory framework intended to foster and oversee a child-centred culture in Italy. This will reinforce the cultural, educational and didactic continuity that is meant to ensure the integration of the nursery and preschool networks. Indeed, in order to address the earlier "split system", the National Commission for the Integrated System of Education and Instruction (Art. 10, Legislative Decree No. 65 of April 13, 2017) has produced the key document *Linee pedagogiche per il sistema integrato "zerosei"* (MIUR, 2021). Thus, at the formal, institutional and political levels, a clear pathway has been mapped out for the revitalisation of services for 0–6-year-olds, with an emphasis on children's rights, the centrality of children, curriculum and planning, professionalism and governance (all key concepts present in the *Linee pedagogiche* document).

The guidelines for child policies in Norway and Italy inform university education, promoting a focus on children's rights that implies learning to observe children, acknowledge their perspectives and listen to the stories with which they represent reality and speak about themselves. To truly understand children's voices, student teachers must develop the ability to analyse their own attitudes, as well as their own actions and those of others, by engaging in critical reflection, both individually and within their professional communities. This will prepare them to engage in appropriate independent action and make their own critical choices (UHR Teacher Education, 2018, p. 5). Bringing a European perspective to bear on education across Italy and Norway "provide[s] learners with an insight into what Europe at large and the Union in particular means in their daily life" (European Commission, 2020, p. 6). Urging students to listen carefully to children's utterances and to engage in collective reflection on their narratives implies the intentional fostering of critical thinking, which is a core aspect of the European approach to education. Mastering cross-cutting abilities such as critical thinking aligns with the broader aspiration for high-quality education.

As early as the first year of their training, student kindergarten teachers learn to use observation as a tool for reflecting on children's behaviour and needs. In the kindergarten teacher education programme at the University College of Western Norway (HVL), the students learn to use stories from their teaching practice as an observational method (Eilifsen, 2015, 2020). The same method is taught and implemented as part of the "Pedagogy of Child Services in Italy and Europe" degree course at the Catholic University of Piacenza. Therefore, just before the onset of the COVID-19 public-health emergency, joint research was conducted with a group of Italian university students and a Norwegian group of preservice teachers (PSTs). The participants were asked the following question:

> What stories do children tell about their everyday life experience and what is it about their accounts that upsets you and makes you reflect on their life circumstances?

The stories were narrated in writing by students in their second year of kindergarten teacher education in Norway and Italy. Hence, the stories analysed in this article were collected by the student teachers themselves, based on encounters with children that took place during their teaching placements or private babysitting and entertainment activities.

Key concepts and theoretical approach

Narratives were generated based on stories from the students' teaching practice, following Max van Manen's (1997, 2014) method of inquiry via the description of lived experience. The students wrote about experiences during their teaching practice that had affected them, describing their own recollections of these experiences. Hence, the stories do not directly describe the everyday lives of the children, but rather the PSTs' perceptions of what everyday life can look like for children. Experience is subjective: it is lived and described from the perspective of one person, and, as such, descriptions of personal experience cannot be automatically transferred to the experiences of others. Nevertheless, by bringing a phenomenological hermeneutic approach (Van Manen, 2014) to bear on these stories, we can highlight the existential dimension of the narratives, which may be viewed as essential structures of the recounted experiences. Based on the student teachers' stories, we identified three core themes, which we go on to discuss in this article. More specifically, the narratives variously touch upon the need to be acknowledged, mistreatment and death. The reflections of these students in describing children's voices can help others to reflect on their practice as it intersects with the everyday existence of children.

Life management is a relatively new concept within the framework plan for kindergartens and early-childhood services, but the task of supporting and shaping children's development is nothing new. Both kindergartens and early-childhood education and care services have traditionally worked to promote social competence by fostering empathy and pro-social behaviour in children. The challenge is to get PSTs to reflect on their everyday encounters with children, and to adopt a stance of listening to children as a visible dimension of their everyday educational action and not just in terms of the formal implementation of a programme. The Norwegian Framework Plan states that educational staff must "support the children's reflections on situations, topics, and phenomena and create understanding and meaning together with the children" (Udir, 2017, p. 22).

In the section on the "centrality of the child", the *Linee pedagogiche per il sistema integrato "zerosei"* define learning as the processing of meaning, a journey of discovery in which

> children demonstrate cognitive, emotional and social involvement that engages both body and mind. This engagement is manifested in observation, action, and reflection, and is accompanied by different modes of expression, ranging from pleasure and joy to disappointment and dismay; it is exercised during exploration, play, interaction and communication with others (MIUR, 2021: p. 19).

In collecting and analysing stories of children, our aim was to enhance understanding of children's everyday lives and to show why it is important to listen to what children are trying to tell us. "To meet a person is to be kept awake by a riddle" (Norwegian translation: Å møte et menneske, det er å holdes våken av en gåte) (Levinas et.al., 1998: p. 57). According to Levinas et al. (1998), we can never truly understand "the other", which we can only get to know through ourselves. Levinas et al. (1998) discusses both our desire to understand and know the other, and the impossibility of doing so. As hard as we may try, we cannot fully comprehend the other, who is only accessible to us in a fragmentary way. Approaching understanding others on these terms will enable us to encounter children in everyday life with respect and humility, without entertaining preconceptions or rejecting important input from the children themselves.

Methodological approach

The theoretical and epistemological framework informing our research is phenomenological, and speaks to the following question: can phenomenological epistemology form the foundation of empirical educational research? In founding phenomenology as an eidetic science, Husserl (1970: p. 178) set out to grasp the essences of that which happens and is experienced by subjects, essences that are to be understood as constant and general organising features of experience. In this sense, "[p]henomenology has as its goal, not a description of idiosyncratic experience – 'here and now, this is just what I experience' – rather, it attempts to capture the invariant structures of experience" (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008, p. 26.). Phenomenological reduction discloses the essential. We define phenomenological reduction here as the process whereby phenomena are considered in relation to both their manifestation before consciousness and the meanings they come to assume in consciousness itself. The purpose of this practice is to grasp the *éidos* – that is to say, the essence, pure form or authentic meaning that is contained within phenomena.

Educational or pedagogical research, which may be defined as a science of experience, is concerned with capturing the specificity of each educational situation and the unique and individual characteristics of each of its objects (whether subjects, relationships or events). It deals with the ever-changing and unpredictable reality of becoming, and it studies the phenomenon itself, in its concrete and unrepeatable uniqueness. How therefore may we reconcile eidetic research, which aims to identify the ideal qualities of its object of study, and pedagogical

research, which is concerned with the specific individual characteristics with which an educational event presents itself? The meeting point lies in the mutual implication of essence and experience, that is, in the world of life, with the people, situations, societies, institutions and human artefacts that constitute the everyday reality into which both phenomenological research and pedagogical research inquire.

Essences do not exist independently of the world and of the subject that grasps them. This is because, in phenomenological terms, consciousness and the world are linked in a structural unity. Therefore, to search for essence means to descend into experience, to welcome its particularities and uniqueness, but also to intuit its fundamental and invariable constitution, which for Husserl (1970) represents the ontological foundation of the empirical sciences. Phenomenologically oriented research focuses on subjective experience and the meanings the subject ascribes to it. A subject's description of his or her lived experience (impressions, emotions, memories, meanings) enables the researcher to grasp the essential structures of this experience.

The empirical eidetic research method aims to grasp the meaning of an experience from the subject's point of view. The subject's or set of subjects' account of something directly experienced and constituting the field of inquiry goes beyond individual subjectivity, bringing into focus the phenomenon of which the situation speaks. The information and reflections gathered through the corpus of children's stories presented here were subjected to subsequent discussion and interpretation, in the belief that all knowledge is inevitably interpretive and that "the very richness of a subject's experience of the world depends on the dialogical space in which it is shared and re-signified" (Sità, 2012, pp. 22–23). In this sense, the phenomenological-eidetic method incorporates the openness to interpretation suggested by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which in turn is informed by the phenomenological hermeneutic perspective conventionally used to approach the specific task of qualitative data analysis (Larkin, Watts & Clifton, 2006, p. 104).

The underlying goal shared by the phenomenological-hermeneutic approach and IPA is a focus on individual experience and the attempt to make sense of experience (Shinebourne, 2011; Smith & Shinebourne, 2012). Informed by the convergence of these orientations, our interpretive work in this study was to interrogate the content of the stories based on perspectives of meaning and to infer additional meanings from the words that were not immediately apparent. The outcome of this process was a critical reading of the narrated experiences from multiple and divergent viewpoints: the perspectives of the children, adults, everyday reasoning and critical pedagogy.

Our approach was consistent with the phenomenological approach, according to which it is possible to understand another person's experience, his or her lived world, by moving from what is visible to make connections with what is not visible and to delve into the implications of what is visible, implications that extend into a horizon of hypotheses, deductions and conceptual excavations. As Roberta De Monticelli (1998, p. 57) writes, it is a matter of allowing ourselves to be guided by the evident outline of things in order to trace the hidden outline. Such methodological expedients can bolster pedagogy as a science that studies the intentional consciousness of the subject with a view to identifying and providing the conditions for increasingly focused and targeted educational and training planning.

Narrative for giving voice to lived experience

If language, which has performative power, helps to shape experience, narrative – which makes use of language – can act as a device that gives voice to subjective – or lived – experience. In so doing, narrative can nurture conscious choices by transforming immobility and uncertainty into determination; it allows us to pursue our projects, investments and acquisitions with greater clarity; it condenses meanings into communicable patterns that ignite the faculty of imagination and, by offering new representations, open new channels of communication that place different lived experiences in dialogue with one another.

Narrating the self reflects our desire to find our own voice, that unique and original set of harmonies and style of interpreting existence with which each of us seeks to establish our own particular attunement with the world. This attunement is reflected in words, which spring from the intuitive desire to bring an experience into focus, to characterise a feeling that has hitherto remained undefined. Assigning a name to experience, separating it out from the magmatic and incessant flow of situations that is a continuous source of emotional arousal to us, has a calming effect on us. It heightens our awareness of our own existence, and ensures that we maintain an active and vital relationship with the reality that surrounds us.

Named reality takes on a different kind of existence: salvaged from the dimension of pure happening, it is legitimised and acknowledged, and becomes part of the system of meanings that shapes our existential horizon. This helps us not to succumb in the face of events and to distance ourselves enough to focus on what is happening to us. We thus gain scope for seeking new equilibriums, and for discerning how best to act, how best to address the reality that we are now able to view from novel perspectives and to access in novel ways.

The process of naming loosens the world's grip on our lives, generates space, releases energies and re-generates. Narrative can thus transform reality, and this potential for change calls education into play by inviting it to adopt an axiologically grounded horizon of meaning.

Narrative is the essential condition for experience to be re-thought, re-elaborated and transmitted, and for the singular and specific situations that characterise a lived experience to be rigorously communicated. Through narrative it is possible "to return to the vicinity of what happened and to say it in living words, to find the words with which reality would like to be spoken" (Mortari, 2007, p. 287). Thus, narrative helps to distil knowledge from experience (Iori, Augelli, Bruzzone & Musi, 2010), contributing to the (re)construction of meaning underlying complex issues. The unravelling of a narrative brings out a "narrative truth" (Bruner, 1992), of which subjects are the authors and protagonists. Narrative brings experience back to a readable and communicable text, but, more importantly, it fulfils our need to contribute to universally valid, modellable and extensible knowledge.

In narrative practices, insights and deep meanings are not communicated directly but are found just beyond the narrative: narratives "evoke" and "suggest" (leading our thought to grasp what lies beneath them), eliciting latent understandings. In the words of Robert Atkinson, "narrative makes explicit the implicit, brings to light what is hidden, gives form to what has no form, and brings clarity where there was confusion" (2002, p. 13). Hence, narrative takes the form of a "manifest reality" that is counterbalanced by an "invisible reality" consisting

of the dynamics of relationships and influences, concerns and defences, aspirations, ambivalences and contradictions (Gabriel, 2000), and above all by that sometimes implicit and always fundamental driving force of educational practice that is intentionality.

Presentation of the material

The following are nine short stories collected by university students; these stories retain within them the views and voices of children. All the stories recount "conspicuous" episodes that stood out for some particularly significant reason. But they also reflect a human sensitivity that was able to "read between the lines" of nuanced and subtle experiences, emotions and feelings: phenomena that were expressed "in a whisper", which only attentive gazes that had not been dulled by habit were able to capture. As the student who contributed Story 3 stated, experience can be radically different from theory, which must sometimes be set aside to make room for the heart. Children are often the ones who teach us this. Children are experts in what concerns them personally. They have their own perspective on their lives, are authoritative witnesses to their own experience and make precise, sustainable and realistic demands. Again, the key point is to have the humility and tools to know how to listen to them. As we well know, children also speak through body language. Some of the stories in this study do not feature the children's spoken voices, but rather how the PSTs "read" and "heard" what the children were saying via their body language.

Story 1: See me!

This summer I worked at a summer camp and met Julia, a four-year-old girl. The first day I met her, she started to vomit. I thought she was sick with a tummy bug or the flu, but later I realised she was throwing up on purpose. Then I thought she was throwing up to attract attention. I spoke to some of the teachers and noticed that Julia described herself as worse than her friends. I tried speaking with Julia's parents, but, unfortunately, they minimised the problem and said she did this at home too.

Later I discovered that Julia's parents were in the middle of a divorce this summer. So, what more could Julia do to be listened to? I think that in situations like this, we might listen more closely to children's voices.

Story 2: I want to be a princess

Before attending a supervised meeting with her father, Cami, a five-year-old girl, told me, "I want the most beautiful dress so I can look like a princess," and I, confused, asked her the reason for this request. She replied that the prince chooses the most beautiful princess in all the adventure stories.

The stories read every evening by the teachers affected her deeply and often, when she had a tantrum, she would scold herself, saying "a princess shouldn't cry so much, just a little." This was her way of pacifying herself. Making her believe that she was a princess helped her to have some small respect for the rules, but above all to feel welcomed and reassured.

Story 3: Change of behaviour

In my first experience as educator two years ago, something happened that had a profound effect on me.

This work experience took place in my preschool in the city: I began to learn what it means to start [to use] all the knowledge I have acquired as part of my background. I understood that practice is very different from the theory because often the mind must be set aside to make room for the heart. It was a child who taught me this. This child refused to eat during each main meal, which he often replaced by frequently snacking throughout the day. The educators tried in every way to get the child to eat, but – crying and screaming – he would always refuse.

One day, at mealtime, I decided to stand beside this child to watch him carefully and try to get him back to eating. I started playing with the food I had on my plate and pretending to put it in my mouth, and he looked at me smiling. Afterwards, I began to comment on how nice and colourful my food was and that he should taste it, but he immediately got annoyed. I realised that I had taken the wrong approach, so I started asking him which of these kinds of food he had ever eaten, and he replied, "None," and, "I only like it if my grandmother makes it." Then I suggested that he taste something and, if he didn't like it, I wouldn't force him to eat anything he didn't want to. He silently started eating small pieces of all the different kinds of food on the plate, telling me how they tasted, whether they were nice or unpleasant, and making other comments.

At the end of the meal, he had eaten almost everything on his plate, and he looked very enthusiastic. What struck me, however, was that he turned to me and said, "I like when you take care of me." Everything we had done (as teachers) before, had not been seen by the child as a help, but rather as a limitation. He just wanted to be seen.

Story 4: Listen!

On my first day working at a kindergarten summer centre, while playing with a child, he told me, "I have a brother and another [brother]. But the second one is in heaven. He is dead." Immediately, the teacher told him, "Why don't you go and play with some of the other children?" This was a complex situation for an adult, and probably the teacher had not learned what to say. The story told by the child might tell us how he had processed the event. It might have been a good moment to talk to the child about this delicate and sad happening and not to shift our attention away from it, avoiding facing up to the problem.

Story 5: Like a ghost

When I worked at a primary school, I tried to learn some of the rules with the children. Usually, when going out into the garden, the kids were required to walk down the paths and try to be quiet: they were to avoid talking so as not to disturb the other classes. So, I invented a story about ghosts and fairies and I told the children, "Now we are little ghosts and fairies, and we must not be seen by the other students. So, we must be quiet."

They learned this through a story.

Story 6: Can you help me?

Last week, I went to school for a few hours as a substitute special education teacher, and I saw a surprising thing. Marco, the nine-year-old boy I had to take care of, had some problems doing calculations. Although children of that age can be very direct (and sometimes even a little unkind), [they] did not laugh because of Marco's shortcoming. On the contrary, the class tried to help him by explaining the operations he needed to do to solve the problem. Marco was so happy to be helped, and he was also quite proud because he felt supported by his friends.

Story 7: Eat your lunch!

During lunch, a four-year-old boy refuses to eat his portion. One of the school staff orders the boy to eat his food. He looks around a little before throwing a slice on the ground, which makes the staff member annoyed with him. She picks up the rest of the bread and puts it on his plate and says, "You must eat this before you leave the table."

All the children were allowed to leave the table, except for the boy. I go and play with the other children and after an hour I go to the toilet and walk past the lunch table and see that the boy is still sitting there. There are two or three assistants nearby, including the teaching staff. I walk over and ask if I should take the bread to the kitchens so that the boy can go and play. I am told that he must eat that slice, otherwise he wins.

I go and play with the other kids again. At three o'clock, we bring other children to the lunch table to eat their fruit, and the boy is still sitting there. The boy reaches out for the fruit, but the staff quickly direct him back to his plate: "Bread first and then fruit."

Story 8: I'm cold!

Ivar, who is two-and-a-half years old, is out in the playground. He is cold and freezing, and he doesn't want to be out. I suggest running a little together so he can warm up, but he doesn't want to. Then I say with a "scary" little voice: "Now I'm coming to catch you!", while stretching out my hands towards him. He cries out with a smile and runs five steps away from me before stopping and waiting for me to pick him up. I run after him, he tries to dodge me and I lift him up and turn him upside down. He smiles and I put him back down on the ground again. He runs five steps away from me again and looks behind to see if I am coming. When he sees that I am chasing him, he shouts for joy. He is waiting to be tickled and lifted again. We go on like this for a long time, until he shows me that he knows how to use the slide.

Story 9: Spontaneous boy

Josefine, who is just over one year old, is standing outside with a bucket and spade in her hands. Daniel, of the same age, comes over and grabs the spade and bucket. He looks up and sees an assistant coming towards them, and he leans over and hugs Josefine. The assistant praises Daniel for giving the hug; obviously, she hasn't seen what he did right before she came. Daniel continues his "hold" and Josefine is confused again.

Discussion

As anticipated in the introductory section, the stories told by PSTs prompt multiple themes for further reflection. On the one hand, they evoke the rights outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Adolescent (UN, 1989); on the other, they confirm the concerns expressed in the documents that inform policy and educational services for children in both Norway and Italy. Children and adolescents are "capable of forming and expressing their own opinions" (UN, 1989) and have the right to express them, but it is not up to them to prove their abilities in this regard; rather, it is the responsibility of adults to "tune into" the nuances of their voices and to transform what they hear into greater wellbeing for the children. Thus, full implementation of Article 12 of the UN Convention requires recognition of and respect for the nonverbal forms of communication – including play, body language, facial expressions, drawing and painting – that even very young children can deploy to express their understandings, choices and preferences.

If children's rights under Article 12 are to be respected, adults must assume that children have the capacity to form their own opinions, and it is incumbent on adults to inform children about salient issues so that they can evaluate these matters for themselves. Otherwise, instead of being seen as capable of exercising their own rights, children are seen as dependent on adults to uphold and enforce their rights for them.

Children ask to be seen and heard

The first impression that we glean from reading the stories is that children ask to be seen and heard (stories 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8). They request this explicitly, but also by acting out "bizarre" behaviours. They thus seek to attract the attention of adults in order to be "recognised" within their unique and special stories, and to be comforted, reassured, accompanied and not left alone. Most of the stories express this kind of request, implying that adults do not pay enough attention to children, sufficiently observe their behaviours, welcome their experiences or support and protect them when it emerges that they are facing particular challenges (such as parental separation). This even occurs in settings that are dedicated to the care of young children and meant to be sensitive to their needs. It follows that the basic training of educators and teachers should provide more effective tools for ensuring that idealised representations of children do not drown out the voices of real children, thus silencing them once again.

Neglect and maltreatment

We cannot overlook a theme that, although it only featured in a handful of stories, is of significant concern: namely, the neglect and mistreatment of children. If we consider that our corpus is comprised of only nine stories, to have detected it in four different narratives implies a potentially high prevalence of such issues if extrapolated to a larger scale. This theme is particularly strongly reflected in stories 1 and 2, in which the young protagonist was obliged to vomit in the first case and pretend to be a princess in the other, in order for their experiences of suffering and loneliness to be acknowledged. In Story 3, it is surprising that the teachers did not find an effective way to invite a child to eat, when by making a minor adjustment the PST managed to access the child's world and win his trust. Even more serious, however, is the situation that emerges from Story 7, in which a struggling child is punished and mistreated instead of being received with affection and patience.

Mourning in solitude

The theme of death only emerges in one narrative, Story 4, but again this is a major issue that requires careful consideration. A child has lost a little brother, and the teacher, evidently upset by the child's words, instead of addressing this painful and sensitive experience, simply invites him to go and play. As the student notes, the teacher could have greeted that confidence with affection and understanding, offering the child a chance to find comfort, attention and authentic and deep listening. In contrast, the teacher's human and professional vulnerability thwarted the child's trust and request for help.

Conclusion

Children need competent teachers that listen with their ears and eyes

Edgar Morin (2015), in his book-manifesto on how we might transform education, denounces the somnambulism "that has appeared in our crisis, which is not only an economic crisis, nor only a crisis of civilization, but also a crisis of thought" (p. 15). Our failure to think about the vital questions of existence generates vulnerability and uncertainty across our decision-making structures. Attending to these vital questions implies "educating to explore the essential questions that define our individual existential sphere, in order to grasp its un-addressable problematic knots and radically question them" (Mortari, 2002, p. 64). From this perspective, uncertainty ceases to be synonymous with a blind and clueless manner of proceeding. Rather, we come to see it as an unavoidable existential constant that is inherent in our very freedom. The only way to deal with this constitutive human uncertainty is to train ourselves in the exercise of thought. Knowing how to most appropriately direct our minds is key to dealing with life issues. However, in educational settings, adults are often disoriented and overwhelmed by these problems, and consequently children and adolescents can be neglected, as even the present small study has shown.

Educational psychology research has shown that children who perceive the most significant adults in their lives, primarily their parents, as a solid ethical and normative compass and a reliable source of safety and emotional support, display higher levels of self-esteem, optimism and life satisfaction. Conversely, when the ethical-normative modelling and guidance and affective care provided to children come across as vulnerable and uncertain, or, worse still, as neglectful, this is associated with increased signs of distress including depression, irritability, impulsivity and low self-esteem (Alfieri, Marta, Lanz, Pozzi & Tagliabue, 2014).

Effective education requires appropriate attitudes and behaviours in both the affective (warmth, support, etc.) and ethical-normative (compliance with rules, legitimacy, etc.) spheres. For those who take on educational responsibilities, this requires becoming progressively more aware of their own resources and vulnerabilities (Cappello & Fenoglio, 2005). While full self-awareness is evidently impossible (to the very end, we are destined to remain "living problems", or, as St. Augustine warns us: *quaestio mihi factum sum* [I have become a question to myself]), educators must at least be committed to that process of self-exploration which is elicited by the other but also benefits oneself.

Children's rights stem from adults' awareness of their own responsibilities

Adults represent the first hope for the protection of children, while education stands as a pledge to foster children's full potential for a flourishing life. Articles 28 and 29 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child make the case for education as a right that must be guaranteed to all children (UN, 1989). Hence, alongside the care of children, we need to pay careful attention to the training of adults: this will involve offering adults opportunities to authentically explore their own personal histories, with a view to constructing the tools of understanding and awareness that they will require in their everyday educational practice.

Oscillating between hyper-celebration and oblivion, contemporary children face the prospect of being left alone to navigate a hostile world to which they realise they do not hold the keys. Reduced to shadows, societal expectations and the future threaten to become millstones around their necks. They face the task of shining as unique individuals, while still lacking the tools to understand themselves and their place among others. From "Children of desire" (Gauchet, 2010) – born of willful procreation, burdened by heavy parental expectations – children have become a function of their parents' plans, aspirations and failures.

If we are to implement the right of the young to be heard – and acknowledged in terms of their uniqueness, their legitimate expectations and the tasks for which they must be prepared – we must expand the spaces where adults welcome and listen to children. Recognising children's needs does not mean adopting childish attitudes ourselves nor acting on our instincts. Rather, it requires learning not to project our own experiences onto others: "When you realize that [certain] behaviours are alien to you, you can begin to create your own...When you are able recognize that [certain] feelings come from your childhood, you have already taken a considerable step forward" (Missildine, 2004, p. 25).

In this task – which does not necessarily lead to the psychoanalyst's couch, but may be managed independently – we may be usefully assisted by educational trajectories, practices of reciprocity and mutual professional help, opportunities for encounter and narrative workshops. These instruments can amplify the voices that are often muffled by the interplay of our childhood experiences, external influences and resonances deep within ourselves. Here, shadows can find room to unveil themselves, offering an opportunity for renewal. The words that flow from "thinking together", from accounts of personal experiences and from spaces of listening and sharing stories enable us to take care of the individual, family and community dimensions of our lives. Our work as educators is to stand in the presence of what surfaces in the encounter, of the images that crowd into mind and heart, identifying new keys to greater and better mutual understanding, thereby enhancing our capacity to embrace the existence of others.

Listening to the voices that dwell within us is an enlightening process. The outcome of this exercise is a fruitful and generative social body that can help to transform a generation of insecure adults into mature and responsible teachers.

Building settings to enable achievement

The construction of a protective and nurturing social body is the task of those who, by virtue of their adult and professional responsibilities, practise a "critical", "revolutionary" and "non-adaptive" (Freire, 2011) pedagogy that is decidedly "unactual" (Bertin, 1977). Indeed, we know that an unjust sociocultural background affects individuals' desires and choices (Nussbaum, 2001), inhibiting their capacity to listen to their own desires as a route towards self-actualisation and self-determination. Nussbaum argues that the state – by directing its democratic resources (laws, policy programmes, services, funding allocations, etc.) towards attaining higher levels of civilisation and ensuring the rights of an ever-increasing number of people – plays a key role in educating its citizens to develop the sensitivities and skills they require to fulfil their potential and attain a good life. More specifically, Nussbaum's

ten "capacities" (2012) of the subject, associated with the basic conditions that a society cannot forgo without trampling on humanity, frame the issue in terms of social justice rather than communal virtue. Those who hold the means of – and are charged with – managing and governing the communal dimension have possibilities and thus responsibilities that the individual only exercises to a minimal degree. In Nussbaum's view, the institutional state should prioritise supporting those institutions that exert the strongest influence on the formation of capability, because basic social justice can only be attained by bringing citizens to a threshold level of capabilities (Nussbaum, 2012, pp. 39–40). These capabilities should be read in a broad sense, in light of a democratic paradigm of citizenship. According to Nussbaum, and as echoed in the scholarship of Amartya Sen (2010), it is not enough to enjoy formal rights: one also needs capabilities to avail oneself of them. A capability is defined as the connection between external opportunities (in terms of the availability of economic resources and rights) and internal capabilities. Possessing such capabilities provides access to external opportunities, expanding individual freedoms, and thus the possibility of conceiving and implementing autonomous life plans. Accompanying children to achieve their broader capabilities, while also guiding their teachers to enhance their attention and sensitivity, is the leading purpose of a country's social policies, especially policies aimed at supporting parenting and teaching and investing in the future. In the words of Paola Milani:

> A child's needs presuppose an appropriate response, through which new capacities may be generated. Thus, children's rights are the inverse of their needs: they are universal; when they are demanded, they promote the development and expression of children's capabilities and self-confidence; they guarantee children the opportunity to become independent and socially integrated adults. Rights are legal prerogatives, of which the child is the subject and bearer (2018, p.23).

Acting as both an admonishment and a safeguard, rights remind teachers what must not happen to their fellow human beings, and especially to very young children, if we are to guarantee "the voiceless" the satisfying, safe and serene life to which we all aspire (Baker, 2010, p. 32). Entitlement is the "stepping stone" required by the youngest among us in order to "nurture their being with the seeds of possibility and the energy required to make them flourish" (Mortari, 2015, p. 22). The grown-ups themselves must become "elevating platforms" by incorporating entitlement into themselves and investing their own greatest resources, in terms of their experience, knowledge and tools, and thus their responsibility, into building a more accessible, just and happy world for all.

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