

ANNA MARIA PASSASEO  
*Editor*

CURRENT ISSUES  
IN MORAL MATTERS

A Call for Education



MESSINA  
UNIVERSITY  
PRESS



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*Editor*

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IN MORAL MATTERS**

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## PRESENTATION

What is morality? What qualifies us as moral subjects? It is difficult to answer these questions at a time in history when, unlike in the not so distant past, we feel the absence of strong and stable guidelines for personal and social living, and when value and cultural pluralism inhabits our western societies: at a time in history, in other words, when particularistic interests seem to prevail over consideration of the consequences of our choices and actions on others, meant, *latu sensu*, as ‘everyone else’ and not as belonging to our ‘circle of interest’.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, moral sensitivity is something that all of us, as human beings, manifest very early on, we can say from the first time we use the expression “It’s not fair!”. And we start doing this as children. Because it is precisely from the perception of a wrong, an outrage suffered, a humiliation that we begin to process and develop our moral sense.

It happens that once an individual reflects on the experience of moral outrage, that experience becomes almost a point of no return: its negative traits are brought into focus, so that these can be identified and recognised in other similar experiences, one’s own or those of others, and one can behave accordingly. In other words, that experience becomes the occasion for the construction of the subjective category of “injustice”. It is a psychological process that seems to be common to all human beings and, quite simply, leads to affirmation: “No more!” (No more will I allow a person to treat me this way, no more will I allow a weak person to suffer this, no more will I allow someone to be humiliated, and so on).

This process involves, at the same time, the construction of a complementary category of “justice”, within which we include those forms of behavior that we judge to be “not unjust”. Indeed, it is the idea of what is evil that provides the starting point and the impulse to formulate normative theses about how it is possible to reduce or

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. F. ALBERONI, S. VECA, *L'altruismo e la morale*, Milano, Garzanti, 1992.

eliminate the suffering of individuals and, consequently, also about how it is right that everyone should be treated.<sup>2</sup>

In short, it happens that from the experience of a feeling of injustice we derive the foundation of our ethos: it is the feeling that establishes the order of priority of our values or the 'order of the heart' of each individual, as Roberta De Monticelli would say.<sup>3</sup>

Here then, to return to the initial questions, namely “what is morality?” and “who is the moral subject?”, we can answer that morality, in a ‘minimal’ definition, is the *affirmation of the dignity of the person*, which is realized in the protection of the person from offense and humiliation. And, in this way, the person is recognised as a ‘subject of value’, so that any experience aimed at ensuring respect both towards oneself and towards others, as ‘subjects of value’, is ‘moral’.

As a 'subject of value', each of us is both a moral patient, i.e. a subject to be protected and valued, and a moral agent, i.e. a subject free to act, following his or her own order of values or order of the heart.

Today, however, we are witnessing a kind of “moral apathy”: that sensitivity that should lead us to protect and safeguard ourselves, as subjects of value, has died out. And we are witnessing, especially in adolescents and young people, behavior of self-hatred.

But that sensitivity to others, whose fate no longer touches our heartstrings, has also died out.

All this is for us a cause for concern and, at the same time, an incentive to plan for change.

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<sup>2</sup> The 'sense of justice' could be equated with an inner drive to envisage societies without great evils, as Stuart Hampshire well describes: «There is nothing mysterious or "subjective" or culture bound in the great evils of human experience, re-affirmed in every age and in every written history and in every tragedy and fiction: murder and the destruction of life, imprisonment, enslavement, starvation, poverty, physical pain and torture, homelessness, friendlessness. That these great evils are to be averted is the constant presupposition of moral arguments at all times and in all places, and particularly when the costs involved in pursuing different conceptions of the good are being coimted.» (S. HAMPSHIRE, *Innocence and experience*, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1989, p. 90).

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. R. DE MONTICELLI, *L'ordine del cuore. Etica e teoria del sentire*, Milano, Garzanti, 2012, p. IX.



To get to the heart of these what we might call ‘*apathetic phenomenologies*’ in reference to morality, to understand them from within, we need more sensitive glasses to sharpen our gaze: the glasses of philosophy, of psychology – in all its declinations –, of sociology, of law. In order to intervene appropriately, we need the spectacles of pedagogy, of the arts, of the sphere of justice: all perspectives present here, which, I hope, can dialogue constructively to prompt informed reflection.

Thus, the first part of the volume means to delve into the many forms through which moral apathy manifests itself today, probing its modes of expression and educational implications.

Alessandro Versace gets to the heart of the moral problem, focusing on the widespread phenomenon of the erosion of empathy, namely that human characteristic that enables relationship and recognition of the other.

From the same perspective of the observation of young people's inability to build authentic interpersonal relationships, Rosa Grazia Romano observes how it is the value of success and its obsessive pursuit that causes young people to develop in a way that only serves to sustain a consumerist and materialistic society and causes ethical poverty.

There follows a specific focus on the world of adolescence: Giombattista Amenta investigates new adolescent behavior, especially at school, where provocations and insults towards peers or teachers are increasingly frequent and where the risk for educators to deal with them inappropriately is high; Caterina Benelli investigates the widespread behaviors of isolation, social withdrawal and hyper-connection, which photograph today's youth fragility and cause a disruption of psycho-social development together with an increase in the fragmentation of the self; Karin Bagnato sees disorientation as the condition that best describes adolescents, who, deprived of strong guiding values and authoritative parental figures, appear 'without a compass' and are therefore exposed to multiple forms of unease and malaise.

Special attention is then reserved for the pervasive phenomenon of bullying: Anna Maria Passaseo frames it as a moral problem due to the dynamics of ‘*moral disengagement*’ that it activates and, from this perspective, suggests the most

appropriate approach to combat and reduce it; Clara Lombardo, Chiara La Barbiera, Maria Catena Silvestri, Francesca Godfrey and Carmela Mento deeply investigate the psychological aspects that underlie cyberbullying behavior and, in general, all behavior of online aggression and violence; Francesca Pollicino offers an interpretation of the phenomenon of cyberbullying from the perspective of international law, identifying the limits of current European Union policy and the possibilities of a European regulatory framework capable of setting minimum rules common to the member states to guarantee the protection of cyberbullying victims and greater harmonization in the sanctioning and educational approach.

Other contemporary moral issues are also of extreme importance, which cause disorientation in the consciences of individuals as well as in public opinion and require, in order to be understood, an informed approach oriented towards complex thinking rather than exclusively emotional and simplifying thinking. Thus, with reference to the topic of illegal migratory flows, Cinzia Ingratoci Scorciapino accompanies us to understand the nature and scope of the rights of migrants crossing the sea, the relative rescue obligations of state and private vessels, and the responsibilities in the management of a phenomenon that involves EU interests and apparatuses.

With reference to the issue of information and data manipulation on the web, Francesco Pira shows how in the liquid-modern era deception has become central to processes of understanding reality and the distinction between true and false is no longer perceived. His call, therefore, is for careful reflection on the future of learning processes, at risk of instrumentalization by *tech companies*.

Natale Emanuele Di Nuzzo, on the other hand, invites us to reflect on the moral implications of technological research, using, as an example, the export of the human gestational function inside an artificial womb. Bioethical questions, which inevitably arise to challenge the possibility of post-human development, require to be addressed in full respect of the complexity of the problem.

The second part of the volume offers an opening to feasible educational proposals and good practices in moral education already implemented.

In this direction, Dorota Chimitz introduces the 'manifest' value of the moral approach in the educational field: inclusion. The need to create a culture of inclusion appears as a moral imperative: to be open to differences, to remove barriers, to respond negatively in public to the language of aggression, xenophobia and the labeling of otherness, to reduce prejudice and discrimination and to increase students' skills, knowledge and motivation to interact with different others.

The privileged place for promoting an inclusive culture is school. In this regard, Marta Garcia-Sampedro, María Amparo González-Rua and Antonio Torralba-Burrial place emphasis on the figure of the teacher and on the construction of his identity as a 'good' teacher: what it is characterized by and how it can be achieved constitute the objects of their research.

Also for Domenica Maviglia, school is the ideal educational context to propose "Practical Wisdom", as an exercise of moral responsibility. Based on the idea that knowledge is not just a set of theoretical concepts, but that it is also an ability to act effectively in concrete situations, "Practical Wisdom" asks teachers to combine theoretical skills and educational skills in the field to improve knowledge and the cultural horizons of students, pushing them towards greater social and democratic responsibility.

Valentina Frascà's research is of a reconnaissance nature, aimed at investigating the ways in which pre-adolescents today receive a moral education in public secondary schools, in a city like Messina, which due to its characteristics: being a city of South; of belonging to a region that has always had a moral sense contrasting with the national one; to be a port open to migratory landings; to have activated multicultural reception and inclusion policies; to register the presence of numerous subcultures in its social composition, needs to strengthen the moral sense of adolescents.

Another important educational place for the moral sphere is that of justice. The proposals successfully tested by Agnieszka Lewicka-Zelent, with Agnieszka Markiewicz-Gospodarek and Anna Maria Passaseo, and by Enrico Interdonato, with Natale Emanuele Di Nuzzo, move in this context.

The first proposal concerns the practice of mediation in Poland, introduced in 1995, with the creation of a project aimed at minors. Mediation takes on three dimensions: criminal, juvenile and scholastic. Regardless of its type, it provides an excellent lesson in constructive communication with others, in empathy, in the formation of an adequate hierarchy of values (e.g., justice, responsibility), and in the development of adequate moral feelings.

The second proposal concerns the “Liberi di scegliere” (Free to Choose) project activated by the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria since 2012 and created to remove minors belonging to Calabrian underworld families ('ndrangheta') and entrust them to the Juvenile Social Service, but outside Calabria. In this way it is possible to provide minors with adequate protection for regular psycho-physical growth and offer them the human stimuli necessary to be able to choose their own destiny in a free and conscious manner.

Art as an opportunity for moral education is the proposal of the next three contributions.

Alicja Lisiecka, following the classic bond that has existed between art and morality since the times of ancient Greece, as a result of the formative influence that beauty has on the human soul, proposes to use the same influence but adapting it to contemporary aesthetic canons. Modern and contemporary art has introduced new qualities into the artistic language, often divergent from classical beauty. One of these qualities is disgust, which can offer various stimuli for moral education, since many theories highlight the profound link between disgust and morality.

Caterina Trifirò interprets the relationship between theater and moral education in the context of social and community theater practices, which intertwine performance and daily life with the aim of improving the authentically human quality of relationships.

Finally, Umberto Spaticchia proposes role-playing as a useful tool for evaluating moral development in adolescents and young people, by encouraging them to reflect on ethical dilemmas, in line with Lawrence Kohlberg's stage theory.

ANNA MARIA PASSASEO

# PART I

## PHENOMENOLOGIES OF MORAL APATHY



## THE EMPATHIC EROSION: THE LOSS OF VALUES

Alessandro Versace

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SUMMARY: 1. The basics of empathy: recognizing emotions. – 2. The zero degree of empathy: the annihilation of the other.

### *1. The basics of empathy: recognizing emotions*

The concept of empathy is not a new matter, it is already present in Tolomeo's *Tetrabiblos* as a physical passion or an empathy of the flesh, but finds its original place thanks to the German word *Einfühlung*<sup>1</sup> which appears in Germany in the second half of the Eighteenth Century, in the romantic cultural climate, and began to assume a much more significant meaning thanks to Vischer, who included it in the concept of philosophical aesthetics<sup>2</sup>. In 1909 Titchener translated the word *Einfühlung* in English as empathy and, still in the field of aesthetic enjoyment, the first attempt at a systematic generalization of empathy was due to Theodor Lipps, who underlined that the objects of aesthetic experience are not only observed, but emotionally shared. In particular, Bühler's works on the mimic correspondence between the child and the mother in the first months of life are worth mentioning.

The studies conducted by Stern on emotional understanding and by Trevarthen on intersubjectivity underline this construct. Emotional contagion, related by Hoffman to the concept of *global empathy* – which underlines the fusion that the child experiences due to a lack of differentiation between self and other – in Wallon's opinion, and subsequently also shared by Hoffman, it is not limited to

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<sup>1</sup> A. PINOTTI, *Empatia. Storia di un'idea da Platone al postumano* Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2011, pp. 33-34.

<sup>2</sup> K.R. STUEBER, *L'empatia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2010 [2006], p. 31.

early childhood, but it can also recur in adulthood. The processes involved, namely motor imitation and the primary circular reaction, do not involve any cognitive mediation and are automatic<sup>3</sup>. If emotional contagion, seen both as the child's emotional reflection of the maternal emotional states and as a contagion in adulthood, is related to innate imitative tendencies, therefore devoid of cognitive mediation, since there is no direct access to the emotion of the other, the forms of *parallel empathy* or *event-based empathy*, which begin at the end of the first year of life, of which Strayer is one of the most important academics, "occur when the situation activates an emotional response in the child based on the event itself and not necessarily in compliance with that of the person observed"<sup>4</sup>. At the age of three/four years, when even words are capable of provoking situations able to raise empathic responses, and therefore there is also a mediation of language, we reach forms of *participatory empathy*, which is a more evolved form of empathy and refers to the child's ability to differentiate his own emotion from that of other ones, to recognise the experience of the others from his own one. We therefore arrive at a first form of decentralization about oneself and the distinction of the other as different from us<sup>5</sup>. Participatory empathy, also defined as *mature* or *sharing oriented*, implies a greater cognitive mediation and the ability to assume the perspective and the role of the other (*role taking*) is considered the second component of empathy. Feshback's perspective is that *role taking* implies a gradual overcoming of egocentrism, one's own point of view that is increasingly distinct and does not overlap with others' one. Strayer defines it as the *representation of the experience of the other*<sup>6</sup>. Participatory empathy, as mentioned before, is best characterized when, around the sixth year, the ability to *decentralize* begins to manifest itself, understood as "vicarious sharing of the emotional state of others and it is characterized by the

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<sup>3</sup> S. BONINO et alii, *Empatia. I processi di condivisione delle emozioni*, Firenze, Giunti, 1998, pp. 22-23.

<sup>4</sup> A.M. MENECHINI, *Sentire e condividere. Componenti psicologiche e correlati biologici dell'empatia*, Firenze, Seid Editori, 2010, p. 112.

<sup>5</sup> Ivi, p. 115.

<sup>6</sup> S. BONINO et alii, *Op. cit.*, p. 37.



subjective ability to be clear that the shared emotion is the other's one"<sup>7</sup>.

Empathy, in short, is one of the most advanced forms of communication of the human being, and it is thanks to the Rizzolatti, Gallese and Sinigaglia's work, however, that we begin to glimpse the first real scientific requirements of empathy. These authors discover *mirror neurons*, they are neurons involved in the "imitation" process, or more precisely involved in the decoding of information relating to the interaction between subject and object. The peculiarity of these cells lies in the fact that they are activated during the execution of specific acts and not during the presentation of an object. This requires a specific "vocabulary", called "acts vocabulary" because, if an action performed is not present in this "vocabulary", the cortical areas will not be activated and, therefore, the mirror neurons will not be involved. The recognition of emotions occurs in the same way; however, the emotional language is a shady, mysterious, often impenetrable language, hidden by a series of behavioural attitudes structured on "masks" that are worn so as not to let the real emotion leak out, in addition to the own fragility and vulnerability. And it's profound. The emotional language, if ever a metaphor could be used, would be the "language" of the sea depths which, however explored, remain imbued with mystery. Known, directed, mitigated, as far as possible, emotions lead towards horizons of meaning as they emerge from the profound sharing between those who "cure", not only therapeutically but also educationally, and those who are treated. This is the key to the essential and existential dimension of human conduct. The emotional language itself is subject to different interpretations, there is no common agreement in defining what an emotion is, what a feeling is and what a state of mind is. For W. Pasini, a feeling is something that involves the same emotions, imagination and sensations, it has a longer duration than emotions and it also compared to the different frame of mind that human beings experience on a daily basis<sup>8</sup>, for A. Damasio feelings are directed inward and private, emotions are

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<sup>7</sup> A.M. MENEGHINI, *Op. cit.*, p. 115.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. W. PASINI, *La qualità dei sentimenti*, Milano, Oscar Mondadori, 1995.

external and public<sup>9</sup>, but it is with R. Plutchick that a large number of linguistic references attributable to emotions emerge and without exploring the analysis and research conducted by the psychologist, here it is sufficient to say that “language is a complex structure that has evolved over a period of thousands of years. In each language there are many different historical elements. The words of the English language, for example, derive from Latin, Greek, German and French roots [...]. Over the centuries, a multiplicity of meanings can be associated with a word<sup>10</sup>. Anxiety, for example, is almost always recognized as an emotional word but, etymologically, it refers to the meaning of *causing pain* or *suffocation* and three definitions are reported in Webster: the first expresses the sense of a “painful discomfort of the mind in front of an evil in progress or anticipated”, the second refers to a “pathological state of restlessness and agitation with an anguishing sense of oppression in the heart” and, finally, the third, which has its roots in psychoanalytic theory, describes it as “an expectation of damage or danger without adequate foundation”<sup>11</sup>. In the last theory examined it lacks the subjectivity of experience, so it is already evident how complex it is to divide emotional language from non-emotional language also because “the meanings of words are not only given by explicit definitions, but also by lists of related words or synonyms”<sup>12</sup>. Verbal “labelling” of emotions, therefore, occurs through other paths. Schachter and Singer assert that it is “based on information on the physical and social context in which we live, and on knowledge of the types of emotions that are produced in certain situations [that] we place the label fear, love, sadness, anger or joy over that particular state”<sup>13</sup>. The verbal labelling of emotions depends, therefore, largely on the situations that one experiences since childhood, on the parental methods, mostly adults, through which one relates emotionally with subjects in the developing

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<sup>9</sup> A. DAMASIO, *Emozioni e coscienza*, Milano, Adelphi, 2000 [1999], p.52.

<sup>10</sup> R. PLUTCHICK, *Psicologia e biologia delle emozioni*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1995 [1994], p. 64.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ivi*, p. 65.

<sup>13</sup> S. SCHACHTER, J.E. SINGER, *Cognitive, Social and Physiological Determinants of Emotional State*, in «Psychological Review», n. 69, 1962, pp. 379-399.

phase. A little girl who comes into the house with her dirty with mud shoes and soils a carpet will be able to hear her mother yelling at her and being told that that type of behaviour makes her very angry. The little girl will be able to introject the idea that the word *anger* is connected to the mother's high tone of voice and abrupt behaviour. In the case of a child who sees another child kick the wall and who listen to the other child's mother calmly ask him why he is angry, he will link *anger* to active behaviours. It can be seen, from the two examples given, that the word *anger* can be used by adults in a variety of different situations, and this causes greater difficulties for the child in learning the concept useful for describing an internal state. Different exposures to different scripts are necessary for the child to use the term angry in different ways. Verbal labelling, however, can be attributed above all to primary emotions, such as anger, joy, fear, sadness since they are much more common and easily recognisable, while learning and identifying some mixed, more subtle emotions, such as hope and optimism, seems more difficult because they present a greater degree of ambiguity<sup>14</sup>.

The verbal labelling that would be necessary for emotions is not a simple "archival" work, rather it refers to the idea that every «emotion is confronted with a horizon of meaning, with an alter ego, with a you, with an object that can be internal, or external, and every emotion has its own internal *time* [...]. When we talk about time, we are obviously not referring to clock time, but to subjective time, to the time of one's life»<sup>15</sup>. The time lived is the amount of time we spend, also, in relationships with others, in a *meeting*, in *listening* and in *being listened*, and yet, without seeking help from scientific literature, it is plausible to say that often, if not always, our very existential condition is poor in tenderness, understanding, human warmth and this happens due to emotional inability or different defence mechanisms. We prefer "not to listen", and therefore not even to interpret and "label" that emotion present in the other. How, therefore, can we recognize emotion

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<sup>14</sup> R. PLUTCHICK, *Op. cit.*, p. 66.

<sup>15</sup> E. BORGNA, *Le emozioni ferite*. Milano, Universale economica Feltrinelli, 2021, p. 23.

in others and activate an empathetic path if we are not even able to “understand” and interpret an emotion? How to cross the borders, the frontiers, the walls that separate us from the suffering, but also from the joy, of others? If affliction and discomfort require *compassion*, following Nussbaum’s line of thought, it is equally true, the philosopher suggests, that without empathy «we are likely to remain insensitive and inert, without even knowing how to make sense of the situation we observe. Empathy is a very important tool for making sense of what is happening to the other person, and also for creating interest and a form of contact»<sup>16</sup>.

A possible solution could be provided by recognizing, at least, the primary emotions, which R. Plutchick identifies as anger-fear, expectation-surprise, sadness-joy, acceptance-disgust which are bipolar, that is, each corresponds to the other which is of the “opposite sign” and all subject to growth in intensity. Thus, anger could become rage and fear terror<sup>17</sup>. P. Ekman, however, identified the fundamental emotions as anger, fear, sadness, joy, surprise, disgust – but also, although scientific literature usually stops at these first six, amusement, embarrassment, guilt and shame – following a research he conducted in the highlands of Papua New Guinea in the Fore tribe but, above all, the universality of emotions «is present not only in the expression of emotions, but also in some events that arouse it [...]. For sadness or anguish, the common theme is a significant loss. Who or what constitutes a loss may perhaps vary from one individual to another and from one culture to another [...], universals are also present in some of the changes that occur in our bodies when we experience an emotion»<sup>18</sup>. It is not possible, in Antonio Damasio’s opinion, to repress corporeity from existence and avoid the emotions which, instead, bind man with man, man with the world<sup>19</sup> and it is in this bond, in the relationship, that the Ego is in front of another, and where the initial disturbance comes from the presence of the “body” of the other which is

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<sup>16</sup> M. NUSSBAUM, *L’intelligenza delle emozioni*, Bologna, Il Mulino, Bologna, 2004 [2001], p. 398.

<sup>17</sup> R. PLUTCHICK, *Op. cit.*, pp. 67-72.

<sup>18</sup> DALAI LAMA, D. GOLEMAN, *Emozioni distruttive*, Milano, Mondadori, 2003 [2003], p. 163.

<sup>19</sup> A. DAMASIO, *L’errore di Cartesio. Emozione, ragione e cervello umano*, Milano, Adelphi, 1995 [1994], pp. 17-27.

not just a physical object, but the body of the other is the intermediary of something else.

It is «the expression of a conscience, of an experience, of expectations, of anxieties, of hope, of desires, of future prospects and of past memories. It is a *singularity* which, however, needs to be recognized by another singularity. The body [...] of the other is in fact not a thing among things, but it is a living body»<sup>20</sup>. Identification with the other is a

form of knowledge that goes beyond the barriers, the frozen walls of separation between us and others [...]. Empathy is [...], the ability to identify with another. More precisely, the ability to experience the emotions, feelings and desires of others, including fears and phobias. Empathy presupposes a substratum or emotional potential common to all people so that no one can say or feel completely alien to the feelings of the other<sup>21</sup>.

Empathic extension presupposes recognizing the vulnerability, the fragility of the other and in the other and, in Chan Kwok-Bun's words, «the authenticity of what I discovered about myself is strengthened because I found confirmation of a part of me in you, and you in me»<sup>22</sup>.

Human nature is marked by empathy or, better said, by the possibility of empathic development, Iacoboni, one of the greatest academic of mirror neurons, states that, if «you see me suffering, in emotional discomfort for failing in scoring a penalty, the mirror neurons of your brain simulate the same discomfort. You automatically feel empathy for me: you know how I feel because you literally feel what I'm feeling»<sup>23</sup> and however, how do you raise an empathetic child? Not by telling him how to be empathetic, but by being empathetic to him. If mirror neurons are the neurobiological

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<sup>20</sup> L. BOELLA, *Sentire l'altro. Conoscere e praticare l'empatia*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2006, p. 33.

<sup>21</sup> M. TREVI cit. in E. BORGNA (A cura di), *Op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>22</sup> CHAN KWOK-BUN cit., in J. RIFKIN (A cura di), *La civiltà dell'empatia. La corsa verso la coscienza globale nel mondo in crisi*, Milano, Mondadori, 2010 [2009], p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> Ivi, p. 78.

basis for the activation of empathic behaviour, it is the context that subsequently shapes the subject, directing them towards social and proactive behaviours.

## 2. *The zero degree of empathy: the annihilation of the other*

In 1961, to try to understand the brutal Nazi crimes, S. Milgram conducted an experiment to understand the *obedience to authority*. For the psychologist, the type of obedience present during the Second World War was structured on a psychological mechanism that associated individual action with a political purpose and which persuaded subjects to the point of making them commit actions that went beyond ethics and moral conduct<sup>24</sup>.

*Mutatis mutandis*, in 1971 another experiment was carried out by P. Zimbardo and collaborators, known as the “Stanford experiment” or “*the Lucifer effect*”. Following G. Le Bon, according to which through the mechanism of *deindividuation*, individuals in a cohesive group lose their personal identities, Zimbardo recruited university students through advertising who were told that the experiment was aimed at studying the psychological effects of prison life. The experiment, which was supposed to last two weeks, was interrupted on the sixth day because of what was happening in the simulation. Zimbardo’s final analysis is summed up in the idea that people conform to social roles<sup>25</sup>. In both

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<sup>24</sup> S. Milgram creates a fake current generator, with 30 possible voltages, in a range from 15 to 450 volts. The victim is just an “actor”, a collaborator of the psychologist, who obviously simulates the pain felt during the fake shocks. The shocks, always fictitious, are gradually increased in intensity up to extremely dangerous voltages. Where the subject refuses to give the shock, the experiment ends, because it is considered an act of disobedience. The objective is to understand the mechanisms of obedience and although disobedience would not have been punished, 26 out of 40 people acted against their own moral rules. Cfr. S. MILGRAM, *Obbedienza all’ autorità. Uno sguardo sperimentale*, Torino, Einaudi, 2003 [1974].

<sup>25</sup> Among the chosen students, some took on the role of guards, the others of prisoners, in a completely random way. The first were divided into groups of three people who worked eight-hour shifts, the prisoners stayed in one room and were treated like real criminals. They were arrested in their homes, taken to the local police station, fingerprinted, photographed and placed in a file. Subsequently, they were blindfolded and taken to a basement of Stanford University used as a prison, doors and windows

experiments one of the possible interpretations may be to consider that tyranny, dictatorship or simply obedience to an institution is due to an active identification with who promotes cruel actions covering them as virtuous actions. Hannah Arendt in “The banality of evil” highlights how the various actions carried out by men who had to follow orders do not constitute responsibilities for the crimes committed against the Jews<sup>26</sup> while Browning’s *Ordinary Men* makes it clear how acts of the CI battalion of the German Police Reserve, a Nazi unit, were carried out only to execute orders<sup>27</sup>.

Men, therefore, who were not “addicted to evil” and who in other contexts and circumstances also presented forms of empathy and who, in particular situations, lacked it. We must ask ourselves, then, whether it is more correct to speak of “evil”, “cruelty” or the absence of empathy. S. Baron- Cohen’s theory postulates the idea that actions devoid of empathy are simply the tail of a bell curve that is found in all populations on the planet. The psychologist claims that every human being is within a spectrum of empathy and that exaggerated evilness or infinite goodness are nothing more than the extremes of the empathy spectrum. The word empathy has been object of several definitions, Baron-Cohen’s seems to cover a point that has not been highlighted in other descriptions, or if it has been done it has been done quite implicitly. The author argues that empathy is our ability to identify what someone else is feeling, or even thinking, and responding to those thoughts and feelings with emotional equivalent. From the statement cited above

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barred, bare walls, cells for a maximum of three inmates. A storage closet of about 60 cm was then used as an isolation cell, called “the hole”. The prisoners forcibly wore a uniform with a number, it was the first step towards the cancellation of personal identity, a heavy chain was placed on their right ankle, and they had to follow a series of strict rules. The guards, on the other hand, had a whistle, mirrored sunglasses, uniforms and truncheons and had ample room to intervene to enforce the rules, without however using physical violence. In a short time, each of them totally identified with the role they assumed, some guards went so far as to carry out deplorable actions and some inmates felt the discomfort deeply, leading to symptoms of stress and depression. The experiment was therefore stopped. Cfr. P. ZIMBARDO, *L’effetto Lucifero. Cattivi si diventa?* Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2008.

<sup>26</sup> Cfr. H. ARENDT, *La banalità del male. Eichmann a Gerusalemme*, trad. it., Milano, Universale economica Feltrinelli, 2009 [1963]

<sup>27</sup> Cfr. C.R. BROWNING, *Uomini comuni. Polizia tedesca e soluzione finale in Polonia*, trad. it., Torino, Einaudi, 1995 [1992].

it can be seen that empathy has often been defined as “the ability to recognize the emotions of another one”, leaving out an equally important aspect, that of offering a response, specifically an emotional one. This consideration pushes us to ask ourselves whether we are self-centred (*single-minded*) or other-centred (*double-minded*) beings. In the first case the attention is concentrated only in personal interests, attention, personal desires, in the second case they refer to the other person. Empathy, therefore, can be “turned on” or “turned off”, there are people directed towards the other or “imprisoned” within themselves<sup>28</sup>.

The first consideration to make to better understand the possibility of becoming empathic subjects is of a neurobiological nature. There is a so-called “empathy circuit”, roughly made up of about ten interconnected brain regions and the first of these is the *medial prefrontal cortex* (MPFC), a sort of “hub” for processing social information and to compare one’s point of view with the others’ one<sup>29</sup>. Therefore, if an ethics of neuroscience implies the moral lawfulness of scientific discoveries, the neuroscience of ethics is useful for understanding and guiding moral behaviours<sup>30</sup>.

It is not a question of arguing that the cortex has the ability to exercise moral judgments but rather of associating emotional aspects and cognitive aspects, understanding how one decides what is illicit and what is not, what pushes one to take one action rather than another and the possibility of reading the *places* of the brain in more detail through brain maps associated with decision-making processes, evaluations and social behaviours. The MPFC is divided into a dorsal part (*dorso-medial prefrontal cortex*, dMPFC) and a ventral part (*ventro-medial prefrontal cortex*, vMPFC). The first is involved in the representation of the thoughts and feelings of others, the second refers to the use for one’s own mind<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> S. BARON-COHEN, *La scienza del male. L’empatia e le origini della crudeltà*, trad. it., Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2012 [2011], pp. 13-17.

<sup>29</sup> Ivi, pp. 23-27.

<sup>30</sup> M. SANTERINI, *Educazione morale e neuroscienze. La coscienza dell’empatia*, Brescia, La Scuola, 2011, p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> S. BARON-COHEN, *Op. cit.*, pp. 23-29.



The latter, following the discoveries of A. Damasio, is also responsible for memorizing an emotional value. In particular, Damasio's *somatic marker* idea is based on the fact that emotions *mark* certain aspects of a situation and generate certain outcomes of the subject's possible actions in association with somatic responses. The *somatic marker*

forces attention on the negative outcome (for example, when you have to give an answer to solve a problem and you feel an unpleasant sensation in your stomach opening) to which a given action can lead and acts as an automatic alarm signal: beware of the danger that awaits you if you choose the option that leads to this outcome<sup>32</sup>.

The theory of somatic markers allows us to understand how «the mechanisms for reading one's own mind and that of others are oriented»<sup>33</sup>. It is, therefore, the same evolution of the brain which through its functioning becomes "responsible" for the activation of the empathic circuit and, beyond any brain impairments such as to determine a *zero degree of empathy*, positive as in the cases of autism – reduced empathic capacity and absence of "badness" and negativity as in the cases of borderline personalities or psychopaths – not feeling anything on an emotional level - it is education that plays a big role in the development of empathy and, therefore, also of development morality connected to it. J. Rifkin maintains that, if mirror neurons represent the predetermined possibility of learning empathy, it is the context that then offers the possibility of developing empathy itself<sup>34</sup>.

Without empathy it is very unlikely that people will develop a moral sense without which human decline and loss are inevitable. Emancipation from oneself and from others, from external conditioning, from excessive instinctual

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<sup>32</sup> A. DAMASIO, *L'errore...*, cit. p. 245.

<sup>33</sup> M. SANTERINI, *Op. cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>34</sup> J. RIFKIN, *Op. cit.*, pp. 76-97.

dependence implies a path aimed at ethics, morality, the acquisition of those values without which one would be deprived of an existential and cultural posture and, therefore, educational action and moral action coincide in this sense. It is a question of going beyond Kolberg's lesson according to which it is through model that values are learned and arriving at an ethics of care which has in rationality, typical of the moral subject, the key principle through which one becomes aware that one's universe of values cannot be imposed on others<sup>35</sup> to promote what Recalcati calls the *humanization of life*<sup>36</sup>. To deal with forms of "moral autism", education must therefore ask itself where to find the ethical codes and rules of moral conduct. One possibility is offered by the "natural dimension of empathy", which implies our belonging to the entire human family, although it should be underlined, as previously mentioned, that only a mature stage of empathy allows us to distinguish what happens to another and what happens to us, to decentralize ourselves from an egocentric vision that usually accompanies us. Suspension of one's own needs to understand the other which embodies the idea of *feeling* considered as a natural characteristic which allows the educational process to transform automatic empathy into moral internalisation. It is necessary to offer a new key to understanding moral education which should not be considered as an a-priori but as an openness, a possibility towards certain choices which cannot be attributed only to nature<sup>37</sup> since education "based on an ethical approach, not only explains, but above all makes us "experience" the meaning of the other by discovering and attributing value to personal experience<sup>38</sup> since empathy is a constitutive element of an intersubjective world, it allows to feel that the other has emotions, thoughts, personality. We move in the orbit of recognizing the *other* as an *absolute value*, not objectivized, not dehumanized. Recognizing the other is the specific character of empathy which represents the discovery of our existence

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<sup>35</sup> S. BROTTTO, *Etica della cura*, Salerno, Orthotes editrice, 2013, pp. 45-60.

<sup>36</sup> Cfr. M. RECALCATI, *L'ora di lezione. Per un'erotica dell'insegnamento*, Torino, Einaudi, 2014.

<sup>37</sup> M. SANTERINI, *Op. cit.*, pp. 132-140.

<sup>38</sup> Ivi, pp. 141-142.

together with others and elects the space of the relationship<sup>39</sup>, every human activity is, therefore, an incarnated experience, that is of sharing with others and symbolizes a direct challenge to the old norms of science and of the reason. Incarnated experience marks the entry into the empathy era and, given that empathic expansion not only allows one to experience the suffering or condition of the other «as if» it were one's own, but also contributes to strengthen and deepen one's sense of self<sup>40</sup>, this will help to overcome those actions of defeat, humiliation, annihilation of the other who reside in one of the many *non-places of the soul*<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>39</sup> L. BOELLA, *Op. cit.*, pp. 87-92.

<sup>40</sup> J. RIFKIN, *Op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>41</sup> A. VERSACE, *I non-luoghi dell'anima*, in «Ricerche di pedagogia e didattica», 12, 2, 2017, pp. 215-227.



ETHICS OF SUCCESS AND PRAISE OF WASTE:  
PARADOXES OR TRENDS IN TODAY'S SEARCH FOR MEANING?

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SUMMARY: 1. The Ethics of Success in the Societies of Self-Celebratory Individualism. – 2. In an existential defense of waste. – 3. The concept of “waste” in education and its potential meanings. - 4. Conclusion.

*1. The Ethics of Success in the Societies of Self-Celebratory Individualism*

Contemporary society is marked by experiences and behaviors that, however excessive and sometimes pathological, are becoming the new “normalities”. What once defined the time of personal maturation, stemming from the natural pursuit of self-realization, recognition, and esteem from others, now has transformed into an obsessive - often premature - quest for success, power, wealth, and visibility.<sup>1</sup>

Through our narcissistic societies, we have ushered in the era of the *après-devoir*<sup>2</sup>, the post-duty era, a post-deontic epoch where the word “duty” has been delegitimized, resulting in almost no “compromise” on the ethical plane and a limited personal engagement regarding responsibility<sup>3</sup>. Ethics are replaced by aesthetics and performativity.

Indeed, ours is the age of self-celebratory individualism, of showcasing oneself, one's achievements, but also one's failures, which are obliged to become “epic fails”<sup>4</sup>. Both personal and others' failures are glorified but also trivialized, ridiculed, and stripped of educational meaning. It is no longer a means to learn from mistakes but has become a way to celebrate viral success if it becomes an “epic failure”, a grand occasion to garner attention and popularity in terms of “likes”.

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. V. ANDREOLI, *L'uomo di vetro. La forza della fragilità*, Milano, Rizzoli, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. G. LIPOVETSKY, *Le crépuscule du devoir. L'éthique indolore des nouveaux temps démocratiques*, Paris, Gallimard, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. Z. BAUMAN, *Le sfide dell'etica*, trad. it., Milano, Feltrinelli, 2018 [1993]; Z. BAUMAN, *Le nuove povertà*, trad. it., Roma, Castelvecchi, 2018 [2004b].

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. P. MAGAUDDA, G. BALBI (a cura di), *Fallimenti digitali. Un'archeologia dei “nuovi media”*, Milano, Unicopli, 2018.

In the society of self-celebratory individualism, we are effectively creating substitutions on both the existential and axiological planes, which have significant repercussions on the educational sphere.

We have replaced the 'other' with the narcissistic self<sup>5</sup>. We allow the other to touch our existence only if it serves to fulfill any of our needs or desires.

We have swapped ideals and values that once centered around the common good and solidarity<sup>6</sup> with pseudo-values that instead prioritize individual benefit, competition, and performance<sup>7</sup>. Exaggerated competition feeds, and indeed must feed, on a spectacularization and hyper-idealization of the Self, that gravely damages the education and mental health of children, adolescents, youth, adults, and even the elderly. It especially harms the younger generations to whom adults are issuing a paradoxical mandate: "Be yourself, but in my way!"<sup>8</sup>.

Young boys and girls are expected to mature according to grandiose expectations of success, popularity, beauty, that is, to become performers, but as the fragile adults and influencers of today demand. However, adolescents, unable to consistently meet these 'vampiric' social expectations, pay a high price in terms of low self-esteem, feelings of shame, a constant need to appear flawless, and a sense of failure. Evidence of this is seen in the fact that youngsters, unable to manage anxiety and expectations, exhibit a range of symptoms and behaviors, ranging from anxiety crises to panic attacks, eating disorders, self-isolation, self-cutting, and even suicide.

Furthermore, we have constructed a society where success lies in gossip, self-referential talk, at the expense of dialogue, a fundamental value and educational challenge for the future, for the entire world<sup>9</sup>. Dialogue forms the basis of every inter-relational, inter-generational, and inter-cultural educational process, thus becoming a privileged tool capable of building interdependence among individuals and nations, inspired by principles of equality, solidarity, and humanization.

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<sup>5</sup> Cfr. C. LASCH, *La cultura del narcisismo. L'individuo in fuga dal sociale in un'età di disillusioni collettive*, trad. it., Milano, Bompiani, 1981 [1979].

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. E. COLICCHI, *I valori in educazione e in pedagogia*, Roma, Carocci, 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. A. HONNETH, *Riconoscimento e disprezzo. Sui fondamenti di un'etica post-tradizionale*, trad. it., Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 1993; U. GALIMBERTI, *La parola ai giovani. Dialogo con la generazione del nichilismo attivo*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. M. LANCINI, *Sii te stesso a modo mio. Essere adolescenti nell'epoca della fragilità adulta*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. D. LE BRETON, *Fuggire da sé. Una tentazione contemporanea*, trad. it., Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2016 [2015].

We have substituted the value of freedom<sup>10</sup> - yearned for in every time and place - with an *imaginary freedom*<sup>11</sup>, often purely virtual, conceived solely as the absence of constraints and ties, a product of a hedonistic ethic summed up as 'I want everything and immediately' and 'Only I can decide what is good for me.' It's a freedom resulting from an adolescent and self-referential view of life, whose sole aim is to become collectors of pleasure without assuming responsibility.

We have built societies that fuel the value of subjectivism by distorting the concept of '*inter-esse*,' where the '*esse*' is constituted precisely through that '*inter*'<sup>12</sup>, that is, the being-*among* others, in that space that embodies mutual care and respect. This "*traità*" (*betweenness*)<sup>13</sup>, an original ontological structure, forms the relational and communal dimension, the encounter that gives meaning to our human existence, the space in which one can learn to be a person and feel part of a global and interdependent whole.

Therefore, we are facing an exacerbation of the concept of success, which represents one of the worst forms of ethical poverty, because it causes one to lose sight of the meaning of existence, discourages individuals from listening to their true needs and desires, and renders them incapable of accepting their own and others' vulnerabilities.

## *2. In an existential defense of waste*

Ensnared within the logic of efficiency and consumerism, today's individuals, both young and adult, are adept at the art of "consuming life". Consequently, they have become intolerant towards any form of frustration, incapable of dealing with any delay in gratification. Faced with a denial of their needs, they become capable of reacting fiercely and inhumanly.

As Alain Ehrenberg asserts, for many, today's suffering is not the result of a scarcity of goods and means, but rather the abundance of possibilities. The malaise of living and the "fatigue of being oneself" stem from the "weight of the possible"<sup>14</sup>, which may lead to responses characterized by forms of new addiction, depressive implosions, or aggressive outbursts.

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<sup>10</sup> Cfr. E. COLICCHI, A.M. PASSASEO (a cura di), *Educazione e libertà nel tempo presente. Percorsi, modelli, problemi*, Messina-Civitanova Marche, Armando Siciliano, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. M. MAGATTI, *Libertà immaginaria. Le illusioni del capitalismo tecno-nichilista*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. R. ESPOSITO, *Communitas. Origine e destino della comunità*, Torino, Einaudi, 2006 (vers. ampliata e aggiornata) [1998].

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. M. BUBER, *Il principio dialogico e altri saggi*, A. Poma (a cura di), trad. it., Cinisello Balsamo, San Paolo, 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. A. EHRENBURG, *La fatigue d'être soi. Dépression et société*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1998.

How is it possible that an increase in choices does not lead to greater satisfaction, but rather to increased feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction? Perhaps humans are searching in the wrong directions. In reality, having an excess of everything and this "excessmania" (unrestrained consumption, compulsive shopping, etc.) merely serves to fill voids with anything that appears as a semblance of happiness. Thus, modern men and women end up being slaves to what others want them to be<sup>15</sup> and slaves to anything that temporarily satisfies their needs. The key point is to understand that success and power are merely anesthetics that temporarily numb the discomfort of living, anxieties, and fears. However, success and power are not the solution.

Even more disturbing is that today individuals apply the disposable dynamics of things to people. Just as consumer goods are bought, used, and discarded, people seduce, use, and discard each other, leaving each other often via WhatsApp or social media. Individuals become waste. This unlimited consumption of both things and people represents the asphyxiation of ethics, which inevitably leads to crisis and self-consumption<sup>16</sup>.

Yet, even crisis can become an opportunity for a change of course and hope if, starting from it, one begins to reflect on what truly matters in life, on what is essential and what is incidental, on how to reconsider desires, failures, and waste, and how to learn from them<sup>17</sup>.

In defense of waste, I would like to start from the basic existential idea that everyone desires to be happy. However, setbacks, shattered expectations, and broken dreams convince the individual that happiness lies outside of oneself and must be sought "externally" - travels to the ends of the world, real and virtual quests, extreme forms of control over one's body and mind, etc. Men and women are convinced that everything that can make them happy and successful is far from home, from their city, from their relationships, and most importantly, outside of themselves.

Upon closer examination, many of the activities offered by the digital society are a push to move away from oneself, to challenge one's own limits (consider challenges), to immortalize oneself as happy and joyous even when one is not inwardly so. Consequently, individuals throw themselves into a series of activities (even good ones) that they think can bring them happiness: working hard, pursuing a career, studying and writing incessantly, holding prestigious roles, and more. What is done externally should actually help the individual to enter within oneself, to embark on an internal

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<sup>15</sup> Cfr. R. GIRARD, *Menzogna romantica e verità romanzesca. Le mediazioni del desiderio nella letteratura e nella vita*, L. Verdi-Vighetti (a cura di), trad. it., Milano, Bompiani, 2005 [1961].

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. Z. BAUMAN, *Vite di scarto*, trad. it., Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2011<sup>4</sup> [2004a].

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. H. ARENDT, *Vita activa. La condizione umana*, introduzione di A. Dal Lago, trad. it., Milano, Bompiani, 1994 [1958].



journey, which is the most arduous journey, one that almost no one wishes to take, except when compelled by significant problems<sup>18</sup>.

Therefore, what was initially good not only becomes a compulsion to act (leading to forgetting the true motivations behind the anancastic need for success) but in the long run, tends to demotivate and prevent acceptance of what one has become. It does not measure up to the expectations placed on oneself and the idealizations made about oneself and others. If a failure occurs, it becomes even more apparent that pursuing success, not only fails to satisfy one's deep needs, but also erodes and diminishes the existential and relational depth of one's life<sup>19</sup>.

However, it is thanks to a failure, to something not going as anticipated, to a disappointment, that it is possible to change course and turn failure and waste into an educational opportunity. Waste, as Maria Grazia Contini writes, can become a «propulsive and dynamic element between what we have managed to achieve within the limits of our concrete experiences and the horizon of the possible[-other] that, opened up in front of us, always and again indicates other paths and further objectives»<sup>20</sup>.

At this point, we can outline an initial educational path that involves *accepting what one has become*, not in terms of a resigned acceptance, but as a pacification with oneself<sup>21</sup>. Not everything in life is repairable, and as long as a person spends all their time trying to repair themselves, it means that they have not yet accepted themselves with their own limits and fragilities<sup>22</sup>. It is only through self-acceptance that one can begin to see life through different lenses, to stop blaming oneself, to understand that sometimes the choices made were the only ones available. Only then will one be able to accept failure and reassess waste.

Embracing failure means trying to understand what is hidden within that failure and what can be learned from it. If experienced in this way, waste becomes an «emblematic figure of education»<sup>23</sup>, to be praised because it urges pushing the bar further and, at the same time, teaches to accept failures (without narcissistic wounds) as an integral part of every individual's life.

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<sup>18</sup> Cfr. P. BARONE, *Il bisogno di introversione. La vocazione segreta del mondo contemporaneo*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2023.

<sup>19</sup> R.G. ROMANO, *Genitori e "figli della rete". Mutamenti antropologici e nuove sfide educative*, «La Famiglia», 56/266, Brescia, 2022, pp. 219-230.

<sup>20</sup> M.G. CONTINI, *Elogio dello scarto e della resistenza*, Bologna, Clueb, 2009, p. 14.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. R. GUARDINI, *Accettare se stessi*, trad. it., Brescia, Morcelliana, 2011<sup>5</sup> [1987].

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. R.G. ROMANO, *La sete generativa. Ermeneutiche pedagogiche e percorsi formativi*, Brescia, Morcelliana-Scholè, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> M.G. CONTINI, *Op. cit.*, p. 14.

### 3. The concept of “waste” in education and its potential meanings

It is fundamental to understand that the construct of waste embodies four meanings that can become directions for education.

The first meaning of waste refers to an educational proposal that envisages - as a formative moment - an interval of reflection and elaboration between the proposal and the solicited response. This time is necessary for the other person to evaluate the proposed plan and adjust it according to their possibilities and desires. It does not mean to promote grand expectations of success, popularity, or beauty, nor manipulative communication that drives towards performance and excellence. It is not about immediate freedom, but rather waiting patiently for the other's growth. Waiting carries with it the power to make the individual understand if what they desire is truly what they want. For example, within the 'no' - a word children, adolescents, and young adults are no longer accustomed to hearing - lies a great educational potential, as it allows time for desire to mature. Any contribution aimed at fostering the development of another person can yield generative effects only after a long, very long, winter-like period<sup>24</sup>.

In the era of hyper-hedonism, where pleasure must be compelling and immediate, it is also important to learn perseverance by waiting. As Paul Ricoeur suggests, «commitment is not the virtue of an instant [...]; it is the virtue of duration»<sup>25</sup>, of fidelity, and perseverance. Simone Weil connects the term 'waiting' to the Greek expression ἐν ὑπομονῇ (*en hypomonè*), which literally means 'to stay under, to remain within, to dwell', and consequently, to persevere<sup>26</sup>. Perseverance is an educational element of fundamental importance because it teaches a person to remain without fleeing from difficulties, to dwell in an unresolved situation without escaping, to stay in a challenging relationship without leaving, to inhabit the unknown and the incomprehensible without immediately wanting to resolve it. *Hypomonè* teaches a person creative fidelity, remaining faithful to the original inspiration while being open to novelty by courageously undertaking new paths. It leads individuals to acknowledge their personal incompleteness, fostering patience towards oneself and others and teaching respect of others' time, which often does not coincide with one's own.

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<sup>24</sup> R.G. ROMANO, *Riprogettare l'esistenza partendo dal futuro. Un itinerario dal desiderio alla speranza*, in S. POLENGHI, F. CEREDA, P. ZINI (Eds.), *La responsabilità della pedagogia nelle trasformazioni dei rapporti sociali. Storia, linee di ricerca e prospettive*, Lecce-Brescia, Pensa MultiMedia, 2021, pp. 468-475.

<sup>25</sup> P. RICOEUR, *La persona*, trad. it., Brescia, Morcelliana, 1997 [1983-1990], p. 32.

<sup>26</sup> Cfr. S. WEIL, *Attesa di Dio*, trad. it., Milano, Adelphi, 2008 [1950].

The second meaning of waste is less common and involves a shift, a change in direction, an exit from the path outlined by the educator. It is essential to recognize that there will always be a distance between the path indicated by the educator and the one chosen by the learner. It is crucial for the individual to perceive that the educator does not expect to know what the right path is or what their happiness might be. This presupposes that the educator is the first to be convinced that each person has the right to find their own path and can deviate from the educational proposal.

As Contini writes, waste is the «'distance between': between educational planning and its outcomes, between the timing of our words and the timing of responses from our educational interlocutors, between what we and they are and the horizon of the possible»<sup>27</sup>. The distance between what we are and what we could or will be always marks the starting point, the generative position of educational planning. Hypothesizing the educational potential of what is now considered waste implies believing in the strength and fragility of every human being and in their educability always and in every condition.

Generally, the abrupt deviation of the learner from the educational proposal is due to excessively high expectations nurtured by the educator, causing a fear of failure. Explaining to young people that the discrepancy between the educational proposal and their actual capabilities is less severe than they perceive, often does not serve much purpose. Rational explanations do not always aid in understanding. In family and affection-based education, we have shifted from 'You must obey!' to 'You must understand! I would like you to understand!'.

However, young people do not always fully understand, and, above all, educators and parents are not always obliged to explain everything in an attempt to obtain what they ask for. There is a pedagogical weakness among adults who have become incapable of dealing with conflict with their children and, to avoid it, are willing to provide any kind of explanation to ensure that young people 'understand.' The 'rupture' and the suffering with children have become intolerable for adults. From this new situation, a significant amount of literature has emerged on the importance - undeniably - of empathizing with children and young people, understanding their difficulties, expressing serenity, and having confidence in their abilities<sup>28</sup>. Yet, at time, this emphasis on empathy hides the adult incapability of establishing rules and enforcing them.

The third meaning of waste is *letting go*, which is the most challenging action in education, without which the entire generative educational process risks being

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<sup>27</sup> M.G. CONTINI, *Op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Cfr. A. BELLINGRERI, *Per una pedagogia dell'empatia*, Milano, Vita e Pensiero, 2005; M. FABBRI, *Controtempo. Una duplice narrazione tra crisi ed empatia*, Bergamo, Junior, 2015; M. FABBRI, *Problemi di empatia. La pedagogia delle emozioni di fronte al mutamento degli stili educativi*, Pisa, ETS, 2008.

nullified. The gap is between the emotional-affective desire to hold onto something and the rational comprehension of having to let go. Without this action, educational care turns into possession, control, and mutual dependence. The litmus test of generativity could be seen precisely in letting go of the other person and allowing them to grow autonomously, to increase their freedom, and to discover, in turn, their own generativity<sup>29</sup>. In this letting go of the other, there is the handing over of the baton, authorizing others to bring to fruition what has been sown, but in their own way. Without this loss and trust in the other, nothing new can emerge<sup>30</sup>.

The fourth and final meaning concerns existential waste, referring to what is considered 'marginal,' 'residual,' or 'of little value' in relation to everything that matters in our consumeristic societies<sup>31</sup>.

We are talking about groups and individuals who are marginal and weak in terms of power, but who, from their position, manage to pose questions and open breaches in the granite walls of postmodern certainties. Naturally, we refer to the marginalized, the poor, and those who do not conform to the current rules of success and the aesthetic canons imposed by celebrities, aesthetic consumers, and hedonists. These groups, minority subjects, actively responsible and critical, previously considered losers (pacifists, environmentalists, the many volunteers in vulnerable areas worldwide), themselves discarded in relation to groups and subjects who sometimes impose themselves violently, manage to achieve unexpected results and visibility. Contini writes:

Their message of justice and peace, respect, and solidarity plays a valuable role in pedagogical consciousness: anticipating, within the realm of possibility, educational goals that are currently unachievable, but could potentially be achieved in the future, who knows. Once again, waste is envisaged, between the given condition of our 'thrownness' into the here and now in which 'we must' live – without evading its tasks and difficulties – and the possible direction chosen, to be pursued and built with the ethical commitment of our planning for the future<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Cfr. P. BERTOLINI, *La costruzione della libertà*, in E. COLICCHI, A.M. PASSASEO (a cura di), *Educazione e libertà nel tempo presente. Percorsi, modelli, problemi*, Messina-Civitanova Marche, Armando Siciliano, 2008, pp. 151-160.

<sup>30</sup> Cfr. H.G. GADAMER, *Educare è educarsi*, trad. it e a cura di Mario Gennari, Genova, Il Melangolo, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Cfr. Z. BAUMAN, *Homo consumens. Lo sciame inquieto dei consumatori e la miseria degli esclusi*, trad. it., Trento, Erickson, 2006.

<sup>32</sup> M.G. CONTINI, *Op. cit.*, p. 17.

#### *4. Conclusion*

Are success and waste paradoxes or possible trends in today's search for meaning? If success is understood as achieving power, money, and visibility, and by waste, everything that deviates from these imperatives, the two terms become not only paradoxes, but also antinomies.

However, if success is instead defined as the ability to commit ourselves, take on the responsibilities of growth, and help others grow, allowing ourselves to be challenged by life's questions and embracing fragilities and failures, then even what is considered waste becomes a fundamental existential and educational dimension, generating meaning.

Understood in this way, the praise of waste is a serious axiological-educational proposal that primarily aims to reconsider the values, priorities, and socio-educational objectives that our societies impose and, consequently, to value alternative experiences that do not conform to the logic of being first 'at all costs.' These experiences are often ignored and marginalized by efficiency-driven and hyper-technologized societies.

Therefore, success will consist of the ability to bring together all these aspects that individualistic and self-aggrandizing societies conceal and reject, but which constitute possible directions for educational and projective meaning, along with that openness that determines the possibility of existence, today and always.

Educational commitment, in this sense, takes the form of an existential stance that, on one hand, counters both resigned passivity and the anancasm (obsession) of rampant and competitive ambition, and, on the other hand, educates to 'dare' happiness as a horizon of meaning derived from our solidarity and truly human existence with everyone in the world, even if away from the spotlight.



# NEW ADOLESCENT BEHAVIORS IN THE SCHOOL PROCESS ANALYSIS AND USEFUL SUGGESTIONS

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SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. – 2. The case of the teacher hit by pellets fired from an air gun. – 2.1. Description of the situation. – 2.2. Declared and implemented actions. – 3. Analysis of the situation. – 3.1. Offensive behavior by students. – 3.2. In-depth examination of offensive and abusive behaviors. – 4. Options for intervention. – 4.1. Grasping the limits of common strategies. – 4.2. Understand and respect the defensive function of problem behaviors. – 4.3. Addressing the belief of being worthless and intrinsically flawed.

## *1. Introduction*

In their work, it is common for teachers to encounter complexities that, besides being annoying, risk undermining the classroom group climate and sabotaging pedagogical-didactic activities. A growing challenge in this regard is certain behaviors of students who, in the presence of their peers, provoke, offend, and even mistreat educators.<sup>1</sup>

The content of this paper is primarily aimed at teachers who, as previously indicated, may encounter difficulties related to the behavior of students who provoke and mistreat them in the presence of their peers. With this in mind, to make the discussion as concrete as possible, we will describe a recent case in which a teacher was subjected to insults and mistreatment. Subsequently, valuable explanations will be offered to understand the unacceptable conduct and to devise appropriate interventions to address it.

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<sup>1</sup> A. G. ALVES et. al., *Dimensions of Student Violence Against the Teacher*, in «Revista Ciência and Saúde Coletiva», XXVIII, 3, 2022, pp. 1027–1038.

## *2. The case of the teacher hit by pellets fired from an air gun*

Among the significant incidents where an educator is mistreated and offended, we can recall the event that occurred last year in a first-year class of a secondary school in Rovigo. As is known, a student shoots some rubber pellets at the science teacher using an air gun during the lesson. Meanwhile, some classmates laugh, and another records the incident with a cell phone to promptly share it on social media.

### *2.1. Description of the situation*

In the video available on YouTube,<sup>2</sup> the teacher is seen sitting behind her desk with her legs crossed. As she tries to teach, she alternates her gaze between the computer screen and the students in front of her, some of whom are engaged in conversations, contributing to a constant background chatter.

While lifting the textbook and addressing the students, the teacher says, “See the figure on page ten, this one here!”. She then turns her face back to the display, holding the mouse in her right hand, and for about ten seconds, she does and says nothing. Meanwhile, a small rubber pellet shot from an air gun hits her on the forehead. Instinctively, the teacher touches the impacted area with her left hand and exclaims: “Oh no! I won't forgive this! It really hurts!”

Then, she stands up, leaves her desk, and, while continuing to hold her forehead, asks: “Who threw the pellet right at my head?”

As the background murmur continues, some students smirk while others, one after the other, ask:

- Student 1: “What?”
- Student 2: “What happened, Prof.?”
- Student 3: “What happened, Prof.?”

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<sup>2</sup> The referenced footage can be found on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=APGKkalmzhw>



- Student 4: “What happened, Prof.?”
- Student 5: “What happened?”

The teacher then returns to her seat and begins writing a note in the register. She resumes, “Who threw this thing at me? It really hurt! Who was it? (raising her voice). Who among you threw it? It hit right here!”.

While some students try to respond, saying, “If it came from over there... Prof...!”, another student shoots her again, and a third student remarks, “Prof., again?!”. Many students burst into laughter. Annoyed, the teacher asks: “Who finds it amusing to throw pellets at me?”.

This unpleasant and regrettable situation encompasses elements and behavioral patterns worth identifying and analyzing.

### *2.2.Declared and implemented actions*

According to Ansa,<sup>3</sup> the students who played a role in the incident mentioned in the previous paragraph should have been suspended.<sup>4</sup> Particularly, the student who fired the shot and the one who recorded the scene with a cell phone should have been punished with a five-day suspension. The student who brought the gun, allowed his peer to use it, and then hid it should have been removed from school for two days. The school principal, presumably to downplay the incident, noted that the events took place in a first-year class and involved students who had recently come from middle school and who, moreover, do not come from disadvantaged families. She added that these are normal kids who planned and participated in the teacher's mistreatment somewhat as if it were a "game" without realizing the seriousness inherent in the act

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<sup>3</sup> See, in this regard [https://www.ansa.it/veneto/notizie/2022/10/26/prof-colpita-con-pistola-ad-aria-compressa-alunni-sospesi\\_21ae4a51-20f0-4bf4-8bb2-2e62fec61b81.html](https://www.ansa.it/veneto/notizie/2022/10/26/prof-colpita-con-pistola-ad-aria-compressa-alunni-sospesi_21ae4a51-20f0-4bf4-8bb2-2e62fec61b81.html)

<sup>4</sup> In fact, following an appeal by a parent, the measure that decreed the suspension was not executed, and the students were not removed from the school. For more details, see in this regard, <https://www.tecnicadellascuola.it/prof-colpita-con-pistola-ad-aria-compressa-genitore-fa-ricorso-e-fa-annullare-la-sospensione-per-gli-studenti-responsabili>.

of ridiculing a public official.<sup>5</sup> The principal also announced that she had deemed it appropriate to inform the police chief about the incident.

The affected teacher, who initially did not submit medical reports or file formal complaints after realizing that the school management had not issued the disciplinary measures she hoped for, resorted to legal action and filed a complaint against those responsible for the reprehensible deeds.<sup>6</sup>

In summary, the interventions announced and carried out regarding the students can be summarized as follows: inquiries to ascertain the facts, namely to identify the perpetrators of the deplorable behaviors and to determine their specific responsibilities; note in the register; reprimand; suspension and expulsion from school; notification to the police chief of the incident; legal complaint by the offended teacher.

By notifying or implementing measures of the indicated type, the hope is that the students will reconsider their actions and not repeat similar behaviors in the future. Indeed, although the mentioned interventions may be appropriate, suitable, and sometimes even obligatory, they present significant limitations that will be discussed in detail in the paragraph dedicated to the search for intervention options.

In any case, it is important to emphasize from the outset that the listed strategies: a) tend to focus on observable behaviors; b) are based on a fundamentally moralistic logic; c) appeal to repentance and voluntary self-control, hoping that this will be enough to bring about change.<sup>7</sup>

### *3. Analysis of the Situation*

Reflecting on the reported situation, fundamental aspects emerge that merit analysis and deeper exploration. The goal of the forthcoming proposals is not to criticize or

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<sup>5</sup> Cfr. G. MARI, *Competenza educativa e servizi alla persona*, Roma, Edizioni Studium, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> See, in this regard the link <https://www.fanpage.it/attualita/prof-colpita-con-fucile-ad-aria-compressa-promossi-i-due-studenti-valditara-diseducativo/#:~:text=L%27insegnante%2C%20che%20durante%20una,a%20gennaio%20a%20prezentare%20denuncia>.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. G. AMENTA, *Gestire il disagio a scuola*, Brescia, Morcelliana, 2020.

demonize anyone. “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone.” The purpose is to explore the specific dynamics involved and devise intervention options that could be used to manage similar cases.

### 3.1. *Offensive Behavior by Students*

In the described situation, some students demean, ridicule, and mistreat the teacher, while some of them record the incident on a cellphone to promptly post it on social media. Many of them laugh, participate, or get actively involved. Though less evident in the video, others do little or nothing, perhaps because they do not approve of their classmates' offensive actions or would like to dissociate themselves or defend their teacher.

Given this context, it is essential first to consider that the age group of the involved students is the adolescent phase,<sup>8</sup> a period during which the sense of anonymity in some of them can grow excessively, becoming spasmodic and unbearable.<sup>9</sup> The emotions of the involved students vary, at least in some of them, from superficial amusement to indifference. Of course, it is unclear whether they feel any guilt for their actions, i.e., for mocking, hurting, and mistreating a teacher. Furthermore, the school principal highlights the judgment of immaturity, coupled with a perception of normality. She states that these students have recently arrived from lower secondary school and are not from disadvantaged or troubled families.

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<sup>8</sup> Cfr. M. LANCINI, *L'età tradita: Oltre i luoghi comuni sugli adolescenti*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2021; P. PIERRE, *Adolescenti da brivido: problemi, devianze e incubi dei giovani d'oggi*, Roma, Armando, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. D. BIONDO, *Gruppo evolutivo e branco: Strumenti e tecniche per la prevenzione e la cura*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2020; D. CHEN et al., *A Developmental Perspective on Peer Rejection, Deviant Peer Affiliation, and Conduct Problems Among Youth*, in «Child Psychiatry and Human Development», LVI, 6, 2015, pp. 823-838.

### 3.2. *In-Depth Examination of Offensive and Abusive Behaviors*

To understand offensive and abusive actions like those mentioned, it is crucial to recognize that they are carried out in the presence of others, specifically in front of classmates.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, considering some studies on the collective management of reputation,<sup>11</sup> it is not difficult to see that the group does not dictate reprehensible behavior, neither in the case at hand nor in similar ones. It is naive to assume that students - as is often imagined - "get carried away by their peers," as if they were caught in a torrential river; thus, the situation would determine their improper actions. On the contrary, the group acts as an audience. It constitutes the necessary and qualified public to whom the provocative and humiliating conduct is presented as an act of heroism.

To understand this, consider that in situations of conflict between young people and authority and significant failures, especially in the educational field, the need for reputation can become crucial, frantic, and pressing.<sup>12</sup> More precisely, when adolescents or young people believe they are worth very little or are inherently flawed, the need to compensate for a sense of inadequacy by constructing some form of reputation becomes acute. Especially when they believe they lack the qualities and resources necessary for a positive reputation, it is almost automatic to aim at building a negative one, which ensures the same result: satisfying the need to feel like someone, namely essential and worthy of respect and dignity. The paradox, of course, is creating an acceptable reputation through unacceptable actions, trusting peers will consider them heroic.

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<sup>10</sup> Cfr. G. AMENTA, *Gestire il disagio a scuola*, cit.

<sup>11</sup> N. EMLER, S. REICHER, *Adolescence and Delinquency: The Collective Management of Reputation*, Cambridge, Blackwell Publishing, 1995; A. CARROLL et al., *Delinquency and Reputational Orientations of Adolescent At-Risk and Not-At-Risk Males and Females*, in «Educational Psychology», XXVIII, 7, 2008, pp. 777-793.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. F. MONTUSCHI, A. PALMONARI, *Nuovi adolescenti. Dalla conoscenza all'incontro*, Roma, Edizioni Dehoniane, 2006.

The deplorable and aberrant behaviors considered are merely a means to attest to oneself and others their worth.<sup>13</sup> A way to demonstrate possession of those qualities deemed necessary to be admired, accepted, considered,<sup>14</sup> or to integrate into reference groups, to avoid the risk of being ostracized and excluded, rejected and marginalized.<sup>15</sup>

It is essential to understand that the more disproportionate and deep-rooted the belief of being profoundly and intrinsically flawed, the more painful and urgent the need to be accepted. The more spectacular must be the feat to redeem oneself and finally feel qualified to be welcomed, admired, and considered worthy of respect and esteem.

Finally, considering the function of the indicated deplorable actions, it becomes understandable that intensifying sanctions risks producing paradoxical outcomes and increasing the severity of punishments risks making the trophy to be won through deplorable or deviant actions more attractive and appealing. Consequently, the danger is that the value of the trophy increases instead of decreases. Its conquest will require even more courage, strength, and audacity. Therefore, the provocative act may be perceived as even more valid to attest and document the possession of those widely coveted properties to feel less flawed.<sup>16</sup>

In this perspective, ultimately, can be found usable explanations for the trivial, mild, and incomprehensible motivations declared by the protagonists when asked why they committed specific offensive, deviant, and deplorable actions: "for fun," "to see what it feels like," "to entertain ourselves." In reality, it is worth reiterating once again that these behaviors are carried out to free oneself from emptiness and uselessness, to compensate for the despair linked to the fear of being alone, excluded, and ostracized. These behaviors performed to gain prestige and credit are considered a *sine qua non* condition for being accepted and welcomed into reference groups.

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<sup>13</sup> N. EMLER, S. REICHER, *Adolescence and Delinquency*, cit.; L. LÓPEZ ROMERO, E. ROMERO, *Reputation Management of Adolescents in Relation to Antisocial Behavior*, in «The Journal of Genetic Psychology: Research and Theory on Human Development», LXXII, 4, 2011, pp. 440-446.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. F. MONTUSCHI, A. PALMONARI, *Nuovi adolescenti*, cit.

<sup>15</sup> A.A. SHILLING, C.M. BROWN, *Goal-Driven Resource Redistribution: An Adaptive Response to Social Exclusion*, in «Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences», X, 3, 2016, pp. 149-167.

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. F. MONTUSCHI, A. PALMONARI, *Nuovi adolescenti*, cit.

#### *4. Options for Intervention*

As variously observed in the preceding pages, about the situation under examination, the actions undertaken or announced include: a) questions aimed at establishing the facts, identifying the authors of the deplorable behaviors, and determining their specific responsibilities; b) reprimand of the involved students; c) suspension or removal from the school of the perpetrators of the improper behaviors; d) notification to the police chief of the events for further investigations or possible actions; e) filing of a complaint by the offended teacher, to pursue any legal responsibilities.

##### *4.1. Grasping the Limits of Common Strategies*

By notifying or adopting measures of the type indicated, the hope is that the students reflect on their improper behaviors, repent for having carried them out, and avoid repeating them in the future. It is essential to recognize that the interventions mentioned, although appropriate and necessary in many cases, have significant limitations that significantly reduce their effectiveness. As already observed, they tend to focus on evident behaviors, are based on an essentially moralistic logic, and appeal to repentance and voluntary self-control to promote change.<sup>17</sup>

To understand the indicated limits, it can be helpful to imagine, for a moment, exporting and applying the logic underlying the measures listed in the medical field and verifying the consequences that might arise from it. In particular, when accompanying a child with a fever of 40 degrees Celsius to the doctor, a reasonable parent usually expects the professional to make a good diagnosis and after prescribing some appropriate therapy. Rarely would the parent above be satisfied if the expert limited themselves to indicating medications to reduce the temperature or eliminate the fever without understanding what it signals. At a minimum, such a parent would

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<sup>17</sup> Cfr. G. AMENTA, *Gestire il disagio a scuola*, cit.

express surprise if, appealing to voluntary self-control, the doctor admonished the child and invited him to get over the fever. However, when reasoning about problem behaviors and unacceptable behaviors, it is sometimes considered reasonable to invite students to modify or eliminate them, ignoring what they signal. It even assumes that symptoms and underlying problems are the same thing and, consequently, by modifying or eliminating the first, one deludes oneself into solving the issues at the root. Worse still, there is a tendency to demand changes that the students cannot realize, if only because what from an external perspective are problem behaviors, in reality, also constitute fundamental defensive strategies to protect themselves.

#### *4.2. Understand and Respect the Defensive Function of Problem Behaviors*

From what has been observed in the concluding part of the previous paragraph, it follows that the variously considered behaviors - legitimately judged reprehensible and even deviant - can be modified and easily eliminated when they are no longer needed or when others are constructed that can replace and substitute them. Otherwise, it is like trying to take away a lifebuoy from someone who is using it to avoid sinking: it is unlikely that they will give it up. In other words, it is improbable that an individual will abandon a defense, if not temporarily before having devised another.

For instance, the boy who has decided not to study in rebellion against his parents who imposed a school he dislikes can be helped to assert himself, that is, to directly and assertively declare his school preferences and ask his parents to respect them. For example, he could tell his parents that the school they chose for him is distasteful and that, despite trying and retrying, he cannot come to like it and commit to studying. He might add that he would appreciate help changing schools to prevent rejection. If all this is not possible, the boy could be helped to acknowledge the situation, that is, to consider the school experience resulting from his parents' imposition as a kind of parenthesis, as a segment of a path that, once overcome, will allow him to continue on

his journey towards realizing his dreams and his self-project of the life. He can also understand that liking the school he dislikes and studying are different things; that is, deciding not to study as a form of rebellion represents only a way to cause further harm to himself and to adjust accordingly.

#### *4.3. Addressing the Belief of Being Worthless and Intrinsically Flawed*

When the focus is on the overt behaviors of students, it becomes difficult to grasp what underlies them. Offensive and abusive behaviors often indicate the presence of a need for reputation, which stems from an excessively painful self-concept that amplifies feelings of inadequacy, fragility, and vulnerability.<sup>18</sup>

As highlighted by many, one of the preferred defensive strategies to compensate for this feeling of inadequacy is: to try to appear better or superior to others;<sup>19</sup> to adopt the guise of being strong and tough; to celebrate integrity; to deny any form of tenderness, considering it inappropriate or a sign of weakness.<sup>20</sup> It is important to note that the more individuals perceive themselves as fragile, vulnerable, inferior, and inadequate, the more likely they are to construct a facade of superiority, strength, toughness, and courage. The poorer the self-concept, consequently, the more abnormal and exaggerated the defensive strategies devised and adopted to gain a reputation will be.<sup>21</sup>

Given this, in managing complex situations of the kind mentioned, it is crucial to intervene in the negative beliefs the learners have about themselves to change them. This is, of course, a goal that requires long-term educational paths, considering that

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<sup>18</sup> Z. KRIZAN, O. JOHAR, *Narcissistic Rage Revisited*, in «Journal of Personality and Social Psychology», LVIII, 5, 2015, pp. 784-801.

<sup>19</sup> A. ADLER, *Inferiorità e compenso psichico. Un contributo alla medicina clinica*, Milano, Mimesis, 2003; H.L. ANSBACHER, *The Development of Adler's Concept of Social Interest: A Critical Study*, in «Journal of Individual Psychology», XXXIV, 2, 1978, pp. 118-152.

<sup>20</sup> W. GAYLIN, *Hatred: The Psychological Descent into Violence*, New York, Public Affairs, 2003.

<sup>21</sup> R.F. BAUMEISTER et. al., *Self-Esteem, Narcissism, and Aggression. Does Violence Result from Low Self-Esteem or from Threatened Egotism?*, in «Current Directions in Psychological Science», IX, 1, 2000, pp. 26-29.



any quick strategies may be helpful in dispelling anxiety but risk being illusory and producing redundant boomerang effects.

It is necessary to encourage the belief of being valuable regardless of conduct, results, or products that the learner can achieve. If we adopt the language of Transactional Analysis, it is essential to prioritize, from the early stages of the learner's development, the use of "unconditional strokes" or those aimed at being in addition to those aimed at doing. The word stroke, according to Berne,<sup>22</sup> primarily indicates various forms of intimate physical contact. Some caress the child, kiss them and give them a pat or a pinch. By extension, the word stroke can familiarly indicate any act that implies the recognition of the presence of another person.

As is well known, the mentioned reflections starting from the classical studies of Spitz<sup>23</sup> on maternal deprivation, which documented how, in environments poor in stimuli, orphaned children often died due to the atrophy of the Central Nervous System. On the contrary, those who were touched and even treated roughly and violently had a higher chance of survival. The referenced research demonstrates that attention and stimulation are fundamental for living.<sup>24</sup> They confirm that the so-called "negative strokes" are far preferable to their lack or their total deprivation.<sup>25</sup>

For convenience, examples of unconditional positive recognition are provided, that is, directed towards being marked by increasingly heavy weight that educators can adapt and recycle in educational relationships:

- "Hello!";
- "I am glad to see you!";
- "How nice that you are here today!";

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<sup>22</sup> E. BERNE, *What Do You Say After You Say Hello, The Psychology of Human Destiny*, New York, Grove Press, 1972.

<sup>23</sup> R.A. SPITZ, *The First Year of Life: A Psychoanalytic Study of Normal and Deviant Development of Object Relations*, New York, International Universities Press, Inc., 1965.

<sup>24</sup> J. BOWLBY, *The Making and Breaking of Affectional Bonds*, London, Tavistock Publications, 1979.

<sup>25</sup> S. WOOLLAMS, M. BROWN, *Transactional Analysis. A Modern and Comprehensive Text of TA Theory and Practice*, Dexter, Huron Valley Institute, 1978.

- "I like working with you!";
- "You are unique";
- "I love you".

Coherently and appropriately integrated by non-verbal behavior (facial expressions, gestures, physical contact), such messages can be used to communicate to the learners that they are essential as a person, that is, insofar as they exist, and that they are far from “transparent,” insignificant or useless.

Indeed, it is necessary for significant people, teachers, and parents, to demonstrate their belief in the learners by showing them dedication and commitment, performing their role and their work to the best of their ability. These are, in fact, attitudes capable of meta-communicating to the learner that they are important and worthy of value. In this sense, the educator needs to learn to cheer for the learners, following them in their growth and process of change.

Moreover, the frantic search for reputation, which indicates a lack of self-esteem, underlies the need to reconcile with oneself first and foremost. Those who laboriously try to fill their lack of self-esteem, hoping to gain recognition and acceptance from others, need to reconcile with themselves, permit themselves to be themselves and accept themselves. Hoping to be admired and recognized by others, in reality, is vain and illusory. It risks inducing dependence on others and their judgment, which, as seen in the case described at the beginning of this work, can result in offensive, abusive, destructive, and deviant behavior. Indeed, it is possible to free oneself from such dependence by allowing oneself to be oneself and by acknowledging, monitoring, and downscaling, in particular, certain parental dispositions and severe internal criticisms, which sometimes even become merciless.

Thirdly, to reduce the allure of deviant behaviors, it is essential to encourage learners to experience expressive forms of themselves that are authentic, free, and creative rather than demonstrative. Expressive and free behavior refers to the person's authenticity and genuineness. Adapted action, whether of a rebellious or conformist type, has others as its reference. In the first case, the horizon of reference for the

conduct, which values the person and brings the action back to its objective meaning, is acting to be. In the second, it is acting to obtain something. By promoting expressive and free action, educators can help learners rediscover their positive qualities and dust off their resources. This can become a powerful antidote against the ingrained sense of defectiveness that can result in the realization of striking, destructive, and deviant behaviors.<sup>26</sup>

What is proposed requires time, patience, and dedication. However, it can allow learners to emerge from certain abysses, that is, to develop healthy self-esteem and to overcome the frantic search for reputation by resorting to destructive behavior for themselves and others.

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<sup>26</sup> F. MONTUSCHI, *Fare ed essere, il prezzo della gratuità in educazione*, Assisi, Cittadella, 1997.



# SUSPENDED ADOLESCENCE, FRAGMENTATION OF THE SELF AND NEW FRAGILITIES

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SUMMARY: 1. Fragility and adolescence – 2. the social withdrawal – 3. Hyperconnectivity.

## *1. Fragility And Adolescence*

Isolation, social withdrawal and hyperconnectivity are the current fragilities that increasingly characterize the young people. If with fragility we mean something that breaks easily when exposed to strikes, then adolescence fully represents this phase of life<sup>1</sup>. We are witnessing the expansion of new fragilities above all during the current sanitary emergency; these vulnerabilities do not allow the full development of the individual, social and relational dimension in the adolescence phase.

Beside these fragilities there is of course a less troubled and suffered adolescence that is more characterized by the experimentation of the self, by the extensive but continuous change as far as the main evolutionary tasks are concerned. In this article we examine the suspended, isolated, interrupted adolescence (or pre-adolescence): a condition that is not specifically connected with the current health emergency, but which highlights even more the anxiety of the young people increasingly hidden in the virtual world and in a social withdrawal with the consequential suspension of the evolutionary phase connected with the development of socialization. The deep understanding of these phenomena requires an analysis of multiple variables:

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. M.R. MANCANIELLO, “*Adolescenti in situazione di fragilità*”, in C. BENELLI, M. GIJON (a cura di), (*in*) *Tessere relazioni educative. Teorie e pratiche di inclusione in contesti di vulnerabilità*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2020.

individual, environmental, economic and social ones. The intention of this article is to take into consideration the aspects of the psycho-pedagogical development of the young people dealing with their evolutionary tasks. A challenge for the educational staff, for the institutions and for a pedagogy that promotes inclusion in order to hinder the educational isolation and desertion.

Even if we know the typical fragilities of the evolutionary crisis in the adolescence phase, we increasingly witness the interruption of the socialization experiences in different educational contexts. The pull towards hyperconnectivity, the social withdrawal and the suspension of the interpersonal relationships are threatening even more the development of the individual and social evolutionary tasks in the pre-adolescence phase, causing new fragilities and the increasingly frequent onset of new adolescent problems and pathologies. By studying the new vulnerabilities of the today adolescents, the researchers and the experts of educational processes can hinder this phenomenon. As a matter of fact the school dropout allows to become more aware of the educational and didactic proposals needed for the educational pathway of young generations, supporting also the reference figures and the institution involved in the educational cure. Becoming adolescents, young people make social, friendship and love experiences outside their family, acquiring new roles that promote and facilitate the development of their identity. The adolescent change, that involves the inner and outer world at the same time, has been considered for a long time so upsetting that it has been associated with metaphors like storm, crisis, disaster and breakdown<sup>2</sup>. From a psycho-social point of view, some authors observe that the current adolescent are characterized by a relative continuity of the self-concept, without having experienced a break with the family of origin or harsh protests like in the past. In the passage from childhood to adolescence, the evolutionary challenge remains the definition of themselves and their identity formation<sup>3</sup>. Adolescence is a crucial moment of exploration and change in which the body becomes the equivalent of the figural

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<sup>2</sup> Cfr. E. BORGNA, *La fragilità che è in noi*, Torino, Einaudi, 2014; G. PIETROPOLLI CHARMET, *Fragile e spavaldo*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. E. ERIKSON, *Gioventù e crisi d'identità*, Roma, Armando, 1974, [1968].

identity and where the relationship with the other is fundamental for the formation and completion of the experience of our physical and psychic identity.

The analysis of some theories on the moral development in the adolescent phase will help us to see such vulnerabilities as phenomena able to block the development process and the consequential individual and social maturation of the adolescents. Various authors consider the moral development as a part of the process of socialization and some representatives of the social psychology dare to push on stating that socialization and moral development are the same<sup>4</sup>. A fundamental characteristic of the moral development theory is the conception of morality as a whole of particular and specific actions, contextualized in a process of interactions of the individual with the social environment. The moral development as a whole is characterized by real experiences, from which the individual absorbs and elaborates a personal awareness of what is socially allowed and accepted. The acquisition of moral values is based also on the learning of regulations through experiences and confrontations in the peer group.

Therefore we wonder whether the difficulty in the peer relationships hinders the social development. And how the socialization experiences filtered by the web can influence the social development of adolescents with a social life which is mainly conditioned by the web. Last but not least in the current period of sanitary emergency what has happened to our young people already in a condition of vulnerability? The data are even more discouraging and when analyzed show a generation of suffering young people and more and more isolated and withdrawn<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Cfr. A. BANDURA et alii, *Mechanisms of moral disengagement in the Exercise of moral agency*, in «Journal of Personality and Social Psychology», 71(2), 1996, pp. 364–374.; A. BANDURA, *Autoefficacia: teoria e applicazioni*, Trento, Edizioni Erickson, 1997.

<sup>5</sup> See. D. SCHWARTZ, Y. RYJOVA, A. R. KELLEGHAN et alii, *The refugee crisis and peer relationships during childhood and adolescence*, in «Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology», Volume 74, march, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2021.101263>.; UNESCO, *COVID-19 educational disruption and response*, UNESCO website, <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>, 2020; OECD, *Education at a Glance 2020*, OECD Indicators, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2020; DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION, *Coronavirus (COVID-19): implementing protective measures in education and childcare settings*, GOV.UK, 2020, ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)).

## 2. *The Social Withdrawal*

We have already stated that the social development during adolescence is necessary for the identity development and that the interruption or suspension of this phase causes the isolation of the young people. This isolation is a form of protection from social contacts and communication and is referred to all the form of isolation in particular from the peer group. The social withdrawal is basically a behaviour phenomenon with mixed clinical pictures, with extremely varied dynamics and conflicts. However, for many adolescent the withdrawal is something more than a simple symptomatic behaviour. For some adolescents it represents the identity symbol of their way of face and experience the adolescence. “Withdrawing” is the mental, symbolic and physical action that identifies themselves beyond the symptom. For the withdrawn adolescent the gaze of the other seems unbearable, because it brings judgement: the mortification of their fragile and inadequate new adolescent self. The withdrawal avoids the risks of mortification and indubitably seems the wiser choice, the only that can guarantee to survive. The forms of withdrawal are partially pervasive: in some cases they show a total social withdrawal with the consequential abandonment of any contact with the external world and a compensatory hyperinvestment on the virtual world. The social withdrawal does not allow the “social birth” and the evolutionary movement of separation and diversification from the parent figures, which is a necessary passage in the evolutionary development in the adolescence phase. The withdrawn adolescent remains deprived of the evolutionary nourishment of friendship, of the group and of the relevant value system.

From a psychopathological point of view the social withdrawal is considered as a consequence of internal factors such as anxiety, negative self-esteem and self-perceived difficulties in social abilities and in social relationships<sup>6</sup>. The social

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<sup>6</sup> See. H.J. RUBIN, I.S. RUBIN, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. 2nd Edition, London, Sage Publications, 1995.; K. H. RUBIN, J. B. ASENDORPF, *Social withdrawal, inhibition, and shyness in childhood: Conceptual and definitional issues*. in K. H. RUBIN, J. B. ASENDORPF (Eds.), *Social withdrawal, inhibition, and shyness in childhood*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.,



withdrawal could represent an attack to the parental figures and an attempt to communicate an urgency of separation. Moreover, it represents one of the most important consequences of the peer rejection in late childhood and in the adolescence. As a matter of fact it is exactly in this evolutionary phase that the social withdrawal becomes a risk factor to all intent and purposes. Among these clinical forms, one in particular expresses the radical closure to the world: the loneliness of the young people who seek refuge in their bedrooms for months or years, refusing any contact with the external world, making a massive use of the internet and going out of their rooms only for urgent needs.

In the last years a highly discussed phenomenon is the Japanese so-called “hikikomori”. This word means: isolation, closure, retreat. The word hikikomori was coined in Japan in the '70 by the psychiatrist Saitō Tamaki; today the government estimates count more than one million cases, of which more than 90% are male, almost all firstborn. None of them goes to school or to work and the school dropout is often justified by acts of bullying suffered during the study pathway. Many hikikomori spend even twelve hours at the computer and some authors believe that the internet addiction is the primary cause of social withdrawal, whereas others consider it as a secondary cause and think that the use of the internet and of the social network is the only way in which the withdrawn adolescent maintains a sort of link with the rest of the world. Most studies show the absence of a clear definition of the term and there is no agreement event on the diagnostic criteria for the identification of a well-defined syndrome. In addition many authors consider this discomfort as a specific cultural response to the changes that have occurred in Japan in the last years and connect the onset of this problem to the Japanese social, familiar and cultural structures, whereas others identify this discomfort also in other countries<sup>7</sup>. According to many studies conducted on the diffusion of this phenomenon outside Japan, the hikikomori

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Mahwah (NJ) 1993, pp. 3-17. K. H. RUBIN, R. J. COPLAN, *Paying Attention to and Not Neglecting Social Withdrawal and Social Isolation*. Merrill-Palmer Quarterly, 50(4), 2004, pp. 506-534. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mpq.2004.0036>

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. F. AGUGLIA et alii, *Il fenomeno dell'Hikikomori: cultural bound o quadro psicopatologico emergente?*, in «Giornale italiano di Psicopatologia», n. 16, 2010.

syndrome is not exclusively a Japanese phenomenon but it goes beyond the specific cultural context, even if it is influenced by it. This phenomenon highlights the increasing struggle of the individual in the current world, where the loneliness of the segregation in one's own room seems the only solution compared to the shame of existing<sup>8</sup> The young hikikomori seem to have abandoned any attempt to become independent by going beyond the separation and identification: this aspect has been identified by the psychologist Margaret Mahler regarding the overcoming of the mother-child symbiosis, that has been later analyzed by John Bowlby<sup>9</sup> in the studies about the attachment styles in the psychodynamic field.

The hikikomori syndrome is part of the new addictions and is classified as a form of deviance, since the hikikomori subjects reacts to the social discomfort by isolating themselves, withdrawing and refusing the other self<sup>10</sup>. The virtual environment becomes progressively the only useful channel for maintaining any contact with themselves and with the world and enables them to find refuge from judgmental gazes of the outer world. According to many studies the hikikomori syndrome may appear already in ten-years subjects but it is more frequent in the years of the secondary school and at the beginning of the university studies, in other words between the fifteen and nineteen years old, i.e. the adolescent age<sup>11</sup>.

This syndrome shows many symptoms in those who suffer from it: fear of the others, obsessive-compulsive disorders, insomnia and day-night reversal, lack of communication, child regression, domestic violence, school absence, apathy and depression. These are some of the symptoms that can be consequential to social isolation.

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<sup>8</sup> Cfr. R. SPINIELLO, A. PIOTTI, D. COMAZZI (a cura di), *Il corpo in una stanza. Adolescenti ritirati che vivono di computer*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2015; C. RICCI, *La volontaria reclusione. Italia e Giappone: Un legame inquietante*, Roma Aracne, 2014. G. SAGLIOCCO (A cura di), *Hikikomori e adolescenza, fenomenologia dell'autoreclusione*, Sesto San Giovanni, Mimesis, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. J. BOWLBY, *Attaccamento e perdita*, vol. 3, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1983.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr.. K. BAGNATO, *L' hikikomori: un fenomeno di autoreclusione giovanile*, Roma, Carocci, 2017.; M. LANCINI (a cura di), *Il ritiro sociale negli adolescenti. La solitudine di una generazione iperconnessa*, Cortina, Milano, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. M. LANCINI (a cura di), *Il ritiro sociale negli adolescenti. La solitudine di una generazione iperconnessa*, cit.

### 3. *Hyperconnectivity*

The expansion of the media and the possibilities offered by the internet to open to the world, to exchange messages, to identify with one's own peer and the globalization of the consumer market have created a real and virtual relationship network in which every youngster is unavoidably immersed. As a matter of fact this is a hyperconnected generation: a new youth condition with the opportunity to be cast in the world but, at the same time, to be exposed to new fragilities.

Adolescents get in touch early with their own generation, developing an almost natural sense of belonging to a wider group than that of their street group of friends. Thanks to the use of technologies and to the homogenisation of the trends by the consumer market, the new adolescents can count on a very precocious experience of belonging to the collective of their generation, increasingly immersed in the virtual world, in a continuous switch between presence and absence. If we analyze the concept of presence, we see that the latin root *preasènzia*, feminine noun, indicates presence, power, efficiency, appearance but also in a possible composition. Being in front of each other in a physical proximity, where the bodies and the place determine the relationship and its qualities. The presence refers to something that reveals itself, that is visible and tangible. The contrary of presence is absence from a place in which one regularly finds oneself, and that refers to a deprivation, a lack. In the internet there is no body, it lacks physically. The other is not there but at the same time there are their own figurative substitutes or symbolic portrayals. There are no feelings expressed with contact, but there are controlled emotions, filtered and revealed with different communication channels and represented by the "emoticons". The concepts of social withdrawal and hyperconnectivity develop from the theme of absence and lack.

From the other perspective we observe that adults are worried that the young people can find themselves trapped in the mesh of the net, unable to handle the time of connection and to defend themselves from the dangers of the virtual world. The new addiction of the young people is considered the biggest pandemic of all times, like

the drug addiction, that is to say the *internet addiction*<sup>12</sup>: a disorder connected to the abuse of the internet characterized by the substitution of the real world with a mediatic reality.

The diagnostic manual of personality disorders DSM-5 specifies only the aspects linked to the abuse of video-games, and in the ICD-11, the 11th revision of the international classification compiled by the World Health Organisation we can find the “Gaming Disorder”, namely the abuse of videogames. Some studies demonstrate a correlation between emotional disorders and in particular the depression in young people, associated to the internet addiction. Other phenomena are school phobia, anxiety disorders and sometimes suicidal ideation. In the last years one more specific diagnostic category has been added to the one already known and identified, and namely the one regarding the abuse of the smartphone: the “no mobile phone phobia”. The peculiarity is the anxious state generated by the loss of the telephone or when it discharges or the credit has run out. The no mobile phone phobia hides the need for relationships, for acknowledgment, for being seen but also the fear of being isolated, excluded from the virtual world, defined: “Fomo” (Fear of missing out).

In this pandemic phase the adolescents are under a particular stress because of their condition, a stress that amplifies the specific characteristics of their development phase, turning it into a sort of “extended adolescence”: becoming adults, that is to say reaching a complete growth up to maturity, requires more time. The current limitations for the control of the epidemic, that impose physical isolation, represent one of the most difficult moments for the adolescents who should experiment the time of desire, and that have the need for peer interaction, typical needs of this specific phase of life. In this moment adults should handle and act against the specific suffering factors of adolescence that are obliged to stay at home, by helping them to find a way to cultivate and promote the social connection also during this isolation, finding and supporting the possible ways of socialization.

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<sup>12</sup> Cfr. Ivi.

The current studies emphasize the risks of the virtual interaction, that seems to cause anxiety, depression, and in the worst cases, also suicidal thoughts. At the same time the literature indicates that the virtual interaction can be useful in some contexts to hinder the isolation phenomenon. Instead of prioritizing a reduction of the time spent online, we should carefully reflect on the fundamental need of the adolescent, that is to socialize. Depicting the social media above all as a risk rather than a potential support can be misleading. Group meetings can be a virtual substitution that hinder social isolation; the collective *streaming* of a film can be the same as an evening at the cinema; many are the applications that allow the synchronic streaming. A moderate quantity of time spent alone in front of the screen allows distraction as well, and does not involves necessarily significant risks.

In a study published on the review *The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health*<sup>13</sup>, researchers encourage politicians to consider the effects of the physical distancing, introduced in order to control the diffusion of COVID-19, on the social development and wellbeing of young people. The lack of social, face to face contact with their peers, can interrupt the process of interaction and social development with peers and in the long run, have harmful effects with consequences on mental health and on the development of the sense of the self. A condition that requires to be monitored, examined and critically analyzed in order to limit the school dropout caused also by a depreciating and unproductive judgement and by a possible labelling of the phenomenon.

And the outcomes are emerging right now.

Pedagogists, psychologists and the professionals of the education sciences are those who have the task to take care of them. Thei action should be focused on the development of educational pathways with the intent to facilitate socialization and take care of the even more critical fragilities caused by the pandemic.

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<sup>13</sup> Cfr. in: <https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/home>



NAVIGATORS WITHOUT A COMPASS. ADOLESCENTS BETWEEN  
DISORIENTATION AND SELF-CARE

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SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. – 2. The construction of values in adolescents. - 3. Adolescents between disorientation and self-care.

*1. Introduction*

The word “ideal” derives etymologically from the Greek “idéa” and late Latin “idealís”, meaning it refers «to something that exists only in thought and primarily resides in the world of ideas»<sup>1</sup>. The etymological meaning of “ideal” relates thus to the inner orientation and motivation of natural values.

However, in natural values, we find only specific intentions and varying degrees of motivation to translate these intentions into concrete life plans, but we do not find clear indications of “how” to achieve them. Notably, the word “idealist” refers to a person who lives more in the world of ideas and illusions rather than in concrete reality.

In the past, the values that guided individuals’ lives were passed down from generation to generation and represented unalterable and unquestionable truths that one had to believe in and obey. Consequently, the possibility of dissociating from them or forming a personal interpretation was excluded.

The consequences for those who transgressed were threats of punishment and a strong sense of guilt and shame. Nevertheless, over the centuries, the possibility of

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<sup>1</sup> GABRIELLI, *Dizionario della lingua italiana*, Carlo Signorelli editore, Milano, 1993, p. 936.

orienting oneself in the preference of one's own values has been the easier and more functional choice.

Over time, the shift from a rigidly heteronomous morality to an autonomous one has encouraged a freer and more authentic search for values, especially within oneself. This has created the conditions for individuals to focus on a more natural and intuitive perspective of what is right or wrong<sup>2</sup>.

This was also facilitated by the fact that each individual has an internal compass that guides them toward ethical behavior. However, this compass sometimes suggests paths different from those leading to genuine well-being because while the idea of what we want usually appears quite clearly in our minds, the subsequent steps toward reality are often not so clear. In other words, the actual journey to achieve that path, while driven by strong motivation, is always filled with numerous and different difficulties. Navigating this path is like moving within a labyrinth where it is easy to become disoriented.

## *2. The construction of values in adolescents*

Adolescence is a period of transition, transformation, and identity redefinition. It is the time when one decides to become an adult and what kind of adult they want to be. These decisions are often unconscious and influenced by automatic replication of other models but can become conscious and integrated with their multiple self-needs<sup>3</sup>.

Around the ages of 11-12, the ability to “construct” one's own values begins to break free from the internal conditioning imposed by the authority of parents and the reference group. Piaget<sup>4</sup> and Kohlberg<sup>5</sup> emphasize that, even at this age, hypothetical-deductive thinking is present, allowing preadolescents more autonomy in evaluating

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<sup>2</sup> Cfr. Z. BAUMAN, *Postmodern ethics*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. A. PALMONARI (a cura di), *Psicologia dell'adolescenza*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> J. PIAGET, *Le jugement moral chez l'enfant*, Paris, Felix Alcan, 1932.

<sup>5</sup> L. KOHLBERG, *The psychology of moral development*, New York, Harper & Row, 1981.



their values. The individual begins to form their personal conscience, which will eventually enable them to autonomously formulate their concept of right and wrong and define their True Self.

Adolescents have new needs, dreams, and sometimes conflicting expectations, arising from impulses, emotions, and new developmental tasks. Additionally, the transition from childhood to adolescence inevitably involves leaving behind a privileged phase of life to step into an uncertain future. Adolescents experience thus a genuine developmental crisis, torn between wanting to remain connected to the illusions and pleasures of childhood and fulfilling their developmental tasks, even if it means heading into an ambiguous and feared horizon<sup>6</sup>. In such conditions, it is easy to deviate from what is considered “normal” and choose pseudo-values.

This deviation could occur because the values an adolescent should naturally construct during this phase may have been weakened, eroded, or obliterated by severe frustrations or educational deficiencies. As a result of these negative conditions, instead of self-esteem, respect for others, and trust in the future, the adolescent may manifest insecurity, sadness, apathy, withdrawal, anger, anxiety, and even dysfunctional behaviors. In other words, various negative factors could alter the inner balance of the adolescent and hinder the expression of their values.

In addition to being characterized by conflicting feelings and emotions, adolescence is also marked by «disordered openings and sudden leaps, often followed by closures, reversals, and genuine developmental blocks. The perspective of young people undergoes rapid changes in a few years, enriching their affective, relational, and instinctual dimensions, completely overturning their way of thinking about life and themselves and forcing them to let go of old, outdated ways of desiring and thinking about reality and relationships»<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> C. NANNI, *Adolescenza e gioventù: difficile età, difficile crescita*, in R.G. ROMANO (a cura di), *Ciclo di vita e dinamiche educative nella società postmoderna*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2004, pp. 126-155.

<sup>7</sup> D. MISCIOSCIA, *I valori nel processo d'individuazione*, in D. MISCIOSCIA (a cura di), *I valori degli adolescenti. Nuove declinazioni degli ideali e ruolo educativo degli adulti*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2021, p. 52.

These rapid transformative processes introduce new values that different educational cultures may not always support, thus impeding the natural ethical development that occurs in this phase of life. Often, societal role models guide young people toward choices that have little ethical basis, creating illusions and disorientation among the youth.

Initially, the values embraced by preadolescents to navigate their new world and define their True Selves are influenced by both their inner world and the cultural reference. They identify with emotions and instincts that make them feel more independent and expressive, while also paying attention to messages from the cultural reference to understand the most appropriate way to shape their values in reality.

As time goes on and they gain greater intellectual and cultural resources, young people can more precisely define their True Selves and their values. At this point, a young person will not feel the need to identify solely with a simple distinguishing trait of their new identity (e.g., a piece of clothing or a song that represents them) but will sense the need to more accurately delineate their social affiliations and values, which represent integral parts of their future identity and facilitate the process of “subjectivation”<sup>8</sup>.

Regarding the value propositions of previous generations, it is important to note that they have often been misleading for young people in their quest for their True Selves. While on one hand, these propositions promoted the identification and affirmation of certain values, on the other hand, when they were not fully accepted by the young, they were not listened to, and the opportunity to appreciate their natural values was not given.

In particular, the value guidance from adults, typically based on partial natural values, triggered mechanisms of denial in the young. In some cases, excessive radicalization of the values underlying their ethical project deeply damaged their

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<sup>8</sup> Cfr. C. NANNI, *Op. cit.*

original moral qualities and negatively influenced the ability for new generations to identify with them<sup>9</sup>.

It is no coincidence that all the social and political models that have emerged throughout history symbolize only a partial expression of natural values. Once established in society as morality and, therefore, as “custom”, they became the ethics guiding that specific society. Therefore, every social morality is not only a necessary “custom” for identifying one’s values but also an armor that hinders the evolution of new generations and prevents them from thinking with balance about what is right or wrong<sup>10</sup>.

The historical, cultural, and social evolution of recent decades has created conditions for today’s adolescents to approach adulthood with greater ethical awareness and freedom, without the burden of too many prejudices.

Examining the ethical landscape in which young people navigate, it is clear that many of them have recognized the significant challenges to be addressed: the pursuit of real gender equality, overcoming prejudices against homosexuals, environmental issues, the climate crisis, a new vision of international relations, and more - all ethical challenges often overlooked by previous generations.

All of this has been made possible thanks to four conditions that have gradually enabled this ethical revolution in “advanced democracies”<sup>11</sup>:

1. The end of ideologies: this condition has significantly reduced conflict between older and younger generations, promoting collaboration between them in the perspective of cultural and ethical renewal;
2. The acceleration of history: economic and technological development has accelerated cultural processes, making individuals more open and flexible to change;

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<sup>9</sup> Cfr. A. MAGGIOLINI, M. DI LORENZO, *Scelte estreme in adolescenza. Le ragioni emotive dei processi di radicalizzazione*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> D. MISCIOSCIA, *Op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem.*

3. The presence of credible interlocutors: some adults from older generations have shown a willingness to abandon old ideologies in favor of seeking new ethical values, allowing them to support and assist the younger generations in their quest for ideals;
4. The new generations are unwilling to give up their ethical values and are open to renewal: this is evident from the commitment that young people put into activities like volunteering and ecological movements. Furthermore, their open-mindedness has been strengthened through travel and participation in international projects.

Indeed, it is important to emphasize that the current culture exhibits numerous inconsistencies and negativities that particularly affect culturally vulnerable young people. While there are conditions and stimuli that promote the development and maturation of their True Selves, these opportunities are often available to only a minority of young individuals – those who receive the right guidance from primary educational institutions such as family and school to support their ethical growth. Others are at risk of being disoriented by these inconsistencies and contradictions, which may lead them towards less ethical choices and the manifestation of dysfunctional behaviors.

Furthermore, the absence of constraints has not necessarily made young people genuinely free to seek their ideals. They find themselves navigating in a reality that tends to confuse them and, in some ways, even dull their critical thinking abilities. All of this does not certainly help in strengthening their reflective capacities.

### *3. Adolescents between disorientation and self-care*

In light of what has been discussed so far, it is legitimate to ask: How can we help these compass-less navigators?

One possible answer could be to teach them the art of existence, the Wisdom of human affairs that Socrates speaks<sup>12</sup> (Apology of Socrates, 20d).

Of course, educational knowledge cannot directly teach this art since no one possesses it. It is something that is built through experience and, as it is constructed, it transforms both itself and the individual. Therefore, it is a challenging form of learning that needs intentional guidance and facilitates in young people the art of existence.

While education cannot directly teach this Wisdom, it can guide the individual to learn the methods that “shape their being”, those necessary practices to authenticate their existence. What needs to be cultivated is self-formation, which motivates the individual to work towards the realization of a value<sup>13</sup>.

From this perspective, to educate means to provide the individual with experiences that are meaningful in every aspect of the human dimension (cognitive, emotional, ethical, aesthetic, political, etc.). These experiences will lead them to take responsibility for their own formation. Therefore, the ultimate goal of education should be to promote in the individual the acquisition of specific skills, abilities, competencies, and the development of dispositions that enable them to take responsibility for shaping their way of being (self-formation process). In other words, the sense of education should be to ensure that the other person learns to take care of themselves<sup>14</sup>.

Taking care of oneself allows access to an authentic dimension of life that manifests in living by taking on the task of deciding directions and meanings.

As Franco Cambi<sup>15</sup> states, taking care of oneself involves «taking custody of one’s existence, moods, character, and destiny as one’s own, imposing oneself as one’s own guardian and guide, both theoretically and practically».

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<sup>12</sup> Cfr. G. REALE (a cura di), *Platone. Tutti gli scritti*, Milano, Bompiani, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. E. STEIN, *Introduzione alla filosofia*, trad. it., Roma, Città Nuova, 2001 [1991].

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. V. BOFFO, *La cura in pedagogia. Linee di lettura*, Bologna, Clueb, 2006; F. CAMBI, *La cura di sé come processo formativo*, Milano, Laterza, 2010; L. MORTARI, *Aver cura di sé*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. F. CAMBI, *L’autobiografia come metodo formativo*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2002, p. 119.

For Socrates, taking care of oneself implies knowing oneself because only by knowing oneself can one understand how to take care of oneself.

He considered self-knowledge the preliminary condition for exercising self-care, but he emphasised that knowing oneself does not coincide with taking care of oneself; rather, it constitutes the condition for it. Therefore, «if we know ourselves, we might also know how to take care of ourselves, but if we do not know ourselves, we will not know how to do that either»<sup>16</sup> (Alcibiades I, 129e).

Each individual should learn to know themselves to understand the forces that act on the life of the mind, their implications on one's way of being, and to what extent they aid in the development of one's existence.

The “know thyself” that Socrates speaks of is a transformative practice that requires activating a certain way of looking, developing specific mental postures, and changing certain aspects of the mind<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, an ethical behavior is a choice that involves attention to the individual before adhering to a rule. This is the ethics of care.

Taking Socratic self-care as a reference, where a central role is played by self-knowledge, it becomes essential to identify the ways to know the True Self and practice self-formation.

The Socratic principle of “knowing oneself” can be interpreted as an analysis of the life of the mind. Therefore, thinking one's thoughts means having “knowledge of consciousness”. Thinking thoughts is realized in acts of reflection in which consciousness becomes the object of analysis and is conceptually understood<sup>18</sup>.

The practice of reflection is like lighting an “inner light that illuminates the flow of life” and responds to the need to seek meaning “in what lies ahead because the rational search for meaning is a free act”<sup>19</sup>.

In particular, knowing oneself means living in introspection, having the ability to understand what to seek, where to direct one's energies, recognizing which aspects of

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<sup>16</sup> Cfr. G. REALE, *op. cit.*

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. L. MORTARI, *Aver cura della vita della mente*, Roma, Carocci, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. E. STEIN, *op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. E. STEIN, *Das Kreuz wie eine Krone tragen: vom Geheimnis des inneren Lebens*, Zürich-Düsseldorf, Benziger Verlag, 1997.

oneself to focus on. It also means living in the most intimate sphere, understanding the deepest thoughts, explicit desires, as well as those suppressed, the most intimate feelings, and the origins of suffering. Knowing oneself is also about understanding what consumes and wears down life.

Knowing oneself should not be exclusively and reductively interpreted as an intimate focus on one's «internal noises and tastes»<sup>20</sup>, but it should also be seen as an inquiry into oneself in relation to the surrounding world, the relationships one experiences, and the situations one encounters.

The possibility of transforming one's way of being is connected to the action of transforming ideas (working on thoughts). This perspective is grounded in Constructivism, as it considers ideas as constructs of the mind that can be deconstructed, legitimizing work on the products of thought, not limited to examination but also modification.

If Constructivism allows for the hypothesis that the life of the mind can be changed through reflective work on ideas, Social Constructivism delineates the profile of the context that facilitates the learning of self-practices.

Therefore, the practice of self-work should not only be seen in Plato's terms of silent dialogue of the mind with itself but also from its social and intersubjective aspect, cultivated within a community of self-formation practices. Just as continuous interaction with other individuals promotes the elaboration of knowledge and the internalization of cognitive skills that materialize in exchanges with others, intersubjective comparison facilitates the learning of ways to look at oneself that can have transformative effects.

There is an intimate connection between dialoguing with others and dialoguing with oneself because it is the encounter with the other that develops the predisposition to that radical thinking which, when practiced on oneself, represents the most powerful “exercise”. The individual truly becomes themselves through dialogue with

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<sup>20</sup> Cfr. R. DE MONTICELLI, *L'allegria della mente*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 2004, p. 88.

themselves and openness to others. They become aware of themselves in the relationship with themselves and with others, and can be understood in their essence as “beings in relationship”<sup>21</sup>.

The ability and capacity to think thoughts and work with thoughts is of fundamental importance in fostering reflection on one’s values and, thus, embarking on a journey to discover the True Self and one’s inner world in adolescents. This marks the beginning of increased awareness that leads to change and growth. The pursuit of personal values is an inner path that helps identify what is authentically meaningful.

For adolescents, discovering their own values and understanding how to place them at the core of their growth project is a way to develop and enhance their moral intelligence, leading to a meaningful and fulfilling life<sup>22</sup>.

Knowing one’s values and learning to use them provides a clear compass to guide one’s life, tap into dormant energies to achieve their goals, maintain the course during challenging times, and unleash their potential for change.

When adolescents have the opportunity to live in alignment with their values, they find a sense of direction and integrity. Decision-making becomes easier as they have a solid foundation to base them on, and every moment in life becomes an opportunity to get closer to their True Self.

In light of what has been said, self-care is a reflective, interpretive, reorienting, and self-midwifery practice that needs exercise to become consolidated, objective, operational, and effective. This makes the individual more self-aware and self-controlled: it is the individual who guides and supports themselves. Self-care makes every individual “the captain of themselves”, along a complex journey that leads to the construction of personal identity<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Cfr. M. BUBER, *Il principio dialogico e altri saggi*, Cinisello Balsamo, San Paolo, 1993.

<sup>22</sup> Cfr. L. MAZZUCHELLI, *86400. Trova te stesso e cambia la tua vita con l'intelligenza valoriale*, Firenze, Giunti Psicologia, 2023.

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. C. XODO CEGOLON, *Capitani di sé stessi. L'educazione come costruzione di identità personale*, Brescia, La Scuola, 2003.



Thus, we are faced with the most complex, nuanced, and elusive model of care, certainly more unstable and uncertain but also the highest, as it involves coming into contact with one's True Self and the realm of personal experiences.

Taking care of oneself means, therefore, taking one's own becoming to heart to give it the best possible form.



# BULLYING AS A MORAL ISSUE

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Summary: 1. Introduction. - 2. Inside Bullying - 3. Bullying a moral issue? - 4. Moral development: the traditional view. - 5. The emotion-based theory of moral development. - 6. Moral know-how. - 7. The hypothesis of a universal moral grammar. 8.- Conclusions.

## *1. Introduction*

In ordinary language, the term ‘bullying’ is mainly used to refer to a generic set of dysfunctional behaviours by certain pupils that disrupt the smooth course of activities carried out in educational contexts, primarily school. Anti-social actions such as vandalism, hooliganism or defiance of adults are also sometimes inappropriately considered forms of bullying.

Psychological and sociological research has restricted the application of the term to a series of aggressive behaviours with precise characteristics linked to the agent's lucid intentionality, temporal dimension and relational dimension<sup>1</sup>.

What distinguishes bullying from the set of other violent attitudes that can occur in the life of any human being are three specific peculiarities: intentionality, persistence and power imbalance.

*Intentionality* indicates the fact that the action is carried out by the bully voluntarily and with the knowledge that his sole purpose is to cause harm to his/her victim.

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. A. FONZI (a cura di), *Il bullismo in Italia. Il fenomeno delle prepotenze a scuola dal Piemonte alla Sicilia*, Firenze, Giunti, 1997; N. IANNACCONI (a cura di), *Stop al bullismo. Strategie per ridurre i comportamenti aggressivi e passivi a scuola*, Bari, La Meridiana, 2005; E. BUCCOLIERO, M. MAGGI (a cura di), *Il bullismo nella scuola primaria. Manuale teorico-pratico per insegnanti e operatori*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2008.

*Persistence* indicates that the aggressive behaviour and attitude pursued by the bully against his or her victim is not a one-off or isolated phenomenon but persists and is repeated over time.

*Power imbalance* characterizes the situation in which the bully and the bullied in general find themselves, indicating the gap that exists in their relationship: it may be a gap determined by different physical strength, or by cultural, social, economic or intellectual differences.

When we use the term aggressive behaviour, we are referring not only to physical aggression, but also to verbal and relational aggression, inflicted either by direct or indirect means.

Direct ways are visible attitudes with which the bully prevails over the other: typical physical phenomena are the use of kicks, shoves, punches, taking possession of personal objects without asking permission. Yet, direct methods also include verbal aggressions used by the bully, such as threats, insults, teasing..

Indirect ways, on the other hand, are hidden, insidious and, consequently, less likely to be detected. Among the most common attitudes are psychological violence, gossip, and the victim's isolation.

The kind of aggression and the choice of using direct or indirect ways varies according to the age and gender of those involved in the phenomenon: observing the behaviour of girls, their way of bullying is an indirect way because they prefer to exclude the victim rather than face her directly. Direct aggression, on the other hand, is typical of the male gender.

This gender difference just mentioned can also be observed in the way the bully reacts to violence: whereas girls tend to get depressed and feel deep sadness, rarely taking an attitude of reaction to abuse, boys, on the other hand, react with anger.

It is therefore interesting to delve into a deeper understanding of the phenomenon.

## 2. *Inside Bullying*

As known, the characteristics we have just identified mean that in every bullying situation specific social roles are defined.

With reference to the role of a bully, we can distinguish at least four types.

A first type is what the literature defines as “the aggressive or dominant bully”: very self-confident, he is the undisputed leader of the group and the most popular. His strength, not only physical but above all psychological, is superior to that of the rest of the group, and this makes him a skilful manipulator, aggressive in all the actions he takes without caring about the consequences his attitudes may have on people.

A second type is recognizable as “the anxious bully-victim”: insecure, he does not have high self-esteem, is anxious and does not enjoy popularity in the group. He shows aggression in his attitudes, is a skillful provocateur and generally engages in bullying mainly to draw attention to himself.

A third type can be defined as “the passive or gregarious bully”: very insecure, he never takes his own initiatives but backs the group leader in his actions. His interest is predominantly in being part of the group and seeking approval from peers, as his interest is not in subjugating the victim, but in preventing him from becoming a victim in turn.

“The temporary bully” is the fourth typology that research has identified: he only shows his aggression after he has suffered an event that has traumatized him. This becomes the cause of his bullying behaviour, which will only end when he has found a solution to the causes of the traumatic event.

Different types can also be recognized with regard to the role of victim.

The so-called “passive or submissive victims” are weak both physically and psychologically, and extremely insecure. With low self-esteem and a negative opinion of themselves, they tend to exclude themselves and have difficulty fitting in and relating to the peer group. When bullied, they are unable to respond to insults or provocations and react by shutting down or crying, thus making themselves even weaker and more vulnerable in the eyes of the bullies. Very often they believe that the

bullying they suffer is their own fault, thus making themselves resigned to their situation as victims.

On the opposite, the “aggressive or defiant victims” are impulsive and sometimes provoke bullying. They show difficulties in managing their emotions and, although suffer bullying, they react to it but not adequately.

The group also plays a fundamental role within the bullying phenomenon, especially in the relationship it establishes with the bully. The latter, in fact, enjoys the approval and admiration of his peers who, in order to get into his good graces, tend to comply with his requests and imitate his behavioural patterns. The group, for its part, supports the bully in every way, thus activating mutual reinforcement and support.

All these characteristics indicate that bullying cannot simply be counted among the problems involving aggressive or antisocial conduct disorders, since the insensitivity to others’ suffering and the inability to empathize with others’ states of mind that it presents inevitably involve the moral sphere.

### *3. Bullying a moral issue?*

The above-mentioned characteristics legitimise the qualification of bullying as a moral issue.<sup>2</sup> Albert Bandura’s theory of ‘moral disengagement’ helps to justify and understand this perspective.

In his theory of moral development, morality is a dimension of the person guaranteed by internal controls and self-sanctions that make up each person’s conscience: it is these that prevent moral norms from being transgressed:

In the development of a moral self, individuals adopt standards of right and wrong that are guides and deterrents for conduct. They do things that give them satisfaction and a

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<sup>2</sup> Cfr. S. CARAVITA, G. GINI, *L’(im)moralità del bullismo*, Milano, Unicopli, 2010.

sense of self-worth. They refrain from behaving in ways that violate their moral standards because such conduct will bring self-condemnation. Moral agency is thus exercised through the constraint of negative self-sanctions for conduct that violates one's moral standards and the support of positive self-sanctions for conduct faithful to personal moral standards. In the face of situational inducements to behave inhumanely, people can choose to behave otherwise by exerting self-influence or learn how to do so. Self-sanctions keep conduct in accordance with internal standards.

The exercise of moral agency has dual aspects – inhibitive and proactive. The inhibitive form is manifested in the ability to refrain from behaving inhumanely. The proactive form, grounded in a humanitarian ethic, is manifested in compassion for the plight of others and efforts to further their well-being, often at personal costs.<sup>3</sup>

There are, however, mechanisms capable of selectively disengaging internal control and self-sanctions by freeing the individual from feelings of self-condemnation and guilt, which are detrimental to self-esteem, when compliance is broken. This process is called *moral disengagement*.

Bandura identifies eight mechanisms of moral disengagement, which can be divided into three sets:

A first set are the mechanisms that act directly on immoral conduct by making it more acceptable. They are:

- *Moral justification*: immoral conduct, through cognitive reconstruction of its meaning, is made acceptable both personally and socially, as it serves other higher moral principles (e.g. 'It is good to use force against those who offend your family');
- *Euphemistic labelling*: the individual disguises the reprehensible action by attributing positive characteristics to it so that it appears better and less serious than it actually is (e.g. 'After all, we were only joking, we were just playing and nothing happened');

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<sup>3</sup> A. BANDURA, *Moral Disengagement. How People Do Harm and Live With Themselves*, New York, Worth Publishers, 2016, pp. 1-2.

- *Palliative comparison*: consists in comparing one's immoral action with a worse one in such a way as to make it appear less unacceptable or even benevolent (e.g. 'It's not bad to insult a comrade since beating him up is worse').

The second set are mechanisms that operate by concealing or distorting the relationship between actions and the effects they cause:

- *Displacement of responsibility*: the responsibility for immoral behaviour is not attributed to the individual who performs it but to external sources (e.g. family or friends, 'If the boys are not well brought up at home, they cannot be reprimanded if they misbehave');

- *Diffusion of responsibility*: this is a mechanism for distributing the responsibility for an immoral action among all members of a group by relieving the burden of personal responsibility (e.g. 'It is not only my fault but also the fault of others!');

- *Distortion of consequences*: the outcomes of a negative action are modified or minimized to make them appear less serious (e.g. 'Teasing doesn't really hurt anyone').

The third and last set are the mechanisms that focus on the recipients of the immoral action.

- *Dehumanisation of the victim*: this leads to devaluing the victim by seeing him/her as someone who is not human and who should therefore not enjoy the same respect (e.g. 'It is right to mistreat someone who behaves like a filthy being');

- *Attribution of blame*: the blame for the negative action is placed on the victim who provoked the negative behaviour of the perpetrator by making the perpetrator not feel guilty (e.g. 'Children who are mistreated usually deserve it').

Manifestations of verbal violence on social networks can find an explanation for their increasing prevalence in moral commitment mechanisms.

As Bandura observes:

Moral disengagement does not alter moral standards. Rather, it provides the means for those who morally disengage to circumvent moral standards in ways that strip morality from harmful behavior and their responsibility for it. However, in other aspects of their lives, they adhere to their moral standards. It is the selective suspension of morality for



harmful activities that enables people to retain their positive self-regard while doing harm.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, all this constitutes a moral problem because it legitimises the non-recognition of the subjects involved as moral subjects, i.e. ‘subjects of value’, deserving to affirm their dignity as persons, both as *moral patients* and as *moral agents*.

Identifying bullying as a moral problem means that educational processes can be put in place to prevent and contrast the phenomenon that go beyond mere sanctions, but are aimed at recognizing and protecting the dignity of each individual, acknowledging him or her as a ‘subject of value’.

And this goes through an education of the heart, of the mind and of the posture of one's ‘being in the world’.

It is interesting to ask: how should educational intervention be structured and designed? A brief survey of the ways in which moral development has so far been interpreted in the pedagogical literature may help to answer this question.

#### *4. Moral development: the traditional view*

As is well known, Greek philosophy (with the exception of Aristotle) established and handed down the thesis according to which the moral sphere is subordinate to the cognitive sphere, so that the development of morality corresponds with the acquisition of knowledge and, more generally, with the strengthening of the rational faculties.

The famous Socratic thesis according to which ‘who does evil does it out of ignorance of good’ is, in this respect, emblematic.

It is on this assumption that are based those theoretical models of morality that identify liberation from instincts and passions as the criteria for judging the

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<sup>4</sup> Ivi, p. 3.

correctness of principles and the rightness of conduct. These models follow two main orientations: the utilitarian orientation, according to which an action is right in relation to its consequences, i.e. when its outcome maximises the good for the greatest number of people; and the deontological orientation, according to which an action is right or wrong in reference to given principles, regardless of its consequences.<sup>5</sup>

The profile of the moral subject that emerges from this tradition is that of an individual in constant conflict between the desire to satisfy natural impulses and the limits imposed by socio-cultural conventions: a profile that responds to a ‘conflictual’ model identifying the moral sense as an ally of reason.

Following this model, much psychological production, until a few decades ago, was based on the idea that moral principles and the judgments derived from them are initially transmitted through socialisation; subsequently refined by social experience, which acts through rewards and punishments, appropriately modulating the sense of right and wrong; finally questioned and redefined thanks to a mature ability to reason about moral dilemmas.

The thought of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg, the main figures in moral psychology of the 20th and 21st centuries, follows the rationalist philosophy from Socrates to Kant and delivers to pedagogical theorisation a representation of the moral subject as a being capable of letting the use of reason prevail over the emotional aspects of its experience.

But how would the child go from immaturity to moral maturity?

Beyond the significant differences that run between their respective theories, Piaget and Kohlberg converge in hypothesising that children reach moral maturity gradually, passing through various levels of moral development, which lead them from initial stages of moral indifference to stages of self-interest, and then to stages of concern for the good of others, thanks to an increasing ability to integrate their

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<sup>5</sup> The tendency to derive a set of guiding principles to consider our moral duties, irrespective of content or specific case, is the way of Kant and his categorical imperatives: norms indicative of right action because they are not bound to particular circumstances or content, but are endowed with universal validity.

parents' directives. The sense of 'good' or 'lawful' and 'bad' or 'forbidden' would develop in children because of what their parents tell them to do or not to do and the use of rewards and punishments.<sup>6</sup>

According to Kohlberg, moving from a 'conventional' level - in which the subject has internalised parental directives and is fully aware of its obligations and duties towards society - to a 'post-conventional' level - in which the subject extends its circumscribed vision to include others and to embrace universal ethical principles, disengaged from social norms -, that model of the moral subject of Socratic memory would gradually assert itself in the process of growth.

It is a theory of moral development to which many limitations have now been acknowledged.

According to cognivist neuropsychologist Marc Hauser, recognising that we engage in rational, conscious forms of reasoning is different from accepting that this is the one and only form of mental operation that underlies our moral judgements.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, Damasio's studies - starting with the famous case of Phineas Gage, the construction foreman who went from being an exemplary worker and family man to an irreverent and antisocial man after an iron bar had pierced his skull - had revealed that rational capacities were not sufficient to make moral judgements, choices or plans for the future, leading him to hypothesise a close correlation between emotions and reasoning.<sup>8</sup> The lesions found in his patients included crucial areas for the brain in its emotion-processing activity and as a consequence these patients, although absolutely average in terms of IQ, could no longer disentangle themselves from the complex decision-making process that takes place even with regard to ordinary matters.

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<sup>6</sup> Cfr. J. PIAGET, *Il giudizio morale nel fanciullo*, trad. it., Firenze, Giunti, 1972; L. KOHLBERG, *Moral stages and moralization: the cognitive-development approach*, in T. LICKONA (ed.), *Moral Development and Behaviour*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. M.D. HAUSER, *Menti morali. Le origini naturali del bene e del male*, trad. it., Milano, Il Saggiatore, 2007 [2006], p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. A.R. DAMASIO, *L'errore di Cartesio. Emozione, ragione e cervello umano*, trad. it., Milano, Adelphi, 1995 [1994].

Indeed, a concept of the moral subject consisting solely of the capacities to control emotional impulses, practical reasoning and logical inference is no longer acceptable today.

However, the multiple weaknesses of that concept, if sufficient to declare outdated an educational model aimed only at the cultivation of rational capacities, are not sufficient to exclude the care of those capacities, to the exclusive benefit of others. It is thanks to cognitive activity, in fact, that the subject can arrive at defining his own moral principles to guide him in choosing how to behave in situations of uncertainty: moral principles, meant not so much as impersonal imperatives, but rather as normative teachings that he can autonomously draw from experience.

Multiple experiences that share the same character (a type of experience, for example: humiliation, abuse, instrumentalisation...) can be observed from an external perspective and re-read with a reflexive attitude, becoming aware of the content of 'evil' or injustice that they have in common, and imposing oneself not to re-experience them any more: "Don't allow anyone to treat me like an object!" and, consequently, "Don't treat others like an object!" become principles matured from one's own experience. Not normative impositions imposed from above, therefore, but 'rules' that the subject autonomously gives himself, thanks to his reflective capacity on his emotions, which he submits to the scrutiny of reason.

Meant in this way, moral principles are purged of that intellectualistic and 'disembodied' connotation that Kant had attributed to them, but interact and 'collaborate' with other elements of moral experience that intervene in decision-making processes, such as desires and emotions. In this order of ideas, the rational component remains an important part of the formation of the moral subject, but does not exhaust it.

### 5. *The emotion-based theory of moral development*

Opposed to the idea of moral development as the attainment of the capacity for moral reasoning free from passions is the idea that the formation of moral judgements is inseparable from emotional experience.

This is a hypothesis that finds its first formulation in David Hume.

The dynamic governing moral experience, as illustrated by Hume, is thus a three-element dynamic, involving the agent, the recipient and the spectator: vices and virtues motivate the agent to act in a particular way, the agent's actions directly influence the recipient's feelings, and the spectator experiences particular emotions towards the agent and the recipient.<sup>9</sup>

It would be sympathy, therefore, that fosters altruism: prompting us to take others' views into consideration and dissuading us from harming others.

The representation of the moral subject that takes shape in Hume's philosophy is that of an individual capable of adopting moral behaviour and of quickly resolving moral doubts without resorting to reasoning or explicit norms or the dictates of ethical or religious doctrines, but simply following his or her own emotional reactions to an event.

This is a representation of the moral subject that has only recently received renewed attention from psychologist Martin Hoffman, who has explained and illustrated the 'mechanism' that presides over altruistic conduct through the in-depth study of that human capacity that Hume called 'sympathy' and is now called 'empathy'.

Hoffman defines empathy as the activation of psychological processes that cause a person to have feelings that are more congruent with another person's situation than their own. Consequently, by coming into contact, either directly or indirectly, with a person who is suffering, a victim of someone or something, the observer will feel

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<sup>9</sup> D. HUME, *Trattato sulla natura umana*, trad. it., Milano, Bompiani, 2001 [1739], p. 903.

emotions either similar to those of the victim or different but closely related, such as anger, even if the victim is simply sad.<sup>10</sup>

This emotional experience brought about by sharing the other's experience is called *emotional distress* and would be the motivational drive to engage in pro-social behaviour.

The child's first forms of empathy would be mostly automatic and unconscious, often triggered by his or her uncontrollable imitative abilities. With the development of cognitive capacities, not peculiar to moral development, the ability to take on the other's perspective would also mature.

This model of moral development delivers to pedagogical theorisation a profile of the moral subject capable of tuning in to the 'emotional frequencies' of the social context in which the individual finds himself and of responding in a manner that is appropriate and consistent with them.

And yet, Hauser observes in this regard, while it is true that empathy plays an important role in our moral actions, it is equally true that our emotions cannot explain how we judge what is right or wrong, and in particular cannot explain how the child navigates between social norms in general and moral norms in particular.<sup>11</sup>

Cognitivist studies attest that emotions constitute complex systems of responses determined by cognitive processes, on which depend, on the one hand, the formation of certain fundamental parameters of judgement and, on the other hand, the activation of a series of cognitive evaluation systems specific to each emotion<sup>12</sup>.

In the onset of each emotion, the intervention of a cognitive evaluation is now recognised. Thus, emotions would be aroused not by direct perception – by the

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<sup>10</sup> Cfr. M. HOFFMAN, *Empathy and Moral Development. Implications for Caring and Justice*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2000. It reads: «The key requirement of an empathic response according to my definition is the involvement of psychological processes that make a person have feelings that are more congruent with another's situation than with his own situation. The empathy-arousing processes often produce the same feeling in observer and victim but not necessarily, as when one feels empathic anger on seeing someone attacked even when the victim feels sad or disappointed rather than angry.» (Ivi, p. 30).

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. M. HAUSER, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. R. TRENTIN, *Emozioni e processi cognitivi*, in V. D'URSO, R. TRENTIN (a cura di), *Psicologia delle emozioni*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1988, pp. 159-190; L. ANOLLI, *Le emozioni*, Milano, Unicopli, 2002.

‘impressions’ of which Hume spoke – but by an instantaneous evaluation of what is perceived: a process that, in psychological language, is called appraisal<sup>13</sup>.

According to appraisal theory, different emotions are characterised by different evaluative systems. They cannot therefore arise and manifest themselves without some reason and their origin can always be traced back to some form of cognitive appraisal of the situation in the terms in which it is perceived by the subject, with all the links with the subject’s own beliefs, expectations, aims and desires. Therefore, emotional experience not only has a cognitive nature, but subjectivity plays a prominent role in it.<sup>14</sup>

Knowing that emotions have a cognitive matrix and not only an instinctual one opens up and legitimises the space that opens up for educational intervention: thinking of them in relation to an object means recognising, through their manifestation, what is of value or, vice versa, what is of no value to the subject; it means recognising and identifying the cause of apparently irrational choices; knowing that they are based on convictions and beliefs makes it possible to work on their truthfulness and groundedness.<sup>15</sup>

Knowledge of the entire cognitive process relating to the emotions leads to the delineation of a concept of the moral subject in which the ability to listen to one's emotions with a view to a moral choice is flanked by the rational capacities that are predominantly exercised in the functions relating to the definition and scrutiny of moral principles and the verification of the veracity of beliefs.

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<sup>13</sup> Cfr. M. ARNOLD, *Emotion and Personality*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1960.

<sup>14</sup> The two characteristics, that of the cognitive nature and that of the subjective trait of emotion, are also recognised by the philosophical analysis of emotions. Robert Nozick observes that, not only is emotion much more 'cognitive' than one might think, but it is also subjective: different is the belief or evaluation, different is the emotion (Cfr. R. NOZICK, *La vita pensata*, trad. it., Milano, Arnoldo Mondadori, 1990 [1989], p. 92).

<sup>15</sup> On the subject of beliefs, Michel Gazzaniga writes: «Our species can develop beliefs at the speed of light. We create them almost as a reflex. We now know that it is the left hemisphere of the brain, the one that attaches meaning to input from the outside world, that creates them. We also know that the soundness of a belief can be manipulated in many ways: it can be questioned, then followed by a decision; it can be subject to reinforcement or repetition; it can be associated with emotional stimuli or be weakened by competing ideas.» (M. S. GAZZANIGA, *La mente etica*, trad. it., Torino, Codice edizioni, 2006 [2005], p. 147).

But, one has to ask, is that all? Or is there more that intervenes in our moral behaviour?

### *6. Moral know-how*

The study of Hume's old sympathy or newly defined empathy now opens up new horizons of knowledge. Over the last two decades, the sciences of the mind have provided many elements for understanding empathy, demonstrating its neural basis, explaining its development and its collapse in situations of psychopathy.<sup>16</sup>

Thanks to such studies, we know that all humans are endowed with a moral faculty: a natural capacity that allows each individual to unconsciously and automatically assess which response to stimuli coming from the context.

The epistemologist Francisco Varela defines this response mechanism as 'know-how', which is triggered by events with a strong emotional impact, such as an accident – which prompts us to offer help –, or the perception of a person's embarrassment on a given topic - which prompts us to change the subject with a humorous joke.<sup>17</sup>

It frequently happens, Varela adds, that we contrast this type of instinctive moral behaviour with situations in which we feel we are the ones who decide, by virtue of reflections and reasoning that lead us to voluntary deliberations. And yet, although part of our moral behaviour derives from such judgements, «we cannot, and should not, disregard the first, more widespread mode of ethical behaviour merely because it is not 'reflexive'». <sup>18</sup>

Neuroscience, through experiments using neuroimaging techniques, confirms the existence of this know-how in the human mind.

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<sup>16</sup> Starting with Giacomo Rizzolatti's and Vittorio Gallese's studies on mirror-neurons, neuroscientific research has shown how inherent in human beings is the capacity to recognise the other-as-us and us-as-the-other, thus laying the foundations for a theory of human nature as one 'made' for relationship. Cfr. G. RIZZOLATTI, C. SINIGAGLIA, *So quel che fai. Il cervello che agisce e i neuroni specchio*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. F.J. VARELA, *Un know-how per l'etica*, trad. it., Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1992.

<sup>18</sup> Ivi, p. 8.



### 7. *The hypothesis of a universal moral grammar*

It was the linguist Noam Chomsky and the political philosopher John Rawls who first put forward the hypothesis that there are profound similarities between language and morality, relating to our innate competence in these two areas.

As is well known, Chomsky had posed the question of how it was possible for children to learn their mother tongue so quickly and easily, even though they were not instructed in its rules and despite the fact that the stimuli available to them to eventually 'reconstruct' those rules on their own were extremely poor and fragmentary.

Hence the hypothesis of an innate body of knowledge that has taken the name 'Universal Grammar'. Assuming the existence of a Universal Grammar serves to account for the way in which human beings acquire language and describes the initial, genetically determined state of the linguistic faculty, i.e. the biological matrix thanks to which children would acquire linguistic competence in their mother tongue.<sup>19</sup>

Inspired by Chomsky, Rawls asserts that a moral grammar exists in our minds that would allow us to quickly learn the moral norms of a given culture and would be activated whenever we find ourselves in the situation of having to categorise an action in terms of 'permissible', 'obligatory' or 'forbidden', without requiring the involvement of higher mental processes, or the control of consciousness or explicit reference to underlying moral principles.<sup>20</sup>

From a pedagogical point of view, this hypothesis explains both how in each culture moral capacity is one of the building blocks of social coexistence and why it is so difficult to understand the moral behaviour of individuals belonging to other

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<sup>19</sup> N. CHOMSKY, *Language and Problems of Knowledge: The Managua Lectures*, Cambridge, MA MIT Press, 1987. It reads: «The acquisition of a specific moral and ethical system, wide ranging and often precise in its consequences, cannot simply be the result of 'shaping' and 'control' by the social environment. As in the case of language, the environment is far too impoverished and indeterminate to provide this system to the child, in its full richness and applicability. [...] it certainly seems reasonable to speculate that the moral and ethical system acquired by the child owes much to some innate faculty.» (Ivi, pp. 152-153).

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. J. RAWLS, *Una teoria della giustizia*, trad. it., Milano, Feltrinelli, 2008 [1995], p. 58.

cultures, in the same way that it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand a speaker of another language if one does not know it.

### *8. Conclusions*

The hypothesis of the existence of a universal moral grammar, together with other proven knowledge on moral development, is of great interest in the field of pedagogical research and design for several reasons.

Firstly, it directs and guides educational intervention, since it identifies a biologically defined area of capacity, open therefore to the development of possible functioning on which educational action can act.

Secondly, the fact that such a grammar is not only open to the development of different moral codes, but also allows for the learning of their functioning, makes it possible to identify a specific educational task: that of developing capacities for moral understanding that are not ethnocentric – i.e. limited to culturally determined moral categories – but ethnorelative – i.e. capable of ensuring the subject's ‘displacement’ from its own moral categories to those of others.

Finally, the capacity to shift from one moral code to another also enables the subject to acquire the capacity to shift those evaluative processes that preside over the onset of an emotion – the processes of appraisal – to be effectively able to place oneself 'in the other's shoes'.

All this makes it possible to gradually extend that motivational drive to moral action – empathy – to the 'anyone' other than the self.

It often happens, in fact, that prejudices and unverified beliefs against those who are different (by ethnicity, religion, faith, sexual orientation, etc.) reduce empathy to a 'sympathy' reserved exclusively for one's fellow human being.

If neuroscientific studies confirm that it is from empathy that moral capacity develops, it is by nurturing, cultivating and exercising this capacity for cognitive

functioning, aimed at questioning beliefs and revising principles, that empathy will be free to mature and express itself in a pro-social sense.

On these bases, an effective educational path to overcome bullying behaviour can be structured.



## ADOLESCENTS AND ONLINE RISK BEHAVIORS

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**SUMMARY:** 1. Introduction. – 2. Psychological aspects of online risk behaviors. – 3. The role of prevention. – 4. Conclusions. – 5. References.

### *1. Introduction*

Web use has increasingly become a means of aggregation, exchange, and communication among young people. Adolescents often find gratification in spending more time online than in real life, experiencing a new social competence. Frequent web use can lead to psychosocial distress. New technologies are sometimes used to intimidate, harass, embarrass, and make people feel uncomfortable. This phenomenon is called cyberbullying. In recent years, other phenomena such as sexting, revenge porn and grooming have also emerged. Sexting consists in sharing sexually explicit texts, videos and images. In the solitude of their rooms, young people feel free to

explore, even take naked pictures of themselves and send them. Whereas revenge porn consists in sharing intimate photos or pornographic videos on the web as a form of blackmail or revenge, usually after the end of a relationship or a betrayal. Grooming, on the other hand, is a form of psychological manipulation used by potential adult abusers with the aim of establishing an emotional bond and engaging in sexual activity.

Moreover, “Challenges” are a recent phenomenon which consist in recording while acting dangerously, and then post everything on social networks, inviting other people to do the same. The consequences can be severe: decreased self-esteem, depressive episodes, fear, frustration and scholastic problems. Being exposed, directly or indirectly, to harmful content is considered a risk factor for young people. For this reason, awareness and digital education should be promoted on digital platforms.

Internet is increasingly influential in the lives of adolescents, and it has radically transformed the way young people interact, communicate, and socialize. Adolescents are spending increasing amounts of time online, and they are uniquely vulnerable to the development of addictive behavior.

Certainly, the use of online communication has become a focal aspect in adolescents’ life, providing several chances for psychosocial development and the formation of intimate relationships and offering multiple opportunities for connection and exploration for young people.

On the other hand, it also poses significant risks and dark implications.

While social media platforms continue to gain widespread popularity, growing evidence indicates significant correlations between their use and mental health and behavioral issues in adolescents. Heightened engagement with social media has been associated with reduced self-esteem and body satisfaction, elevated risk of cyberbullying, greater exposure to explicit content, and risky sexual behaviors<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> J. SHAH et al., *New age technology and social media: adolescent psychosocial implications and the need for protective measures*, in «Current opinion in pediatrics», 2019, 31.1, pp.148-156.

## *2. Psychological Aspects of Online Risk Behaviors*

Cyberbullying is a form of online aggression, increasingly prevalent among adolescents, represents a dangerous manifestation of the digital dimension in daily life. Cyberbullying is not limited to occasional negative interactions but can take various forms, including intimidation, harassment, embarrassment, and the generation of emotional distress.

Victims of such behaviors often find themselves facing constant and pervasive pressure from various online channels, which can have serious consequences on their mental health and emotional well-being<sup>2</sup>

Cyberbullying can manifest through offensive comments, spreading false information, image manipulation, and more, amplifying the harmful potential of this practice. The victim, often isolated in their digital experience, may find themselves in a situation where constant pressure and ongoing threats compromise their self-esteem, lead to depressive episodes, and generate a profound sense of fear and frustration. In some cases, cyberbullying can even result in educational difficulties as the anxiety and stress stemming from negative online interactions can adversely affect academic performance<sup>3</sup>

Over time, the percentage of adolescents who have experienced the phenomenon of cyberbullying at least once in their lifetime has increased from 20.8% in 2010 to 33.8% in 2016<sup>4</sup>.

This phenomenon emphasizes the urgent need to promote awareness among young people about the dangers of cyberbullying and to develop effective strategies to prevent and address it. Digital education plays a crucial role in providing teenagers with the necessary tools to navigate the online world safely and responsibly, while also

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<sup>2</sup> E. MENESINI et al., *Prevenire e contrastare il bullismo e il cyberbullismo*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2017, pp. 35-45.

<sup>3</sup> D. OLWEUS, S.P. LIMBER. *Some problems with cyberbullying research*, in «Current opinion in psychology», 2018, 19, pp. 139-143.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

encouraging a culture of mutual respect and compassion<sup>5</sup>. Only through a holistic approach involving parents, educators, and digital practitioners can we hope to create a healthier and more inclusive digital environment for the younger generations.

Parallel to the phenomenon of cyberbullying, additional serious issues emerge directly involving young people in the realm of their relationships and online sexual activities. One of these challenges is represented by sexting, a behavior where teenagers explore their sexuality by sharing explicit content such as texts, images, or videos. The increasing ease of access to communication technologies has made sexting more prevalent but it also brings forth significant risks, such as the non-consensual dissemination of intimate material and the potential exposure to manipulation or coercion<sup>6</sup>

Revenge porn represents a highly concerning form of online abuse where individuals, often motivated by revenge or resentment after the end of a relationship or due to a betrayal, deliberately disseminate intimate photos or videos of their ex-partner without their consent<sup>7</sup>. This practice goes beyond a violation of privacy, evolving into an inherently harmful act that can inflict deep and lasting psychological damage on victims involved. The non-consensual dissemination of intimate material in the public domain exposes the victim to extreme emotional and psychological vulnerability, promoting public humiliation and negative social judgments<sup>8</sup>.

Among the consequences of revenge porn there are the deterioration of the victim's self-esteem and mental well-being. Being the target of this form of online abuse can generate feelings of shame, guilt, and isolation, as the victim faces the challenge before a wide online audience. The societal judgment associated with revenge porn can

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<sup>5</sup> M.T. KAARAKAINEN, L. SAIKKONEN. *Remark on digital accessibility: educational disparities define digital inclusion from adolescence onwards*, in «Universal Access in the Information Society», 2023, 22.4, pp. 1279-1292.

<sup>6</sup> J. BURÉN, C. LUNDE. *Sexting among adolescents: A nuanced and gendered online challenge for young people*, in «Computers in Human Behavior», 2018, 85, pp. 210-217.

<sup>7</sup> C. MENTO, F. PIRA. *La violenza in un "click": Profili sociologici, psicologici e giuridici del revenge porn*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2023, pp. 43-51.

<sup>8</sup> A. SORGATO. *Revenge porn: aspetti giuridici, informatici e psicologici*, Milano, Giuffrè Francis Lefebvre, 2020, pp. 270-279.



further exacerbate emotional trauma, contributing to a sense of mistrust in future relationships and having a significant impact on long-term mental health <sup>9</sup>.

The fight against revenge porn requires not only a strict enforcement of existing laws on privacy and cyberbullying but also significant efforts to raise public awareness about the damages caused by this behavior. Promoting a digital culture that is respectful and aware is essential for preventing revenge porn and providing support to victims. Additionally, it is crucial to engage in the development of policies and resources that enable affected individuals to defend themselves legally and psychologically against this type of abuse, allowing them to rebuild their lives after such a traumatic experience.

Another widespread phenomenon that raises concerns for young people is Grooming. It's described as a continuous procedure wherein an adult prepares a minor, along with their surroundings, for potential sexual abuse. This is achieved by establishing emotional connection with the minor and obtaining compliance and secrecy from them <sup>10</sup>

Online sexual grooming is distinct from online sexual solicitation as the solicitation is a single occurrence of behavior, while grooming is a systematic process that leads to an intimate relationship. The grooming process unfolds through a series of stages, encompassing victim selection, the cultivation of trust and rapport, desensitization to touch, and the introduction of sexual content<sup>11</sup>

This process highlights the vulnerability of young people in the digital environment and the need for increased awareness regarding online relational dynamics. A study by Resett et al.<sup>12</sup> aimed to test whether emotional problems and dark personality were predictors of sexting and grooming and whether this behavior differed by gender and

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<sup>9</sup> A. M. GASSÓ et al. *Sexting, mental health, and victimization among adolescents: A literature review*, in «International journal of environmental research and public health», 2019, 16.13, p. 2364.

<sup>10</sup> E. A. GREENE-COLOZZI et al., *Experiences and perceptions of online sexual solicitation and grooming of minors: A retrospective report*, in «Journal of child sexual abuse», 2020, 29.7, pp. 836-854.

<sup>11</sup> G. M. WINTERS, E. L. JEGLIC, *Stages of sexual grooming: Recognizing potentially predatory behaviors of child molesters*, in «Deviant behavior», 2017, 38.6, pp. 724-733.

<sup>12</sup> S. RESETT, P.G. CAINO, B. MESURADO, *Emotional problems, dark personality, sexting and grooming in adolescents: the role of gender and age*, in «CES Psicología», 2022, 15.2, pp. 23-43.

age. The results of this study clearly show that in female cases, older age and psychopathy were the significant predictors. In the case of males, less anxiety was the significant predictor. Linear regressions to predict grooming from sexting also suggested this relationship was moderated by gender.

Griffith e Roth<sup>13</sup> agree that online grooming, aimed at the sexual abuse of minors, is not a new phenomenon but argue that the internet has opened new possibilities for its implementation. The distinctive features of online grooming listed by the authors include shorter timelines compared to face-to-face grooming, the opportunity for offenders to gather more information about victims from online databases, the use of various tools such as images, videos, and audio during the grooming process, ease in masking identity, the ability to keep the relationship more effectively secret, the absence of access and time limitations, and the potential for abusers to be more selective in choosing victims and to target multiple victims simultaneously.

O'Connell was one of the first to examine online grooming, considering it as a phase within the broader process of cyber-sexploitation<sup>14</sup>. He identifies six phases through which the process of online grooming develops, a model also corroborated by other research, such as Katz's study on the accounts of young individuals suspected to be victims of online abuse. These phases include friendship formation, relationship building, risk assessment, exclusivity, sexuality, and the request for the creation or exchange of erotic or child pornography materials. Katz<sup>15</sup> finds that the approach of the offenders was linear and structured, starting with online contact, communication on the internet, building a relationship, requesting risky information, and concluding with the sexual phase and requests for compromising material. Therefore, online grooming represents a serious threat, with offenders exploiting the internet to approach and abuse minors. Understanding the phases of this process is

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<sup>13</sup> G. GRIFFITH, L. ROTH, *Protecting children from online sexual predators*. Sydney, NSW Parliamentary Library Research Service, 2007, pp. 6-12.

<sup>14</sup> R. O'CONNELL. *A typology of child cybersexploitation and online grooming practices*, 2003, pp. 1-19.

<sup>15</sup> C. KATZ, *Internet-related child sexual abuse: What children tell us in their testimonies*, in «Children and Youth Services Review», 2013, 35.9, pp. 1536-1542.

essential for developing prevention and protection strategies against this form of online abuse.

The widespread prevalence of these practices highlights the complexity of challenges related to online navigation for young people. To effectively address such issues, it is crucial to implement educational programs that teach not only the technical skills necessary for using the web safely but also an awareness of relational dynamics and the risks associated with online interactions. Additionally, it is essential to promote a culture of digital respect and responsibility, involving parents, educators, and online safety advocates to create a safer and more aware virtual environment for young people.

Today, we also witness an increasingly widespread dissemination of challenges online, typically involving the creation of short videos in which individuals encourage others to replicate a dangerous action.

Various studies indicate that one of the main reasons viral challenges become prevalent on the Internet is the need for social belonging. Feeling accepted and included by peers is crucial for positive development; thus, challenges become a means through which adolescents can feel an integral part of a group<sup>16</sup>. The challenges pose an additional cause for concern in the realm of young people's online interactions, bringing with them a series of risks and negative consequences. These challenges often involve young individuals actively engaging in recording and sharing risky behaviors on social networks, ranging from physically dangerous acts to extreme and sometimes illegal behaviors, which are then documented and disseminated online.

The consequences of such practices are serious and can leave a long-term effect on the mental health and overall well-being of the young individuals involved. Exposure to harmful contents can significantly affect self-esteem, with young people constantly facing negative judgments or offensive comments on social media<sup>17</sup>. This can lead to

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<sup>16</sup> S. FERREIRA DESLANDES et al. *Online challenges among children and adolescents: Self-inflicted harm and social media strategies*, *Salud colectiva*, 2021, 16, p. 3264.

<sup>17</sup> C. MENTO et al. *Who Believes in Fake News: A Study on the Relationship between Affective Temperament, Cyberchondria and Problematic Use of the Internet during the COVID-19 Pandemic*, in «OBM Neurobiology», 2023, 7.1. pp. 1-16.

depressive episodes, fuel fear and frustration, contributing to a cycle of emotional stress that can extend to the academic sphere as well.

The decline in school performance is one of the most tangible consequences of these negative digital dynamics. The negative effects on emotional well-being often translate into difficulties in concentration, anxiety, and reduced motivation, directly impacting students' academic performance.

### *3. The role of prevention*

Young people have increasingly free access to the beauty of innovation with all the dangers it contains. The Covid-19 pandemic has led to an overuse of social networks and an increase in anxious-depressive features, which could lead to a certain emotional lability resulting in the use of compensatory mechanisms. The promotion of awareness and digital education across all online platforms becomes crucial to mitigate the negative impact of these dynamics. Efforts should focus on raising awareness about the danger associated with the use of web, encouraging responsible digital practices, and creating an online culture that fosters mutual respect and compassion.

Prevention plays a crucial role in managing online risks for adolescents. Key aspects include education and awareness, as adolescents need to be provided with adequate education about the potential risks they may encounter online. This includes understanding the consequences of sharing personal information, recognizing cyberbullying, and being aware of online predators<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Y. L. REID CHASSIAKOS et al. *Children and adolescents and digital media*, in «Pediatrics», 2016, 138.5.

#### *4. Conclusions*

Digital literacy is equally essential. Promoting digital literacy skills ensures that adolescents have the knowledge and critical thinking abilities to navigate the online world safely. This includes understanding how to verify information, assess online content, and protect their privacy. In the hypermodern era, it is also necessary to educate parents about online risks, and the importance of monitoring their children's online activities helps create a supportive environment. Open communication between parents and adolescents is crucial to addressing concerns and providing guidance. Setting up appropriate school programs allows adolescents to develop a comprehensive understanding of potential risks and how to navigate the digital landscape responsibly. Implementing technical measures, such as privacy settings, parental controls, and age-appropriate content filters, can add an extra layer of protection for adolescents online. Recognizing the potential impact of online risks on mental health means that prevention efforts should include support mechanisms, counseling services, and resources to help adolescents manage issues such as cyberbullying or online harassment. Finally, involving the community, including educators, law enforcement, and mental health professionals, would foster a collaborative approach to preventing and treating online risks for adolescents.

By combining these preventive measures, it is possible to create a safer online environment for adolescents and empower them to make informed and responsible decisions in their digital interactions.



**A CALL FOR ACTION:  
CONTRASTING CYBERBULLYING AND  
PROTECTING MINORS' RIGHTS AT EU LEVEL**

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SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. – 2. Protection against cyberbullying at international level. – 3. An EU toolkit in the fight against cyberbullying: an overview. – 4. Education vs criminalization. Is it enough? – 5. Concluding remarks.

*1. Introduction*

In the last decades, digital services have hugely influenced our lives, transforming and increasing communication channels, circulation of ideas, sharing of images and contents.

The digital environment represents an opportunity for all, but exposes the individuals to risks and challenges that deserve to be analyzed, mostly for minors and children who are massive users of digital services. Increased access and anonymity of the internet, have made cyberbullying one of the most pervasive and more challenging risks to be tackled for minors users.

According to a recent report by the European Commission's science and knowledge service, in the European Union the phenomenon which has been steadily increasing during the last decade, had an even steeper rise during the COVID-19 first lockdown<sup>1</sup>, caused by a sudden shift of most children's activities into the digital world.

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<sup>1</sup> B. LOBE, A. VELICU, E. STAKSRUD, S. CHAUDRON, R. DI GIOIA, *How children (10-18) experienced online risks during the Covid-19 lockdown - Spring 2020*, European Commission, JRC Tech. Report, Luxembourg, 2021; L.G. ZAFFARONI, D. CINO, K. THIEL, C. LAMPERT, *Drivers of cyberbullying and cybervictimization during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings from an online survey during the first lockdown*, Media Education, 2022, 13(2) pp. 65-77.

Globally, 1 in 3 children report experiencing online bullying. In 2020, 33 % of girls and 20 % of boys in Europe reported experiencing disturbing content online at least once a month<sup>2</sup>, and the pandemic has not improved the scenario.

Recently the European Parliament (EP) discussed the issue of *Fighting cyber bullying of young people across the EU*<sup>3</sup>, pleading for an effective protection at EU level, against such a despicable behaviour. The phenomenon has been confronted on three levels: education, awareness rising among young people about the dangers of cyberbullying; law, making bullies accountable for their actions; support for victims through counselling.

There is not a single definition of cyberbullying at international level, even though many attempts have been made to catch its very deep significance.

Back in 2009, the European Commission defined cyberbullying as a «repeated verbal or psychological harassment carried out by an individual or a group against others through online services and mobile phones»<sup>4</sup>.

Broadly speaking, following the definition delivered by the United Nations (UN) in 2016<sup>5</sup>, it can be said that cyberbullying is an aggressive and intentional action carried out through internet and digital communication, against a specific victim, repeated along time and usually characterized by an unbalanced power relation. Different definitions share some common elements: the use of internet and social media to carry out cyberbullying harassment, intentionality to cause a damage, public relevance of the action, reluctance of victims to denounce, caused by fear of adverse reactions among peers or of adult censures, anonymity, causing lack of accountability of abusers, power unbalance.

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<sup>2</sup> Press release, D. ŠUICA, T. BRETON, C. RUSSELL, *Protecting children's rights in a digital world*, le Monde, 21 November 2022.

<sup>3</sup> EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, *Verbatim report of proceedings*, Strasbourg, 10 May 2023; question for written answer E-001527/2023 to the *Commission on Current situation in schools and European strategy on bullying and cyberbullying in schools*, 3 may 2023; Answer given by Vice-President Schinas on behalf of the European Commission on 25 July 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Press Release by the EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *Safer Internet Day 2009: Commission starts campaign against cyber-bullying*, MEMO/09/58, Brussels, 10 February 2009.

<sup>5</sup> UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY, *Annual report of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children*, A/HRC/31/20.



## *2. Protection against cyberbullying at international level*

Even lacking a legal definition at international level, cyberbullying is today recognized as a form of violence to which minors are potentially exposed, and against which they should be protected under international law.

The right of minors to be protected against all forms of violence is established by the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)<sup>6</sup>, ratified by all EU Member States and representing the most important and complete international regulatory instrument in the field of promotion and protection of children's rights. Art.1 of the Convention defines the child as a human being under 18 years of age, and art. 19 established that all States Parties of the Convention shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence<sup>7</sup>.

The States, parties of the CRC, are required to provide a report every five years on the implementation and protection of children's rights, which is evaluated by a specific UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Committee also grants a uniform interpretation and update of the CRC norms, in the form of General Comments on thematic issues.

In particular the General Comment n. 13 issued on 2011, on the minors' right to be free from every form of violence, provides for a definition of mental violence, including cyberbullying, as «psychological bullying and hazing by adults or other children, including via information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as mobile phones and the Internet (known as “cyberbullying”）」<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> UNITED NATIONS, *Convention on the Rights of the Child* adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989.

<sup>7</sup> Children's rights are part of the broader category of human rights under the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, *Universal Declaration of Human rights*, General Assembly resolution 2217/A, Paris 10 December 1948.

<sup>8</sup> COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD, *General comment No. 13 (2011) minor's right to be free from every form of violence*, CRC/C/GC/13.

A more recent General Comment, produced in 2021<sup>9</sup> provided for general guidelines for States Parties to implement the Convention in relation to the digital environment. Through the lens of non discrimination, protection of the best interest of the child, right to life, survival and development and respect for the views of the child<sup>10</sup>, State parties should guarantee:

- access rights of minors to digital resources and freedom of expression,
- education of adults and children on the opportunities and threats of the digital environment, as a short and long-term process in which tolerance and respect for the dignity of others are learned,
- awareness rising on rights in the digital environment and access to legal protection in case of their violation,
- collection of reliable data and monitoring of online violence phenomena.

States Parties, on their turn, should review, adopt and update their national legislation in line with international human rights standards, embedding children's rights into legislation, budgetary allocations and other administrative decisions relating to the digital environment.

At European regional level the protection of minors in the digital environment is overseen by the Council of Europe, with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)<sup>11</sup>, which mandates the protection of children against violence, the 2001 Budapest Convention on cyber-crime<sup>12</sup>, the Convention on Automatic processing of

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<sup>9</sup> COMMITTEE ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD, *General comment No. 25 (2021) on children's rights in relation to the digital environment*, CRC/C/GC/25.

<sup>10</sup> These are the four general principles – and respectively art. 2; 3, 6 and 12 f the UN CRC – set as general guiding lines by the CRC.

<sup>11</sup> The text of the Convention, adopted by the Council of Europe on the 4<sup>th</sup> of November 1950, in Rome has been amended by the provisions of Protocols No. 15 (CETS No. 213), No. 14 (CETS No. 194). The fundamental rights enshrined in the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR) integrate the primary law of the EU, *ex art. 6 of the TEU*. COUNCIL OF EUROPE, *European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*, ETS 5, Rome, 4 November 1950.

<sup>12</sup> The Convention is the first international treaty on crimes committed via the Internet and other computer networks, dealing particularly with infringements of copyright, computer-related fraud, child pornography and violations of network security. Its main objective, set out in the preamble, is to

personal data<sup>13</sup> and on the Protection of children against sexual exploitation<sup>14</sup> which are also relevant to cyberbullying. Although not binding, the Council's Strategy on the Rights of the Child for 2022 – 2027<sup>15</sup> identifies access to and safe use of technologies for all children along with freedom from violence also in the digital environment among its priorities.

At European Union level the respect of human rights represents one of the founding values of the EU as prescribed by art. 2 of the Treaty of the European Union (TEU) and further specified among the objectives underlying the EU action *ex art.3 (3)* of the TEU, where the protection of minors' rights are expressly granted<sup>16</sup>.

Moreover, the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (CFREU)<sup>17</sup> guarantees the protection of minors' rights (at art. 24 general protection of the minors' rights, and art. 32 against child labour), both at the level of EU institutions and of Member States.

The protection of minors' rights is a crosscutting EU policy issue, underlying the Union's regulatory activity and policies, and one of the fundamental priorities of the

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pursue a common criminal policy aimed at the protection of society against cybercrime, especially by adopting appropriate legislation and fostering international co-operation. COUNCIL OF EUROPE, *Convention on Cybercrime*, ETS n. 185, Budapest 23 November 2001.

<sup>13</sup> COUNCIL OF EUROPE, *Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data*, ETS n. 108, Strasbourg, 28 January 1981; *Additional protocol to Convention 108 regarding supervisory authorities and trans-border data flows* (ETS No. 181), Strasbourg, 8 november 2001; the Council of Europe approved a proposed modernization of the agreement, *Modernised Convention for the Protection of Individuals with Regard to the Processing of Personal Data*, CM/Inf(2018)15-final, adopted by the Committee of Ministers at its 128th session of the Committee of Ministers, Elsinore, 18 May 2018, not yet in force.

<sup>14</sup> COUNCIL OF EUROPE, *Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse*, CETS No. 201, Lanzarote 25 October 2007.

<sup>15</sup> COUNCIL OF EUROPE, *Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027)*, CM (2021)168-final, 23 February, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> By virtue of Article 3(3) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU), the Union promotes the protection of the rights of the child. Article 3(5) TEU establishes that, in its relations with the rest of the world, the Union shall contribute to the protection of human rights, in particular the rights of the child.

<sup>17</sup> The Charter has been adopted on 2000, and revised on 2007 with the adoption of the Lisbon Treaty it became integral part of the EU primary law. *Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union*, OJ C 326 of 26 October 2012, Nice 7 December 2000.

European Commission's action, as established in the political guidelines of the President Ursula von der Leyen<sup>18</sup>.

However, no binding EU acts (regulations or directives) are specifically dedicated to cyberbullying. Why? First of all, there is a matter of competences. Based on art. 5 TEU, the EU has the powers attributed to it by the Treaties, and exercises these powers based on the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality<sup>19</sup>.

Although the TEU and the CFREU provide for legal bases for EU action in the area of children's rights in the digital environment, it does not confer nor an exclusive neither a concurrent competency on the EU as an overarching policy area, so the EU has only an "additional" role consisting in supporting, coordinating or integrating the initiatives adopted by Member States at national level in this field.

Treaties endow the EU with the competence to set minimum rules by means of directives on mutual recognition of judgments and police and judicial cooperation in criminal matters (art. 82 (2)) and on the definition of criminal offences and sanctions in the areas of particularly serious crimes including computer crime (art. 83 (1)), having a cross-border dimension.

Furthermore, the EU has competence to approximate criminal laws, if such approximation proves essential to ensure the effective implementation of a Union policy in an area which has been the subject of harmonization measures (art. 83 (2)).

### *3. An eu toolkit in the fight against cyberbullying: an overview*

As outlined before, minors' rights protection in the digital environment is a crosscutting issue, touching many EU acts and policies. As a matter of fact, cyberbullying is a multifaceted phenomenon, often characterized by gender sensitive violence, xenophobia and racism, sexual harassment, sexual orientation and

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<sup>18</sup> Political guidelines for the next European Commission 2019-2024, *A Europe that strives for more* By candidate for the President of the European Commission U. von der Leyen, available on line at the link.

<sup>19</sup> *Ex multis* U. VILLANI, *Istituzioni di diritto dell'Unione europea*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. 2020, Bari, Cacucci, pp. 75-95.

vulnerability, so that different rights violation can be at stake, which can be roughly grouped in right to privacy, to safety, to information.

There is a relevant body of EU secondary law entailing the monitoring and protection of minors in the digital environment, including protection in the event of cyberbullying but with a focus on other specific threats:

- the Digital Service Act (DSA)<sup>20</sup>,
- the Audiovisual Media Services Directive<sup>21</sup>,
- General Data Protection Regulation<sup>22</sup>,
- Directive on the rights of crime victims<sup>23</sup>,
- Directive against sexual abuse and exploitation of minors and child pornography<sup>24</sup>,
- Council Framework Decision against racism and xenophobia<sup>25</sup>,
- the so called “Unfair Commercial Practices Directive”<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Regulation (EU) 2022/2065 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 October 2022 on a *Single Market For Digital Services and amending Directive 2000/31/EC*, OJ L 277, 27 October 2022.

<sup>21</sup> The directive obliges platforms to take specific measures on the protection of minors for audiovisual content which may impair their physical, mental or moral development; Directive (EU) 2018/1808 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 November 2018 amending Directive 2010/13/EU on *the coordination of certain provisions laid down by law, regulation or administrative action in Member States concerning the provision of audiovisual media services* (Audiovisual Media Services Directive) in view of changing market realities, OJ L 303, 28 November 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Regulation (EU) 2016/679 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016 *on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, and repealing Directive 95/46/EC*, OJ L 119, 4 May 2016.

<sup>23</sup> Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 *establishing minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime and replacing Council Framework Decision 2001/220/JHA*, OJ L 315, 14 November 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Directive 2011/93/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 *on combating the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and child pornography, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2004/68/JHA*, OJ L 335, 17 December 2011.

<sup>25</sup> The framework decision on combating racism and xenophobia, adopted in 2008, requires Member States to criminalise hate speech and hate crime on the basis of race, colour, religion, national or ethnic origin. In this context, the Commission initiated in 2016 a voluntary code of conduct with major social media platforms. Council Framework Decision 2008/913/JHA *on combating certain forms and expressions of racism and xenophobia by means of criminal law*, OJ L 328, 6 December 2008.

<sup>26</sup> Directive 2005/29/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 May 2005 *concerning unfair business-to-consumer commercial practices in the internal market and amending Council Directive 84/450/EEC, Directives 97/7/EC, 98/27/EC and 2002/65/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council and Regulation (EC) No 2006/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council ('Unfair Commercial Practices Directive')*, OJ L 149, 11 June 2005.

The variety of measures intervening to protect the rights of minors in the digital environment, gives an appraisal of the complexity of the lurking threats and of the lack of a coherent regulatory framework with respect to these phenomena.

Privacy is among the most threatened minors' right in the digital environment, relevant both at international level pursuant to art. 16 of the United Nations CRC and at EU level within the scope of art. 8 of the CFREU, art. 16 Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, providing that everyone has the right to the protection of personal data, and to the EU regulation 2016/679.

The regulation adopted in 2016, deals with the consent to the processing of personal data of the minor (art. 8), lawful only if the minor is at least 16 years old or, if under 16, when the consent is given by the holder of parental responsibility. Member States may establish by law a lower age, in any case no lower than 13 years.

Information relating data processing must be provided in a transparent and intelligible manner, particularly if addressed to minors (art. 12); the regulation also establishes a "right to be forgotten" (Art. 17), consisting in the erasure of personal data upon request of the interested party. In the preamble, the regulation states that that this right is particularly relevant if "the data subject has given his/her consent as a child" not being fully aware of the risks involved by the processing. The data subject should be able to exercise that right notwithstanding the fact that he/she is no longer a child" (§65). Supervisory authorities are established in each Member State, to promote awareness and public understanding of the risks, rules, guarantees and rights related to the processing, with particular attention to activities specifically aimed at minors (art. 57).

Another recent EU act is the European Digital Service Act – DSA which does not directly addresses the issue of cyberbullying, but sets out a wide range of due diligence obligations applicable to intermediaries of digital services in order to reduce the risks to which among others, minors can be exposed. Rules are adapted to the type, size and nature of the service concerned, the most stringent being imposed to the very large online platforms and search engines with more than 45 million users in the EU. The DSA recognises the specific risks related to serious negative effects on a person's

physical and mental well-being, as well as consequences on physical and mental development of children, caused by using these platforms. Online platforms are obliged to put in place appropriate and proportionate measures by, for example, designing their interface with the highest level of privacy, safety and security for minors, adopting standards or codes of conduct for their protection. The DSA obliges the very large online platforms and search engines to assess the actual and foreseeable effects of their services on mental health. They should also implement solutions that remedy the negative effects.

The directive provides some relevant protections and effective guarantees for users, including the possibility of contesting the content moderation decisions and transparency of the algorithms adopted to make visible or to remove certain contents. In the event of inertia of providers in removing contents, national supervisory authorities will intervene in a timely manner, through established procedures. Filter models, procedures for de-index violent or sexually explicit content, should be created upstream and downstream to overcome the problem of transparency of algorithms and contribute to reduce if not the phenomenon of cyberbullying, which has much more to do with education and social awareness, at least its impact on potential victims.

The EU also acts with soft law and multi-annual action programmes<sup>27</sup>. On March 2021, the Commission developed the first EU Strategy on the rights of the child 2021-

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<sup>27</sup> Communication from the Commission *A Digital Decade For Children And Youth: The New European Strategy For A Better Internet For Kids (Bik+)*, COM(2022) 212 final, Brussels, 11 may 2022; Decision (EU) 2022/2481 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2022 establishing the *Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030*, OJ L 323, 19 December 2022, p. 4–26; *European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles for the Digital Decade*, COM/2022/28 final, Brussels, 26 January 2022; *Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 Resetting education and training for the digital age*, COM/2020/624 final; European Commission, *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and The Council on the EU's Cybersecurity Strategy for the Digital Decade* JOIN/2020/18 final of 16 December 2020; European Commission, Report from the Commission, *Final evaluation of the multiannual EU program for the protection of children using the internet and other communication technologies (Safer Internet programme)*, COM (2016) 364 final of 6 June 2016; European Parliament resolution of 20 November 2012 on the *protection of minors in the digital world*, 2012/2068(INI); Communication from the Commission, *European Strategy for a Better Internet for Children*, COM(2012) 196 final of 2 May 2012.

2024<sup>28</sup> which systematically addresses the protection of minors in the real and digital environment. The strategy is based on the existing regulatory framework and was built with a participatory method. It addresses the safety of minors in the digital environment from the dual and complementary perspective of the right to access and the protection from the risks to which minors are exposed<sup>29</sup>. The Strategy proposes to:

- create and facilitate a child-led process, aimed at developing a set of principles to be promoted and adhered to by the industry,
- promote the development and use of information and assistive technologies accessible to children with disabilities,
- ensure the full implementation of the European Accessibility Act,
- step up the fight against all forms of online child sexual abuse.

The strategy also identified the adoption of a new Better Internet for Kids programme (BIK+)<sup>30</sup> as one of the priority actions to be tackled in order to fully overlook to the minors' rights online. Adopted in 2022, the BIK+ represents the digital component of the children's rights strategy and reflects the digital principle according to which children and young people online should be «protected and empowered online»<sup>31</sup>.

The BIK + programme, proposes to fight cyberbullying and ensure a safer digital environment for children through a set of integrated actions, built up around three pillar principles: safe digital experiences to protect children from harmful and illegal

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<sup>28</sup> In June 2022, the Council of the European Union adopted the Conclusions on the European Strategy on Children with which it invites Member States to develop coherent policies on children's rights to prevent and combat all forms of violence against children to strengthen legal systems to protect children's rights and increase opportunities for children to be responsible and resilient components of digital society. Communication from the Commission *EU Strategy On The Rights Of The Child*, COM (2021) 142 final, Brussels, 24.3.2021.

<sup>29</sup> «Almost one third of girls and 20% of boys experienced disturbing content once a month in the past year; and children from minorities encounter upsetting events online more frequently. Amongst LGBTI 15-17 years old respondents, 15% have experienced cyber harassment due to their sexual orientation. More and more traffickers use Internet platforms to recruit and exploit victims, children being a particularly vulnerable target group» COM (2021) 142, p. 15-16.

<sup>30</sup> COM (2022) 212.

<sup>31</sup> *Declaration on European Digital Rights and Principles*, COM (2022) 28 final.



online content, digital empowerment of children, active participation with more child-led activities<sup>32</sup>.

Focusing on protection, the European Commission, along with Member States commits to implement and re-launch a full set of actions, taking advantage of other EU initiatives and acts such as the proposal for a European Digital Identity<sup>33</sup>, the Gender equality strategy 2020-2025<sup>34</sup>, the Digital Service Act, the Consumer Protection Cooperation Regulation<sup>35</sup>, and the interoperability of the Safer Internet Centers with the Child International Helpline harmonised number on cyberbullying.

Finally, protection and repression against cyberbullying cannot go without prevention and empowerment, in particular at school. The European Education Area addresses well-being in schools to build positive learning environments for all learners. In this context, two flagship initiatives address bullying: the Council recommendation on pathways to School Success<sup>36</sup> and the launch of an expert group on supportive learning environments for groups at risk of underachievement and for supporting well-being at school.

#### *4. Education vs criminalization. is it enough?*

Although cyberbullying is unanimously perceived as a major threat all over the EU, not all 27 EU Member States have adopted specific legal provisions against this

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<sup>32</sup> COM (2022) 212, p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Regulation (EU) No 910/2014 as regards establishing a framework for a European Digital Identity*, {SEC (2021) 228 final} - {SWD (2021) 124 final} - {SWD (2021) 125 final}, COM (2021) 281 final, 2021/0136 (COD), Brussels, 3 June 2021.

<sup>34</sup> Communication from the Commission, *A Union of Equality: Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025*, COM/2020/152 final.

<sup>35</sup> Regulation (EU) 2017/2394 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 December 2017 on cooperation between national authorities responsible for the enforcement of consumer protection laws and repealing Regulation (EC) No 2006/2004, OJ L 345, 27 December 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Council Recommendation of 28 November 2022 on *Pathways to School Success and replacing the Council Recommendation of 28 June 2011 on policies to reduce early school leaving*, 2022/C 469/01, OJ C 469, 9 December 2022.

phenomenon. Cyberbullying can be, nevertheless, prosecuted in various Countries under the legal framework for cybercrimes or for other crimes that have criminal relevance, such as defamation, stalking, gender violence, etc. The approach to the prosecution of cyberbullying varies enormously among the different legal systems, which make a coordination of the EU a hard task to handle.

Few EU Member States have defined cyberbullying as a criminal offence and adopted criminal law approach<sup>37</sup>, as it presents various problems such as the age of the subject committing the crime and his/her criminal responsibility, the legally protected rights and the criminal conduct to be prosecuted, the high degree of anonymity, the risk of overlapping with existing criminal offences<sup>38</sup>. Also the civil law approach – compensation for damages - entangles a certain amount of contradictions with varying definition of compensation, compensable damage, age for civil liability.

Italy for instance has adopted a law on the protection of minors for the prevention and containment of the phenomenon of cyberbullying<sup>39</sup>, in 2017. It provides for a specific definition of cyberbullying and combines a preventive and restorative approach through the promotion of digital education and the provision of a specific procedure for the removal of online content harmful to the dignity of the minor<sup>40</sup>.

Minors aged over 14 who is a victim of cyberbullying (or a parent) can ask the website or the data owner to remove harmful contents published online. In case of inertia, the interested party can contact the Guarantor for the protection of personal data, who must intervene within the following 48 hours. The Italian law attaches much importance to the educational aspect, with a deep involvement of schools. Each

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<sup>37</sup> As an example, in Austria cyberbullying has been a criminal offense since 1 January 2016. With a new Article 107c titled *Continued Harassment Disturbance via Telecommunication or a Computer system*, Austria has introduced an offense to its criminal code. Ireland adopted in 2021, the *Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act*, known as “Coco’s Law”.

<sup>38</sup> For a comparative overview see G. BOSTANCI BOZBAYNDIR, *Cyberbullying and Criminal Law*, in «Istanbul Hukuk Mecmuas», vol. 77, n. 1, 2019, pp. 425-450.

<sup>39</sup> Law 29 May 2017, n. 71, *Disposizioni a tutela dei minori per la prevenzione ed il contrasto del fenomeno del cyber bullismo*, in GU n.127 3 June 2017.

<sup>40</sup> R. M. COLANGELO, *La legge sul cyberbullismo. Considerazioni informatico - giuridiche e comparatistiche*, in *Informatica e diritto*, XLIII annata, Vol. XXVI, 2017, n. 1-2, pp. 397-418; P. L. QUERALT, *Prevent and combat cyberbullying: is the current regulatory framework sufficient?*, «JeI - Jus e Internet», 28 June 2017.

school must appoint a teacher responsible to promote initiatives against bullying and cyberbullying in collaboration with local authorities and relevant stakeholders, and to elaborate teaching modules about legality and conscious use of internet.

Finally, the administrative sanction of *warning* by the police authority, introduced in Italy for stalking crimes, has been extended to cyberbullying. This sanction consists of an oral warning aimed at stopping the harmful conduct imposed to the perpetrator, and which entails serious consequences such as the tightening of the criminal sanction in the event of a future conviction for related crimes. On February 2023 a new bill<sup>41</sup> has been presented in order to tighten criminal relevance of cyberbullying, through the introduction of article 612-bis in the Italian penal code, concerning the crimes of bullying and cyberbullying, which should impose a penalty of imprisonment from one to seven years for bullying, defined as a violent conduct suitable to intimidate, threaten or harass someone, putting the victim in a state of serious psychological subjection or isolation, and from two to eight years if the same acts are committed via the internet or mobile telephone. The proposal also increases the amount of the fine provided for by article 731 of the penal code in case of failure to comply with the obligation to educate minors. Finally, the bill proposes to delegate the Government to adopt measures to prevent and combat bullying and cyberbullying allocating adequate financial resources.

### *5. Concluding remarks*

In recent days, the European Parliament invited the Commission to formulate a proposal for a directive on cyberbullying, granting the same level of protection against online abuse across Europe and pushing for new legislation at EU level to criminalise cyber-bullying based on the Irish model. A European strategy on bullying and cyberbullying is much-needed with the increasing involvement of schools, families,

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<sup>41</sup> Camera dei Deputati, Bill n. 910 submitted on the 22 February 2023.

local stakeholders, in order to tackle the causes of the phenomenon, before repairing the effects<sup>42</sup>.

Concluding, before or in parallel with the legal and judicial approach, it is essential to invoke the educational framework with respect to the phenomenon of cyberbullying and more generally to recall the concept of digital citizenship<sup>43</sup>. The educational problem arises on distinct levels for adults and minors: the former require predominantly technical education, the latter, even if digital natives, need ethical references to become technological users who respect the rights of the person and avoid exposing themselves to the risks inherent in the technology itself. A coherent regulatory framework at EU level would help to establish common minimum rules to ensure protection for victims of cyber bullying and greater harmony in the sanctioning and educational systems.

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<sup>42</sup> *EP Verbatim report of proceedings*, cit., May 2023

<sup>43</sup> For an insight in the topic, Council of Europe, *Digital citizenship education handbook*.

# MIGRANTS AT SEA, RESCUE AND MANAGEMENT OF EU EXTERNAL BORDERS: AN ISSUE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

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SUMMARY: 1. Migration as a contemporary issue. – 2 Migrants at sea and rescue obligations. – 3. Rescue operations and the place of safety. – 4. The management of European maritime external borders – 5. Rescue operations management: an accountability issue.

## *1. Migration as a contemporary issue*

Contemporary migration represents a distinctive feature of our time and is the most evident and dramatic effect of a globalization process the extent of which States have not well understood and which, in any case, struggle to govern. It must be said that the migratory phenomenon is nothing new: people have always crossed seas and borders out of a desire for knowledge, comparison, or in search of a new place where they can have a better life<sup>44</sup>.

What characterizes the current migratory flows, however, is the scope and dimension of the phenomenon: entire populations that move without a precise plan along specific routes, for reasons that increasingly often have to do not only (and not so much) with legitimate expectations of improving living conditions (so-called economic migrants), but rather they are the effect of extreme decisions to save one's own life and that of one's loved ones and cultivate the dream of a safe, free and dignified existence.

The current routes to Europe cross the Mediterranean and expose people to a very high risk of losing their lives. The political approach to the phenomenon is often

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<sup>44</sup> A.M. PELLICONI, *Migrants at Sea and the Implication of the “Duty to Rescue”*: Human Rights Perspectives in the light of Italian Case-Law, «Il Diritto Marittimo», 2020, p. 621 ff.

conditioned by emergency situations and security reasons related to the management of growing migratory flows, while the feelings of civil society are often caught between the worry of social and economic impact of the increasing number of migrants and indignation for tragic events, such as the very frequent shipwrecks in the Mediterranean, with an enormous media impact.

There would appear to be a wide lack of awareness of the regulatory framework that regulates the phenomenon, especially regarding the rights of rescued people.

Sea migrants enjoy the protection of various regulatory systems: their status is regulated by the international law of the sea, which recognizes them an unconditional right to rescue if they find themselves in danger at sea.

Furthermore, migrants, as they are potentially entitled to enjoy an international protection regime, are holders of a series of rights recognized by international legislation on refugees and asylum seekers; before anything else, they are holders of human rights, recognized and protected by all civilized nations as *ius cogens* norms of international law<sup>45</sup>. It is therefore clear that this phenomenon comes to the attention of various legal systems considering the “rights” of migrants.

However, the perspective that we prefer to highlight in this article is that of the corresponding obligations imposed both on States and private individuals, as well as on the international community, including the duties of solidarity and protection that bind States that exercise a kind of jurisdiction over migrants, which includes a duty of care on their fate and corresponding responsibilities.

## 2. *Migrants at sea and rescue obligations*

The annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR), 49<sup>th</sup> session of the Human Rights Council (8 March 2022) indicates the obligation to protect human life at sea and other fundamental human rights as an

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<sup>45</sup> J. ALLAIN, *The ius cogens nature of “non refoulment”*, in «International Journal of Refugee Law», 2002, pp. 533-550.

absolutely priority over the State's interest in border surveillance, condemning any behaviour in contrast to this principle<sup>46</sup>. I would like to underline that this condemnation has a legal basis: maritime legislation on rescue at sea, integrated by mandatory rules to protect human rights, foresees that shipwrecked people have the right to be rescued and disembarked in a safe place, while the national rules against illegal immigration cannot introduce exceptions on this point.

The importance of these principles is evident if we consider that a large part of the migratory flows towards Europe cross the Mediterranean in precarious boats, and many of the tragic events we witness are governed by the law of the sea (MSC/Circ.896/Rev.1, 12 June 2001, on *Interim measures for combating unsafe practices associated with the trafficking or transport of migrants by sea*).

Customary principles of the law of the sea, whose origins have been lost in the history of humanity, indicate (maritime) “solidarity” as a fundamental value and the “duty of rescue” at sea as a legal obligation of State and private ships’ masters, the violation of which is criminally sanctioned. This “duty to rescue” is binding on anyone who has news of a dangerous situation at sea when they can provide help; it also forces States to behave proactively, i.e. to organise adequate «search and rescue services», with the aim to prevent dangerous situations and loss of life, also in collaboration with other neighbouring States<sup>47</sup>.

The “rescue obligation” is strengthened by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (hereinafter LOSC) signed in Montego Bay in 1982<sup>48</sup>, and enforced in

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<sup>46</sup> E PAPAVIDIS, *The European Convention of Human Rights and Migration at Sea: Reading the “Jurisdictional Threshold” of the Convention under the Law of the Sea Paradigm*, in «German Law Journal», 2021, p. 417 ff.; F.G. ATTARD, *The Duty of the Shipmaster to Render Assistance at Sea under International Law*, Leiden, 2020; I. MANN, *The Right to Perform Rescue at Sea: Jurisprudence and Drowning*, in «German Law Journal», 2020, p. 598 ff.; M. RATCOVICH, *International Law and the Rescue of Refugees at Sea*, Stockholm 2019, p. 156 ff.

<sup>47</sup> S. HODGES, C. HILL, *Principles of Maritime Law*, Londra, Informa Pub from Routledge, 2001, p. 177 ff.; see also MSC/Circ.896/Rev.1, 12 June 2001, on «*Interim measures for combating unsafe practices associated with the trafficking or transport of migrant by sea*», Maritime Safety Committee of (MSC) International Maritime Organization (IMO), London, [www.imo.org](http://www.imo.org)

<sup>48</sup> United Nation Convention on the Law of the Sea (hereinafter the LOSC) signed in Montego Bay in 1982 and entered into force 16 November 1994. On this subject see, ex multis, Y TANAKA, *The International Law of the Sea*, III ed., Cambridge, 2019; D. ATTARD et al. (eds.) *The IMLI Treaties on*

Italy with Law No. 689/1994, also known as the “Constitution of the Seas”, due to the relevance of the principles enshrined therein and the general application and respect of its rules, which mainly refer to customary international law, including the norms of *ius cogens*<sup>49</sup>. Art. 98, §1 of LOSC foresees that State Parties, as flag States, require the masters of ships flying their flag to aid anyone who is at sea in danger, but to the extent that the rescue operation is possible without compromising the safety of the rescue vessel, its crew and passengers on board.

As coastal States, Art. 98, §2 requires parties to promote the establishment of adequate and effective search and rescue (SAR) services and, when circumstances so require, cooperate with adjacent States to this end, through regional agreements.

The obligation to provide assistance to people in danger of being lost at sea is specified in detail by various Conventions in force, which establish technical rules for safety of navigation<sup>50</sup>. This duty of maritime salvage was first formalized by the Brussels Collision Convention signed in 1910<sup>51</sup>, foreseeing the obligation of ships involved in collisions to provide mutual assistance with the aim of avoiding loss of human life. State obligations to provide rescue as the flag authority are reinforced by the provisions of the 1974 International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS)<sup>52</sup>, Regulation 33, Distress situations, Chapter V, § 1, establishing that the

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*Global Ocean Governance*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018; A PRÖLSS (ed.) *The United Nation Convention on the Law of the Sea: A Commentary*, Oxford, Hart Publishing, 2017; J. BERRET AND R. BARNES, *Law of the Sea: UNCLOS as a Living Treaty*, London, British Institute of International and Comparative Law, 2016; P. VINCENT, *Droit de la mer*, Bruxelles, Larcier, 2008; R. CHURCHILL, A. V. LOWE, *Law of the Sea*, 3 ed., Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1999; T. TREVES, *Il diritto del mare e l'Italia*, Milano, Giuffrè, 1995; R.J. DUPAY, D. VIGNES (eds.) *A Handbook on the New Law of the Sea*, 2 vol., Dordrecht, 1991; D.P. O'Connell, *The international Law of the Sea*, Vol. II, (ed. I. A. SHEARER), Oxford, 1984; R. P. ANAND, *Origin and Development of the Law of the Sea. The History of International Law Revisited*, The Hague, 1983.

<sup>49</sup> Y TANAKA, *The International Law of the Sea*, cit., p. 37 ff.; D. ATTARD et al. (eds.) cit., p- 3 ff.

<sup>50</sup> See *ex multis*, M.P. RIZZO, *La nuova disciplina internazionale del soccorso in acqua ed il codice della navigazione*, Napoli, 1996; G. CAMARDA, *Il soccorso in mare. Profili contrattuali ed extracontrattuali*, Milano, 2006; M.P. RIZZO, *Soccorso in mare e tutela dell'ambiente marino*, in «Diritto dei Trasporti», 2014, p. 775 ff.

<sup>51</sup> Brussels Collision Convention signed on 23 September 1910 and entered into force on 1 March 1913. See S. POLLASTRELLI, *La convenzione di Bruxelles del 1910 in materia di urto di navi. La legge applicabile e la competenza giurisdizionale*, in «Il Diritto Marittimo», 2010, p. 798 ff.

<sup>52</sup> International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) adopted in London, 1 November 1974, and entered into force on 25 May 1980.



master of a vessel which is able to render assistance is required to do so as soon as possible after they receive news that a person(s) is/are in danger at sea.

A resolution of the Maritime Safety Committee (MSC) of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) - MSC 153(78), adopted in 2004, further specifies that the obligation applies regardless of the nationality of the person to whom assistance is provided and the circumstances in which this person is assisted: therefore, it includes irregular migrants, regardless of the sea area in which the event occurs. This means that assistance must also be provided to people who are not entitled to find themselves where they are (such as illegal immigrants) or who have put themselves in danger<sup>53</sup>. Italy provides for such an obligation, which applies to masters and crews of national or merchant ships, punishing any violation under national criminal law (Art. 1158 Italian Navigation Code).

Maritime salvage, on a contractual basis, is governed by the International Convention on Salvage of 1989 (Salvage Convention)<sup>54</sup>.

The obligations of a coastal State to protect human life in relation to a rescue operation are better defined by the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue 1979 (SAR)<sup>55</sup>, as coordinated with the abovementioned rules. The SAR Convention adopts a more proactive approach in compliance with the State's duties pursuant to Art. 98, §2, of LOSC.

Like SOLAS, Regulation V/33, Art. 2.1.10 of the Annex to the SAR Convention (1988 edition) states that «Parties shall ensure that assistance be provided to any person in distress at sea. They shall do so regardless of the nationality or status of such a person or the circumstances in which that person is found». The same Annex, Chapter 2, establishes that State parties, insofar as they can do so individually or in

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<sup>53</sup> I. CARACCILO, *Migration and the Law of the Sea: Solution and Limitation of a Fragmentary Regime*, in J. CRAWFORD, A. KOROMA, S. MAHMOUDI and A. PELLET (eds.), *The International Legal Order: Current Needs and Possible Responses*, Essays in Honour of Djiamchid Momtaz, Leiden, Brill Nijhoff, 2017, p. 278.

<sup>54</sup> Signed in London on 28 April 1989, the so-called 1989 Salvage Convention, ratified and enforced in Italy with Law No. 29, 12 April 1995, in force since 14 July 1996.

<sup>55</sup> International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR), Hamburg, 27 April 1979 in force from 22 June 1985.

cooperation with the States and, if necessary, with the IMO, are obliged to participate in the development of SAR services to ensure that people in distress at sea are rescued (Art. 2.1.1). To this end, by mutual agreement, States concerned are required to ensure that sufficient and contiguous SAR Regions are established in each area, avoiding overlaps, where possible (Art. 2.13 and 2.1.4).

As is known, most of the rescue operations that take place in the Mediterranean basin are conducted using means belonging to Italian authorities, since Italy manages a vast SAR area<sup>56</sup>, having Libya and Malta as front states: both, for various reasons, are unable to adequately manage their own areas. According to the cooperation mechanism envisaged by the SAR Convention, if the request for assistance is made within the SAR zone under the responsibility of a State which is unable to intervene, where another State has this capacity, this State must intervene. Following the conclusion of the 2017 Italy-Libya Memorandum, still in force as it is automatically renewed, Libya has established its own SAR zone, where rescue activities are carried out by the Libyan Coast Guard. The Italian Navigation Code places a rescue obligation also on the maritime authority that has news of a ship in danger, of a shipwreck or any other incident/accident (Art. 69, Italian Navigation Code). Moreover, according to Articles 489 to 500 of the Italian Navigation Code, the master of a ship who has news of a dangerous situation must take action to ensure the safety of people with all means available.

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<sup>56</sup> The SAR area of Italian responsibility, established in Presidential Decree no. 662/1994 and subsequent amendments, extends for approximately 500,000 km<sup>2</sup>. It is divided into 15 sub-areas headed by the same number of MRSCs (Maritime rescue sub centres - based at the maritime directorates: the 12th MRSC is established in Palermo). The general organization of maritime SAR services is ensured by the General Command of the Corps of Port Authorities, such as the national maritime rescue coordination centre (IMRCC), which makes use of maritime directorates and port commanders. The port commanders, such as coastal guard units (UCG), order the intervention of the maritime rescue units dependent on them. In case of need, the IMRCC and the MRSC request competent high commanders of the Navy and the Air Force and the assistance of naval and air vehicles belonging to these State administrations. Following the conclusion of the 2017 Italy-Libya Memorandum, renewed in February 2020 for a further three years, Libya has established its own SAR zone, where rescue activities are carried out by the Libyan Coast Guard. On February 2, 2023, the Memorandum automatically renewed for a further 3 years. It provides funding and training for the Libyan Coast Guard with the aim of stopping migratory flows in the Mediterranean.

The National Authority responsible for the SAR Region in which shipwrecked victims are recovered is required to provide a «safe place» or ensure its availability (Res. MSC 167-78 of 2004, para. 2.5)

### *3. Rescue operations and the place of safety*

Rescue operations at sea cannot be considered concluded until people rescued have been disembarked in a safe place<sup>57</sup>. As stated by the Italian Supreme Court of Cassation, in the “Rackete case”<sup>58</sup>, the obligation to provide assistance does not end in the act of rescue, involving the consequent obligation to land castaways in a place of safety.

According to SOLAS and the SAR Annex, as amended in 2004, the State responsible for the SAR region in which the rescue was provided is required to ensure that the rescued persons are disembarked to a place of safety as soon as reasonably possible, taking into account the specific circumstances on a case by case basis and IMO «Guidelines for treatment of people rescued at sea» (Resolution MSC.167(78) 2004). Resolution No. 1821, of 21 June 2011, of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (Art. 5.2) specified that «the notion of “place of safety” should not be restricted to the physical protection of people, but necessarily also entails respect for their fundamental rights», including the principle of non-refoulement. According to some scholars, «customary and treaty law of the sea warrants a proper human right to be rescued and to disembark in a safe place»<sup>59</sup>.

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<sup>57</sup> Maritime Safety Committee Resolution MSC.153 (78), Adoption of Amendments to the International Convention of the Safety of Life at Sea, 1974, of May 2020, Annex, No. 4 and Resolution MSC.155(78) Adoption of Amendments to the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, 1979, of May 20, 2004, Annex No.3.1.9. On the “place of safety” landing obligation see Criminal Court of Agrigento, Judgment of October 7, 2009, No. 954, Cap Anamour case; Judge of Preliminary Investigation of Ragusa, Decree of April 16, 2018, No 1182, Proactiva Open Arms case; Judge of Preliminary Investigation of Trapani, Judgment of May 23, 2019.

<sup>58</sup> Italian Court of Cassation, January 16, 2020, No. 6626.

<sup>59</sup> A.M., PELLICONI, *Op. cit.*, 630.

Therefore, the “safe place” is a place where lives of survivors are no longer threatened, where their primary needs are met and from where they can be transferred to their next destination or the final one (IMO Guidelines, par. 6.12). The qualification as “safe” (referring to the place of disembarkation) includes different requirements that are essential not to violate people's fundamental rights: landings in violation of the principle of non-refoulement, of the prohibition of collective expulsions and in contrast with the rights of international protection granted to potential refugees and asylum seekers are considered landings in “unsafe” places<sup>60</sup>.

A safe place does not coincide with the nearest port: international conventions use the different concept of “minimum further deviation”, that is a “minimum departure” from the original route of the rescuing ship, as a measure aimed at limiting the economic damage of the shipowners involved in the rescue operations and at reducing the period of time in which a ship, not equipped to transport so many people, finds itself sailing overloaded with human beings. This is a condition that is difficult to apply to the ships of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), which routinely monitor the Mediterranean to rescue people, often involved in several subsequent rescues before proceeding to disembark and who, therefore, do not have a defined “original route”. In these cases, the search for a safe place can be better supported by considering the time required for rescue operations. International Conventions require that disembarkation take place «as soon as reasonably possible» (SOLAS Regulation V/33, par. 1-1 and SAR Annex, Chapter III, Art. 3.1.9) without indicating strict deadlines, but indicate the use of general criteria, such as that of reasonableness.

The identification of a safe place also depends on the circumstances of the case, which include the situation on board the rescue vessel, the medical needs of the rescued people, the availability of means of transport or other rescue units and the legal regime

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<sup>60</sup> U. LEANZA, F. GRAZIANI, *Poteri di enforcement e di jurisdiction in materia di traffico di migranti via mare: aspetti operativi nell'attività di contrasto*, in «La comunità internazionale», 2, 2014, 165-210; G. CAMARDA, *Tutela della vita umana in mare e difesa degli interessi dello Stato: i tentativi di immigrazione clandestina*, in «Rivista di diritto dell'economia, dei trasporti e dell'ambiente», 2007, [www.giureta.it](http://www.giureta.it); T. SCOVAZZI, *La lotta all'immigrazione clandestina alla luce del diritto internazionale del mare*, in «Diritto, immigrazione e cittadinanza», IV, 2003, pp. 48-60. See Preliminary Investigation Judge of Trapani, Judgment of 23 of May 2019, p. 27 of the motivation.

of the area where the rescue operations took place. IMO Guidelines are not mandatory in all States bordering the Mediterranean and many of these countries have not ratified the amendments to SAR and SOLAS Conventions adopted in 2014, according to which the obligation to provide a safe landing place for the shipwrecked person(s) «falls on the Contracting Government responsible for the SAR region in which the survivors have been recovered». In other words, once the rescue operation has been carried out, migrants' access to the ports of the State coordinating the SAR operations is not automatic.

Ports, as internal waters, are maritime zones that fall under the complete and exclusive sovereignty of the coastal State, which can refuse landing: there is no provision in the international law of the sea which requires States to open their ports to foreign ships<sup>61</sup>. International law of the sea (Art. 19 LOSC) allows the coastal authority to prevent access of foreign ships to its territorial sea for safety reasons, when the passage of that ship is not “harmless”, for instance, because it is in violation of State immigration regulations. However, this rule admits an exception, coming from a “principle of general international law”, according to the European Court of Human Rights<sup>62</sup>, which requires coastal States to tolerate entry of foreign ships in distress into its ports: the UNHCR defined it a “humanitarian obligation”<sup>63</sup>. According to the Italian Supreme Court<sup>64</sup>, the “humanitarian argument” excludes the crime of aiding and abetting illegal immigration from the sanction only in the case provided for rescue at sea. Thus, the disembarkation of migrants in a safe place, despite the prohibition of the coastal authority, is not punishable, as the shipmaster of rescue ship is acting in fulfilment of his duties<sup>65</sup>. This was the main point of the

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<sup>61</sup> Y. TANAKA, *The International Law of the Sea*, cit. 98; A. PRÖLSS (ed.) *The United Nation Convention on the Law of the Sea: A Commentary*, cit., 359.

<sup>62</sup> ECHR, I, March 30, 2023, No. 21329.

<sup>63</sup> UNCHR, Conclusion No. 15 (1979), Refugees without an asylum Country, 1979. ECHR, I, March 30, 2023, No. 21329.

<sup>64</sup> Italian Supreme Court, sentence of June 5, 2023 No. 33822.

<sup>65</sup> Public Prosecutor's Office of Palermo, June 13, 2018, Rackete case.

debate raised in the cases of the “Aquarius”<sup>66</sup> a rescue vessel operated by the German NGO SOS Méditerranée, the “Diciotti”, an Italian Navy ship waiting for days at the port of Catania<sup>67</sup>, and the “Sea Watch”, where the ship master, Carola Rackete, forced the entry of her ship into the port of Catania, despite the ban by the Italian authorities. The non-refoulement criterion binds States also in the case of rescue operations carried out in international waters, as rescued people, potentially asylum seekers, are under control and responsibility of the coordinating SAR Authority and/or the flag State Authority as soon as the rescue operation begins. As clarified by the European Court of Human Rights<sup>68</sup>, States exercise jurisdiction over the shipwrecked person(s), even outside of their territorial waters or off-board of State vessels, by virtue of effective control over the fate of rescued people, as in the case of management of a rescue operation in the context of anti-immigration surveillance activities. According to this rule, a State cannot reject migrants rescued in international waters based on agreements with neighbouring States, when the States to which people are sent to cannot guarantee a safe place of landing<sup>69</sup>. Those criteria are referred to by the European Maritime Surveillance Regulation<sup>70</sup> establishing rules for the surveillance of external sea borders in the context of operational cooperation

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<sup>66</sup> On 10 June 2018, Italy refused the *Aquarius*, a rescue vessel operated by the German NGO SOS Méditerranée, access to its ports to disembark of more than 600 rescued migrants on Italian territory. The *Aquarius* [arrived safely in Valencia a week](#) later, on Sunday 17 June 2018, but the case was of serious concern, particularly in view of the new Italian policy concerning access to Italian ports for NGO vessels rescuing migrants in the Mediterranean.

<sup>67</sup> See S. PITTO, L. ZUPPA, *Il difficile bilanciamento tra regole internazionali per il coordinamento delle operazioni di soccorso e rispetto dei diritti dei migranti: riflessioni a partire dai casi “Open Arms” e “Diciotti”*, in «Il Diritto Marittimo», 2020, p. 39 ss.

<sup>68</sup> ECHR, *Hirsi Jama v. Italy*, Judgment of February 23, 2012. A. FAZZINI, *Le politiche di contrasto alle ONG che operano il soccorso in mare (terzo atto) e la tenuta dello Stato di diritto*, in *Ordine internazionale e diritti umani*, 2023, pp. 124-142; V. MORENO-LAX, *Hirsi Jamaa and Others v Italy or the Strasbourg Court versus Extraterritorial Migration Control?*, in «Human Rights Law Review», 12, Issue 3, September 2012, pp. 574-598.

<sup>69</sup> A. Di PASCALE, *Migration Control at Sea: The Italian Case*, in B. RYAN, V. MITSILEGAS, *Extraterritorial Immigration Control*, Brill, Leiden, 2010, p. 282.

<sup>70</sup> European Council Reg. (EU) of 15 May 2014, No. 656/2014 Establishing rules for the surveillance of external sea borders in the context of operational cooperation coordinated by the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union.

coordinated by the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union (Frontex)<sup>71</sup>.

The Italian Supreme Court of Cassation recently ruled on this point, condemning the shipmaster of an Italian tugboat who, after having rescued 101 migrants in precarious conditions in the Mediterranean, following the order of the coordinating SAR authority handed them over to the commanders of the Libyan coast guard<sup>72</sup>. The ruling is of particular interest as it clarifies that failure to comply with the international and internal navigation law relating to rescue operations at sea constitutes a crime; the surrender of a group of migrants to the authorities of a country, such as Libya, must be understood as a crime where the protection of the fundamental rights of the rescued people and their admission to international protection procedures is not guaranteed.

This issue is part of the broader question relating to the relationship between the regulation of rescue at sea and anti-immigration legislation.

#### *4. The Management of European maritime external borders*

Migration at sea geographically affects EU countries bordering the Mediterranean, but politically it concerns all of Europe, as an effect of the free movement of people in

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<sup>71</sup> Reg. (CE) n. 2007/2004 of the Council, 26 October 2004, establishing a European Agency for the management of operational cooperation at the external borders of the Member States of the European Union (Frontex), no longer in force.

<sup>72</sup> The occurrence date back to 30 July 2018, when an Italian tugboat, the “Asso 28”, after having rescued 101 people in the Mediterranean, brought them back to Libya and handed them over to the local authorities. The conduct was condemned pursuant to Art. 591 of the criminal code which punishes the crime of abandonment of minors or incapable persons. The duty of care incumbent on the shipmaster of the rescue tug arises from the special rules regarding rescue at sea. According to the judges, the master should have communicated immediately, both before starting the rescue activities and after carrying them out, to the coordination and rescue centres in Tripoli and to the Italian National Centre for Rescue at Sea, in the absence of a response from the former. By handing over the migrants to the Libyan authorities, the shipmaster violated “the procedures established by the SOLAS Convention and the directives of the International Maritime Organization” by implementing “a collective pushback in a port considered unsafe like the Libyan one”. Furthermore, the Court of Cassation reiterates that in the specific case the shipmaster “should have carried out necessary checks on the migrants, checked whether or not they wanted to ask for asylum, carried out necessary checks on the minors, to check whether they were accompanied or not”: Italian Criminal Supreme Court, VI, December, 16, 2021, No. 15869.

the *Schengen Area*<sup>73</sup>. The EU has been working on a program for the coordinated management of controls at the EU common borders for twenty years, closely related to the exigence of governing the migratory phenomenon, which had already seen massive flows at the end of the last century<sup>74</sup>.

The EU Maritime Surveillance Regulation in force (Reg. No. 656/2014) is aimed to harmonize the EU maritime border surveillance operations with the assignment of operational tasks to the European Border Coast Guard Authority (EBCGA) established by EU Reg. 2019/1896<sup>75</sup> in force.

According to Art. 9, § 1, of the Maritime Surveillance Regulation, Member States are required to assist “any vessel” or “person(s) in distress at sea” they come across during a maritime surveillance operation; Art. 3 requires that maritime border surveillance operations be implemented in such a way as to ensure the safety of intercepted or rescued persons, of participating units and of third parties. Operations are planned and implemented with full respect for human dignity and human rights, including the prohibition of refoulement.

EU regulation requires the States involved in rescue operations take shipwrecked people to a safe place. However, State prerogatives and duties depend on the marine space in which the rescue activity was carried out, distinguishing rescue operations

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<sup>73</sup> See Schengen Intergovernmental Agreement, 14 June 1985, concluded by Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, France and Germany, and Schengen Convention, 19 June 1990. In 1995, the Common Manual on border controls was issued, published with decree. n. 2000/751/EC and 2002/353/EC (GUCE C 313, 16 December 2002) amended by Council regulations (EC) no. 790/2001 and n. 2133/2004. The Schengen Convention and related agreements were integrated into the institutional and legal framework of the European Union with the Protocol annexed to the Amsterdam Treaty of 1997. See R. ADAM *Cooperation in the field of justice and home affairs: from Schengen to Maastricht*, in «Riv. Dir. Eu.», 1994, p. 225 ff.; B. BIRTH, *From Schengen to Maastricht. Open borders, judicial and police cooperation*, Milano, 1995; ID., *The incorporation of the Schengen Agreements into the framework of the European Union and the future role of the Parliamentary Control Committee*, in «Riv. Ital. Dir. Pubbl. Com.», 1999, p.731 ff.

<sup>74</sup> European Commission, Communication on 'Priority actions for responding to the challenges of migration', Brussels, 30 November 2005, COM (2005) 621 final. See also The Council's 2014 EU Maritime Security Strategy (EUMSS) and the Commission's 2015, European Agenda on Migration on the website [www.europa.eu](http://www.europa.eu).

<sup>75</sup> Regulation (EU) 2019/1896 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 November 2019 on the European Border and Coast Guard and repealing Regulations (EU) No 1052/2013 and (EU) 2016/1624.



which take place in territorial seas (Art. 6), contiguous zones (Art. 8) or the high seas (Art. 7).

According to Art. 10, in the case of interception in territorial seas or contiguous zones, disembarkation shall take place in the coastal Member State; in the case of interception on the high seas, disembarkation may take place in the third country from which the vessel is assumed to have departed. If that is not possible (for instance, because it is not a safe place), disembarkation shall take place in the host Member State; without prejudice to the responsibility of the Rescue Coordination Centre, the host Member State along with the participating Member States shall cooperate with the competent Rescue Coordination Centre to identify a place of safety and, if is necessary, disembark the rescued persons in the host Member State.

Irrespective of where the operations take place, they must be conducted in compliance with the principle of non-refoulement and human dignity (Art. 4, § 1, § 6)<sup>76</sup>

The countries most affected by the migrant flows reaching their coasts (Italy, Spain, Greece) have experienced increasing problems in carrying out maritime border control, being obliged to respect obligations undertaken under the *Schengen acquis*, on the one hand, and fundamental values of protection of human life and the dignity of the person, on the other.

As clarified by the European Court of Justice <sup>77</sup>, the «discipline relating to the attribution of public authority powers to border guards (such as the arrest of irregular migrants, the seizure of ships and the repatriation of persons arrested to a specific place) implies incisive interference with the fundamental rights of people involved» that only European legislative authorities can deliberate.

The relevance of the issue and its moral implication for peaceful development of the integration process in economic and social matters has urged Europe to equip itself

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<sup>76</sup> Cfr. R. MUNGIANU, *Frontex and Non refoulement: the International Responsibility of the EU*, Cambridge Press University, 2016, 35 ss.; T. DEMMELHUBER, *The European Union and illegal migration in the southern Mediterranean: the trap of competing policy concepts*, in «The International Journal of Human Rights», 2011, Vol. 15, No. 6, 813-826.

<sup>77</sup> CJEU 5 September 2012, in Case C-355/2010, European Parliament v. Council, in «Giust. civ.» 2012, 10, I, p. 2207.

with a centralized structure for the supervision of border control operations, maintained as an area of competence of national authorities.

With the abovementioned EU regulation No. 2007 of 2004, Frontex was established, with the task of coordinating the activities managed by the Member States with their coast guard personnel<sup>78</sup>. After a decade, an amendment to the founding regulation has provided for the establishment of an EU standing corps to support EU countries in border control and return tasks, as well as in the fight against cross-border crime, in the context of operational cooperation coordinated by Frontex according to the Maritime Surveillance Regulation (No. 656/2014).

The crisis related to the massive migratory flows registered in Europe in 2015<sup>79</sup> urged the EU to reinforce the regulatory framework on sea border surveillance. By Reg. (UE) n. 2016/1624 the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (EBCGA) was established<sup>80</sup> as the European coordinating body between competent national authorities and the existing European Agencies, Frontex, and the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA)<sup>81</sup> and the European Fisheries Control Agency (EFCA)<sup>82</sup>.

Integrated border management entrusted to the new EBCGA is a complex function, now regulated by the current (EU) Reg. No. 2019/1896, which includes both search and rescue operations at sea with surveillance activities and the safeguard of the fundamental rights of intercepted persons. Reg. 2019/1896, in force, strengthens

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<sup>78</sup> H. EKELUND, *The Establishment of FRONTEX: A New Institutionalist Approach*, in «European Integration», 2014, Vol. 36, n. 2, 99-116; S. WOLF, A. SCHOUT, *Frontex as Agency: more of the same?* in *Perspectives on European Politics and Society: journal of intra-European dialogue*, 2013, 14 (3) 324; F. PELLEGRINO, *La discussa Agenzia Frontex*, in «Immigrazione e condizione giuridica dello straniero», edited by G. Moschella, L. Buscema, Roma, Aracne, 2016, p. 199 ss.

<sup>79</sup> EU Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, Protection of EU external borders, April 2019, [www.europarl.europa.eu/supporting-analyses](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/supporting-analyses).

<sup>80</sup> Reg. (UE) n. 2016/1624, 14 September 2016 on the European Border and Coast Guard and amending Regulation (EU) 2016/399 of the European Parliament and of the Council and repealing Regulation (EC) No 863/2007 of the European Parliament and of the Council, Council Regulation (EC) No 2007/2004 and Council Decision 2005/267/EC (*European Bording Coast Guard Agency – EBCGA*).

<sup>81</sup> Regulation (EC) No 1406/2002 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 June 2002 establishing a European Maritime Safety Agency.

<sup>82</sup> Regulation (EU) 2019/473 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 19 March 2019 on THE EUROPEAN FISHERIES CONTROL AGENCY (CODIFICATION).

the role of the new body, taking a very innovative step in the establishment of a permanent EBCG staff. It determines composition, organization and competences of this permanent European border guard standing corps, composed of statutory staff, officials and military personnel seconded from the Member States, which act as the “operational arm” of the three EU Agencies (Frontex, EFCA and EMSA). The EBCG standing corps is allowed to use force (and carry arms) and has an increasing and sizeable budget (circa €5.6 billion for 2021 – 2027) for their own equipment (vessels, drones, airplanes).

European integrated border control has become a shared responsibility of the EBCGA and the national authorities competent for border management, including coast guards: while Member States are responsible for issuing decisions of rescue and return, the EBCGA supports the application of EU regulations relating to the management of the external borders surveillance and return, by assessing, programming, coordinating and reinforcing the actions of Member States which implement these measures.

Therefore, it is important to analyse the structure and functions of the new EBCGA to identify the role of EU and national authorities, with the aim of sharing EU and Member States’ responsibilities in carrying out coordinated operations under the supervision of the new EU body.

### *5. Rescue operations management: an accountability issue*

Until 2014, search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean basin were organised on an institutionalized basis, as part of collaborative search and rescue missions between Member States’ navies, coordinated by the EU. The last humanitarian mission was Mare Nostrum, which was brought to a close in 2014. Following the 2015 migration crisis, EU efforts focused on surveillance of external maritime borders, to manage migratory flows in countries of origin and transit. An EU mission, such as Triton, designed to combat irregular immigration, laid the foundations for the Italy-

Libya Memorandum (2017), aimed at strengthening human resources and means of the Libyan Coast Guard, for the purpose of creating a Libyan SAR zone, proclaimed in 2018. Non-governmental and humanitarian organizations (NGO) have become the main actors of rescue missions in the Mediterranean.

In this context, the EBCGA is entrusted with «search and rescue operations for persons in distress at sea, launched and carried out in accordance with Regulation 656/2014» (Art. 3, § 1, let. b, Reg. 2019/1896). According to the current 2019/1896 Regulation, the executive Director of EBCGA decides operational programs, and control of activities falls to the prerogative of the EBCGA, so that Member States are required to operate according to the EU Agency program (Artt. 37 ff., 2019/1896 Reg.). I wish to note that the EBCGA manages all phases of the risk analysis of border vulnerability: it defines the evaluation criteria to be used in the analysis; it then evaluates the level of risk and capacity of reaction by the Member State concerned; according to its evaluation, it adopts recommendations to guide States' activities. In the case of lack of action, the Management Board can issue a binding decision for rapid border interventions in accordance with Art. 42. The operational plan that rules joint operations, also with reference to fundamental rights and data protection, is drawn up by the executive director of the Agency, in agreement with the host Member States.

According to Art. 46, §4, «the executive director shall, after consulting the fundamental rights officer and informing the Member State concerned, withdraw the financing for any activity by the Agency, or suspend or terminate any activity by the Agency, in whole or in part, if they consider that there are violations of fundamental rights or international protection obligations related to the activity concerned that are of a serious nature or are likely to persist».

Although the competences of the EBCGA are pervasive, both in the planning phase of rescue operations and in their operational and tactical management (Artt. 37 ff.), the EU Regulation does not introduce guarantees in the event of damage attributable to the activities of the EU body. In the most tragic recent shipwreck along the Italian coast, which occurred in February 2023 in Cutro due to an evident deficiency in the organization of rescue operations, the executive director of the Agency declared that,

following the Frontex report regarding a vessel in difficulty, the decision to intervene with the “Guardia di Finanza” (and therefore carry out an anti-immigration intervention) or start a SAR operation was up to Italy. Italy responded by declaring that the European Agency had not provided clear indications on the state of danger of the ship and the people on board.

EBCGA competences in organizing joint missions impact the prerogatives of States in managing surveillance and rescue operations, also due to the availability of EBCGA's own personnel and equipment and the Agency's power to negotiate directly with third countries. A clearer definition of the role of the Agency and EBCGA staff engaged in joint operations becomes urgent, to clarify the lines of “accountability” between the EU coordinating the operations and the host Member State responsible for them.

We must focus our attention on the following points: who has the power to assess the vulnerability conditions to decide for launching a joint mission? Who has control of activities once the mission has begun, and the possibility of suspending or cancelling operations? Who has control over the acts of EU standing agents with special reference to the protection of human rights?

The EU Regulation requires the EBCGA to be accountable for its actions before the European institutions at a political level and, from a legal point of view, for unlawful acts committed against third parties. During the deployment of border management, teams, return teams and migration management support teams shall all, in the performance of their tasks and in the exercise of their powers, fully respect fundamental rights, including access to asylum procedures and human dignity, and shall pay particular attention to vulnerable persons (Art. 43 §3). The EBCGA is called upon to compensate for damage caused by its statutory staff in the exercise of their functions, according to the general principles and the provisions of Art. 340 TFEU, but it is not responsible for the actions of operational agents, which involve responsibility of the host State or the national State.

The new regulation does not include a strong mechanism of human rights protection. According to Art. 109 «a Fundamental Rights Officer shall be appointed

by the management board based on a list of three candidates, after consultation with the consultative forum. The Fundamental Rights Officer shall have the necessary qualifications, expertise, and professional experience in the field of fundamental rights». The officer has only monitoring, counselling, and information competencies, informing the Executive Director in the case of violations of fundamental rights during activities of the EBCGA.

Under Art. 110, “Fundamental Rights Monitors”, employed as statutory staff, «shall constantly assess fundamental rights compliance of operational activities, provide advice and assistance in that regard and contribute to the promotion of fundamental rights as part of European integrated border management».

However, the Fundamental Rights Officer and the Fundamental Rights Monitors can just receive complaints and send them to the Executive Director of the Agency for considerations. The result is an ineffective mechanism in the protection of victims and little guarantee for the alleged guilty parties, subject to unspecified consequences.

On the other hand, the examined rules do not exclude the responsibility of the EU for damages deriving from the activities of the EBCGA (Art. 46, §4).

Moreover, in the event of a violation of fundamental rights, or the risk of such violation, of the rules on international protection, while the agents remain subject to the measures provided for by the legal systems to which they belong, the EBCGA can intervene in a much more radical way with a mandatory decision, by the Executive Director, to suspend, terminate or not launch activities, if they consider that there are violations of fundamental rights or international protection obligations related to the activity concerned that are of a serious nature or are likely to persist (Art. 46).

These powers are even more relevant because of the implementation of the new approach to multi-sectoral and cross-border management of operations, in which Member State authorities enlarge their scope of competencies by being able (and in many cases having) to act in the interest of the EU, according to a prevention model that dematerializes national borders, allowing wide-ranging controls based on access to information and remote monitoring.

The question remains whether a centralized approach to the management of European border control, including maritime ones, which involves EU interests in the framework of the free movement policies should not translate into a clearer definition of the responsibilities for search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean and common models of assistance and treatment of migrants. The moral question knows no geographical boundaries, nor does it further tolerate the dispute between national authorities oriented towards the defence of maritime borders, even for security reasons, and jurisdictional protection of human rights of migrants; the only way is perhaps to rethink the role and responsibilities of the rescuer “State” and its ships, especially in the case of rescue outside territorial waters.

At the same time, the EU body responsible for coordinating maritime border control could be considered responsible for supervising rescue operations carried out under common maritime surveillance services, with the task of identifying a safe port on a case-by-case basis, and evaluate asylum applications, activities which could be managed through European guard personnel.





# TEENAGERS AND THE TRUTH OF THE FAKE: LIVING WITH FAKE NEWS ON THE WEB

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SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. – 2. Recognizing the false, i.e., the proliferation of misinformation – 3. The impact of platforms on learning process. – 4. Conclusions.

## *1. Introduction*

In 1997 I began to study the interactions between children, adolescents and new technologies and published several essays and volumes dedicated to the evolution of these communicative dynamics related to the development of new media and technological platforms<sup>1</sup>.

In this path of investigation, I observed how over time the technologization of society has had a profound impact on educational agencies, family and school *in primis*. Indeed, it can be observed how over time the technologization of society has had a profound impact on educational agencies, family and school first and foremost.

The explosion of the Internet, with the definition of data in digital format<sup>2</sup> marks the transition from Marshall McLuhan's definition that the medium is the message, to

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<sup>1</sup> See F. PIRA, V. MARRALI, *Infanzia, media e nuove tecnologie. Strumenti, paure e certezze*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2007; F. PIRA, *La nuova vita della media education. Le metamorfosi della media education di fronte alla digitalizzazione dei codici nell'era della convergenza tecnologica*, «Media Education. Studi, ricerche, buone pratiche», Vol. 9, n. 2, anno 2018, Edizioni Centro Studi Erickson, pp.236-251; F. PIRA, *Figli delle APP. Le nuove generazioni digital-popolari e social-dipendenti*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2020; F. PIRA, *La crisi del modello della produzione culturale: la vetrinizzazione esasperata = The crisis of the cultural production model: the exasperated vitrinization*, «Hermes, J. Comm.» 20 (2021), pp. 247-268.

<sup>2</sup> See N. NEGROPONTE, *Being Digital*, New York, Alfred a Knopf Inc, 1995.

that of Manuel Castells<sup>3</sup>, the network is the message. In fact, in the introduction to the essay *Internet Galaxy* Castells defines the network as a new organizational form.

The Internet is the web of our lives. If information technology is today's equivalent of electricity in the industrial age, the Internet could be compared to both the power grid and the electric motor because of its ability to distribute the power of information to all fields of human activity. Moreover, just as new technologies for producing and distributing energy made factories and large enterprises possible as the organizational foundation of industrial society, the Internet is the technological basis of the organizational form in the Information Age: it is the network<sup>4</sup>.

Castells' vision goes further, going so far as to define how the Internet assumes a central role in structuring social relations by offering a contribution to the new model of sociality that is being defined based on individualism.

The dominant trend in the evolution of social relations within our societies is the rise of individualism, in all its manifestations. From very different perspectives, social scientists such as Giddens, Putman, Wellman, Beck, Carnoy and myself have emphasized the emergence of a new system of social relations centered on the individual. After the transition from the predominance of primary relationships (represented by family and community) over secondary relationships (embodied in associations), the new dominant model seems to be built on what might be called tertiary relationships, or what Wellman calls "personalized communities," embodied on ego-centered networks. This represents the privatization of society [...] The new model of sociality is thus characterized by networked individualism<sup>5</sup>.

I agree with this view, where the emergence of networked individualism built on the basis of tertiary relationships and, the resulting pattern of sociality that results,

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<sup>3</sup> See M. CASTELLS, *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society*, Oxford UP, Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> See. Ivi, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Ivi, pp. 127-128.

underlies the research path I have tried to develop over the years. The prevalence of individualism generates significant consequences on identity construction processes that always appear to be mediated by the role that digital technologies play in people's lives. Technology is no longer a mere tool but a relational environment where platforms exploit that cancellation of boundaries that profoundly alters the ability on the part of individuals to understand context. As van Dijck et al. argue:

At the heart of platforms thus lies a structural contradiction: they are environments in which on the one hand we experience the maximum visibility of social behaviors and communicative processes of individuals, companies and institutions and on the other hand we are confronted with the invisibility of the operating dynamics regulated by the algorithms that govern them and the lack of transparency of the corporate cultures of reference. In practice, what is visible depends on an intrasparent technological structure that produces evidence on the relational and sociocultural level<sup>6</sup>.

The definition of environments that allow maximum visibility to social behaviors and communicative processes, the invisibility of functioning dynamics, and intrasparent technology represent those critical factors that different authors have also highlighted. And this brings us back to the subject of this dissertation, adolescents and the educational models and processes through which they construct their knowledge and identity. In this context, the theme of transparency is central: even in Rivoltella's<sup>7</sup> reflection on the fate of media education as citizenship education he introduces the concept of transparency as a prerequisite for enabling access to knowledge, in this sense he defines the hypothesis of a radical reconceptualization of media educational work in relation to the concepts of critical sense and responsibility<sup>8</sup> which need to be declined in accordance with the new challenges posed by the

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<sup>6</sup> J. VAN DIJCK, T. POELL, M. DE WAAL, *The Platform Society*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, tr. it., *Platform Society. Valori pubblici e società connessa*, Milano, Guerini e Associati, 2019, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> See P. C. RIVOLTELLA, *Nuovi Alfabeti. Educazione e culture nella società post – mediale*, Milano, Editrice Morcelliana, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Ivi, p. 110.

informational society, especially in relation to the fact that we are only on the surface facing disintermediated communication processes, while in reality as contemporary scholars are pointing out<sup>9</sup>, the mediators or rather the controllers who create and exploit the logics of digital capitalism have changed.

## 2. Recognizing the false, i.e., the proliferation of misinformation

The inability to recognize fake shows us how there is a lack of immune defenses in the system that leads to misinformation, that is, the tendency to unknowingly spread fake news.

The exploitation of dynamics related to the filter bubble<sup>10</sup> has made it possible to create news following a well-defined framing.

A visual and narrative structure designed to attract the user's attention and stimulate it emotionally. It is a pattern that shows the attractive power of images and words that stimulate what Daniel Kahneman calls "system one"<sup>11</sup> of our brain, the primordial instinctive, emotional and fast. Thus, the news that reaches us has the irresistible character of emotional urgency: it stimulates our disapproval or indignation or immediately invites us to share, like a continuous and urgent referendum on the topic<sup>12</sup>, and this has a profound impact on the minds of adolescents going through a developmental phase in which they build their own identity.

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<sup>9</sup> See E. MOROZOV, *The Net Delusion. The dark side of Internet freedom*, Cambridge, Cambridge Press University, 2011, tr. it, *L'ingenuità della rete*, Torino, Codice edizioni, 2011; E. PARISIER, *The Filter Bubble. What the Internet is Hiding from You*, London, Penguin Books, 2011, trad. it., *Il filtro. Quello che Internet ci nasconde*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 2012; E. SADIN, *Critica della ragione artificiale. Una difesa dell'umanità*, Roma, Luiss University Press, 2019; HAN BYUNG-CHUL, *Infocrazia. Le nostre vite manipolate dalla rete*, Torino, Einaudi, 2023; Z. BAUMAN & D. LYON, *Liquid surveillance. A conversation*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2012; S. ZUBOFF, *Il capitalismo della sorveglianza. Il futuro dell'umanità nell'era dei nuovi poteri*, Roma, Luiss University Press, 2019; L. FLORIDI, *Etica dell'intelligenza artificiale. Sviluppi, opportunità, sfide*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> See E. PARISIER, *cit.*

<sup>11</sup> See D. KAHNEMAN, *Pensieri lenti e veloci*, Milano, Mondadori, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> See M. DELMASTRO, A. NICITA, *Big Data. Come stanno cambiando il nostro mondo*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2019.

Platforms, in fact, induce us to build social relationships based on aggregative processes rather than rational thinking that goes through processes of abstraction and objectification of the real. In essence, we experience as real only that which responds to our biases<sup>13</sup>.

Thus fake news and misinformation are characterized by a single common thread, speaking to one's audience with the sole aim of strengthening one's position. In this context, adolescents represent the expression of the onlife dimension referred to by Luciano Floridi<sup>14</sup> whose impact is particularly profound. The apparent opposition is not a search for dialectic but a simple re-establishment of the ties of the community of reference. The media become tools to govern power, and this connotation of the tool brings us back to the definition of bias introduced by Innis<sup>15</sup>, which recalls the concatenation between strength and weakness and is found in the dynamics that characterize the flow of fake news. Previous work<sup>16</sup> presented the analysis that led to the definition of a set of indicators called the **hexagon** that groups six characteristics that define their strength and persistence in the media system and originate misinformation and disinformation<sup>17</sup>.

By now, the proliferation and dissemination of disinformation is no longer an episodic phenomenon but an integral part of a well-defined strategy that exploits social dynamics to build consensus and manipulate public opinion. It is a global influence industry that cuts across all sectors of society, and it is evident that in crisis situations there is an alteration of the directions of meaning. Increased insecurity and fear leads to communication constructed to alter the perception of risk, the Covid -19 pandemic crisis in this sense was a relevant example. Consequently, defining environments that allow maximum visibility to social behaviors and communicative

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<sup>13</sup> F. PIRA, *Emergenze Covid in Italia: adolescenti sempre più soli in rete*, in R. PALTRINIERI, S. SPILLARE, G. TARDIVO (a cura di), *Orizzonti Medi-terranei. Comunicazione, istituzioni e prospettive mediatiche in un confronto tra Italia e Spagna*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2022, p. 84.

<sup>14</sup> L. FLORIDI, *Etica dell'intelligenza artificiale. Sviluppi, opportunità, sfide*, cit.

<sup>15</sup> See H. INNIS, *Impero e comunicazioni*, Roma, Meltemi Editore, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> A. ALTINIER, F. PIRA, *Giornalismi. La difficile convivenza con fake news e misinformation*, Limena, libreriauniversitaria.it, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> F. PIRA, *Op. cit.*, 2022, p. 85.

processes, invisibility of operating dynamics, and "intransparent" technology represent critical factors for learning processes.

### *3. The impact of platforms on learning processes*

We are witnessing the rise of technology controlling technology, giving rise to surveillance capitalism as Zuboff<sup>18</sup> defines it, which introduces us into the concept of the shadow text that influences the dynamics through which learning develops. Theorizing how narcissistic tendencies, the performative self, and hyper-consumerism are giving rise to a different social order, one that places what Zuboff calls "the division of learning" at the center<sup>19</sup>.

In hypercommunication everything is mixed with everything. Even the boundaries between inside and outside become more permeable. Today we are completely externalized into a 'pure surface of absorbing and reabsorbing networks of influence'<sup>20</sup>.

A mechanism of acceleration has been triggered that amplifies, "bulimizes," almost all areas of human action, so communicative processes become, in Han Byung-Chul's critical vision, hyper-communication.

We are thus faced with phenomena, the consequences of which are still largely to be identificate. The division of learning, according to which platforms and surveillance capitalism direct, through the shadow text, learning paths by enslaving them to their own logics and goals, exert greater power over the most fragile strata of society with

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<sup>18</sup> S. ZUBOFF, *Il capitalismo della sorveglianza. Il futuro dell'umanità nell'era dei nuovi poteri*, Roma, Luiss University Press, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> See BYUNG-CHUL HAN. *L'espulsione dell'Altro. Società, percezione e comunicazione oggi*, Milano, Edizioni Nottetempo, 2016.

fewer tools at their disposal to identify the false and initiate critical knowledge processes, in this sense become, pure surface absorption.

It is evident that the current process of fragilization has a profound impact on all areas in which processes of identity construction and cultural and social growth take place, and in particular on educational systems that should have as their primary purpose cultural reproduction as generational transmission of cultural values, norms and experiences<sup>21</sup>. The mutation of linguistic codes; the inadequacy of educational systems with respect to the speed with which the world of work evolves, as a result of both technological innovation and macroeconomic dynamics; and finally the growing inequality in the distribution of social capital, represent an obvious paradox of the digitized society<sup>22</sup>.

In the research I conducted on a sample of 1858 junior high and high school girls and boys, surveyed through an online questionnaire, during the months of the 2020 lockdown, which later flowed into the volume *Children of Apps*, some critical elements were already highlighted:

- the tendency toward isolation
- the strong propensity to window dressing in their lives
- hyper-connectedness
- an obvious distorted use of technology through the use of fake profiles that create opacity and often trigger polarizing and violent behavior.

Changing time, space and relationship dimensions generate, on the one hand, a loss of ability to implement deep educational processes within households<sup>23</sup>, on the other hand, inadequate knowledge delivery models create a problem of loss of authority that increases the generational and social divide.

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<sup>21</sup> A. GIDDENS, P.W. SUTTON, *Sociology. Seventh edition*, Cambridge, Polity, 2013, trad. it *Fondamenti di sociologia*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2014, p. 336.

<sup>22</sup> F. PIRA, *La nuova vita della media education*, cit., p. 240.

<sup>23</sup> P.C. RIVOLTELLA, *Op. cit.*

The fluidity, contamination, and communication developed through codes and texts that are often the result of the action of social sharing, to take up the concepts stated above, give rise to a message in which it is possible to recognize the *mens auctoris*, we are witnessing the proliferation of messages and language that is no longer an autonomous construction of meaning, but appears as the consequence of a cloning that tends to massify<sup>24</sup>.

#### *4. Conclusions*

The growing complexity of the media ecosystem, the platformization that relies on the hoarding of data and the new frontier of artificial intelligence, open up new questions and show the emergence of new critical issues, where the ability to put in place strategies to exploit technologies does not coincide with the possession of the knowledge tools necessary to govern such complex processes. And, this also invests in learning processes, which also represent to a big business for tech companies, which have already been investing in the sector for some time, intent on promoting:

a new idea of learning, which eradicates or circumvents the basic values of publicly funded education: the *Bildung*, knowledge-based learning pathways, teacher autonomy, collective sustainability, and the idea of education as a tool to achieve social and economic equality<sup>25</sup>

I believe that it is necessary to build a new educational practice and it is therefore necessary to understand through which paths and tools. One can start by analyzing some aspects that are in my opinion relevant:

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<sup>24</sup> F. PIRA, *La crisi del modello della produzione culturale...*, cit.

<sup>25</sup> J. VAN DIJCK, T. POELL, M. DE WAAL, *Op. cit.*, p. 218.



Deepen the dimension of "over-representation of self" among adolescents and identify the implications that can lead to the construction of a relational system characterized by extreme fragility.

Investigate the issue of loneliness, which explodes in all its criticality with a profound impact precisely on the new generations that will be the expression of the new digital citizenship.

Analyze the social behaviors that can generate deviance and risks, as a consequence of the ease and speed of use offered by technology that end to cancel the time of reflection, an essential tool in path of growth and identity construction.

Understand what educational model is being implemented in and out of school, whether it is still possible to think in the terms of Bildung (self-cultivation in the German tradition) or are we moving from the construction of critical consciousness to the performatization of learning.



ARTIFICIAL WOMB AS NEW “BIRTH” POSSIBILITY:  
NEW FRONTIERS FOR EDUCATION

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SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. – 2. Ectogenesis as a new possibility. – 3. Artificial placenta and artificial wombs – 4. Moral and education implications.

*1. Introduction*

The speed at which new technologies are developing in the genetic field imposes on philosophy a radical renewal and a total immersion in the ever-changing problems associated with this growth. With geminoids as a social presence, “Paro” as a rethinking of the human-animal relationship, and with “KASPAR”, a robot capable of helping children, particularly those with “high-functioning” autism spectrum disorder, to establish social relationships<sup>1</sup> we have already passed the insurmountable limit: technology has so violently entered the domain of nature that it has sometimes supplanted it. But is this really the case? Has it not always been man's main tendency to improve his life by bending and employing nature and its limits to his own benefit through techniques?

Among the areas affected by this trend is a field that bio-robotics is exploring and which requires careful ethical and philosophical examination, namely the use of new biotechnologies in the field of procreation.

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<sup>1</sup> L. DAMIANO, P. DUMOUCHEL, *Vivere con i robot. Saggio sull'empatia artificiale*, trad. it, Milano, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2019, p.159.

## 2. *Ectogenesis as a new possibility*

When geneticist John B.S. Haldane coined the word “ectogenesis” in 1923, he was envisaging a technology capable of making embryos develop outside the human body<sup>2</sup>. It’s a question of creating the conditions for embryos to develop outside the womb<sup>3</sup>, as Henri Atlan argues in his text entirely devoted to this issue. We are dealing with a machine that is much more complicated than the artificial kidney, but absolutely possible, because from a strictly mechanical point of view, an artificial womb is “only” an intricate «system of pipes»<sup>4</sup>.

The life of an embryo in the laboratory is already partly possible, but only at the beginning and at the end of gestation<sup>5</sup>; in fact, after in-vitro insemination, the fertilized ovum can develop in the laboratory up to the fifth day, and from the 24th week premature babies can be kept alive in incubators<sup>6</sup>. We are getting closer and closer to bridging this gap.

The artificial womb to date is a possibility that is slowly being brought into the real, a possibility that presents itself to us, rather than as a miracle of/from technology, as an educational challenge.

## 3. *Artificial placenta and artificial wombs*

The creation of artificial wombs represents a chance to learn about the human that has never before been made possible, as Jiaping Fu, a researcher at the University of

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<sup>2</sup> J. B. S. HALDANE, *Dedalo o la scienza e il futuro*, Torino, trad. it., Bollati Boringhieri, 1991, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> H. ATLAN, *L’utero artificiale*, trad. it., Milano, Giuffrè Editore, 2006, p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> Ivi, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that even today, defining "beginning" and "end" of gestation is a hotly debated topic. In this text, because the embryo is in vitro, we identify the beginning of gestation at about 6 days after fertilization, with the attachment of the blastocyst to the uterine wall in a womb-like environment. For a clearer overview of the debate regarding the onset of life we refer to M. GENSABELLA FURNARI, *Il corpo della madre. Per una bioetica della maternità*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubettino Editore, 2018.; L. PALAZZANI, *Dalla bio-etica alla tecno-etica: nuove sfide al diritto*, Torino, Giappichelli Editore, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. M. GENSABELLA FURNARI, *Il corpo della madre. Per una bioetica della maternità*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubettino Editore, 2018.

Michigan, points out, this new technology «can help fill critical gaps in knowledge about early human development»<sup>7</sup>. The artificial uterus would make it possible to observe a crucial moment in pregnancy, namely the period between two and four weeks, a period in which more miscarriages also occur – the World Health Organization has in fact estimated that there are one million cases per year of premature birth worldwide<sup>8</sup>, globally 0.4% of babies are premature. The term “tardy” has been used to define these possible artificial wombs, which, basically, would perform the task of an incubator capable of keeping very premature babies alive by means of “liquid ventilation”. This consists of injecting a solution that fills the lungs, which contains a perfluorinated derivative that transports oxygen by simulating breathing<sup>9</sup>. These “tardy” artificial wombs would save prematurely born fetuses from spontaneous or unwanted abortions.

It is possible to trace a chronology of the main studies that have “concretely” dealt with the development of life outside the womb. Obviously in order to make our view on the matter less foggy, animal origin embryos, specifically sheep and mice, have been used. The aim is to recreate not only a womb-like environment, but also to develop a placenta that allows life to develop within it.

In 1987, Yoshinori Kuwabara attempted to develop goat fetuses extracted from the mother prematurely in a plastic bag filled with amniotic fluid, connected to an extracorporeal membrane oxygenator. With this system, the fetuses can be kept in

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<sup>7</sup> D.CYRANOSKI, *Primate embryos grown in the lab for longer than ever before*, in «Nature», n. 575, 2019, pp. 17-18, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-019-03326-5>.

<sup>8</sup> Here are the data on the deaths of babies born prematurely: E. OHUMA, A-B. MOLLER, E. BRADLEY, et al. National, regional, and worldwide estimates of preterm birth in 2020, with trends from 2010: a systematic analysis, in *Lancet*. 2023;402(10409):1261-1271. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(23)00878-4.; J. PERIN, A. MULICK, D. YEUN et al., *Global, regional, and national causes of under-5 mortality in 2000-19: an updated systematic analysis with implications for the Sustainable Development Goals*, in «Lancet Child & Adolescent Health», 2022; 6(2): 106-15.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. T.H. SHAFFER, M.R. WOLFSON, J.S. GREENSPAN, *Liquid ventilation: current status*, in «Pediatrics in Rev», Dec 1999, pp. 134-42. PMID: 10587539.

a stable physiological condition for up to 165 hours, after which, once out of their reservoir, the foetuses remain alive for a couple of days, but none survive<sup>10</sup>.

Thirty years later, a key step for the future clinical application of the artificial womb is the studies conducted by the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia on a biobag capable of hosting fetuses of lambs born prematurely.

The innovative system uses a single container filled with warm fluid connected to custom-designed machines that provide physiological support. Lamb fetuses grow in a temperature-controlled, sterile environment, breathing amniotic fluid as they normally do in the womb, their hearts pumping blood through the umbilical cord into a gas exchange machine outside the bag. Electronic monitors measure vital signs, blood flow and other crucial functions<sup>11</sup>. The eight lambs tested in the most recent prototype were physiologically equivalent to a human infant of 23-24 weeks gestation. The recreated environment is sealed, sterile and isolated, thus preventing variations in temperature, pressure and light, but especially preventing infection. The lambs showed normal growth by opening their eyes and swallowing normally, unlike the old prototypes, with no adverse neurological or organ maturation consequences. Dr. Alan W. Flake, surgeon and director of the Centre for Fetal Research in the Centre for Fetal Diagnosis and Treatment at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia said that «this system could prevent the severe morbidity suffered by extremely premature infants, potentially offering a medical technology that does not currently exist»<sup>12</sup>.

Being able to build an extra-uterine system capable of supporting organ growth and maturation, even for just a few weeks, would save a million lives per year and relieve parents of the possibility of immense psychological trauma. All this would represent a new standard of care.

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<sup>10</sup> Cfr. Y. KUWABARA et al., *Development of Extruterine Fetal Incubation System Using Extracorporeal Membrane Oxygenator*, in «Artificial Organs», V. 11, n. 3, Hoboken Giugno 1987. DOI: 10.1111/j.1525-1594.1987.tb02663.x

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. A. PARTRIDGE et. al., *An extra-uterine system to physiologically support the extreme premature lamb*, in «Nature Communications», V. 8 n. 15112, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1038/ncomms15112>

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

Another study worth mentioning is the one conducted in May 2021 in Rehovot, Israel, at the Weizmann Institute of Science, which allowed us for the first time to observe the development process of a mammalian embryo. A tiny cluster of shapeless cells attaches itself to the uterine wall and is ready to develop nervous system, heart, stomach and limbs. No human eye has until now been able to see, from so close up, the very beginning of life.

The first step by Professor Jacob Hanna’s team lasted about two days, at which stage the mice embryos were small spheres made up of 250 identical stem cells placed on a special laboratory plate that acted as the wall of the uterus. It was thus possible to observe the very first phase of embryo development, that of nesting in the uterine wall, in which the embryo triples in size and begins its formation.

In the second phase, the embryos were placed in beakers in constant motion on rollers, so as to keep the nutrient solution inside constantly stirred so as to simulate the flow of maternal blood into the placenta – here too, as in the case of the biobag, it was crucial to learn how to dose the right amount and pressure of gases.

What this experiment makes possible is not only the scientific dream of creating life outside a natural envelope, but being able to observe developmental stages only theoretically studied, under the right conditions it will be possible to observe the genetic code like domino sequence, where each tile hits the next<sup>13</sup>.

Embryos can survive outside the womb until the eleventh day of life, at which time there is insufficient nutritious fluid compared to that in the mother’s womb. Emphasised in the experiment are the self-organising properties<sup>14</sup> of the embryo itself.

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<sup>13</sup> A. AGUILERA-CASTREJON, B. OLDAK, T. SHANI et al., *Ex utero mouse embryogenesis from pre-gastrulation to late organogenesis*, in «Nature», 593, 119–124, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-021-03416-3>

<sup>14</sup> Regarding self-organization we invite further investigation with F. J. VARELA, *The science and technology of cognition: Emergent directions*, in: J.L. ROOS, *Economics and Artificial Intelligence, 1st IFAC Intl.Symposium*, Oxford, Pergamon Press, 1987; F. J. VARELA, *Scienza e tecnologia della cognizione*, trad. it., Firenze, Hopeful Monster editore, 1987; G. GEMBILLO, A. ANSELMO, *Filosofia della complessità*, Firenze, Le Lettere, 2017 (terza edizione), A riguardo anche A. ANSELMO, G. GEMBILLO, G. GIORDANO, *Complessità e formazione*, Milano, Enea, 2008; L. DAMIANO, *Unità in dialogo. Un nuovo stile per la conoscenza*, Milano, Mondadori, 2009.

What is provided are nutrients and a suitable environment, then it is the embryo that does its work<sup>15</sup>.

#### 4. Moral and Education implications

The philosophical enquiry must carefully weigh up the benefits and drawbacks and fully understand the range of possibilities that these new technologies offer. Hanna's aim is to create synthetic embryos in artificial wombs with pluripotent stem cells. In the hypothetical scenario of an individual needing an organ transplant, we could take cells from his or her skin, turn them into stem cells, pool as many as are needed to make a synthetic embryo, have it begun to differentiate its cells into the various organs, and then have the organ it needs develop in the appropriate environment. Being an organ obtained from the patient's own cells would also eliminate the risk of rejection<sup>16</sup>

Bioethically, as Hanna himself acknowledges, the question is a delicate one. The question we must ask ourselves is: to what do we refer that little group of cells? Even the way of asking the question itself is complicated in that it determines who or what we are interfacing with. Can the oxymoron of a synthetic human being exist?

We can try to answer this question by looking at the 2003 study by Ying Chen and his team concerning the production of embryonic totipotent cells by transferring human somatic cell nuclei into female rabbit eggs deprived of the nucleus<sup>17</sup> - basically a kind of non-reproductive cloning for therapeutic purposes. Picking up on Atlan, he clearly states about Chen's experiment that the production of embryonic totipotent cells in no way proves that blastocysts obtained by nucleus transfer would have the capacity to develop as normal embryos if they were implanted in utero.

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<sup>15</sup> Cfr. A. AGUILERA-CASTREJON, B. OLDAK, T. SHANI et al., *Op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. *Ibidem.*

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. Y. CHEN, Z. HE, A. LIU et al. *Embryonic stem cells generated by nuclear transfer of human somatic nuclei into rabbit oocytes*, in «Cell Res», 13, pp. 251-263, 2003. <https://doi.org/10.1038/sj.cr.7290170>



It follows that the name “embryo” is wholly inappropriate for cells and cellular structures artificially produced without fertilization, even though there are some properties, including totipotency, of embryonic cells<sup>18</sup>.

We are dealing with “embryoid units” or “pseudo-embryos”. For Atlan, this would be «reserving the name embryo for cells or sets of cells capable of developing into adult organisms after implantation in the uterus»<sup>19</sup>.

In fact, we are dealing with a life that is not born. According to the World Health Organization, a “born life” is one that has been completely expelled or extracted from the mother<sup>20</sup>, it follows that it is not possible to define as a “newborn that which develops in an AW/AP (Artificial Womb/Artificial Placenta) environment. Elizabeth Chloe Romanis suggests a new term – gestateling – for those treated in the biobag, albeit considering it different from intensive care<sup>21</sup>. Romanis' step is crucial; we are not dealing with a new aspect of ICU, but with a new way of coming into the world. For this very reason, having explained why the term “newborn” has no application here, a term that highlights the newness is needed. In my vision I propose the term “Neo-gestate”, which may represent a rough first step in view of further study.

With Dolly the sheep, man «has opened a Pandora’s box from which have emerged demons or angels [...] who never cease to overturn the ideas we have received about life and the human»<sup>22</sup>. This is the challenge that ectogenesis imposes on philosophy, a rethinking of the human, a rethinking that starts through it from its first cell. The immense revolution before us will see human beings being born and growing without fertilization, from cell constructs that are veritable laboratory artefacts. It is our responsibility to renounce the passivity that is increasingly characterizing our species and to adopt a different attitude, one that can actively respond to this challenge.

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<sup>18</sup> Cfr. H. ATLAN, *Op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> H. ATLAN, *Op. cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. Maternal Mortality Ratio in World Health Organization: health statistics and information system, 2020. Available [Maternal mortality \(who.int\)](https://www.who.int/data/datasets/bank/indicators/SH.SRVS.MMRV.SRVS), in M. R. MERCURIO. K. M. WERNER, *Ethical considerations in the use of artificial womb/placenta technology*, in «Seminars in Perinatology», Volume 46, Issue 3, Aprile 2022

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. E. C. ROMANIS, *Artificial womb technology and the frontiers of human reproduction: conceptual differences and potential implications*, in «J MED Ethics», 44, 2018, pp. 751-755.

<sup>22</sup> H. ATLAN, *Op. cit.*, p. 28.

Picking up on Martin Heidegger's thought, what is really disturbing is that man is not at all prepared for the radical change in the world dominated by technology: «if man renounces to throw meditating thought against calculating thought into this decisive game»<sup>23</sup>

The subject of the artificial womb must be treated with respect for its complexity, which is emblematic of all philosophical issues that emerge – and will emerge – on the subject.

The artificial womb sits in a new space of interaction between different disciplines, laying bare the very complexity of the human and, consequently, the posthuman. It is not possible to discuss this complexity through a simplistic and separatist description that belittles the whole. One cannot Cartesianly reduce the artificial womb to the medical-scientific or mechanical realm, because what is invested by this technology is the very concept of human<sup>24</sup>. And the human as complex cannot be reduced. As Rosy Braidotti argues «the post-human condition urgently calls us to rethink, critically and creatively, who and what we are becoming in this process of metamorphosis»<sup>25</sup>. It is here that it is necessary to understand that addressing the issue is not the same as «disallowing the bio-psycho-social and material dimensions of man, but rethinking the complex cultural system within which man is placed and interpreted»<sup>26</sup>, a necessity, as Franca Pinto Minerva and Rosa Gallelli write, to redefine ontological, epistemological, and ethical assumptions of humanist anthropocentrism and, consequently overcome the separatist nature-culture, human-animal, subject-object, biological-artificial vision<sup>27</sup>.

With the advent of ever new technologies, human beings are increasingly being led into post-humanism, almost as if the technologies themselves are inviting, if not

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<sup>23</sup> M. HEIDEGGER, *L'abbandono*, trad. it., Genova, Il Nuovo Melangolo, 2004, p.37.

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. A. RICH, *Nato Di Donna*, trad. it, Milano, Garzanti, 1983.

<sup>25</sup> R. BRAIDOTTI, *Il post-umano. La vita oltre l'individuo, oltre la specie, oltre la morte*, Roma, DeriveApprodi, 2014, p.18.

<sup>26</sup> F. PINTO MINERVA, *Intelligenza artificiale e post-umano*, in «Pedagogia e utopia, Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione», Pontificia Facoltà di Scienze dell'educazione Auxilium, Anno LIX NUMERO 1, GENNAIO/APRILE Roma 2021, p. 58.

<sup>27</sup> Cfr. F. PINTO MINERVA; R. GALLELLI, *Pedagogia e post-umano. Ibridazioni identitarie e frontiere del possibile*, Roma, Carrocci, 2004, pp. 137-158.

**PART II**  
**EDUCATION PROPOSALS**



# MORAL EDUCATION AND MORAL GROWTH AS ELEMENTS OF CREATING A CULTURE OF INCLUSION IN EDUCATION

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SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. – 2. A paradigm shift towards inclusivity. – 3. A culture of inclusion as a moral imperative. – 4. Conclusions.

## *1. Introduction*

Educational space, like physical space in the new sense, is not just given, but constantly “being” given, it is not only discovered but constantly being discovered, as if being on the move<sup>1</sup>. It is therefore a space in which individuals act and participate. It is shaped both by the educational system and by the people through their needs. Properly arranging the educational environment and ensuring that it is open to the changes taking place in the world, is extremely important and a challenge not only for teachers but also for education policy makers<sup>2</sup>. In the face of rapid transformations in the modern world, there is a growing demand for educational interventions aimed at facilitating positive intergroup interactions, reducing prejudice and discrimination, and increasing students' skills, knowledge, and motivation to interact with diverse others. Thus, education systems ought to transition to a more inclusive and democratic perspective grounded in principles of justice and human rights advocacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. M. PIASECKA, *Jak fizyka kwantowa naznacza-przecina-otwiera edukację?* [How quantum physics marks-crosses-opens education?], in P. Błajet (Ed.), *Ciało-edukacja-umysł*, Wydawnictwo Uczelniane Wyższej Szkoły Gospodarki, Bydgoszcz 2010

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. D. AL.-KHAMISY, T. SKRYPNYK, O. MARTYNCHUK, “*Od kultury edukacji do kultury szkoły dla wszystkich i kultury klasy zróżnicowanej*” [From a culture of education to a culture of schools for all and a culture of the diverse classroom], in «Wyzwania XXI wieku dla edukacji szkolnej», edited by J. SZADA-BORZYSZKOWSKA, M. STYCZYŃSKA, pp. 89-106. Siedlce: [i]WN IKRiBL, 2020.

According to Blessinger,

«the calls for more inclusive educational environments are not only concerned about widening participation but the calls are equally concerned about reorienting the mission, vision, and values of educational institutions to better align them with core democratic principles. In this relationship, educational institutions have a valuable role to play in helping strengthen democracy»<sup>3</sup>.

The need to create a culture of inclusion appears to be a moral imperative to help people open to differences and types of orientation, and treat all differences equally, to remove barriers, to respond negatively in public to the language of aggression, xenophobia, and the labelling of otherness, to resist constructively the deprivation of specialised care, and to leave vulnerable and helpless people to fend for themselves.

The definition of inclusion used in this chapter, particularly relevant to the context of education, is provided by Lewis, “inclusion is about more than equal distribution of resources; it is about equal access and the full participation of historically marginalized groups”. Social inclusion is viewed as a dynamic rather than a static process, emerging from how an individual interacts with various systems across different levels, encompassing personal connections as well as the inclusive measures prevalent within the broader society<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Cfr. P. BLESSINGER, *Creating a culture of inclusion in higher education*, The Patrick Blessinger Blog, November 13. <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20161102112722844>, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. B. M. FERDMAN, *The practice of inclusion in diverse organizations*, in B. M. Ferdman, *Diversity at Work: The Practice of Inclusion*, 3-54. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118764282.ch1>.

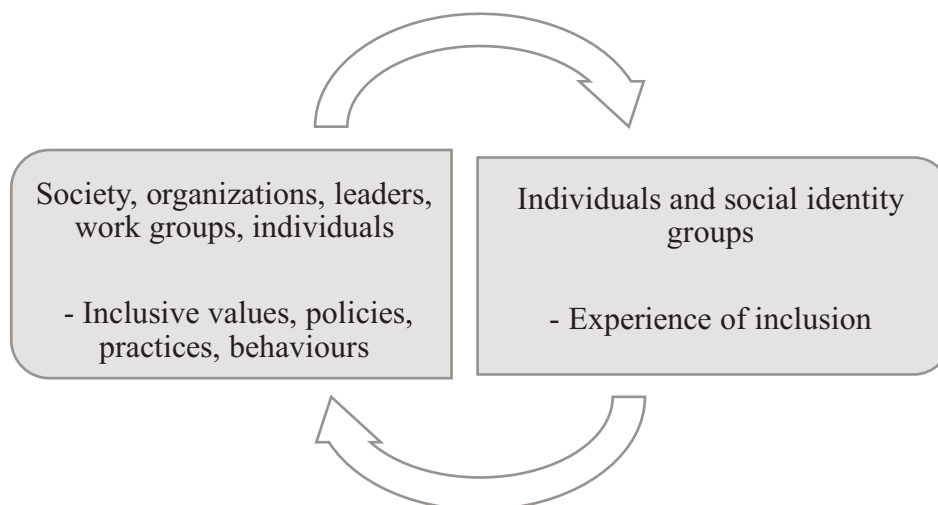


Fig.1 Inclusion as a Systemic and Dynamic Process<sup>5</sup> (Ferdman, 2013).

### ***2.A Paradigm Shift Towards Inclusivity***

A paradigm shift towards inclusivity signifies a transformative change in how societies, institutions, and individuals perceive, interact with, and accommodate diversity in all its forms. It involves a comprehensive reorientation of mindsets, policies, practices, and cultural norms to create an environment where everyone feels respected, valued, and empowered, regardless of their background, identity, abilities, or characteristics.

Inclusion and diversity in education have been greatly influenced by a combination of societal shifts, legal developments, educational theories, and advocacy efforts. These factors have contributed to a changing landscape in education, emphasizing the importance of creating inclusive and diverse learning environments that cater to the needs of all students.

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<sup>5</sup> Ivi.

### *Civil Rights Movements*

The modern diversity and inclusion movement, rooted in the civil rights movements of the 20th century, including the African American Civil Rights Movement, Women's Liberation Movement, and LGBTQ+ rights advocacy, highlighted the need for equal treatment and opportunities for marginalized groups. These movements spurred discussions and actions to ensure that education is accessible and equitable for all, regardless of race, gender, or other identities. The traces of the inclusion and diversity movement can be discerned in the suffrage movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a struggle that unfurled to secure the enfranchisement of women<sup>6</sup>.

### *Legislation and Policies*

Legal frameworks and policies, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in the United States<sup>7</sup>, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education<sup>8</sup>, and similar laws in other countries, mandate that students with disabilities have the right to receive an education in the least restrictive environment. These laws have been instrumental in promoting inclusive practices and ensuring that diverse learners are accommodated within mainstream educational settings.

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<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Diversity Hero, *The Evolution of Diversity and Inclusion: From Civil Rights to Business Imperative*, Accessed August 11, 2023, <https://www.diversityhero.com/blog/the-evolution-of-diversity-and-inclusion-from-civil-rights-to-business-imperative>; D. CHOMICZ, "Koncepcja „kultury włączającej” w instytucjach szkolnictwa wyższego” [The concept of an "inclusive culture" in higher education institutions], Chapter In A. PROKOPIAK (ed.), *Oblicza kultury dostępności. Księga Jubileuszowa Profesor Zofii Palak*. [Faces of Accessibility Culture. Professor Zofia Palak Jubilee Book], Wydawnictwo Episteme, Lublin, 2023, pp. 70-91.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. D. W. ANDERSON *Special Education as Reconciliation*, in «Journal of Education and Christian Belief», 7.1: pp. 23-36, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. *Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 45(1), 56-62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796919896097>.

UNESCO. 1994. The Salamanca Statement and Framework for action on special needs education: Adopted by the World Conference on Special Needs Education; Access and Quality. Salamanca, Spain, 7-10 June 1994; M. AINSCOW, R. SLEE, M. BEST. *The Salamanca Statement: 25 Years on*, in «International Journal of Inclusive Education», 23 (7-8): pp. 671-676, 2019. doi: 10.1080/13603116.2019.1622800



### *Inclusive Education Theories*

The shift towards inclusive education has been influenced also by educational theories that emphasize the benefits of catering to diverse learning needs. The concept of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), for example, promotes flexible teaching methods and curriculum design that accommodate a wide range of learning styles and abilities<sup>9</sup>.

### *Globalization and Cultural Awareness*

Increased globalization and cultural awareness have highlighted the importance of preparing students for a globalized world. Schools recognize the need to expose students to diverse cultures, languages, and perspectives to prepare them for intercultural interactions and collaborations<sup>10</sup>.

### *Advocacy and Awareness Campaigns*

Advocacy groups, non-profit organizations, and activists (inspired by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, CRPD) have played a significant role in raising awareness about the importance of inclusion and diversity in education. Their efforts have helped to create a sense of urgency and fostered a collective commitment to transforming educational systems<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Cfr. A. MEYER, D.H. ROSE, D. GORDON, *Universal design for learning: Theory and Practice*, Wakefield MA, CAST Professional Publishing, 2014.; L. CANTER et al., *Evaluating pedagogy and practice of universal design for learning in public schools*, in «Exceptionality Education International», 27 (1), pp. 1-16, 2017; D. CHIMICZ, *Uniwersalność w projektowaniu procesu dydaktycznego studentów z niepełnosprawnościami* [Universality in designing the teaching process for students with disabilities. The UDL concept for higher education], in «Koncepcja UDL dla szkolnictwa wyższego. Niepełnosprawność-Dyskursy Pedagogiki Specjalnej», 44, pp. 54,75, 2021. Accessed August 9, 2023.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. J. A. BANKS, *Multicultural education, transformative knowledge, and action: Historical and contemporary perspectives*, New York, Teachers College Press, 1996; R. ROBERTSON, *The three waves of globalization: A history of a developing global consciousness*, London, Zed Books, 2003; C. SLEETER, C. GRANT, *Making choices for multicultural education: Five approaches to race, class and gender* (4th ed.), Hoboken (NJ), Wiley, 2003; S. NIETO, P. BODE, *Affirming diversity: The social political context of multicultural education* (5th ed.), Boston, Allyn & Bacon, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. C. B. COVAS, M. A. CABRA DE LUNA, *Advocacy for Inclusive Education: A European Approach*, Chapter in G. DE BECO, S. QUINLIVAN, J. E. LORD (Eds.), *The Right to Inclusive Education in International Human Rights Law*, in «Cambridge Disability Law and Policy Series», Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019, pp. 269-303. doi:10.1017/9781316392881.012.

### *Research and Evidence-Based Practices*

Research in the fields of education, psychology, and sociology has highlighted the benefits of inclusive and diverse learning environments. Studies have shown that diverse classrooms promote critical thinking, creativity, and empathy among students, preparing them to thrive in an increasingly interconnected world<sup>12</sup>.

### *Teacher Training and Professional Development*

Educator training programs and ongoing professional development have increasingly emphasized the importance of inclusive teaching practices. Teachers are now better equipped to accommodate diverse learning needs, create inclusive curricula, and provide a supportive environment for all students<sup>13</sup>.

### *Technological Advances*

Technological advances have brought about significant improvements in the field of inclusive education, making learning more accessible and tailored to the diverse needs of students. These innovations have the potential to level the playing field for learners with disabilities, accommodate different learning styles or preferences, and promote a more inclusive and equitable educational experience. It is important to note that while these technological advances have the potential to enhance inclusive education, their successful implementation requires thoughtful planning, teacher training, ongoing support, and consideration of individual student needs. Additionally, access to

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<sup>12</sup> B. G. COOK, S. C. COOK, *Unraveling Evidence-Based Practices in Special Education*, in «The Journal of Special Education», 47(2), pp. 71-82, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466911420877>; G. HORNBY, *Inclusive special education: Evidence-based practices for children with special needs and disabilities*, New York, Springer, 2014; S. SMITH, et al., *Evidence-based Practices to Promote Inclusion in Today's Catholic School*, in «Journal of Catholic Education», 2020. <https://doi.org/10.15365/joce.2302102020>

<sup>13</sup> Cfr. Z. AL-SHAMMARI, P. FAULKNER, *Effects of special education teachers' specialization and teaching experience on using evidence-based cognitivist instructional strategies*, in «Inclusion Classrooms», Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Research in “Education, Teaching and Learning”, 2019. DOI: 10.33422/2nd-icetl.2019.04.237; A. TURNBULL, R. TURNBULL, *Rights, Wrongs, and Remedies for Inclusive Education for Students with Significant Support Needs: Professional Development, Research, and Policy Reform*, in «Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities», 45(1), pp. 56-62, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796919896097>.

technology and digital resources can vary, which highlights the importance of addressing digital equity issues to ensure that all students benefit from these advancements<sup>14</sup>.

#### *Parent and Community Involvement*

Parents and communities have become more engaged in advocating for inclusive and diverse education. Their involvement has pushed schools and educational institutions to consider the needs and preferences of various stakeholders in shaping educational policies and practices. Real participation and inclusion in the community do not just happen but require the commitment of all community members<sup>15</sup>.

#### *Changing Pedagogical Approaches*

Evolving pedagogical approaches, such as Project-Based Learning (PBL), Collaborative Learning, Differentiated Instruction, Flipped Classroom, Co-Teaching, Culturally Responsive Teaching, and Personalized Learning have embraced inclusivity by recognizing and building upon students' individual strengths and differences. Inclusive education goes beyond merely accommodating students with disabilities; it aims to create a supportive and equitable learning environment for every student, regardless of their abilities, backgrounds, or learning styles. Changing pedagogical approaches towards inclusion requires ongoing professional development for educators, collaboration among staff, and a commitment to creating a learning environment that respects and celebrates diversity. It is important to recognize that

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<sup>14</sup> Cfr. P. REED, G. BOWSER, *Assistive technologies and the IEP*, in D. EDYBURN et al. (Eds.), *Handbook of Special Education Technology Research and Practice*, Whitefish Bay, Knowledge by Design Inc., 2005; D. CHIMICZ, *Wykorzystanie technologii wspomagających uczniów z niepełnosprawnościami w edukacji włączającej*, [The use of assistive technologies for students with disabilities in inclusive education.], in «Szkola specjalna», 3 (304): pp. 175-187, 2020. Accessed August 11, 2023. DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0014.2357, ISSN 0137-818X.; E. D. ADHIKARI, *Technology and Inclusive Education*, 2022. Accessed August 11, 2023. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.21113.54883.

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. S. SORESI et al., *Community involvement in promoting inclusion, participation and self-determination*, in «International Journal of Inclusive Education», 15:1, pp. 15-28, 2011. Accessed August 11, 2023. DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2010.496189.

no single approach fits all situations, and a combination of strategies may be needed to effectively meet the needs of diverse learners<sup>16</sup>

In conclusion, a paradigm shift towards inclusivity represents a profound change in the way we approach diversity and ensure that everyone is valued, supported, and empowered to reach their full potential. It requires a holistic transformation across multiple dimensions of society, driven by a commitment to fairness, empathy, and a shared vision of a more equitable future.

### *3.A Culture of Inclusion as a Moral Imperative*

Inclusivity has become a strategic issue for many settings and educational institutions in recent years, influencing learning and teaching, research, and the culture of these institutions. Creating an inclusive education system involves not only creating the conditions for inclusion (through the education curriculum or ensuring accessibility) but also actively challenging the inequalities that are still present. It is a way of working not only towards a more open, equitable educational landscape but more importantly towards broader social justice. Thus, diversity and inclusion should not be just buzzwords or empty metrics – but the foundation for a forward-thinking, fair, caring and just-generating society.

The great diversity and inclusion advocate Verna Myers best describes what inclusion means. Myers states that, «Diversity is being invited to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance». The quote captures the essence of two important concepts in the field

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<sup>16</sup> Cfr. L. FLORIAN, K. BLACK-HAWKINS, *Exploring inclusive pedagogy*, in «British Educational Research Journal», 37(5), pp. 813–828, 2011; O. N. DE JESUS, *Differentiated instruction: Can differentiated instruction provide success for all learners?*, in «National Teacher Education Journal», 5(3), pp. 5-11, 2012; Y. SONG et al., *Fostering personalized learning in science inquiry supported by mobile technologies*, in «Educational Technology Research and Development», 60(4), pp. 679-701, 2012.; L. FLORIAN, *Conceptualising inclusive pedagogy: The inclusive pedagogical approach in action*, in J. Deppeler et. al. (Eds.), *Inclusive pedagogy across the curriculum. International perspectives on inclusive education*, London, Emerald Group Publishing, 2015, pp. 11-24; T. LOREMAN, *Pedagogy for Inclusive Education*, in «Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education», Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.148>.

of social dynamics and equality: diversity and inclusion. Diversity pertains to the existence of a broad spectrum of individuals or elements in a group, organization, or society. It encompasses distinctions in race, gender, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socio-economic background, abilities, and more. In the context of the quotation, “being invited to the party” signifies the acknowledgement and recognition of these diverse identities. This is the first step in creating a diverse environment that represents the complex nature of the world we inhabit. Inclusivity goes beyond simply recognizing diversity; it entails actively engaging with and valuing the views and input of all individuals. When someone is invited to participate, it signifies a degree of involvement, engagement, and empowerment. Inclusion is the act of creating an environment where everyone feels welcome, respected, heard, and involved. It encompasses removing barriers, eliminating biases, and ensuring equal opportunities for all to contribute and thrive. Therefore, educational environments should be shaped by a culture of inclusion rooted in moral values. Moral education and moral growth are crucial in establishing an inclusive culture within the education system. These elements help to promote empathy, understanding, and respect among students, foster a sense of belonging for everyone, and prepare future generations to contribute actively to an inclusive and harmonious society.

#### *The call for Moral Education*

According to Veugelers and Vedder , in the past years, there has been a decline in previously cohesive value systems and a rise in individualisation across modern Western society. It is becoming increasingly crucial to independently develop one's own values and to have the skill to reflect on them. The authors state that values find expression not solely within academic subjects or the instructional strategies employed by educators – they also resonate through the culture of the educational institution. Scholars, authorities, and educators share a consensus regarding the pivotal role of school culture in fostering the development of values and standards. Sergiovanni and Starratt developed a helpful model to examine school culture using

an ‘onion skin’ model of culture. At the core of this model is the belief system. Beyond that is the value system, followed by the norms and standards. Finally, at the outer layer, are the shared behavioral patterns. The deepest level comprises the belief systems and includes the assumptions and understandings held by people in that context. In a similar fashion, the value systems – the things regarded as important and held in high regard by groups – will influence the norms and standards which, in turn, will influence behavioural patterns. Skrtic posits that schools are “human constructions grounded in values”.

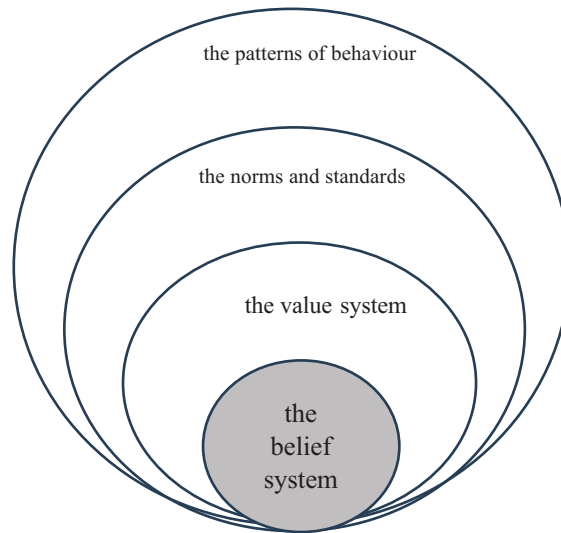


Fig. 2. An ‘onion skin’ model of culture by Sergiovanni and Starratt<sup>17</sup> (1988).

While the conventional perspective posits that students internalize values and norms through alignment with institutional practices, an alternative and more dynamic outlook emerges – one that envisions participation in the school culture as a proactive and collaborative endeavour, involving the co-creation and active shaping of the cultural milieu<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, moral education should address the contemporary threats facing the younger generations in dialogue and respect for their diverse needs.

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<sup>17</sup> T. J. SERGIOVANNI, R. J. STARRATT, *Op. cit.*

<sup>18</sup> W. VEUGELERS, P. H. VEDDER, *Op. cit.*

In today's digital age marked by misinformation, cyberbullying, polarization, and the erosion of ethical standards, moral education can equip students with the critical thinking skills to navigate the online world responsibly and to distinguish between credible sources and misinformation. In addition, the increasingly diverse and multicultural nature of populations, coupled with changing family structures, shifting cultural norms and economic pressures, and questionable ethical practices in social and political life, underscore the need for schools to reinforce timeless values that promote resilience, emotional intelligence, and positive relationships across ethnic and social backgrounds. By integrating moral education, schools can provide a proactive response to these challenges, creating a supportive environment that counteracts negative influences, cultivates empathy, and empowers students to make ethical decisions in the face of these contemporary threats. This comprehensive approach not only prepares students for academic success but also equips them with the ethical tools to address the complex and multifaceted challenges of our interconnected world. It enables them to embrace diversity, appreciate different perspectives and contribute positively to a society characterised by understanding, respect, and unity.

*Moral education as a way to stimulate the moral development linked to creating an inclusive culture*

According to Czyżowska & Czyżowska<sup>19</sup>, the main aim of moral education is to foster the moral development of students and cultivate respectful attitudes towards other individuals and values, which in turn will help them become morally mature individuals in the future. The report cited by the authors, titled *Moral Education in the Life of the School*<sup>20</sup>, by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) panel on moral education, outlines six essential characteristics that a morally mature individual must possess:

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<sup>19</sup> N. CZYŻOWSKA, D. CZYŻOWSKA, *Edukacja moralna czyli o sposobach wspierania rozwoju moralnego uczniów*, [Moral education that is ways of supporting moral development of students], in «Kwartalnik Naukowy», 2 (34), pp. 27-39, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1988. *Moral Education in the Life of the School. A Report from the ASCD Panel on Moral Education*. Accessed August 14, 2023, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED298651.pdf>.

- 1) *Respect for human dignity*, which includes respecting the values and rights of all people, avoiding deception and dishonesty, promoting human equality, respecting freedom of conscience, co-operating with people with different points of view and refraining from prejudiced actions.
- 2) *Concern for the welfare of others*, which includes knowing that people are interdependent, caring for one's country, striving for social justice, taking pleasure in helping others and helping others to achieve moral maturity.
- 3) *Integration of individual interests and social commitments* which includes becoming involved in community life, a fair division of labour in the community, displaying self-regarding and other-regarding moral virtues such as self-control, diligence, fairness, kindness, honesty, and civility in everyday life, meeting commitments and developing self-esteem through relationships with others.
- 4) *Integrity* which includes practising diligence, standing up for moral principles, demonstrating moral courage, knowing when to compromise and when to confront, and accepting responsibility for one's choices.
- 5) *Reflection on moral choices* which includes recognizing moral issues in specific situations, applying moral principles when making moral judgements, thinking about the consequences of decisions, and seeking information on important moral issues in society and the world.
- 6) *Seeking peaceful solutions to conflicts* which includes striving for the fair resolution of personal and social conflicts, avoiding physical and verbal aggression, listening attentively to others, encouraging others to communicate, and working for peace<sup>21</sup>.

Generally, a morally mature individual comprehends the moral principles and takes accountability for implementing them, which is central in the uncertain times that we live in. Defining the concept of moral maturity has obvious practical implications for education, as moral growth pertains to the ongoing development of an individual's moral character and ethical decision-making abilities. This process entails reflection, self-awareness, and embracing diverse perspectives. As students

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<sup>21</sup> Ivi. pp. 19-20.



engage in moral growth, they become more open to understanding the experiences of others, differences, and confronting biases. This type of growth is inherently linked to creating an inclusive culture, where empathy and respect for others are central tenets. The integration of moral education and moral growth into educational settings can be advantageous for:

- *Fostering Empathy and Understanding:* Moral education involves teaching students about ethical principles, values, and the importance of treating others with respect and kindness. By exposing students to diverse perspectives, cultures, and experiences, they develop a deeper sense of empathy and understanding for the challenges faced by individuals from different backgrounds. This empathy is a cornerstone of building an inclusive culture where differences are embraced rather than marginalized.
- *Cultivating Respect for Diversity:* Moral education emphasizes the value of diversity and the idea that every individual deserves equal respect and consideration. Through discussions, activities, and role modelling, educators can help students recognize and appreciate the richness that diversity brings to a community. This understanding is essential for dismantling stereotypes, biases, and prejudices, and creating an environment where everyone's contributions are valued.
- *Promoting Inclusive Decision-Making:* Moral growth involves the development of critical thinking skills and the ability to make ethical decisions. When students are guided to consider the perspectives and needs of others, they become more equipped to make inclusive decisions that consider the well-being and dignity of all individuals. This is particularly important in collaborative settings where diverse groups work together to solve problems.
- *Addressing Bullying and Discrimination:* Moral education provides a platform to discuss and confront issues related to bullying, discrimination, and exclusion. By teaching students about the harmful effects of such behaviours and encouraging them

to stand up against injustice, schools can create a safer and more welcoming environment for all students.

- *Cultivating Responsible Citizenship:* Moral growth extends beyond personal values to encompass a sense of responsibility towards society. Students who receive moral education are more likely to become engaged citizens who actively work towards creating positive change and advocating for social justice and inclusion.
- *Building Positive Relationships:* Moral education emphasizes the importance of building and nurturing positive relationships based on trust, empathy, and mutual respect. This is foundational for fostering a culture of inclusion where students collaborate effectively and support one another's growth.
- *Promoting Open Dialogue:* Moral education encourages open and respectful dialogue on complex and sensitive issues, such as racism, gender identity, and privilege. By providing a space for these discussions, educators help students develop the skills to engage in meaningful conversations about diversity and inclusion.
- *Empowering Student Leadership:* Moral education empowers students to become leaders who champion inclusivity within their schools and communities. When students understand the moral imperatives of inclusion, they are more likely to take initiative, organize events, and lead efforts to create a culture that celebrates diversity.
- *Long-Term Impact:* The lessons learned through moral education and moral growth have a lasting impact on individuals. When students internalize inclusive values and ethical principles, they carry these ideals with them into adulthood, influencing their interactions, decisions, and contributions to society.

Incorporating moral education and promoting moral growth within the education system is a powerful strategy for nurturing a culture of inclusion. By imparting values, fostering empathy, and encouraging ethical decision-making, educators contribute to

objectives. Moral education and moral growth could help to promote inclusivity in education systems, which benefits everyone. Schools may potentially facilitate a better society, challenging perceptions about who and what matters, promoting fair treatment of individuals and groups. It is evident that education is a vital tool for promoting social justice that can help move away from the boundaries of traditional school organization and practices that marginalize some students.



# TEACHER IDENTITY: BEING A GOOD EFL TEACHER ACCORDING TO PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

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SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. 1.1. Aims. – 2. Methodology. – 2.1. Sample. – 2.2. Instrument. – 2.3. Procedure. – 2.4. Analysis. – 3. Results. – 3.1. Preservice teachers' perception on EFL formal instruction received. – 3.2. Preservice teachers' perception on *EFL* teachers' positive and negative characteristics. – 4. Reflexions. – 5. Conclusions.

## *1. Introduction*

The development of teacher identity is a fundamental aspect of the process of learning how to become a teacher<sup>1</sup>. This issue goes beyond achieving the necessary skills and knowledge to teach in today's world<sup>2</sup>, and directly affects how teachers perceive themselves as teaching professionals. That is, how they act, how they understand their

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<sup>1</sup> See M. D. FRIESEN, S. C. BESLEY, *Teacher identity development in the first year of teacher education: A developmental and social psychological perspective*, in «Teaching and Teacher Education», 36, 2013, pp. 23-32.

<sup>2</sup> See A. PAVIÉ, *Formación docente: hacia una definición del concepto de competencia profesional docente*, «Revista Electrónica Interuniversitaria de Formación del Profesorado», 14(1), 2011, pp. 67-80; I. ENGENESS, *Developing teachers' digital identity: towards the pedagogic design principles of digital environments to enhance students' learning in the 21st century*, in «European Journal of Teacher Education», 44(1), 2021, pp.96-114.

work, and how they are in the end<sup>3</sup>. There are distant factors related to individual experiences that affect teaching identity as well as personal and social construction and evolution<sup>4</sup>.

Although there have always been different notions how a good teacher should be, there are specific dimensions that have traditionally defined a good teacher<sup>5</sup>. These are the following: content knowledge, classes and materials structure, efficient communication, appropriate methodology, motivating factors, learning achieved by students, treatment received by students, and finally, assessment tools.

However, society may value these dimensions distinctly depending on the agent of the educational system questioned (school leadership teams, teachers, students) and the educational stage considered (university, secondary, primary, early childhood)<sup>6</sup>. In any case, these dimensions must include knowledge of the content and professional teaching skills. These involve communicative skills<sup>7</sup>, and those related to collaborative teamwork<sup>8</sup>, strongly influenced by teaching digital competence in recent years<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> See J. SACHS, *Teacher education and the development of professional identity: Learning to be a teacher*, in P. DENICOLA, M. KOMPF, *Connecting policy and practice: Challenges for teaching and learning in schools and universities*, London, Routledge, 2005, pp. 5-21.

<sup>4</sup> See E. A. RUSHTON, E. RAWLINGS SMITH, S. STEADMAN, E. TOWERS, *Understanding teacher identity in teachers' professional lives: A systematic review of the literature*, in «Review of Education», 11(2), 2023, e3417.

<sup>5</sup> See. A. CASERO MARTÍNEZ, *¿Cómo es el buen profesor universitario según el alumnado?*, in «Revista Española de Pedagogía», 68 (246), 2010, pp. 223-242.

<sup>6</sup> See. E. LÓPEZ-MARTÍN, B. GUTIÉRREZ-DE-ROZAS, A. OTERO-MAYER, E. EXPÓSITO-CASAS, *Análisis cualitativo del perfil profesional del buen docente de educación secundaria | Qualitative analysis of the professional profile of a good secondary school teacher*, in «Revista Española de Pedagogía», 80 (283), 2022, pp. 493-516; P. K. MURPHY, L. A. M. DELLI, M. N. EDWARDS, *The good teacher and good teaching: Comparing beliefs of second-grade students, preservice teachers, and inservice teachers*, in «The Journal of Experimental Education», 72(2), 2004, pp. 69-92; R. STOBAUGH, J. MITTELBERG, X. HUANG, *Examining K-12 students' perceptions of student teacher effectiveness*, in «Teacher Development», 24(2), 2020, pp. 274-292.

<sup>7</sup> See. S. J. SAVIGNON, *Communicative competence*, in J. I. LIONTAS, *The TESOL Encyclopedia of English language teaching*, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0047>

<sup>8</sup> See. K. MAARANEN, K. STENBERG, *Making beliefs explicit - student teachers' identity development through personal practical theories*, in «Journal of Education for Teaching», 46(3), 2020, pp. 336-350.

<sup>9</sup> See. L. CASTAÑEDA, F. M. ESTEVE-MON, J. ADELL, S. PRESTRIDGE, *International insights about a holistic model of teaching competence for a digital era: the digital teacher framework reviewed*, in «European Journal of Teacher Education», 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2021.1991304>; J. M. FERNÁNDEZ-BATANERO, M. MONTENEGRO-RUEDA, J. FERNÁNDEZ-CERERO, I. GARCÍA-MARTÍNEZ, *Digital competences for teacher professional development. Systematic review*, in «European Journal of Teacher Education», 45 (4), 2022, pp. 513-531.

In fact, these competences are essential for teachers' development. That is why teacher training programmes, educational strategies, and projects are trying to promote them<sup>10</sup>.

By the time that future EFL teachers have reached their university training certification, they have lived immersed in the educational system (early childhood education, primary education, secondary education) for almost two decades. During that time, they have been able to compare, from a student perspective, their EFL teachers' different methodologies, assorted capacities, and varied ways of acting.

Preservice teachers start their university instruction laden with a certain baggage of beliefs, experiences, and images learnt through their schooling lives<sup>11</sup>. This implies that they contrast approaches, theories, teaching methodologies and activity designs provided during their university training with the memories of their earlier experiences at school<sup>12</sup>.

Preservice teachers' own experience might be partly far from current reality, due to the temporal distance between their first student experiences and their ongoing training. In this sense, society has been evolving, increasing its dependence on technology, and therefore teacher trainers should update preservice teachers' technological and digital training<sup>13</sup>. At schools, EFL teaching has highly evolved due to the implementations of innovative language approaches and methods<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> See I. ENGENESS, *Op. cit.*, J. M. FERNÁNDEZ-BATANERO et al., *Op. cit.*, M. GARCÍA-SAMPEDRO, S. AGUDO PRADO, A. TORRALBA-BURRIAL, *Pre-service teachers' skills development through educational video generation*, in «European Journal of Teacher Education», 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2024.2323925>; E. J. INSTEFJORD, E. MUNTHE, *Educating digitally competent teachers: A study of integration of professional digital competence in teacher education*, in «Teaching and Teacher Education», 67, 2017, pp. 37-45.

<sup>11</sup> T. ANSPAL, Ä. LEIJEN, E. LÖFSTRÖM, *Tensions and the Teacher's Role in Student Teacher Identity Development in Primary and Subject Teacher Curricula*, in «Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research», 63 (5), 2019, pp. 679-695; D. VAILLANT, *La identidad docente. La importancia del profesorado*, in «Revista Novedades Educativas», 22(234), 2010, pp. 1-17.

<sup>12</sup> C. EICK, C. REED, *What makes and inquiry-oriented science teacher? the influence of learning histories on student teacher role identity and practice*, in «Science Teacher Education», 86(3), 2001, pp.401-416; H. G. YÜKSEL, S. KAVANOZ, *Influence of prior experiences on pre-service language teachers' perception of teaching*, in «Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences», 199, 2015, pp. 777-784.

<sup>13</sup> L. CASTAÑEDA et al., *Op. cit.*; E. J. INSTEFJORD, E. MUNTHE, *Op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> F. VIEIRA et al., *Primary English teacher education in Portugal: an exploratory study*, «European Journal of Teacher Education», 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2022.2132384>.

However, it is also true that the teaching models found throughout preservice teachers' educational experience may or may not be an adequate reference to shape future teachers' teaching identity. This vision of education may generate tensions or confirmations with what preservice teachers learn during their university training and internship periods<sup>15</sup>. The necessary adaptation between these teaching models and the educational stage in which future teachers will practice may also be relevant, requiring appealing to specific methodologies of the stage<sup>16</sup>. In any case, it is possible to explore to what extent EFL teaching staff is a model to follow and/or an element of value in their teaching identity training. Anyhow, a qualitative study on their experiences may provide with an excellent overview of the matter<sup>17</sup>.

In this sense, the analysis by Yüksel & Kavanoz<sup>18</sup> with EFL preservice teachers shows that certain characteristics of their own primary and secondary teachers were considered positive influences: pedagogical knowledge of the content (pedagogical skills more than content knowledge), educational innovation, and characteristics related to emotions (patient and flexible teachers who adapt themselves to students). On the other hand, there were negative issues such as teachers' knowledge atrophy and authoritarian attitudes that discouraged students' participation.

### 1.1. Aims

Studying preservice teachers' perceptions on their EFL formal training received (school and university); learning which are most influential EFL teachers' positive and negative characteristics in preservice teachers' professional future.

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<sup>15</sup> T. ANSPAL *et al.*, *op. cit.*; N. CABAROĞLU, G. ÖZ, *Practicum in ELT: a systematic review of 2010-2020 research on ELT practicum*, «European Journal of Teacher Education», in press, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2023.2242577>; F. VIEIRA *et al.*, *Op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> B. CORTINA-PÉREZ, A. ANDÚGAR, *Exploring the ideal foreign language teacher profile in Spanish preschools: teacher education challenges*, in «Teachers and Teaching», 27(8), 2021, pp. 713-729.

<sup>17</sup> N. GARZA-RODRÍGUEZ, M. G. RODRÍGUEZ-BULNES, I. ESPARZA-MORENO, L. M. MUÑOZ-CANTÚD, *Professional Teacher Identity: Methodological Alternatives for Qualitative Research*, «Revista Lengua y Cultura», 3(5), 2021, pp. 108-117.

<sup>18</sup> H. G. YÜKSEL, S. KAVANOZ, *Op. cit.*



## 2. Methodology

Bearing in mind that this study aims to know preservice teachers' perceptions on the formal instruction received in English as a Foreign Language, both at school and at university, the authors opted for a qualitative methodology<sup>19</sup>, being the focus groups, the technique applied<sup>20</sup>. This tool is especially adequate for this study due to the size of the sample<sup>21</sup>.

The focus groups developed during four academic years: 2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23 and 2023-24 were organised during the lectures in the classrooms of an English teaching module. Lecturers organised students in groups of 9-10 individuals with a moderator (the lecturer in charge of the module). Then, they analysed the data obtained using categories and subcategories to understand their perceptions on the EFL instruction received and their EFL teachers' more influential characteristics.

### 2.1. Sample

The sample of people studied consisted of 199 preservice teachers from the module *Didactic training for the English Classroom II: English* (all students enrolled in the module). These preservice teachers belonged to the English Primary Teaching Degree of the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, University of Oviedo, Spain. It was a non-probabilistic sample, also called casual.

Participants were mostly born in Asturias, the region where University of Oviedo is located. Most participants (68%) were 21- years- old women, being women 86% of

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<sup>19</sup> P. CÁCERES, *Análisis cualitativo de contenido: una alternativa metodológica alcanzable*, in «Psico perspectivas», 2(1), 2003, pp. 53-82; I. DORIO, M. SABARIEGO, I. MASSOT, *Características generales de la metodología cualitativa*, R. BISQUERRA, *Metodología de la investigación educativa*, Madrid, La Muralla, 2004, pp. 275-292.

<sup>20</sup> G. BOLIN, V. KALMUS, R. FIGUEIRAS, *Conducting online focus group interviews with two generations: methodological experiences and reflections from the pandemic context*, in «International Journal of Qualitative Methods», 22, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231182029>.

<sup>21</sup> X. GONZÁLEZ-RIAÑO, A. FERNÁNDEZ-COSTALES, *Investigación vs innovación y homologación metodológica. Retos actuales de la DLL*, in J. BALLESTER-ROCA, N. IBARRA-RÍUS, *Entre la lectura, la escritura y la educación. Paradigmas de investigación en Didáctica de la Literatura y la Lengua*, Madrid, Narcea, 2020, pp. 75-92.

the sample (Table 1). Preservice teachers are mostly women, as it happens in non-university classrooms in Spain<sup>22</sup>.

Table 1

*Sociodemographic data from the participant preservice teachers.*

Sex	Women				Men			
	170				29			
Age	20	21	22	23	20	21	22	23
	5	135	20	11	2	16	10	0

Source: Developed by authors

## 2.2. Instrument

The focus group was the tool used in the whole study to learn primary preservice teachers' perceptions on the following topics:

1. What is your perception on the EFL formal instruction received at school and at university?
2. Which are the most positive and negative characteristics that your EFL teachers had and most influenced you?

Focus group questions followed the analysis made by Casero<sup>23</sup> being an inspiration for the present study.

## 2.3. Procedure

Firstly, lecturers designed the focus groups questions. Then, they organised the groups of students. During the focus groups sessions, lecturers recorded the audio with a

<sup>22</sup> MEFD, *Igualdad en cifras. MEFD 2024. Aulas por la igualdad*. Ministerio de Educación, Formación Profesional y Deportes.

<sup>23</sup> A. CASERO, *Op. cit.*

tablet. Finally, they transcribed the answers, and established the categories and subcategories to proceed with the analysis.

#### 2.4. Analysis

Lecturers gave an alpha-numeric code to all participants, using ST letters as in student, and a number. Accordingly, codes start in ST1 and finish in ST199. This way, they guaranteed confidentiality of the data and anonymity of participants. Besides, they eliminated any possibility of traceability of the answers.

The categories applied for the analysis of the first question (What is your perception on the EFL formal instruction received at school and at university?) following the review by Casero<sup>24</sup> dimensions were: content knowledge; lesson structure and materials; communication; methodology; teachers' motivation; students' motivation; relationship with the students, and assessment tools.

The categories and subcategories used for the analysis of the data obtained in the second question (Which are the most positive and negative characteristics that your EFL teachers had and most influenced you?) following the review by Casero<sup>25</sup> were: teaching competence; teacher personal characteristics and fulfilment. See subcategories in Table 2.

After categorising the responses, lecturers counted words repetitions, and visually analysed them through the software WordClouds (<https://www.wordclouds.com>). In the resulting figures, the word font size scale was proportional to the times participant repeated words. Besides, the word font size scale was proportional within the group of positive characteristics and within the group of negative characteristics but not within groups, to facilitate visualisation.

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<sup>24</sup> Ivi.

<sup>25</sup> Ivi.

Table 2

*Categories (dimensions) and subcategories of ELF teachers' characteristics.*

Dimensions	Subcategories
Teaching competence	clarity
	content organisation
	content mastery
	motivation skills
	lesson implementation
Teacher personal characteristics	attitude
	physical appearance
	friendliness
	enthusiasm
	language
Fulfilment	--

Source: Based on Casero (2010)

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Preservice teachers' perception on EFL formal instruction received.

Most preservice teachers have a negative perspective of the EFL instruction received at school or at university, but for varied reasons.

Regarding to teacher knowledge, more than 80% of the participants consider that their primary teachers did not have the necessary command in EFL language (teacher content knowledge):

«She did not know how to speak in English» (ST49).

«None of my EFL primary teachers mastered the language» (ST80).

In the case of the secondary teachers, the perception was more positive in respect to teachers' knowledge, but, in cases, preservice teachers talk about the same lack of mastery in EFL (the teacher pedagogical content knowledge):

«At Secondary school, teachers seemed to know much more English than in primary, but some of them, never spoke to us in English, because they taught in Spanish most of the times» (ST145).

However, all the students agree that their EFL teachers at university possess a remarkable command of the English language, but there were other issues that made them feel not amazingly comfortable during their lessons. Preservice teachers consider that lecturers do not know enough methodological or motivating strategies (the teacher pedagogical content knowledge again):

«At university, my EFL teachers spoke really well, and they knew a lot, grammar, phonetics, but their lectures were very boring, and they were very demanding and strict» (ST21).

Regarding communication dimension, the way in which teachers communicate with pupils and students is an essential factor to take into consideration.

Half of preservice teachers' state that their primary teachers communicated with them in Spanish, and they used English in exceedingly rare occasions. Almost a fifth (18%) of preservice teachers confirm that their EFL teachers used both languages in the English classroom, the same percentage that declares that their teachers only used the English language during their lessons. Communication with the university teachers was only in the English language during their EFL lessons.

Regarding lesson structure and materials dimension, preservice teachers agree that their primary teachers used a traditional way of teaching. Their methodologies were old fashioned, and they followed course books to the letter:

«We spent our English lesson doing activities from the course book, and at home, we had to do our workbook. It was a nightmare. We could do listening exercises, but we never did oral activities.» (ST17).

There are exceptions, and preservice teachers had vivid memories of playful and enjoyable English language sessions, too.

All the participants agree to say that their sessions at university have been tedious. The structure of the lessons was always the same and the activities were very mechanical.

Regarding methodology dimension, even though there are exceptions, 40% of the participants agree with the idea that their primary teachers did not possess enough methodological skills. However, 28% of the participants consider that their teachers applied innovative methods, resources, and ICT tools.

ST33 says: “Grammar, grammar and grammar” referring to their teachers’ method.

However, other participants comment that their primary teachers implemented innovative methodologies in the classrooms.

«I had a teacher who was always trying to improve the way he taught us. He loved his job, and he was an enthusiast of new methodologies, resources. At that time, we participated in different projects, and even, we could go abroad in an exchange programme with a school in Finland. He was the best» (ST18).

At university, preservice teachers complain about the classical methodologies applied by teachers:

«My EFL teachers at university spoke great English, but they were as traditional as if they were 100 years old» (ST86).

A crucial point about their experiences in primary education, and which counteracts the negative statements collected above, is the one referring to the motivation of their primary teachers. This way, almost a third (28%) of the participants also consider that their primary English teachers were highly motivated, and for that reason, these teachers were also very motivating professionals. Consequently, their pupils were initiative-taking pupils:

«I remember my teacher in the fourth year. She was a nice woman, and very enthusiastic. If I tell the truth, she has been an inspiration. That is why I would like to become an English Primary teacher». (ST18)

The rest of preservice teachers consider that their primary teachers were unmotivated. They were tired and willing to leave school the soonest.

Two thirds (66%) of the preservice teachers consider that their EFL teachers at university were strongly demotivated. For this reason, they did not make any sort of innovation and maintained traditional methodologies and bossy attitudes.

«It was very difficult to approach to my English teachers in the faculty.” They looked uninterested in us». (ST87)

«They did not like teaching» (ST133)

«I remember a teacher who was so stiff [...]. I never saw her smiling» (ST5)

These perceptions, although majority, were not the only ones present among the teachers. Thus, almost a fifth (17%) of the participants stated that their EFL teachers seemed to be enjoying when teaching.

Students’ motivation dimension analysis let know that students (66%) felt completely unmotivated in one way or another with their primary and secondary EFL teachers. They relate this fact with teachers’ attitude, methodology, and teaching resources.

«We only practised written exercises. It was impossible to feel motivated» (ST97).

«He was always in a very bad mood» (ST133)

«The only important thing was to pass the exams. Lessons were unbearable» (ST45)

Almost a quarter (23%) of the preservice teachers declared to feel motivated in the English classroom at primary education:

«Learning and having fun. That is how it was» (ST18).

«I enjoyed my English lessons very much. We practised conversation with children from other school in Ireland» (ST27)

Most preservice teachers declared themselves as completely discouraged students at the EFL classroom. The reasons were varied: difficult exams, extremely low grades, boring lessons, and traditional resources.

However, almost a fifth of the preservice teachers consider themselves motivated when learning English at university. Only 8% stated that they love learning languages:

«I love English. I love doing readings, conversation, listening, drafting essays (...) Even, I like doing Use of English activities very much» (ST18).

If we bear in mind that education is changing, and the way of teaching and learning is improving, the assessment should also change. In this study, the results show that preservice teachers' perception on the assessment tools dimension is overwhelmingly negative, not only at school, but at university, too.

Participants absolutely agree on the inefficacy of traditional exams or tests. They think that educational authorities should eliminate these tools from the educational system. What people learn by heart today, they forget in hours (ST196). For this reason, teachers should apply new assessment tools, not only in primary and secondary, but at university, too. There are remarkably interesting suggestions formulated during the sessions:

«Exams should disappear completely. Teachers should apply formative assessment» (ST183)

«Teachers should assess the four skills, especially speaking. How? Practising dialogues and situations» (ST199)

«I hate filling the gaps» (ST66)

### *3.2. Preservice teachers' perception on EFL teachers' positive and negative characteristics*

The results show the most influential positive or negative characteristics that preservice teachers perceived of their own EFL teachers in formal education, both at school and at university. See in figure 1 two word-clouds showing teachers' positive and negative characteristics.

As seen in Figure 1, negative characteristics were more repeated than positive ones, suggesting that they were more common in preservice teachers' schooling experience. In fact, the most repeated (70%) negative characteristic was: only written activities, while the most reiterated positive characteristic (40%) was using computers in the classroom.



## Teaching competence



Fig. 1. EFL teachers' positive and negative teaching competences, according to preservice teachers' perceptions.

The positive and most inspiring model is related to ICT implementation in the classroom (computers -38%-, ICT tools -28%-, videos -28%-), to facilitate students' learning, to motivate (28%), and to provide an adequate content (28%) and well-organised instruction (23%), promoting oral activities in the classroom (27%).

On the contrary, the negative characteristics that would define what it is understood by a bad EFL teacher ( a negative model) are related to the concepts of lesson implementation and adequate didactic resources: excess of written activities (70%), resulting in very boring lessons (68%), based mainly on the use of course books, (62%), linked to tedious homework (45%), mechanical activities (44%) and dull exercises in the classrooms (39%), dealing with uninteresting topics (42%), using inadequate resources (34%) or very traditional (18%). All these characteristics are related to pedagogical content knowledge and how to teach content to students.

They have also valued content knowledge very negatively (28%). Similarly, in primary education the impossibility of using English as a language of instruction (18%) and providing students with an inadequate content for the classroom situation (29%) were also considered. See on Figure 2 preservice teachers' perceptions on what characteristics made their own ELF teachers good or bad.

### Teacher personal characteristics



Fig. 2. EFL teachers’ positive and negative characteristics according to preservice teachers’ perceptions.

The variety of positive characteristics is wider than the negative ones. At large, there are more opinions included in teachers’ attitude dimension (14 distinctive characteristics). These characteristics receive individual high or medium valuations,

being lower in “friendliness” for example. Positive characteristics such as respectful (45%), or nice (43%) appear more often than demanding (39%), patient (34%), resourceful (34%), helpful (27%) or inspiring (24%). Other characteristics are related to fulfilment (adequate language level -33% -adequate instruction -28%-), being enthusiastic (38%) or innovator (16%). This characteristic is present in both teachers’ professional competence and teachers’ personality.

The teaching personality characteristics that preservice teachers perceive as negative in their EFL teachers are related to their comments on the observed teaching competences. Being boring is the negative characteristic named more often by almost half of the preservice teachers (49%), followed by problems derived from inadequate instruction (40%) or inadequate adaptation to pupils’ language level (39%). Lack of teacher enthusiasm presents a much lower percentage of preservice teachers (16%), although it is also related to various characteristics addressed in teaching competence and, especially, in comments on the EFL instruction received in formal education.

#### *4. Reflections*

Undoubtedly, the assessment of the training received is always a problematic issue, although it allows us to know certain actions that persist in people’s education memory. In this case, it is extremely interesting to know EFL preservice teachers’ perceptions since they are finishing their training as EFL teachers themselves and they will become inservice teachers very soon.

In this sense, this study research questions promote a deep reflection on what preservice teachers consider about being and acting as good teacher, thinking about their own schooling experience and taking it as a model or not<sup>26</sup>.

Preservice teachers' considerations about the EFL education received appear together with the characteristics that they consider positive and negative in their EFL

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<sup>26</sup> P. K. MURPHY *et al.*, *Op. cit.*

previous teachers. Following their experience, they found teachers who lacked the necessary knowledge of the content taught, especially in their primary education years. It is important to highlight that EFL education in Spain (during the years that participants have spent in the formal educational system) has evolved enormously (García Bermejo, 2021), especially when making comparisons between the primary education instruction received by these preservice teachers, more than a decade ago, and the current situation.

Although this knowledge was increasing in the later stages, preservice teachers show discrepancies with those teachers' pedagogical methods that are only based on the textbook use, written activities and a tyrant employ of grammar tasks. This results into tedious and unstimulating classes and homework as in Yüksel & Kavanoz<sup>27</sup>, in which the most commented negative characteristics have to do with how to teach, rather than with what to teach.

This negative view is not completely general, and preservice teachers also comment on inspiring teachers (those they consider as role models), with adequate knowledge of the subject and who generate vivid memories of playful and enjoyable English language sessions.

EFL preservice teachers seem to appreciate the use of updated teaching resources, the promotion of oral activities and the use of educational technology (ITC tools, videos, computers) to facilitate learning and motivate students. Additionally, assessment procedures, tools and implementation are essential aspects in EFL teaching. In this context, preservice teachers consider that there must be changes, not only in the assessment tools, but in the concept of assessment itself<sup>28</sup>.

They also consider that motivation, enthusiasm, and closeness to the students are necessary characteristics that teachers should possess valuing those who are both

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<sup>27</sup> H.G. YÜKSEL, S. KAVANOZ, *Op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> L. RODRÍGUEZ-OLAY, M. GARCIA-SAMPEDRO, R. AVELLO RODRIGUEZ, *Aprendizaje Servicio en la formación de docentes: Literatura Infantil desde una perspectiva de género*, in «Revista de Estilos de Aprendizaje», 15(3), 2022, pp. 19-33.

initiative-taking and motivating teachers (motivated teachers usually have motivated students)<sup>29</sup>.

Preservice teachers attach importance to different considerations regarding EFL teachers' attitude dimension, with fourteen distinct subcategories highlighted as positive personal characteristics. These attributes receive different percentages of positive evaluations such as respectfulness and friendliness, alongside other qualities such as patience and resourcefulness. Additionally, positive characteristics extend to aspects like enthusiasm and innovation, perceived as indicators of both professional competence and personality. On the contrary, negative perceptions are associated with deficiencies in teaching competence. Particularly, cited examples include being boring, inadequate instruction, and difficulties to adapt to students' language levels. Despite being less emphasized, the lack of teacher enthusiasm is also present, with an impact in various teaching competences and educational experiences.

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<sup>29</sup> M. GARCÍA-SAMPEDRO, S. AGUDO PRADO, *Affective and motivational factors in English as a second language in Spain*, in «Journal of Education Culture and Society», 11(1), 2020, pp. 163-173.

# PRACTICAL WISDOM AS AN EXERCISE OF MORAL RESPONSIBILITY AT SCHOOL

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SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. – 2. The Great Value Machine of the School. – 3. How can we Ensure the Future of Democratic Education? – 4. Portrait, Role, and Responsibilities of Teachers Towards Current and Future Generations.

## *1. Introduction*

Education is a fundamental universal human right, defined as such not only in the Italian Constitution (Articles 3 and 34)<sup>1</sup> but also in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Articles 28 and 29). These latter two pillars constitute an indispensable framework, not only because they indicate the need to establish effective and equitable educational systems but also because they underscore the requirement to provide quality, inclusive education that offers learning opportunities from early childhood.<sup>2</sup>

Educating has always been a highly challenging artisanal profession that demands great commitment and a broad cultural education. It could prove to be radically effective in preventing, combating, and addressing the emergence of small and large discriminations, inequalities, and disparities in opportunities. The concept of educating in this sense could, therefore, become the basis for concrete and daily work that allows us to coexist responsibly with diversity, the multiplicity of experiences,

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<sup>1</sup> “It is the task of the Republic to remove obstacles of economic and social nature that, de facto limiting the freedom and equality of citizens, hinder the full development of the human person”. Article 3; “It is the duty and right of parents to support, instruct, and educate their children...” Article 30; “School is open to everyone” Article 34.

<sup>2</sup> UN Sustainable Development Goal 4, 2015-2030 in <https://unric.org/it/obiettivo-4-fornire-ineducazione-di-qualita-equa-ed-inclusiva-e-opportunita-di-apprendimento-per-tutti/>

and the complex interconnections of contexts, especially those marked by youth distress, school dropout, and educational poverty.

## 2. *The Great Value Machine of the School*

Article 3 of the Constitution of the Italian Republic<sup>3</sup> reads as follows:

All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinions, or personal and social conditions. It is the duty of the Republic to remove the obstacles of economic and social order that, by limiting the freedom and equality of citizens, prevent the full development of the human person and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic, and social organization of the country.

To initiate and carry forward this great and robust set of values expressed in the aforementioned article of the Italian Constitution, as written by one of its founding fathers, the great Italian jurist, lawyer Calamandrei<sup>4</sup>, «we must put into it fuel, a fuel made of commitment, spirit, will, and personal responsibility».

This fuel, this vital essence that should educate to values and shape the consciences of future generations, does not arise out of nothing but is primarily built in the great formative agency par excellence, which is the family, and simultaneously within that place primarily designated to make all men equal: the school. The school, if we think about it, represents «the increasingly socio-cultural-political fundamental agency in the complexity of Our Time».<sup>5</sup> It is a cultural artisanal workshop where the future of generations is ordinarily built; it is, as Comenius wrote in his *Didacta Magna*, «a great workshop of humanity»<sup>6</sup>. It is undeniable that it represents an institution pivotal for

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<sup>3</sup> Cfr. F. CLEMENTI, L. CUOCOLO, F. ROSA (a cura di), *La Costituzione italiana. Commento articolo per articolo. Vol. 1: Principi fondamentali e parte I: Diritti e doveri dei cittadini* (Artt. 1-54), Bologna, Il Mulino, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> P. CALAMANDREI, *Lo Stato siamo noi*, Milano, Chiarelettere, 2011, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> F. CAMBI, *Quale scuola per il XXI secolo? Un'identità possibili*, in «Studi sulla Formazione», 2, 2017, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> J. A. COMENIUS, *Didattica magna*, trad. it. Milano-Palermo-Napoli, Remo Sandron, 2011, p. 109.



educating in democracy, generating quality learning, and constituting a guide to prevent and counteract youth distress, school dropout, and academic failure, while simultaneously deploying all necessary tools to promote social inclusion, attraction to study, active citizenship, equal opportunities, and social cohesion.<sup>7</sup>

The school, therefore, represents the vital space where it is possible to learn to not only acquire cognitive tools useful and aimed at learning disciplines but also those value frameworks that will contribute to maturing in every subject undergoing formation the capacity for reflection, analysis, and understanding of the dynamics of the world in order to interact with it effectively, escaping thus processes of exclusion and marginalization.

The current educational system of our schools is dominated, as pedagogical literature on the critical approach in education has confirmed for the past ten years, by the regime of “business pedagogy”. A completely instrumental pedagogy that, imitating market logic, promotes a bare pedagogy aimed at commodifying knowledge, indoctrination, training in techniques and methods, mnemonic learning, conformism, disinterested knowledge formation, unrestrained individualism, excess competition, and dequalification.

In this direction, even though every classroom is inhabited by individuals embodying a colorful mosaic of identities, woven with many value systems, languages, and socio-cultural peculiarities that exert a considerable influence on the construction of their identity and their schooling process, they are deprived of their criticality, and teachers are subordinated and trivialized. The result of such pedagogy is the promotion of conformity that urges students not to feel responsible towards others and to perceive critical thinking, social responsibility, and justice as «an unbearable burden to be tamed and self-reflective practice as a threat to their own identity».<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cfr. C. SIRNA, *Verso una scuola comunità di apprendimento*, In C. SIRNA, A. MICHELIN SALOMON (a cura di), *Operatività ludicità cooperazione. Idee, percorsi e buone prassi a scuola*, Lecce, Pensa Multimedia, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> H. GIROUX, *Education and the Crisis of Public Values: Challenging the Assault on Teachers, Students, and Public Education*, New York, Peter Lang, 2012, p. 176.

This instrumental view of education inevitably produces a “brainless culture”<sup>9</sup> and, at the same time, causes both students and teachers a socio-political-cultural death, making them forget the social relevance of education in favor of measurement and quantification, fostering mental habits of social and cultural classification and depriving students of any vital form of critical teaching and learning, and therefore, of valuable knowledge.<sup>10</sup>

This educational approach, grounded in the economic philosophy of neoliberalism, unfortunately incorporates the erosion of the possibility of critical reflection in a context dominated by the “new knowledge economy”<sup>11</sup> that constantly seeks to reduce all knowledge to a commodity for an unrestricted market. Knowledge production itself becomes a trade subject to the efficiency requirements of commercial production, incorporating the educational system into new rules of management and responsibility. Market logic, structured on human competitiveness, operates constantly in a concealed manner to conceal its blind imperatives and therefore demands that students, defined as human capital, be educated for global competitiveness, thus bypassing long-accepted and shared values such as democracy, freedom, and human rights.

This passivity includes the inability to imagine life differently and to accept the human victimization of a paradigm that wants us to be passive facilitators of a declining worldview. How can we not share McLaren’s thought when he writes that “we are capitalism, capitalism is us”.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the subtle *modus operandi* of the market has taken residence in our bones, our brains, the structure of our daily lives (such as food, play, travel), even affecting how and why we educate, and therefore, as

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<sup>9</sup> Ivi, p. 171.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. D. MAVIGLIA, *La natura etica e formativa del ruolo dell’insegnante nel tempo della bare pedagogy*, in G. ELIA, S. POLENGHI, V. ROSSINI (a cura di), *La scuola tra saperi e valori etico-sociali. Politiche culturali e pratiche educative*, Lecce, Pensa Multimedia, 2019, pp. 493-502.

<sup>11</sup> D. G. SMITH, *Teaching as the practice of wisdom*, New York, Bloomsbury, 2014, p. 61.

<sup>12</sup> P. MCLAREN, *Rage+Hope: Interviews with Peter McLaren on War, Imperialism+Critical Pedagogy*, New York, Peter Lang, 2006, p. 78.

Kadarkay<sup>13</sup> would say, we are so entangled that becoming aware of it would mean “committing suicide”.

It is a virtuous and shared opinion to think, instead, that all educational institutions should represent a democratic organism of literacy and acculturation capable of evaluating the merit and individual talent of each student. And that the school as a “constitutional organ” of democracy, and as an educational-formative agency, must promote equal opportunities to achieve “a complete democracy that gives everyone effective equal dignity”<sup>14</sup>. And all of us citizens, for this concrete educational and social purpose, should take on the responsibility of protecting and maintaining democracy. Nowadays, however, most of us teachers, as well as students, simply think that living in a democratic society is our birthright and do not think in the slightest that we ourselves have the duty to offer opportunities to learn the means that will allow ourselves and students to guarantee and maintain a democratic lifestyle.<sup>15</sup>

### *3. How can we Ensure the Future of Democratic Education?*

Every day we fall into the mistake of thinking that the enemies of democracy are always and only some “others”, nor do we fully grasp the thoughts of past and present scholars who have taught us and continue to teach us the meaning and value of democracy. For example, those of us who are educators remember Dewey’s powerful statement in his famous work “Democracy and Education”<sup>16</sup> that “democracy must be reborn in every generation, and education is its midwife”.

To make such a dynamic discourse on democratic values concrete, each of us, in the role of a teacher, should necessarily possess the awareness of being a crucial bearer

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<sup>13</sup> Cfr. A. KADARKAY, *Georg Lukacs: Life, Thought, and Politics*, Cambridge MA, Basil Blackwell, 1991.

<sup>14</sup> Cfr. P. CALAMANDREI, *Per la scuola*, Palermo, Sellerio editore, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. J. A. BEANE, M. W. APPLE, *The Case for Democratic Schools*, in M. W. APPLE, BEANE J.A. (Eds.), *Democratic Schools: Lessons in Powerful Education*, Portsmouth NH, Heinemann, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. J. DEWEY, *Democrazia e educazione*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 2000.

of democratic ideals aligned with a deep and continuous commitment to social justice through praxis.

Supporters of democratic values and ideals, like myself, who continue to work to educate for the practice of freedom, firsthand experience how democratic education is undermined by the interests of corporate capitalism, to the extent that students are encouraged to see education solely as a means to achieve material success rather than as a means to acquire knowledge or learn to think critically. So, what and who do we need to ensure the future of democratic education? In an era where the harmful trends of market imperatives are becoming more evident, the need for teachers who responsibly engage in creating a school as a place to sow, nurture, and cultivate conditions for a critical and democratic consciousness becomes indispensable.

After all, educational systems should be the primary place where freedom of speech, dissent, and pluralistic opinions embody both pedagogical theory and educational practice. In a deep meditation on democracy, in “Healing the Soul of America”, Williamson<sup>17</sup> emphasizes that the democratic principle of unity in diversity always remains the foundation of democratic values. Overemphasizing our unity but failing to appreciate the importance of diversity or emphasizing diversity but failing to appreciate the importance of our unity, represents a limitation. It is imperative, instead, to honor both because both our unity and diversity "matter," and their reciprocal relationship reflects a truth and a socio-political-cultural path outside of which we cannot mature and grow.

However, the future of democratic education will be determined to the extent that democratic values triumph over the “spirit of oligarchy” that tries to deny citizens access to “problematic education”. The ability to think is, in fact, a sign of responsible citizenship that generates an even more fundamental democratic impulse, namely the desire to broaden consciousness. Therefore, since democratic education is based on the assumption that democracy is the foundation of all authentic teaching and learning,

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<sup>17</sup> Cfr. M. WILLIAMSON, *Healing the Soul of America: Reclaiming Our Voices as Spiritual Citizens*. Simon & Schuster, [revised ed. *Healing the soul of America: Reclaiming our voices as spiritual citizens*, 1997 onward], 1997.

it is necessary for teachers not to shy away from the collective responsibility they hold in this direction, that is, to educate students to participate in an inclusive democracy to identify, defend, and promote the school as a place of values, democracy, and the common good.

Intellectual Said<sup>18</sup> argues that to alleviate this serious threat to the promise of democracy, which disfigures contemporary society, it is indeed necessary to create pedagogical and formative conditions that promote critical awareness, thinking, and dialogue: these being necessary ingredients for any future democracy. Therefore, as students do not become critical thinkers overnight, it is important to understand who and how can help them embrace, first and foremost, the joy and power of thought itself and then enable them to think critically.

Furthermore, the teaching staff and student classes, considered as the primary resource of economic and moral investment and as a symbol of hope for a democratic future, must be empowered to explore new paths of humanization capable of actively promoting democratic practices.

Therefore, to confront all antidemocratic tendencies, which are covertly shaped by the dominant power in the political and educational spheres, each of us, especially teachers, must strive to concretize the transition from a repetitive apparatus school to a community life school,<sup>19</sup> with the intention of recovering the sense of this task of humanization and sharing it with all forces engaged in a democratic and humanistically solidarity sense.<sup>20</sup>

In this pedagogical-educational framework, the teacher should encourage students to acquire a comprehensive critical view of educational and social reality, helping them to question particular paradigms, value structures, epistemological and political

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<sup>18</sup> Cfr. E. SAID, *What is the Role of the Intellectual in Public and Political Life Today?* Interview by Michael Phillips on Social Thought, February 1991.

<sup>19</sup> C. SIRNA, *Globalizzazione e interventi educativi formali*, In XLI Convegno di Scholé (a cura di.), *Globalizzazione e nuove responsabilità educative*, Brescia, La Scuola, 2003, pp. 103-116.

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. C. SCURATI, *Fra presente e futuro. Analisi e riflessioni di pedagogia*, Brescia, La Scuola, 2001.

orientations. The teacher, in agreement with what Kincheloe<sup>21</sup> affirmed, should thus wear the attire of the Critical Researcher and should possess a sort of “knowledge briefcase” (such as profound inspiration, high ethical motivation, rigorous commitment, a deep sense of care, guidance, animation, and mediation, great competence, sense of responsibility, balance, and participation), which, when deployed with intelligent sensitivity, becomes functional to initiate the construction process and the conquest process in students of their identity, autonomy, and, above all, their openness to social commitment and co-responsibility.

*4. Portrait, Role, and Responsibilities of Teachers Towards Current  
and Future Generations*

I dedicate special attention to the educational figure of the teacher because we are the primary agents of change and enhancement of new educational paths. Inspired by profound ethical motivations, care, guidance, and a strong sense of personal and collective responsibility, we should help the new generations equip themselves adequately in terms of knowledge. In this regard, the teacher should not be perceived as “a clerk offering a bag full of techniques”,<sup>22</sup> serving students like a waiter offering “trite and obvious truths that reinforce both common sense and what is self-evident”.<sup>23</sup> Neither should the teacher be considered a fast-thinking specialist in “disposing of thought” by providing “pre-digested and pre-thought-out fast-food culture”<sup>24</sup>, as this would mean depoliticizing their role entirely. The teacher, as conceived in this way, represents a personality that “loses its sense of public commitment” because it adopts an educational practice that generates “a dangerous

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<sup>21</sup> Cfr. J. L. KINCHELOE, *Critical Pedagogy, Primer, 2nd Edition*. New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 2008.

<sup>22</sup> H. GIROUX, *Op. cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>23</sup> Z. BAUMAN, *Afterthought: On Writing Sociology*. In «Cultural studies/critical methodologies», 2(3), 359-370, 2002.

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. P. BOURDIEU, *On television*, The New Press, New York, 1996.

calm”.<sup>25</sup> This implies a commitment to offering only limited hope of confronting the oppressive structures of dominant power, thereby downplaying complex issues and diminishing fundamental values to the point of draining them of their authoritative significance.

To prevent teachers from condemning critical thinking to extinction<sup>26</sup> and becoming veritable engines of antidemocratic behavior<sup>27</sup>, it is vital for them to exercise the “ethical and aesthetic responsibility” mentioned by Freire<sup>28</sup> in “Pedagogy of Autonomy”. This responsibility is socially and historically constituted not as an “a priori of history” but as a nature in the making that recognizes and values itself as such when lived through practice. Teachers become lively witnesses to those they educate, exercising ethical correctness, respect for others, coherence, and the ability to live and learn with differences.

From this perspective, teachers, in relation to future generations, should be imagined as individuals with a strong ethical and formative imprint, ready to provide students with the tools for acquiring theoretical and practical skills. These skills will enable students to identify and combat various forms of inequality and injustice, contradicting and undermining the principles of freedom, equality, justice, and respect for others.

Teachers following this approach will actively employ knowledge and information in the classroom through analysis, problematization, argumentation, and critical dialogue. This approach encourages students’ self-reflection to make them capable of reading and critically using diverse themes, issues, times, and contexts. Consequently, students’ perspectives and their respective critical and cognitive abilities become a stimulus and guide to expand and deepen knowledge, transforming themselves into future social actors.

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<sup>25</sup> Cfr. M. NUSSBAUM, *The Professor of Parody*, in «The New Republic», 2 novembre 2000.

<sup>26</sup> Cfr. H. GIROUX, *Op. cit.*, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Cfr. A. ARENDT, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report of the Banality of Evil*, New York, Penguin, 1963.

<sup>28</sup> Cfr. P. FREIRE, *Pedagogia dell'autonomia. Saperi necessari per la pratica educativa*, Torino, EGA-Edizioni Gruppo Abele, 2004.

Implementing and effectively using this approach naturally requires, in the exercise and defense of the dual “ethical and aesthetic” nature of educational practice, embarking on a dialogical relationship based on a willingness to engage in dialogue and intersect with the ability to listen. This emphasizes that teachers, knowing they are dealing not with things but with people in formation, changing, growing, reorienting, improving,<sup>29</sup> must be capable of breaking down the condition of considering oneself as the other’s object. This will be possible through the practice of teaching and learning that allows students to understand what an important “personal capital” they represent and, at the same time, to acquire the value of criticality as the ability to reflect, analyze, interpret, compare, and reinterpret, reacting and taking action in the world.<sup>30</sup> In doing so, the teacher will promote the full development of the individual in social, cultural, and moral terms: shaping individuals capable of ethical, intellectual, and political autonomy.

Following this trend, critical thinking becomes a present ingredient in the learning of all subjects, the yeast that guarantees the growth of the mind and the growth of a school as a “community of free doubters”,<sup>31</sup> where a spirit of open and tolerant discussion on all issues prevails. Of course, some educational strategies such as group discussion, research with students, reasoned and open lectures for critical dialogue, the practice of giving and asking for reasons, and others, encourage this process and promote the idea of a school conceived as a democratic community, where relationships are based on free discussion and democratic deliberation rather than hierarchical relations.

Fostering these practices, therefore, offers students fertile ground to cultivate both critical thinking<sup>32</sup> and a future that leads them to the “understanding of history as a possibility and not as determinism”,<sup>33</sup> in lively and full respect of freedom and social justice. This path represents the necessary weapon to participate in democratic

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>30</sup> Cfr. P. FREIRE, *La pedagogia degli oppressi*, Torino, EGA-Edizioni Gruppo Abele, 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Cfr. L. BORGHI, *L'educazione e i suoi problemi*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1953.

<sup>32</sup> Cfr. M. BALDACCI, *La scuola al bivio. Mercato o democrazia?*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> P. FREIRE, *Pedagogia della speranza*, Torino, EGA-Edizioni Gruppo Abele, 2008, p. 91.



political life and navigate the defense of freedom, justice, peace, and values currently at great risk. Educating for dialogue and critical thinking means, therefore, finding the will and courage to contribute to the democratic education of our present and future by choosing to adopt a critical approach in the classroom as an opportunity to resist the pressures and temptations to retreat from collective responsibilities. On the other hand, as Bauman<sup>34</sup> argues, a society that wants to engage its members in the difficult and imperative task of caring for each other and managing common affairs in full respect of collective well-being “does not need disciplined subjects or consumers seeking satisfaction from socially provided services but rather sometimes obstinate, but always responsible citizens”.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Cfr. Z. BAUMAN, *Life in Fragments. Essays in Postmodern Morality*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1995.

<sup>35</sup> *Ivi*, p. 326.



# WHAT KIND OF MORAL EDUCATION AT SCHOOL? AN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH IN MESSINA

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SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. – 2. Field research. – 2.1. Theoretical verification. – 2.2. The empirical research. – 2.3. Analysis and comment of outcomes. – 2.3.1. First issue. – 2.3.2. Second issue. – 2.3.3. Third issue

## *1. Introduction*

The complexity of the contemporary world invites us to question if moral education, as it has always been conducted in the main educational institution, the school, can still be valid. In other words, the question we, like Massimo Baldacci, are asking is whether in our democracy marked by pluralism and increasing multiculturalism it is sufficient to attend public school and rely on a traditional 'implicit' mode of moral education to develop citizen personalities capable of making choices from time to time between what is right and what is not, or whether it is necessary to offer moral education in a more structured way<sup>1</sup>.

Baldacci's reasons for leaning toward the second option are many and agreeable.

First, we are witnessing the demise of monolithic moral references and a natural inclination toward polytheism of values. Today's society poses a choice between multiple and sometimes conflicting values, and none of them can be absolute normative criteria<sup>2</sup>. This is closely related to the concept of relativism. Think, for example, about the multiplicity of communities existing in our territory: each of them

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. M. BALDACCI, *Un curricolo di educazione etico-sociale. Proposte per una scuola democratica*, Roma, Carocci, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. M. WEBER, *Il politeismo dei valori*, Brescia, Morcelliana, 2010.

professes a different religion, which for each will be the right or best one; each community is the bearer of different customs, all equally respectable. Contacts between different communities could, however, give rise to conflicts, with respect to which it is not possible to determine who is in the right, let alone whether one is more valuable than another.

Second, it is not possible to ignore the cultural catastrophe that has occurred as a result of totalitarian regimes and the tragedy of Auschwitz, which has affected the self-consciousness of contemporary man, making tangible the possibility of such events being repeated, precisely because they were devised by man himself. The twentieth century has also shown, by contrast, the strength of man fighting for moral ideals such as peace, freedom, and democracy, and which found its highest expression in the Resistance, an event of great moral as well as political significance, from which the Republic and the democratic Constitution were born.

The third reason is dictated by the advent of neo-liberalism, which, with its ideology of individual affirmation, has led man to have a justified and socially accepted propensity toward selfishness.

Excessive self-centeredness has been accompanied by poor civic sense and accentuated by rampant consumerism, fueling the lust for individual success to be achieved through competition and impropriety, at the expense of social ties.

A further reason is the transformation of our societies in a multicultural direction brought about by the massive migration flows to Europe, which impose forced coexistence between men and women of different cultures and traditions. Without an effective policy of welcome and inclusion, a difficult and conflictual social situation has come about in which the sense of right and wrong is so altered that the solidity of our democracy is at risk.

Finally, the typical feature that distinguishes Italy from the rest of Western democracies, represented by the disruption of its ethical-civil fabric, which has occurred in recent decades, should not be underestimated. At the end of the 1970s, a political system that had long been deadlocked due to the impossibility of alternating

government generated widespread corruption. All this led to legislative and administrative activities often geared to satisfy special interests rather than the common good. Through favoritism and widespread practices of nepotism in accessing jobs in public tenders and competitive bidding, the Italian 'moral sense' has degenerated into selfish hedonism, which has weakened the sense of responsibility to one's community and civic sense. The ethical-civil fabric is also frayed in many regional realities, where there is a clear gap between values professed by our democratic Constitution, which should regulate civil living, and values professed locally by the many subcultures. Today's moral question in Italy is the result of these various intertwined factors.

The place par excellence where it manifests itself is precisely the school.

The present work aimed to investigate the ways in which preadolescents today receive a moral education at school in a city, such as Messina, which, due to its characteristics - of being a southern city; of belonging to a region that has always acted a moral sense contrasting to the national one; of being a port open to migratory landings; of having activated policies of multicultural welcome and inclusion; of registering in its social composition the presence of numerous subcultures - lends itself well to representing the complex of moral issues previously exposed.

## *2. Field Research*

In order to carry out a verification about the ways through which the schools respond to the emergency of moral education, given that, at present, Italian schools do not provide any particular interventions on this matter within their educational curricula. from October 2021 to September 2022 was developed a survey within the lower secondary schools in Messina.

The survey was based on four main phases that characterize the empirical approach: verification of pedagogical literature concerning moral education in schools; fine tuning of a research tool; a selection of a representative sample from both teachers

and headmasters/headmistresses of lower secondary schools in Messina who were interviewed; analysis and reflection of findings.

### 2.1. Theoretical verification

An initial analysis of pedagogical literature showed how at a national level there is no significant interest in moral education while, at an international level, it is considered incredibly remarkable<sup>3</sup>.

For the purposes of our survey, that focus on school, a very remarkable aspect deals with the investigation on teachers' ethical competences. At present, the investigation has not led to any significant findings especially in Italy where no large-scale empirical investigation has been conducted so far, except if we consider the survey carried out by Elio Damiano led in the wake of international investigations about teachers' moral beliefs on school practices<sup>4</sup>.

Another important issue the international research in the school field investigated was about curricular research in regard to moral education. Two paradigms can be distinguished in this field. The first one is constructed on Kohlberg's theory<sup>5</sup> who developed a curriculum for the care of ethical judgment. This paradigm, criticized for

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<sup>3</sup> Theoretical studies on the topic of moral education can be divided into studies that outline previously established ethical systems (Cfr. W. BREZINKA, *Educazione e pedagogia in tempi di cambiamento culturale*, trad. it., Milano, Vita e Pensiero, 2003; R. BARROW, *An introduction to Moral Philosophy and Moral Education*, New York, Routledge, 2007) and those that question moral issues (Cfr. W. KILPATRICK, *Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong: Moral Literacy and the Case for Character Education*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1992; C. WRINGE, *Moral education. Beyond the teaching of write and wrong*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2006). Research carried out by the Association for Moral Education, the European Commission, by the Journal of Moral Education and the experimental investigations aimed at overcoming the 'ideological rhetoric' related to moral education are extremely relevant (Cfr. L. NUCCI, T. KRETTENAUER, D. NARVAEZ, *Handbook of Moral Character Education*, New York, Routledge, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. E. DAMIANO, *L'insegnante etico. Saggio sull'insegnamento come dimensione morale*, Assisi, Cittadella, 2007; E. CAMPBELL, *The Ethical Teacher*, Philadelphia, Open University Press, 2003; D. T. HANSEN, *The call to teach*, New York, Teachers College press, 1995; D.T. HANSEN, *Exploring the moral hearts of teaching. Towards a teacher's creed*, New York, Teachers College press, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. L. KOHLBERG, *The Philosophy of Moral Development*, San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1981.

its rationalistic framework, was contrasted with moral education based on social-affective relationships, responding to contextualized ethics aimed at caring for others<sup>6</sup>.

The second paradigm, based on the theory of multiple intelligences hypothesizes a moral intelligence<sup>7</sup> that develops with the acquisition of moral habits through the exposure to behavioural patterns and states to moral reflection as a further formative phase. Finally, a relevant aspect of these studies concerns the patterns and good practices to train teachers in ethical competences. In this regard, it is crucial to focus on research that interpretes the moral experience in terms of meaning, making and reflectiveness and assign the task of creating a distance from the internalized norms and a critical elaboration of one's own value system to education<sup>8</sup>.

Recently, all these issues have been discussed in Italy, especially at the University of Parma and Urbino.

## *2.2. The empirical research*

On the basis of the studies conducted, it was possible to create a tool in order to develop the empirical research, an open-ended questionnaire based on three main goals: teachers' perception of the moral issue; the projects developed at school on the issue; the improvement suggestions.

The field research was carried out in approximately 4 months and concerned all the lower secondary schools of Messina detected by the state education department, even if, only 12 out of 18 of the schools accepted participate in the study.

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<sup>6</sup> Cfr. G. GILLIGAN, *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. H. GARDNER, *Five minds for the future*, Boston, Harvard Business School Press, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. J. S. BRUNER, *The Culture of Education*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1996; J. S. BRUNER, *La fabbrica delle storie*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2002; M. COLOMBO, *Riflessività e creatività nelle professioni educative*, Milano, Vita e Pensiero, 2005.

The first contact with schools was realized with the relative heads who showed great enthusiasm in the project and revealed the necessity to implement focused interventions for teachers in order to deal with moral education in a professional, aware and focused way.

The topic in question is considered to be a valid opportunity to tackle the challenges of today and the moral and practical emergencies that concern everyone (not only pre-teens) who live, in Bauman's own words, in "liquid modernity" and come across ever more dangerous challenges for their age.

The second contact with schools was carried out with the representative headmasters involved in projects about the issue of moral education.

Thanks to these meetings, it was possible to distribute a questionnaire realized and build a map of those educational activities developed at school, that have a relevance of their moral learning.

### *3. Analysis and comment of outcomes*

The teachers who participated in the survey were asked to answer to three open-ended questions that represented the opportunity to create a dialogue about their own perception of moral education and of their own working experience.

Details on the outcomes of the interviews followed.

#### *3.1. First issue*

*Have you ever dealt with moral education? Have you ever had the impression that you needed to address the subject of moral education within your own profession? If yes, how did you do so?*

All the teachers who were interviewed answered "yes" to these first group of questions and this means that that they had already dealt with this issue and felt it



was necessary apply it in their way of teaching. Rather, they were able to see that this type of moral teaching could be imparted in a transversal way through disciplinary fields that are part of the curriculum and, in general, through all the activities that the school propose to the students. During the lessons each moment is the right one to pass on moral values to students.

More in detail, all the teachers declared that in their opinion there is a connection between moral and civic education.

As we know, on 5th of September, 2019 the law that restored the introduction of civic education teaching in schools at all levels of education was officially passed. This subject is now taught for 33 hours within a school year.

Civic education contributes to form active and responsible citizens and foster a full and conscious participation in civic, cultural and social life of the community complying with the rules, rights and obligations. Civic education also promotes the knowledge of both the Italian constitution and the institution of the European Union within schools in order to share and promote the principles of legality, active and digital citizenship, environmental sustainability and the right to health and wellness of people<sup>9</sup>.

If the goal of civic education is to form responsible and socially active citizens who are also aware of the basic principles of civil cohabitation, the goal of moral education should be to provide to students the opportunity to assess, from time to time, in their own life experience, what is right and what is not. And, it can be carried out through opportunities to debate and confrontation.

Thus, the outcome was that all teachers deal with moral education every day, not necessarily through specific activities, but rather than the discussions that daily concern this issue.

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<sup>9</sup> F. RUTIGLIANO, in “*Educazione civica: 33 ore sono poche per affrontare tutte le aree tematiche indicate nella Legge*” <https://www.orizzontescuola.it/educazione-civica-30-ore-sono-poche-per-affrontare-tutte-le-aree-tematiche-indicate-nella-legge/>» (access date: May 2023).

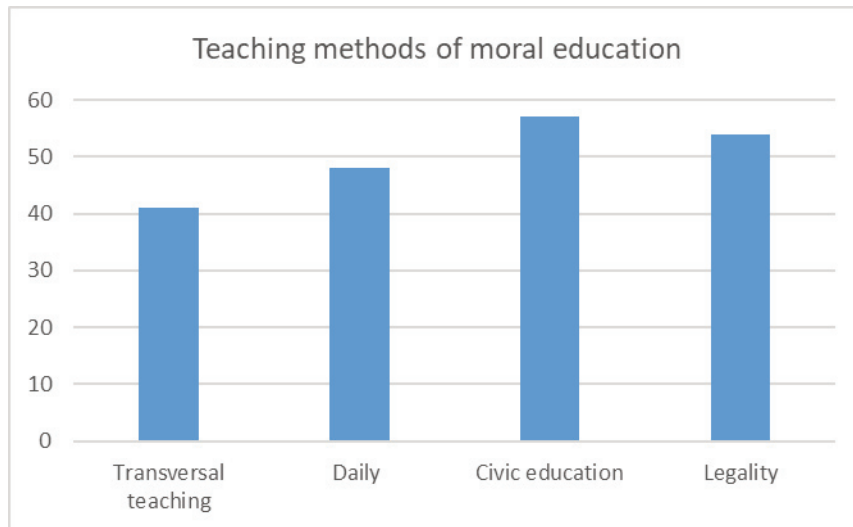


Fig. 1. Graphical representation of the main teaching methods of moral education.

As shown in the above-mentioned statistic graphic, the majority of teachers consider civic education as the best subject they can use to pass down moral values, rather than projects that deal with legality.

Moral education is essential for the student's growth and it is therefore implemented across the board through all subjects and put into practice daily both by the activities teachers propose and the projects developed in order to respond to several educational problems, as shown from the answers provided:

*T1<sup>10</sup>: We can say that we face the issue of moral education on a daily basis, even though we don't openly say "today we're going to talk about morality", but during our lessons and in any educational field, morality is our bread and butter.*

*T2: 280 school days...there is always a good reason to talk about health, legality, peace and honesty.*

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<sup>10</sup> Fragments taken from interviews with teachers who will be called T1, T2....

*T3: But our goal is to plant a seed and then see how the plant grows! Also, because the youngsters will be part of our future society, someone will become an engineer, another a baker, and another an employee, so we will find these former children completely, mentally lost, so, it will be a defeat both for us and the school! Instead, we want to have little victories every, single day.*

*T4: Moral education is implicit, it is not only a subject to teach. Or maybe it should be like this, a sort of metacognition, a quite complex issue.*

*As far as morality is concerned, we deal with it transversally, or rather we teach children to respect rules, to socially respect each other, to not consider other people as “objects”, but rather as human beings. We transversely refer whether to various philosopher, always in a simplistic manner, or to philosophical thoughts, such as universal descriptivism, making it possible to understand how human beings formulate moral judgments through which they govern their behavior. We also perform a straightforward role reversal “if I were in your shoes...”, in order to make students understand the moral issue in a correct way.*

*T6: When we talk about moral education, we refer to the formation of citizens.*

### 3.2. Second Issue

*Are there specific interventions within the educational curricula or projects aimed at developing this topic?*

The teachers interviewed responded that there are projects and activities linked to pupils' moral education and can be summarized as follows:

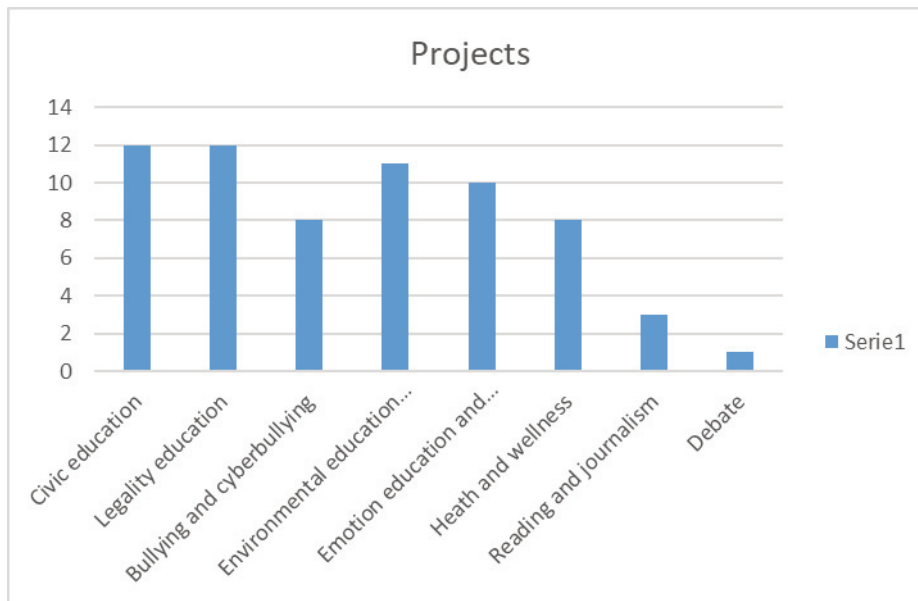


Fig. 2. Graphical representation of school projects on the topic of moral education.

- *Civic Education*

All the teachers interviewed associate moral education with civic education. All the activities planned for the formation of a good citizen and the respect of other people are part of moral and ethical values.

T1: In this school, the educational part for us, matters much more than the didactic part, which, with all due respect, is certainly important, but as I always say: man first! First form the man in all his facets and then the culture.

- *Educating on legality*

All the projects on legality are closely related to civic education. All the teachers interviewed report a close cooperation with law enforcement agencies, especially the postal and traffic police.

- *Bullying and Cyberbullying*

In each school, projects aimed at raising awareness about issues like bullying and cyberbullying have been developed, with a particular focus about how to tackle dangers on the web and the legal consequences one can run into in case of offense.

Bullying incidents in schools appear to be increasing in both sexes and more specifically, during the interviews, teachers reported the increasing growth of female bullying. They underlined that this phenomenon is quite recent.

With the passing of time the ways in which bullying is carried out have changed. The bully no longer attacks their victim physically and verbally, but targets the intimate and moral sphere in an infamous and insidious way.

Cyberbullying is one of the most recent scourges of this society, with the perpetrators acting out at an increasingly young age due to the inordinate and unregulated use of mobile phones.

Teachers complain about the poor cooperation of families summoned for bullying incidents involving their children. Parents mostly tend to downplay such incidents without realizing the harm they cause the victims.

In some schools, a meeting with the parents of both the victim and the bully(s) was considered a real success. Only after the parents understood the frustration and unhappiness caused by their child to his/her schoolmate, they were able to reconsider their positions on the matter. This proves that the dialogue and meeting implemented by the school can have an evident positive effect on the school community.

In one of the schools where the interview took place, after the creation of fake profiles used to denigrate fellow students, serious measures were taken, including the suspension of the bully. The writer of this article was told that the boy's mother took position against that disciplinary measure, so the school decided to organise online meetings with the postal police to make parents aware of the issue.

Following this and other serious bullying incidents, the headmaster, in collaboration with some teachers and the bullying contact person, invited the boys to read Teresa Manes' book entitled 'Andrea Wears Pink Trousers'. The author of the

book is the mother of a 15-year-old boy who committed suicide 10 years ago after being heavily insulted by a group of classmates who said he was gay because he used to paint his nails and wear pink pants. The bullying contact person organized an in-person meeting between the lady and the students, giving parents the opportunity to participate online in the meeting, as due to covid requirements it was not possible for everyone to participate in-person. A deep emotion emerged from this experience among all those present. The teacher believed that the meeting was particularly effective because it acted on the emotional sphere of the youngsters and their families.

*T2: "The lady recounted with incredible heartbreak the effects of words that youngsters say without realizing how they can devastate a person. I think it appealed to the children much more than the postal police who refer to bullying "as a crime" but with a more technical approach, instead this is very empathetic approach, very touching.... Probably having acted on the youngsters' emotions it had a stronger impact on them."*

- *Environmental education and land protection*

Another project implemented by most of the schools surveyed deals with environmental education, which is closely related to moral sense, given that basic principles of civil coexistence are illustrated during these activities.

The students really enjoyed and appreciated these activities because they were directly involved in tangible activities and not just theoretical ones, such as gardening, respecting disabled parking spaces and taking care of the school environment.

In many schools, pupils carry out activities such as cleaning the schoolyard and others related to the care of their surroundings, which leads them, according to teachers, to have a sense of responsibility even outside the school environment.

They learn, for example, that it is wrong to throw paper or garbage on the ground, but not theoretically, that is, merely because they are told so, but, instead because they experience it themselves.

As a teacher told:

*T4: The pupils have cleaned up the yard, planted flowers and regularly take care of them, and I notice that if they see someone walk by in the areas surrounding the yard and throw something on the ground, they tell them it's wrong and are disappointed because they understand that their work and sacrifice can be easily destroyed by a person who does not respect the environment...this is what our work is really all about...getting what is right and what is wrong into their minds, but not in words, in deeds!*

- *Educating on emotions and affectivity*

Other projects that teachers link closely to moral education concern the emotional sphere and affectivity.

It is believed, in fact, that sensitive topics should be dealt with by passing through their emotional sphere, because it is the only way one can be incisive, otherwise theoretical discourses turn out to be ineffective.

The teachers interviewed fight for the implementation of projects and activities aimed at raising awareness among pupils. We increasingly witness scenes of indifference towards victims of violence. Nowadays, those who witness an episode of violence tend, for the most part, not to intervene on behalf of the victim, but rather film the scene with their cell phones, and post it online. What is the reason for this coldness, lack of empathy and concern toward the other human beings? The teachers interviewed wondered why too and affirmed that it was due to the lack of valid educational models.

According to their point of view, we live in the society of appearance, a society in which human beings are increasingly self-centered and in which importance is given

more to appearing than to being. Today's society is experiencing a crisis from all points of view. There is an increasing sense of distrust on institutions.

The family has changed; we are witnessing the formation of reconstructed families, mothers with children from different partners, and an increasing number of separations and divorces. This loss of stability, which was once the strong point of families, now generates disorientation in parents that is inevitably passed on to their children. Don't forget that preteens go through a very delicate phase of their existence, full of physical and mental changes and, not finding stable reference points leads them to a situation of fragility and bewilderment.

Kids today own everything in a material sense. Parents buy them all kinds of technological means, haute couture, mobile phones and much more, but they are often "poor" in moral values. Parents who provide everything in the material sense are the same ones who are incapable of fulfilling the parental task of protecting and accompanying their children in their growth. They are increasingly distracted and hurried parents who consider it is a waste of time to devote themselves morally to their children. So one of the reasons why young people fail to be empathetic is the lack of psychological and practical support from families.

Another reason is the development of technology that is increasingly at our fingertips. Many children under the age of 9 own a mobile phone, and most parents do not monitor their use of it. It is a powerful weapon, given to those who are not yet mature enough to be able to encode its contents.

Nowadays youngsters are increasingly used to witnessing incidents of violence on the web, through video games, YouTube movies and live entangled in a virtual reality that makes it difficult for them to discern reality from fiction.

Almost all of the teachers interviewed expressed their displeasure at seeing the situation worsened by the Covid lockdown. If, on the one hand powerful technological tools have made it possible to escape, albeit virtually, from the loneliness of one's home, on the other they have only increased the sense of frustration and introversion by limiting contact with other human beings, so much that it made us forget the



feeling of wellness we get from being with each other in presence. This, according to teachers, is probably also one of the causes of the indifference and lack of empathy that youngsters have when witnessing incidents of violence. Another cause can be attributed to adults who are no longer an example for their children. We only have to look around to see that parents themselves are subjugated by mobile phone. They are the first to film or take a picture of unpleasant incidents where action should be taken, and this deprives them of the sense of humanity that should underlie our being. Teenagers, therefore, as they are growing up, think it is an example to comply with and so that it is normal to post videos online rather than help people who are in difficulty. Few parents, in fact, deal with these issues together with their children, taking time to explain what is right and what is wrong, so often school and family have divergent thoughts. There is a clash of values that very rarely finds resolution in dialogue and confrontation. Rather, we should join forces for the youngsters' sake.

Another issue hindering the educational process is the increasing presence of parents who are very young, according to public records, and very often too immature to hold parental responsibility, which, often, results in a highly non-educational friendly relationship. Too often, indeed, parents behave like friends with their children, causing the correct and healthy relationship, that should be established between them, to cease. We are increasingly witnessing parents fighting with each other and using their children as a tool for revenge, and what teachers find in children is an abundant sense of loneliness and anxiety. . Teenagers, therefore, as they are growing up, think it is an example to comply with and so that it is normal to post videos online rather than help people who are in difficulty. Few parents, in fact, deal with these issues together with their children, taking time to explain what is right and what is wrong, so often school and family have divergent thoughts. There is a clash of values that very rarely finds resolution in dialogue and confrontation. Rather, we should join forces for the youngsters' sake.

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- *Health and wellness*

Eight out of twelve schools deal with health and wellness through targeted projects in collaboration with Local Health Units (ASP) and other territorial agencies for the promotion of correct eating habits and the pursuit of correct behavioral styles. This category also includes sex education and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases.

- *Educating through reading and journalism*

Interviews revealed that one of the most underestimated activities is "the reading project," which is active in almost all schools but not always reported by teachers as pertaining to moral education.

Teachers report that by reworking, discussing, and comparing ideas about targeted novels or texts, pupils are able to develop their critical thinking skills on well-defined moral issues.

As a result, this creates the opportunity of an "internal moral change" in them, that makes them aware of the right or wrong actions that take place even outside the school environment.

As underlined by a teacher:

*T1: We also have to capitalize these children because they will be the ones we will meet in the future, maybe in an office, a court, a store, or as a headmaster or a mechanic, I don't*

*know, we don't know, maybe a baker ... So having made this premise, it's good for them to learn right away that rules are put into practice not only at school.*

Several schools collaborate with the *Gazzetta del Sud* to produce an insert, called *Noi Magazine*, in which students are the protagonists of articles written by themselves, on current issues concerning education and other hotly debated topics. According to teachers, this mode of expression through writing journalistic articles provides an opportunity to give a voice to pupils' emotions and ideas, empowering them and making them feel important and proud. In other words, by entrusting them with the responsibility of reflecting and putting their thoughts into writing, they manage to come up with appropriate and intelligent content, moreover, written in a language that can be easily understood by young people and which serves to stimulate creativity and critical thinking in those who read them as well.

- Debate

Only one school reported dealing with moral education not only through civic education, but also through a new tool that has had tremendous success among students: debate. This is a new methodology, belonging to and widely practiced by the Anglo-Saxon world, consisting of a rhetorical dispute between two teams around a "moral" nature issue in which two teams have to argue the pros and cons, defending supporting positions and refuting opposing arguments in a real contest. The main goal of this project is to accustom pupils to support their opinions or theses on the basis of well-founded arguments and reasoning based in turn on data, statistics, reliable information and accredited opinions.

The project also aims to develop a critical and self-critical sense, active listening skills and those skills and competencies known as "life skills", as they are aimed at promoting the ability to dialogue with others in an open and peaceful manner, as well as public speaking.

A teacher declared that:

*T7: These are issues that lead us to question why things are done, that is, the issues are almost always moral! And they range from the silliest – which may be, for example, is it right to assign summer homework and ruin our vacation? It may sound frivolous, however, what are we talking about? About what is right and what is wrong! – to more serious, more important issues, like for example, the death penalty, pros and cons.*

All this supports the thesis that youngsters, through this new educational practice are able to activate themselves, using healthy competition in order to achieve multiple and important educational goals:

- Activate a sense of personal empowerment and also respect towards the team to which one belongs, thus the will to do well;
- Documenting oneself appropriately on the topic, in order to be able to debate and defend one's position;
- Overcome the sense of embarrassment caused by the need to speak in front of an audience;
- Develop a sense of belonging (to one's team and, in a broader sense, to one's school);
- Reflect on moral issues, developing a critical sense.

### *3.3. Third issue*

*How, in your perspective, can a moral education training intervention be implemented within your school?*

Teachers, by and large, report a certain degree of satisfaction with the activities carried out so far on the subject of moral education, albeit named differently. Despite this, they say they are interested in conducting training interventions on this topic, as long as these propose practical activities that can be used by the children in their lives, in a practical way and not just theoretically.

The most remarkable aspects pointed out by those interviewed are reported as follows:

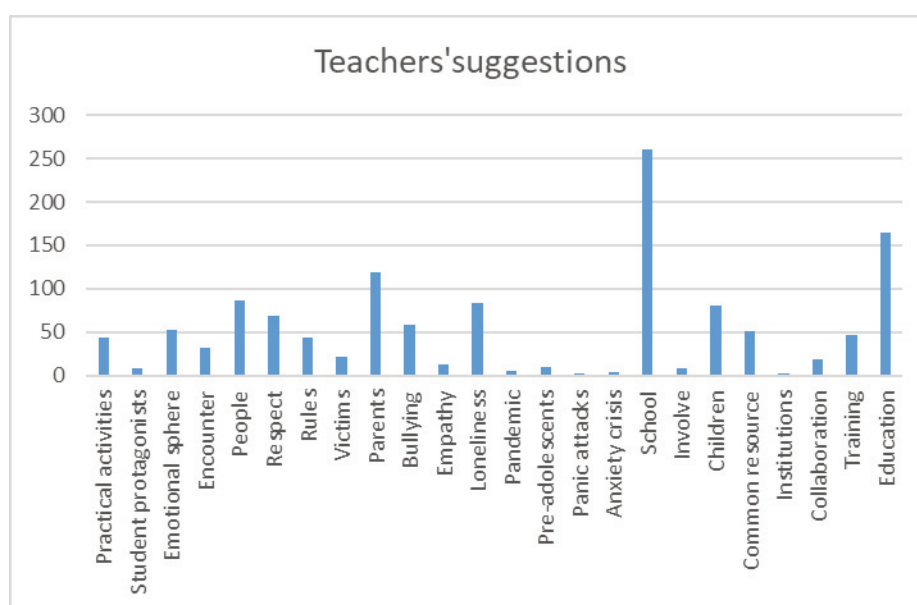


Fig. 3. Graphic representation of teachers' proposals on how to pursue moral education.

Indeed, teachers report that it is very hard for them to attend so many training courses, that most often, in their opinion, are useless on a practical level. Teachers declared that, in order to thrill students of that age, it is necessary, in their opinion, involve them personally. Only to make them protagonists, it is possible to be efficient.

The activities that mainly affect the youngsters are those related to their emotional sphere. In fact, it has been ascertained that meeting people (victims of violence, parents of victims of bullying, foreign parents with different cultures and ways of life, but also practical activities such as gardening and taking care of one's school environment), helps them to develop a sense of empathy that has unfortunately been

lost. The pandemic, moreover, has amplified the already existing phenomena, forcing us to deal with new issues.

The proposal of many teachers is to implement projects related to the emotional sphere of pupils and families, in synergy with the school. Involving parents in activities that bring them closer to their children's emotionality seems to be a priority.

There is also a need to restore confidence in the educational institution. The school has been ousted from the role it played in earlier times; parents perceive schools as "parking lots" in which they can leave their children.

Indeed, everyone agrees that we should restore the trust that families once placed in institutions and forge a true collaborative pact between parents and teachers for their children's sake, who are a common resource.

THE MORAL CONTEXTS OF MEDIATION  
WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF YOUTH.  
ON THE EXAMPLE OF POLAND

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SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. – 2. Mediation in juvenile matters. – 3. Mediation in schools. – 4. Academic mediation. – 5. Values of youth mediation. – 6. Conclusions.

*1. Introduction*

Mediation is approached from different perspectives. Most often, its legal dimension is shown. Indeed, it is difficult to talk about it without referring to normative acts in a given country. For this reason, this article will focus on the moral context of mediation with the participation of young people, based on the provisions of Polish law. It was decided to familiarise the readers with the legal possibilities of young people's participation in mediation in juvenile cases, school mediation and academic mediation, and then to consider the ethical aspects of mediation and its educational dimension.

Regardless of the manner in which the mediation is conducted, of the people involved, each mediator is obliged to follow the golden rules of mediation that increase the likelihood of achieving a satisfactory solution for all concerned. In turn, mediation participants should voluntarily enter the mediation and keep any information gained

to themselves. This means that adherence to these principles is a fundamental ethical requirement for conducting any mediation. The most important principles have been collected in one document - the Code of Ethics for Polish Mediators, prepared by the Social Council for Alternative Methods of Resolving Conflicts and Disputes (the Council) under the Minister of Justice in May 2008<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of developing the document was to maintain the highest ethical standards for mediators, to inspire confidence in mediation among Poles, and to set out some rules for mediating in difficult situations (the function of the handbook). It is based on the ethical values of the mediation profession.

The Council has set out 12 key principles. According to them, a mediator is obliged to conduct mediation proceedings taking into account the autonomy and independence of the participants, their interests and needs, according to the principles of voluntariness, confidentiality and impartiality.

He or she should ensure that they are equipped with knowledge of the nature of mediation, how it takes place, the role of the mediator and the terms of the agreement, but also his or her professionalism, which implies the need to constantly improve his or her competence.

He or she should consciously agree to participate in the mediation, considering his or her skills sufficient for a satisfactory conclusion of the case, avoiding conflicts of interest with the participants.

He or she should provide them with reliable information on the costs associated with the mediation procedure, which is a single remuneration (he or she must not derive additional benefits).

Young people, called minors in Poland, do not have legal capacity, which does not mean that they cannot be participants in mediation: in juvenile, school and academic cases. Therefore, these types of mediation are focused on in the following part of the article, the aim of which is to show the moral aspects of these mediations.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.pl/web/sprawiedliwosc/dokumenty-i-deklaracja-o-stosowaniu-mediacji> (access date: 13.08.2023).



## *2. Mediation in juvenile matters*

Until the first half of last year, mediation in juvenile matters was regulated by the Act on Proceedings in Juvenile Matters<sup>2</sup> of 1982, in which the first provisions on the possibility for minors to participate in mediation were introduced in 2000. At present, in Polish law, a juvenile is a person who is demoralised between the ages of 10 and 18, who has committed a criminal act after the age of 13 but before the age of 17, and a person in respect of whom educational, therapeutic or corrective measures have been applied, but no longer than until the age of 21<sup>3</sup>.

In the Act of 9 June 2022 on the Support and Rehabilitation of Juveniles, one of the articles is dedicated to mediation proceedings<sup>4</sup>. According to this legislation, it is the family court that can refer the juvenile and the victim to mediation, either on their initiative or with their consent. Their voluntary consent is taken by the family court or the mediator. It is preceded by an explanation to the minor and the victim of what mediation is and what principles it follows, as well as the right to withdraw from the proceedings without giving any reason. This means that they enter into mediation in an informed manner, equipped with the necessary knowledge, although, in view of the age of the minor, the meetings are attended by his or her parents or the actual legal guardian, as well as by the legal representative of the victim or the person in whose custody the victim has been placed.

Customarily and legally, it is the minor who undertakes to compensate for the harm suffered or to repair the damage, although the conclusion of a settlement by the minor requires the consent of his or her legal representative. This is in line with the principle of the child's welfare, which is paramount in Polish family and guardianship law.

The minor assumes responsibility for the reprehensible behaviour and learns to bear the consequences for his/her behaviour, which is the ultimate (educational) effect of mediation. However, it is possible that the minor's legal guardian makes a certain

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<sup>2</sup> Journal of Laws of 1982 No. 35, item 228.

<sup>3</sup> Journal of Laws of 2022.0.1700, Art. 1. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Journal of Laws of 2022.0.1700, Art. 57.

commitment in the settlement agreement, e.g. he or she would like to hand over money to the wronged party, and the minor cannot do so due to his or her age. From an educational point of view, this is safe and appropriate insofar as it does not abolish the juvenile's sense of responsibility for the harm or damage caused.

The duration of mediation is a maximum of six weeks, which seems fair from the point of view of its effectiveness. Too short time would often make it impossible to complete the mediation, if only because of independent factors such as the illness of the mediation participant. The longer time, on the other hand, could demotivate them to actively seek a satisfactory solution to the conflict.

In order to carry out the mediation procedure effectively, the mediator shall acquaint himself with the necessary documents. However, he or she does not have access to materials to which the obligation of secrecy of classified information or professional or functional secrecy extends, related to the minor's state of health, opinions about him or her and criminal record data.

Such a solution is, on the one hand, understandable in view of the confidentiality of relevant data, however the intermediary is deprived of important information from the point of view of the effectiveness of the mediation. One question is whether it is ethical not to have information that the mediation participant is dangerous, with serious mental disorders, with psychopathic personality, etc.?

The outcome of the mediation proceedings is relevant to the outcome of the trial, as the court, when deciding the case, takes into account the effects of the mediation contained in the reached settlement agreement.

From a pedagogical perspective, juvenile mediation is an opportunity for the juvenile to take corrective action, an initiatory stage of readiness to change behaviour, through an understanding of the violated rights of the victim, a process of empathising with and taking responsibility for the victim, and the restoration of a sense of justice in the mediation participants.

### *3. Mediation in schools*

Until recently, the conduct of mediation in schools was not regulated in any way in Poland.

Most often, school principals coped in such a way that they added provisions to the prevention and education programme allowing mediation meetings to be conducted at school with the participation of students, teachers and parents. This situation was changed by the Regulation of the Minister of National Education of 9 August 2017 on the principles of organising and providing psychological and pedagogical assistance in public kindergartens, schools and institutions<sup>5</sup>. The Ministry recognised that one of the tasks of an educator and psychologist in a kindergarten, school and institution is to "initiate and conduct mediation and intervention activities in crisis situations." This means, therefore, that from now on, in a "legal" way, schools can and even have to undertake various activities for the promotion and implementation of mediation with minors.

This does not mean, however, that mediation was not carried out in schools until 2017. Attempts were made to implement original programmes, although many of them did not end up being evaluated and their success rates are unknown. The first comprehensive school mediation programme described in the literature and evaluated was the programme "Mediation at School" by A. Lewicka-Zelent. Its implementation began in 2007 as a result of a reflection on the need to resolve conflicts on school premises - rather than in court as a juvenile case. It was implemented for two years throughout the school community. Many desirable changes were achieved from it.

At the end of the first phase of the programme to develop the social competences of the students who were preparing to be peer mediators, it was found that the young people rated their self-confidence, consistency in action, creativity, sense of justice, sense of responsibility, honesty, discretion higher. On the basis of standardised tests,

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<sup>5</sup> Journal of Laws of 2017, item 1591, Article 24, point 6.

results were obtained indicating an increase in pro-social attitudes, empathic imagination, and empathic response to other people's negative experiences<sup>6</sup>.

After the second stage of the programme aimed at developing the mediation competences of adolescents, statistically significant changes were observed in terms of: pro-social attitude, empathic response to negative experiences of other people, empathic response in difficult situations and mediation competences. Programme participants rated higher: their self-confidence, personal culture, honesty, openness, tolerance, responsibility, creativity, fairness, discretion, empathy<sup>7</sup>.

According to the teachers, after the programme, the climate in the schools where the programme was implemented did not improve radically, although the direction of the achieved changes is satisfactory. Probably due to the better situation before the programme (less school violence), more positive changes occurred in the rural school. Schoolchildren were much more likely to declare that they would give help to younger classmates who were bullied by older pupils. They declared reaching for constructive ways of solving peer conflicts, e.g. assertively. Middle school students from an urban school claimed to be more concerned with meeting other people's needs and seeking a solution to the conflict that satisfies all participants<sup>8</sup>.

The level of awareness and knowledge of the pupils surveyed about violence has changed. Pupils from the rural school significantly less often experienced school violence from others, while their peers from the city were significantly less likely to use it against members of the school community. They declared avoidance of emotional aggression in their relationship with peers. These changes were confirmed by teachers, who indicated a decrease in vandalism at school and an increased sense

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<sup>6</sup> Cfr. A. LEWICKA-ZELENT, *Analiza zasobów osobistych uczestników szkolnego warsztatu mediacyjnego* [Analysis of the personal resources of the participants in the school mediation workshop], Opole, Wyd. SCRIPTORIUM, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. Ivi.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. A. LEWICKA-ZELENT, *Diagnoza weryfikacyjna programu mediacyjnego. Klimat szkół gimnazjalnych* [Verification diagnosis of the mediation programme. Middle school climate], Opole, Wyd. SCRIPTORIUM, 2014.

of safety on the school premises. As a result, there was an increase in constructive cooperation between students and teachers.

Pupils admitted that after the mediation programme, teachers began to support them more strongly in solving problems, used effective teaching and learning methods more often and made clear teaching and learning requirements.

Regardless of the location of the school, urban or rural, the participants rated the “Mediation at School” programme highly. Pupils drew attention to the possibility of resolving conflicts without the involvement of adults. Teachers perceived a reduction in educational problems. Peer mediators appreciated the opportunity for their social and emotional development. Parents were satisfied because they had fewer parenting problems and their children were safer at school. The school climate improved due to a reduction in conflicts and, as a result, the school's prestige increased<sup>9</sup>.

Summarising from the example presented, very satisfactory results can be obtained from the implementation of the school mediation programme. Attention is drawn to the possibility of developing young people in the ethical sphere. Here, we are thinking, for example, of empathy and pro-social attitudes as a basis for helping behaviour<sup>10</sup>. In addition, it is rewarding to change the ways of resolving conflicts to more assertive ones. Importantly, these methods were implemented by the adolescents into a different environment than school. Indeed, they confirmed that they had changed their approach to conflicts with siblings and parents. The reduction of verbal, emotional aggression also serves to improve relationships at school, but also in peer groups. Such positive changes in the participants of the mediation programme give hope that they will be role models for their peers. Thus, the next stage of work with these students may be the project “Helpsters” implemented at the 9th High School in Lublin<sup>11</sup>, in which young people with socially desirable characteristics support their younger peers.

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<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Ivi.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. M. DAVIS, *Empathy. A Social Psychological Approach*, London, Routledge, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> <https://biskupiak.lublin.pl/uczen/helpsterzy/> (access date: 14.08.2023).

The Children's Ombudsman in November 2017 made public the “Standards for peer and school mediation in schools and other educational institutions”, which was the result of a collaboration between research and mediation practitioners. Although not a normative act, they provide some guidelines, recommendations for those who intend to use mediation in schools<sup>12</sup>.

The team, led by the Children's Ombudsman, recommends in terms of introducing mediation into schools:

- organising information meetings on mediation for school staff, pupils and their parents, with the participation of: court mediators, representatives of non-governmental organisations, mediation coordinators or school legal education coordinators appointed in common courts and staff of psychological and pedagogical counselling centres;

- obtaining the consent of: Headmaster, Pedagogical Council, Parents' Council and Student Council;

- introducing a provision in the school statutes on peer mediation;

- appointing a peer mediator supervisor(s) from among the teaching staff;

- conducting an information and promotion campaign on mediation;

- recruiting a peer mediator (trustworthy student, psychosocially mature, over 10 years of age) by the college community;

- conducting a min. 20-hour training for peer mediator candidates with the consent of the student and his/her parents and min. 40-hour training for school mediator candidates;

- establishing a mediation centre, club or circle in the school, whose participants (school and peer mediators) will develop the required mediation documentation templates and applicable rules;

- maintaining continuity in the education of successive groups of peer mediators.

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<sup>12</sup>[http://brpd.gov.pl/sites/default/files/standardy\\_mediacji\\_rowiesniczej\\_i\\_szkolnej\\_w\\_szkolach\\_0.pdf](http://brpd.gov.pl/sites/default/files/standardy_mediacji_rowiesniczej_i_szkolnej_w_szkolach_0.pdf) (access date: 14.08.2023).

The conduct of the mediation itself should follow certain rules. The mediation meeting gives a sense of security to the participants and therefore takes place in a special room in the school. It is organised outside of lessons, on the request of: pupils, tutors or teachers, an educator, a mediator, a psychologist, a parent or the principal for a peer mediator, a school mediator, a peer mediator supervisor or another school employee. The function of organiser, coordinator is performed by the peer mediators' supervisor and the person qualifying the cases for mediation and archiving the documentation. Peer mediation is conducted by two peer mediators. After its completion, they participate in a supervision meeting with the supervisor, which serves to develop their competences, strengthen their cooperation and resolve difficult situations<sup>13</sup>.

#### *4. Academic Mediation*

When we talk about youth mediation we very often bring our thinking down to schools, most often the final grades of primary and secondary schools, forgetting about academic youth. «In a metric sense, student youth are those between the ages of 19 and 27»<sup>14</sup>. This is a specific group of people who is in the period of early adulthood when social and professional roles are crystallised.

Paweł Czarnecki defines academic mediation as,

«a voluntary and confidential proceeding aimed at the elimination or alleviation of a dispute arising at a higher education institution between the aggrieved party and the perpetrator of a disciplinary tort with the participation of an impartial academic who,

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<sup>13</sup>[http://brpd.gov.pl/sites/default/files/standardy\\_mediacji\\_rowiesniczej\\_i\\_szkolnej\\_w\\_szkolach\\_0.pdf](http://brpd.gov.pl/sites/default/files/standardy_mediacji_rowiesniczej_i_szkolnej_w_szkolach_0.pdf) (access date: 14.08.2023).

<sup>14</sup> R. GÓRALSKA, *Studenci uniwersytetu końca XX wieku: raport z badań młodzieży Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika* [University students at the end of the twentieth century: a research report on young people at Nicolaus Copernicus University], UMK, Toruń 2003, p. 54.

using knowledge and conflict mitigation skills, seeks to reconcile the parties to this proceeding and for them to reach a reasonable settlement»<sup>15</sup>.

It, thus, indicates the characteristics of the proceedings, the qualities of the mediator and the purpose of mediation proceedings. In this sense, mediation serves to alleviate the conflict arising after a disciplinary offence has been committed but also defends ethical values in the university environment. In the opinion of the authors of the article, this is not an exhaustive definition as it does not take into account the nature of all cases in which academic mediation is applicable. These are not just disciplinary cases where it can be applied. Other proven areas are cases of inequality at universities and collegiate conflicts among students and in the relationship between students and academics. This means that university students can play different roles in the proceedings: the person aggrieved (disciplinary case against teachers), the person who initiated the conflict e.g. cultural, the student who is a participant in the disciplinary proceedings, the person or peer mediator in student conflicts. The spectrum of possibilities is large, nevertheless P. Czarnecki<sup>16</sup>, after analysing collected data from 17 Polish universities, concluded that mediation has not been adopted in disciplinary proceedings conducted against academic teachers.

Olga Sitarz and Dominika Bek<sup>17</sup> argue that academic mediation prepares young people for social life, as they will learn to come to an agreement with other people in an alternative way thanks to their ability to resolve conflicts constructively.

From the legal side, Polish universities have the possibility to conduct academic mediation, but undoubtedly this is the beginning of the road. Apart from the lack of detailed internal regulations and financial resources for this purpose, the biggest challenge is to change the awareness of members of the academic community, shaped

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<sup>15</sup> P. CZARNECKI, *Mediacja akademicka – konfrontacja teorii z uczelnianą praktyką* [Academic mediation - confronting theory with university practice], in «Forum Polityki Kryminalnej», 2(4), pp. 1-22, 2022, p. 7.

<sup>16</sup> Ivi, p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. D. BEK, O. SITARZ, *Mediacja w postępowaniu dyscyplinarnym prowadzonym wobec członków społeczności akademickiej* [Mediation in disciplinary proceedings against members of the academic community], in «Forum Prawnicze», 5(49), pp. 34-49, 2018.



on the attitudes of the older generation (parents), who choose a seemingly simpler solution - court. Therefore, from the point of view of the social responsibility of the academic community, it is necessary to broaden the knowledge of students and academics about mediation and to develop their skills of cooperation in the search for a solution to conflicts.

The Academic Mediation Centre (ACM), established in 2020 at the Faculty of Law and Administration of Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, can be considered a so-called good practice. Its aim is to popularise it and develop. Its members carry out a variety of activities for academic mediation: research, teaching, training and service (maintaining a university list of mediators and providing mediation services among the academic community)<sup>18</sup>.

### *5. Values of youth mediation*

An important value of youth mediation is that it is conducted in accordance with the principles of the Code of Ethics for Polish Mediators<sup>19</sup> and the Code of Ethics of the Peer Mediator (KEMR).

The Social Council for Alternative Methods of Resolving Conflicts and Disputes at the Minister of Justice, promulgating the Code of Ethics for Polish Mediators in May 2008, introduced a document that applies to all mediations, regardless of type. These are therefore principles overriding others, such as those enshrined in the KEMR, which aims to “promote ethical attitudes of the mediator, based on respect for the other person, taking into account the subjectivity of the parties to the conflict, building trust in the mediator and mediation as a method of resolving peer conflicts”. It is about maintaining high standards in the conduct of peer mediation. To this end,

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.umcs.pl/pl/nasze-cele,23125.htm> (access date: 14.08.2023).

<sup>19</sup> [https://pracodawcy.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/kodeks\\_etyczny\\_mediatorow.pdf](https://pracodawcy.pl/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/kodeks_etyczny_mediatorow.pdf) (access date: 15.08.2023).

the peer mediator has the necessary mediation competences, which he/she scales up. He or she makes all information public by his or her colleagues – participants in mediation – as long as he or she does not violate the principle of personal data protection. He or she ensures that he/she and his/her colleagues comply with the mediation rules. Decides to accept a mediation case only if he or she can ensure a high professionalism of his or her services. Respects the decisions of the mediation participants according to the principle of their well-being, and therefore accepts a subordinate role – that of a helper in the search for conflict resolution<sup>20</sup>.

The mediator, because of his function, is obliged to continuously improve his competence. This serves his intellectual, social, emotional and moral development. He or she acquires knowledge about people and the relationships between them and how to repair them. He becomes familiar with the ethical principles he is obliged to follow. Participates in conversations, negotiations, creates safe climate, recognises people's needs. Constantly exercises his/her assertive and empathetic skills<sup>21</sup>.

Peer mediators learn to perform their function properly. They have to distinguish it from other functions, for example, a "detective" who asks a lot of unnecessary questions, interrogates, looks for evidence. It is not uncommon for them to unnecessarily step into the role of a police officer - a directive person, interrogating, looking for evidence, or a judge judging, criticising, finding fault, punishing. He also learns to avoid the role of the rescuer, taking responsibility for solutions and taking away the independence of the mediation participants<sup>22</sup>

By definition, mediation is good and serves people, especially its participants. It enables them to take an active role in finding satisfactory solutions to the conflict, and in doing so increases their sense of self-efficacy and responsibility. It allows them to deal with the issue in a way that is consistent with their needs, in a quick and

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<sup>20</sup>[http://brpd.gov.pl/sites/default/files/standardy\\_mediacji\\_rowiesniczej\\_i\\_szkolnej\\_w\\_szkolach\\_0.pdf](http://brpd.gov.pl/sites/default/files/standardy_mediacji_rowiesniczej_i_szkolnej_w_szkolach_0.pdf) (access date: 15.08.2023).

<sup>21</sup>[http://brpd.gov.pl/sites/default/files/standardy\\_mediacji\\_rowiesniczej\\_i\\_szkolnej\\_w\\_szkolach\\_0.pdf](http://brpd.gov.pl/sites/default/files/standardy_mediacji_rowiesniczej_i_szkolnej_w_szkolach_0.pdf) (access date: 15.08.2023).

<sup>22</sup><https://archiwum-bip.men.gov.pl/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/04/niezbednik-mediatora.pdf> (access date: 14.08.2023).

inexpensive (or even cost-free) manner, to work off strong emotions, to reduce anxiety, to regain trust and social respect.

Indirectly, they can stop conflict and even improve relationships. This is extremely important when the participants in the conflict are close to each other, e.g. they study together in the same class, are relatives or neighbours, which implies the need to cooperate in the future<sup>23</sup>.

### 6. Conclusions

Summarising the discussion on the ethical aspects of mediation with young people, an attempt has been made to indicate the relationship between upbringing, prevention and mediation. This is because it is necessary to draw attention to their close interrelation and thus their application in the interactions undertaken with young people.

Upbringing can be defined very differently, but it can be considered to be the process of supporting the development of the child's moral, intellectual, physical and artistic qualities, the so-called resources<sup>24</sup>. It is purposeful, planned, deliberate and aims to achieve specific outcomes. Mediation, on the other hand, is a conversation between people in conflict aimed at satisfying the needs of the participants in the mediation, taking place in the presence of a mediator creating appropriate conditions for the mediation to take place<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup>[http://brpd.gov.pl/sites/default/files/standardy\\_mediacji\\_rowiesniczej\\_i\\_szkolnej\\_w\\_szkolach\\_0.pdf](http://brpd.gov.pl/sites/default/files/standardy_mediacji_rowiesniczej_i_szkolnej_w_szkolach_0.pdf) (access date: 15.08.2023).

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. N. SILLAMY, *Słownik psychologii* [Dictionary of psychology], Ustawa z dnia 26 października 1982 r. o postępowaniu w sprawach nieletnich z późn. zm. (Dz. U. 1982 Nr 35 poz. 228), Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Książnica, 1994.

<sup>25</sup> Cfr. A. LEWICKA-ZELENT, *Obniżanie poziomu przemocy i lęku młodzieży gimnazjalnej* [Reducing levels of violence and anxiety among junior high school students], Lublin, UMCS, 2012.

The features common for upbringing and mediation are:

- the presence of educational contact, although in a specific form (Education can be understood as a process of interaction between an educator and a role model. In mediation, the participants learn from each other, but also from a peer mediator who has been chosen from among the most trusted pupils of their peers and who is therefore a role model);

- similar essence of support (In upbringing it is the educator who supports, accompanies, whereas in mediation it is the mediator who helps to bring the conversation to a successful conclusion, i.e. to reach an agreement);

- the same far-reaching goal (Both upbringing and mediation foster the development of the human being, which is ultimately to be mature)<sup>26</sup>.

Zbigniew Gaś<sup>27</sup> points to the risks to the development of the psychological, social and spiritual spheres in young people. He boils down the risk factors in upbringing to: blurring of the boundaries between rights and duties, strengthening of egocentrism, preference for hedonistic values, failure to fulfil social roles. Appropriate educational interventions by educators and parents can block these. One effective way can be mediation. Through it, peer mediators learn to adequately perform the role of mediator with a sense of full responsibility. They develop their social competences, including helping others, understanding and empathy. Following Z. Gaś<sup>28</sup> that prevention is a comprehensive intervention, consisting in supporting the pupil in coping with factors blocking his or her development, eliminating them and strengthening protective factors, mediation can be regarded as an excellent preventive influence.

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<sup>26</sup> Z. GAŚ, *Psychoprofilaktyka. Procedury konstruowania programów wczesnej interwencji* [Psychoprophylaxis. Procedures for the design of early intervention programmes], Wydawnictwo Lublin, UMCS, 2000.

<sup>27</sup> Cfr. Ivi.

<sup>28</sup> Cfr. Z. GAŚ, *Tworzenie środowiska szkolnego sprzyjającego działaniom profilaktycznym* [Creating a school environment conducive to preventive action]. in A. MARGASIŃSKI, B. ZAJĘCKA (eds.), *Psychopatologia i psychoprofilaktyka. Przejawy narkomanii, alkoholizmu, przemocy, zaburzeń psychicznych w rodzinie i szkole oraz możliwości im przeciwdziałania* [Psychopathology and psychoprophylaxis. Manifestations of drug addiction, alcoholism, violence, mental disorders in the family and school and possibilities of counteracting them], Kraków, Oficyna Wydawnicza Impuls, 2000, pp. 441-444.

“LIBERI DI SCEGLIERE”:  
THE MORAL ALTERNATIVE FOR CHILDREN  
OF 'NDRAGHETA FAMILIES

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SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. – 2. Minors and ‘Ndrangheta inculturation. – 3. A legal and moral alternative proposal. – 4. The outcomes of “liberi di scegliere”.

*1. Introduction*

Growing in silence, today the 'Ndrangheta is one of the most feared criminal organisations, capable of chameleon-like metamorphosis that, in a feline and almost imperceptible manner, dominates everywhere, succeeding well in adapting to the new market requirements, without ever failing to respect its own characteristics, rules and values, such as silence and blood ties<sup>1</sup>.

And it is precisely by virtue of this anthropo-criminal device that the Calabrian mafia has been able to move undisturbed in the international panorama of illegality, today accumulating in its coffers a volume of money that is around 44 billion dollars a year, equal to 3.4% of Italy's GDP.

In other words, the 'Ndrangheta is among the richest, most aggressive and invasive companies, endowed with high infiltration power in the economy and institutions,

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. N. GRATTERI, A. NICASO, M. BORRELLI, *Il grande inganno. I falsi valoridella 'ndrangheta*, Cosenza, Pellegrini, 2008.

with branches in almost all regions of Italy and ramifications in Europe, Africa, Asia, America and Oceania.

The Calabrian mafia, in fact, displays an organisational phenomenology and criminal architecture different from other mafias. Its profile, outlined only recently, moves sinuously from San Luca to Duisburg: criminal molecules that splash, spread and reproduce in the world. A liquid mafia, which infiltrates everywhere, reproducing, in places far removed from those where it was born, the same ancient, elementary and effective organisational model.

In the manner of Al Qaeda, with a similar sprawling structure lacking strategic direction but characterised by a kind of organic intelligence, in tension between a remote, rural and archaic here and a globalised elsewhere, postmodern and technological elsewhere<sup>2</sup>.

The 'Ndrangheta is the favourite of drug producers<sup>3</sup>. It is, in fact, the most reliable of the mafias: it does not talk, nor does it repent. The familistic asphyxia that strangles collaborations makes it invulnerable to the permeability of judicial investigations<sup>4</sup>.

The main strength of the 'Ndrangheta is, in fact, the criminal exploitation of family ties: close ties of parenthood that crystallise in a rigid structure in which the members breathe, day after day, the elements of a widespread mafia culture, which grows and develops through affective and relational ties, which ensures an operational generational turnover and power over the territory.

## 2. Minors and 'Ndrangheta inculturation

It is on this dark background that we find the disturbing statistics of the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria which, in the last twenty years, has handled about 100

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<sup>2</sup> Cfr. F. FORGIONE, *'Ndrangheta. Boss luoghi e affari della mafia più potente al mondo*, Milano, Baldini Castoldi Dalai, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. P. ARLACCHI, *La mafia imprenditrice. Dalla Calabria al centro dell'inferno*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Cfr. A. BADOLATI, *I segreti dei boss*, Cosenza, Klipper Edizioni, 2005.

proceedings for mafia association and related offences (art. 416 bis criminal code, art. 74 D.P.R. 309/90, extortion, etc., offences under art. 51 bis ter of the Code of Criminal Procedure) and more than 50 proceedings for homicides and attempted homicides – some of which were also committed against law enforcement officers - committed by minors, many of whom - once they came of age – were subjected to the 41 bis penal order regime, were killed during family feuds or assumed the leadership of the "*ndrina*"<sup>5</sup> to which they belonged. Over the years, the Juvenile Court (J.C.) of Reggio Calabria has tried minors involved in kidnappings for the purpose of extortion in Aspromonte (early 1990s), minors used as nursemaids for fugitives, minors who - in an attempt to organise autonomous 'ndrine – did not hesitate to kill carabinieri or other law enforcement officers. In addition, the J.C. has tried minors who practised racketeering to local entrepreneurs using the family surname, on behalf of their parents confined in prison, and minors fully involved, sometimes with the role of killers, in local feuds. In this regard, one of the latest trials defined is the one called 'Fehida', involving several minors who were convicted for their involvement in the family feud of S. Luca, the one that led to the, unfortunately famous, massacre of Duisburg, which made this small Calabrian village of just three thousand inhabitants sadly famous throughout Europe.

The statistical data of the past, unfortunately, is not divorced from the present and, to date, the J.C. of Reggio Calabria finds itself judging the sons or brothers of those who were tried in the 90's and in the first years of the 2000's, all belonging to the historical factions of the territory (Piromalli, Pesce, Cordì, Alvaro, Strangio, Pelle, Bellocco).

This is the bitter confirmation that 'ndrangheta is inherited, families secure power in the territory through generational continuity.

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<sup>5</sup> It is the smallest organised crime cell belonging to the Calabrian 'Ndrangheta.

It is a phenomenon, that of ‘Ndrangheta minors, that is the transmission of deteriorating cultural values from father to son, which is endemic, sometimes submerged, and has been underestimated for too long<sup>6</sup>.

In fact, by specifically analysing the stories and psychological habitus of these young men, it was possible to realise how belonging to the ‘Ndrangheta represents in their life paths not a deviance, an error or a crisis, but rather a way of being that reaffirms rather a coherence with a criminal-family system that has provided a specific training and that, above all, has given satisfactory answers to their needs.

The ‘Ndrangheta exerts a great power of attraction over these adolescents, as it introduces them, without the effort and sacrifice of studying or respecting the rules, into a system of power, into a world capable of controlling the territory, using violence to manage their interests, exercising “their own justice”.

But behind the pride of belonging hides for them a much sadder and unconscious truth: the rigidity of the structure and the construction of a closed world governed by its own rules stifles the growing young person's need for freedom and expressiveness, preventing adolescent maturation and development.

The adolescent age, normally dedicated to the construction of a mature personal identity, thus seems to be denied to these youngsters. Identity for them is the place of a rigid coherence, of an absolute immutability, of a fixity of thought: dogmatic representations of a depressive culture that educates to the impossibility of changing, of constructing flexible thinking, of accepting differentiation without feeling threatened<sup>7</sup>. And so it turns out that the first victims of the mafia are precisely the boys of the mafia, called without appeal to make ranks, to make an army, to do without their youth, to do without their inner world, to be completely at the disposal of interests that do not concern them, without the uncertainty and encumbrance of emotions, fear, feelings.

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<sup>6</sup> R. DI BELLA speech during the ‘Noicontrolemafie’ event in Reggio Emilia, Italy.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. G. LO VERSO, *Il gruppo psicodinamico come strumento di lavoro. Un inquadramento a partire dai testi*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 1998.



The boys of the ‘Ndrangheta do not express any emotion, they are educated to control themselves “so as not to betray themselves”<sup>8</sup>. They have no choice but to carry their great and unconfessed suffering in secret. They are emotionally lonely boys, often without a father (many sides, in prison or killed in mafia ambushes) to stand by, to ask even trivial questions to. Their hunger for affectivity must be satisfied with cold, sacred and untouchable parental ties: their family, even though so present and invasive in guaranteeing certainties and rules, flaunts a profound ignorance of the inner life of minors, of their dreams and desires.

The ‘Ndrangheta adolescent experiences an inhibition of desire that leads him to close himself off from new information, new beliefs and new experiences, and to shy away from the 'risk' of contracting social relations outside his environment<sup>9</sup>. This consideration and the experience gained have led the juvenile justice operators in Reggio Calabria to reflect carefully, strengthening their conviction that the activities of the juvenile court should be differently oriented and that deteriorating mafia educational models should be censured, in cases where the correct psycho-physical development of minor children is jeopardised, in the same way as action is taken against other violent or abusive parents or those with alcoholism or drug addiction problems.

### *3.A Legal and Moral Alternative Proposal*

Therefore, going out of the box, in the last three years the Reggio Calabria Municipal Court has changed its jurisprudential orientation and intervened with several civil measures of forfeiture or limitation of parental responsibility (ex Article 330 et seq. of the Civil Code) or in administrative measures for minors with irregular conduct

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<sup>8</sup> Cfr. Istituto Centrale di Formazione di Messina, *I ragazzi e le mafie. Indagini sul fenomeno e prospettive di intervento*, Roma, Carocci, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. M. SCHERMI, *Crescere alle mafie. Per una decostruzione della pedagogia mafiosa*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2010.

(pursuant to Article 25 of Royal Decree-Law No. 1404 of 20 July 1934) and removal of the minors from the family nucleus, with entrusting to the competent Social Services, with the aim of interrupting this perverse spiral, in all those cases where a concrete prejudice is found.

For example:

- in cases of criminal indoctrination;
- in cases of involvement of minors in illegal family affairs, in the presence of offences symptomatic of a developing escalation;
- in cases of omission of control by the family or in risk situations - for the psycho-physical safety of minors – due to feuds between 'ndrine<sup>10</sup>.

Such measures – which, in the most serious cases, have entailed the temporary removal of the minors from the Region of Calabria and their placement in foster homes or in volunteer families – have the objective of providing the unfortunate boys of the 'ndrine with adequate protection for a regular psycho-physical growth and, at the same time, the possibility of experimenting cultural, psychological and social alternatives/horizons, as well as educational parameters different from those of the deterrent context of origin, functional to avoid their criminal structure or definitive criminal structure.

The purpose of these measures, therefore, is not the mere removal of these youngsters from the bosses, they do not have a sanctioning nature, because moving them is not enough, but to make them see that there is another way of life, in which it is not the name that leads you to choose for yourself, but your own conscience. In other words, these measures aim to introduce these young people - who come from asphyxiated backgrounds (often small towns in the provinces) - to a different world, in the hope of providing them with the knowledge they need to be able to choose their own destiny and break free from their parents' footsteps.

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<sup>10</sup> Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria 2015, Memorandum of Understanding for the implementation of the project "Liberi di Scegliere".

The will to choose alternative paths to those of the ‘Ndrangheta is not even taken into consideration: the alternative does not exist because one does not know it! If a boy comes from a small town like S. Luca, Platì, Bovalino, Africo and all his family members are steeped in mafia culture, there is no one who can show him the correct educational path<sup>11</sup>.

Therefore, once the order has been issued, the minors are housed in foster homes or, recently, also in families, where educators, psychologists and volunteers create – on the instructions of the Juvenile Court – individualised re-education paths, with the aim of providing a valid educational alternative to the mafia context from which they come, functional to avoid their definitive criminal structure.

This 'revolution' implemented by the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria had a particularly noteworthy media reaction, exposing it, at least initially, to easy criticism, sometimes prejudicial or instrumental. The jurisprudential novelty put in place by Judge Roberto Di Bella was harshly criticised by a part of the Italian press through mechanisms of simplification of the cases examined, so as to make the Juvenile Court appear as the great judge who had allowed himself to “deport” children just because they were born in ‘Ndrangheta families<sup>12</sup>.

Similarly, it was also said that the Judicial Authority and – more generally – the Public Institutions must not intervene within family contexts and censor educational models, even if they are imbued with the disvalues of criminal organisations; furthermore, many criticised the removal of children from Calabria, arguing that Calabrian civil society must develop the necessary antibodies to eradicate the ‘Ndranghetist virus: in other words, it was argued that the family, the school, the church, the social services and all the other agencies responsible for the education of minors can reverse the system even in Calabria and do not need the intervention of

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<sup>11</sup> R. DI BELLA, interview with Comitato Addiopizzo Messina Onlus, Messina, Italy, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. M. MANCINI, *Cresciuti a pane e ‘ndrangheta*, in “Narcomafie” Gennaio/Febbraio 2015, pp. 28-40. And M. MANCINI, *La ‘ndrangheta si eredita: spirali generazionali in una terra orfana*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2016.

the judicial authorities, which, on the contrary, could accentuate the gap between the institutions and citizens.

This is an argument that is correct in principle and suggestive, which is unfortunately clearly contradicted by the tragic reality of the facts and which sometimes conceals ignorance of Calabrian society or an underlying hypocrisy. In fact, the necessity of judicial intervention, in the cases of proven damage to the minor and not only because the family is mafia, as well as obligatory by law in the terms that will be clarified below (inasmuch as the State cannot allow children to be educated to become potential killers or, however, to subject them to a destiny of imprisonment or death), stems precisely from the observation of the scarce incidence on the Calabrian social fabric of the agencies and institutions mentioned above, which are not able to culturally counter – with sporadic exceptions - the influence of criminal organisations that systematically condition the normal course of political, economic, social, psychological and even religious relations, as some recent episodes that have risen to the headlines have shown<sup>13</sup>.

Criticism aside, civil interventions in ‘Ndrangheta minors are adopted in compliance with the relevant domestic and international legislation. Constitutional coverage is, first of all, ensured by Article 30 of the Italian Constitution<sup>14</sup> and also by Article 2<sup>15</sup> and 31, paragraph 2 of the Constitution<sup>16</sup>, according to which it is the precise duty of the State - and of its institutional branches - to protect childhood and youth, fostering the institutions necessary for that purpose, and to intervene to protect the physical and social integrity of minors, by means of interventions aimed at safeguarding real existential opportunities enabling effective integration (or reintegration) into the social fabric through the restoration of shared collective values.

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<sup>13</sup> R. DI BELLA speech during the Noicontrôlemafie event in Reggio Emilia, Italy.

<sup>14</sup> Constitution of Italy, *Art. 30*: “It is the duty and right of parents to maintain, instruct and educate their children”, but “in cases of parental incapacity, the law provides for their duties to be performed”

<sup>15</sup> Constitution of Italy, *Art. 2*, “The Republic recognises and guarantees the inviolable rights of man, both as an individual and in the social groups where his personality is developed, and requires the fulfilment of the mandatory duties of political, economic and social solidarity”

<sup>16</sup> Constitution of Italy, *Art. 31, paragraph 2*, “The Republic protects motherhood, childhood and youth, fostering the institutions necessary for that purpose”.

And also the international covenant legislation, including the convention stipulated in New York in 1989, ratified by Italy with Law no. 176 of 1991, which, among other things, stated: «in all decisions concerning children, within the jurisdiction of the courts, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a paramount consideration»<sup>17</sup>, which may entail «separation from his or her parents when they mistreat or neglect the child»<sup>18</sup>, whose 'upbringing must have as its aim respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and the principles enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations the national values of the country in which he or she lives and must be suitable for preparing the child to assume responsibility for life in a free society, in a spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance and equality<sup>19</sup>.

In summary, although international and national sources state in favour of the child's right to grow up and be educated in his or her own family, it is also true that they allow separation from parents - even if temporary - when "it is necessary in the child's best interests"<sup>20</sup>.

When this educational commitment of the parents is lacking, even more so if due to opposing value choices as is the case in 'Ndrangheta families, the State - and, therefore, the Judicial Authority - has an obligation to intervene by taking charge of the social and existential fate of these minors, in order to preserve them from the foreseeable consequences connected to the failure to respect shared values<sup>21</sup>.

However, it should be pointed out that the measures taken are for the protection of the children - and not against the “families” – are temporary and, in any case, cease to be effective when the children turn eighteen. Moreover, contacts are allowed and

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<sup>17</sup> Italian Law no. 176 of 1991, *Art. 3, paragraph 1*.

<sup>18</sup> Ivi, *Art. 9*.

<sup>19</sup> Ivi, *Art. 29*.

<sup>20</sup> (Cfr. *Art. 9, 29* Convention on the Rights of the Child; in this sense see General Comment No. 1, on the purpose of education, approved by the Committee on the Rights of the Child on 17.4.2001 during its 32nd session -doc CRC/GC/2001/1).

<sup>21</sup> R. DI BELLA, interview with Comitato Addiopizzo Messina Onlus, Messina, Italy, 2013.

alliances are sought with family members who decide to accept the re-educational pathway or show signs of resipiscence.

#### 4. *The outcomes of “liberi di scegliere”*

The first, partial, results of the measures issued between 2012 and 2016 are encouraging as, in the various cases treated, there have already been appreciable outcomes. The minors resumed their school attendance, which had been interrupted before, carried out socially useful activities and followed legality education courses organised by the operators of the juvenile services, sometimes in collaboration with other magistrates of the district, with representatives of the police force and with some volunteers (psychologists, educators, etc.) of associations committed to combating the deteriorating values of organised crime: in essence, the children treated have shown that they have potentialities compressed by the deleterious environment of origin.

The analysis of the treated cases revealed another fact that, perhaps, represents a small crack in the monolith of mafia families: that of the suffering of some mothers<sup>22</sup>. There are certainly women who try to indoctrinate their sons according to the mafia culture, but there are others who are tried by the suffering of long imprisonment of themselves or their sons, or by the deaths of relatives. Several mothers of the boys dealt with, after an initial, understandable phase of bitter opposition, no longer resisted, in the hope - unconfessed and unmentionable - of saving their sons from a fate of death or imprisonment.

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<sup>22</sup> On this particularly interesting aspect for the construction of a moral alternative that takes shape in the psychology of these women educated in the 'ndrangheta in order to promote change, a communication is spreading that involves documentaries and TV series. Some examples can be 'The good mothers', a series based on the novel by A. PERRY, *The Good Mothers: The True Story of the Women Who Took on the World's Most Powerful Mafia*, New York, William Morrow & Co, 2018, or the documentary by M. G. MAZZOLA, *Libere di Scegliere*, available in Italy on “Rai Play” Platform, (<https://www.raiplay.it/video/2023/12/Libere-di-scegliere---Tv7-01122023-9264108b-385c-4c6e-8ff0-75825721904a.html>).

In essence, the measures relieved them of the responsibility of making decisions - difficult and lacerating in the system in which they are embedded - for the protection of their children: thus, they accepted the re-educational paths planned in the minors' interest and the prescriptions imposed on them.

In one case, even, there was a clear conflict between the two parents – both detained for the crime under Article 416 bis of the penal code – with the mother who, contrary to the father, incites her younger daughter – involved in an extortion affair by adult relatives – to confess and accept the re-educational path with removal from Calabria and placement in a family of volunteers.

In conclusion, the jurisprudential line summarised above is no stinging very interesting – not only juridical – but above all psychological, cultural and social glimmers, as well as absolutely unexplored, on which in-depth reflections will have to be made. Through an operational protocol stipulated in 2013 with the Social Service Office for Minors of Messina, the Addiopizzo Messina Onlus Committee made itself available to take charge of and innovatively treat two cases of expulsion of minors outside the Region of Calabria, obtaining important results and outlining an operational model that it aims to repropose permanently. This experience has, above all, raised awareness of the need for a wide and stable intervention and support network with 'ndrangheta juveniles, in which the public institution combines and joins with the private social sector in an integrated intervention methodology to be made available for each juvenile subject to a measure.

To this end, the Juvenile Court of Reggio Calabria has recently submitted to the Juvenile Justice Department a project, evocatively entitled “Liberi di Scegliere” (Free to Choose), aimed precisely at ensuring an adequate support network for judicial measures, as well as concrete cultural, training, educational and work offers, with the involvement of the main voluntary associations engaged in the fight against the deteriorating values of organised crime.

A project and an approach that, given the complexity of the topic, has many facets, calls into question a plurality of situations and aims to place the individual story of

the child within the broader context in which it originates, taking into account the multiplicity of factors that converge in determining continuity or turning points in his or her future.

They will not be offered the traditional socio-educational project, the 'basic model' that is proposed to young people entering the Juvenile Justice circuit, but rather combined interventions at various levels and with the involvement of specialised and specially trained teams. A psycho-educational accompaniment that does not frontally attack the mafia identity and culture but promotes a critical review through the discovery of valid existential alternatives, enhances the minor's potentialities, favours the establishment of intimate personal relationships and privileges the offer of experiences and encounters with concrete facts. The support measures indicated will also be extended to parents, or other family figures, where their readiness for a positive alliance is recognised.

Moreover, the specificity of the project is characterised by the continuation of the intervention beyond the age of eighteen, providing an operational continuum that includes accompanying the deserving minor, who has now come of age, in the context to which he or she belongs or, better still, in a new one, also through work and vocational training paths, which make the new values proposed concrete and the possibility of realising a life project real.

It will not be forgotten, in fact, that belonging to the 'Ndrangheta often satisfies a series of needs that affect the quality of life of the boy and that a path of complete emancipation from that environment is not credible, therefore, if it is not accompanied by the offer of valid alternatives, also of an economic nature.

The private social organisation involved will therefore commit itself to providing work grants or, in any case, work opportunities - through the activation of any most useful collaboration with entities adhering to it and pertaining to the national productive sector - tending, at least for a three-year period, to the conquest of logistical (housing and territorial, if desired), social and training-work autonomy<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> R. DI BELLA speech during the 'Noicontrolemafie' event in Reggio Emilia, Italy.



A path, that of intervention with 'Ndrangheta minors, which is only at the beginning but which indicates that the road being taken may be the right one. That showing beauty, an alternative, another way is the only path that can be taken to make people understand that that life, the violence, the abuse, the fear of death, the fear of ambushes, of betrayal, the impossibility of trusting anyone is no life at all. And that there are many other viable paths: you have to show them<sup>24</sup>. The still evolving experiences of the cases under treatment indicate the value and power that this new measure brings, in which one can glimpse the will and the duty to offer even to these young people, who are militating in an organisation that is an enemy of the democratic state and its institutions, a convincing answer/proposal, that is, one that is capable of overcoming all the needs for growth that the mafias do not know how to respond to.

It is necessary for the child to be able to glimpse, behind the operator he or she meets, the presence of an institution and a State that he or she can trust and that is a reliable witness of a credible and convincing way of life and idea of civil coexistence.

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<sup>24</sup> Cfr. A. IANTOSCA, *Bambini a metà. I figli della 'Ndrangheta*, Roma, Perrone, 2015.



# DISGUST AND MORALITY IN CONTEMPORARY ART FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF AESTHETIC EDUCATION

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SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. – 2. Theorising Disgust in Humanities (Outline). – 3. Disgust in Art. – 4. Goals in Aesthetic Education – 5. Artworks, Disgust, and Moral Questions (Orlan). – 6. *Le Baiser de l'Artiste*. Female body, sexuality, and the provocative violation of boundaries (sanctity). 7. The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan. Female body or a woman who is her body. 8. Symposium de Performance. A report from the hidden realm. – 9. Discussion.

## *1. Introduction*

Disgust is a prevalent component within the classification of emotional behaviors observed in most mammals. At its core, disgust represents an aversive emotional experience closely linked to physiological responses aimed at expelling noxious substances from the upper digestive tract. This emotional state typically precipitates a behavioral inclination to avoid, eject, or distance oneself from the offensive stimulus, frequently accompanied by an intrinsic desire to cleanse, purify, or eliminate any residual contact with the offending entity<sup>1</sup>. Research has extensively investigated disgust as a prototypical basic emotion, uncovering its far-reaching implications for social behavior<sup>2</sup>. The complexity of the human experience of disgust is deeply rooted in intricate cognitive and emotional mechanisms, bestowing upon it characteristics that closely resemble those of moral emotions. Moral emotions, by their very nature, stand out for their connection to broader societal interests and the well-being of

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. J. MOLL et al., *The moral affiliations of disgust: A functional MRI study*, in «Cognitive and behavioral neurology» 18(1): 68-78, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Cfr. P. ROZIN et al., *Wstręt [Disgust]*, in J. M. Haviland-Jones, and Michael Lewis (Eds.), *Psychologia emocji*, pp. 798-819, in Gdańsk: Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, 2005.; D. OXLEY et al., *Political attitudes vary with physiological trait*, in «Science», 321.5896: 1667-1670, 2008. D. PIZARRO et al., *Conservatives are More Easily Disgusted than Liberals*, in «Cognition and Emotion» 23(4), pp. 714-725, 2009. K. SMITH et al., *Disgust Sensitivity and the Neurophysiology of Left-Right Political Orientations*, in «PLOS ONE», 6(10): e25552, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0025552>

others, extending beyond a self-centered perspective<sup>3</sup>. Disgust, as a moral emotion, encompasses a diverse spectrum of attitudes, experiences, and behaviors that pervade various domains of human life, including practical wisdom, political discourse, spiritual contemplation, artistic expression, and philosophical inquiry<sup>4</sup>. Its significance often transcends the realm of sensory aversion, becoming profoundly entwined with psychosocial dimensions within cultural and social milieus<sup>5</sup>. In interpersonal dynamics, emotions such as disgust, contempt, and anger frequently emerge in response to perceived transgressions against ethical norms associated with divinity, community cohesion, and individual autonomy<sup>6</sup>. Notably, disgust tends to elicit behavioral responses oriented towards dissolving of affiliations, and confronting or removing the offending agents, with the ultimate objective of re-establishing a perceived state of purity or normative equilibrium<sup>7</sup>.

Disgust, originating from food-related contexts, has expanded, driven by both biological and cultural evolution, to assume roles as a custodian of bodily integrity, societal harmony, and spiritual purity<sup>8</sup>. Haidt et al. note that: «Disgust may have its roots in evolution, but it is also clearly a cultural product. Like language and sexuality, the adult form of disgust varies in accordance with culture, and children must be 'trained-up' in the local rules and meanings»<sup>9</sup>.

Complex, inalienable for humans, and involved in many dimensions of life, disgust has found its place in science and writing in the humanities. Its potential is also

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<sup>3</sup> Cfr. J. MOLL et al., *Op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> H. A. CHAPMAN, A. K. ANDERSON, *Things rank and gross in nature: a review and synthesis of moral disgust*, in «Psychological bulletin», 139(2): pp. 300-327, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. J. MOLL et al., *Op. cit.*; P. ROZIN et al., *op. cit.*; M. DOUGLAS, *Czystość i zmaza* [Purity and Danger: an Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo]. Translated by Marta Bucholc, Warszawa, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2007.; K. ASHENBURG, *Historia brudu* [The Dirt on Clean. An Unsanitized History], Translated by Aleksandra Górska, Warszawa, Bellona, 2009.; S. AHMED, *Performatywność obrzydzenia*, in *Teksty Drugie* 1(145): pp. 169-191, 2014.; C. VICARIO et al., *Core, social and moral disgust are bounded: a review on behavioral and neural bases of repugnance in clinical disorders*, in «Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews», 80, pp. 185-200, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. M. DOUGLAS, *Op. cit.*; J. KRISTEVA, *Potęga obrzydzenia. Esej o ustręcie* [Pouvoirs de l'horreur], Translated by Maciej Falski, Kraków, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. J. MOLL et al., *Op. cit.*

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. P. ROZIN, A. E. FALLON, *A perspective on disgust*, in «Psychological Review», 94, pp. 23-41.

<sup>9</sup> J. HAIDT et al, *Body, psyche, and culture: The relationship between disgust and morality*, in «Psychology and Developing Societies», 9(1), pp. 107-131, 1997, p. 111.

recognized and exploited by artists. This chapter is dedicated to exploring educational prospects inherent in contemporary artworks that probe the interplay between disgust and morality by presenting potential socio-cultural interpretations of these works.

## *2. Theorising Disgust in Humanities (Outline)*

Disgust is studied in various fields, including psychology, anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and philosophy. Theories constructed within different fields of study intersect, rendering disgust an interdisciplinary concept. However, it is worth noting that disgust has not historically been at the forefront of scholarly interest. Winfried Menninghaus<sup>10</sup> points out that disgust belongs to the least documented experiences in human history when compared to emotions like love, hate, or fear. Cultural archives contain only a fraction of the data required for reflection on disgust in culture. Typically, experiences of disgust were not deemed worthy of recording; moreover, their transmission was often rejected as indecent and abominable. Even contemporary researchers of disgust tend to justify their choice<sup>11</sup>. Colin McGinn<sup>12</sup> stated that disgust and revulsion inhabit one of the most taboo-enshrouded areas of human experience, shielded by numerous euphemisms, making them challenging to discuss and study.

Menninghaus identifies Immanuel Kant as one of the early theorists of disgust and, citing him, defines disgust as a "potent vital experience." He states, «Vital experiences permeate the body as deeply as life itself. Regardless of how it is triggered – whether through smell, touch, sight, or intellect – it always impacts the entire nervous system»<sup>13</sup>. Following Kant's philosophy, disgust constitutes an aesthetic-ethical phenomenon, significant both for the judgment of taste and for the upbringing of

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<sup>10</sup> Cfr. W. MENNINGHAUS, *Wstręt: teoria i historia*, Translated by Grzegorz Sowiński, Kraków, Universitas, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. Ivi.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. C. MCGINN, *The Meaning of Disgust*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> W. MENNINGHOUSE, *Op. cit.* p. 7.

individuals, contributing to the formation of their morality. Within Kant's framework, disgust falls under the category of dark sensibilities, serving both as an educational goal and as evidence of cultural advancement. Kant classifies disgust among highly complex elementary concepts that cannot be fully comprehended. He places it alongside other sentiments of the human soul such as sublimity and beauty. These emotions correlate with a triad of higher faculties: sublimity with reason, beauty with intellect, and disgust with the power of imagination (understood as a "dark" impression in a complex relationship with the sense of morality). Additionally, the German philosopher describes disgust as a form of 'negative laughter,' a bodily shock akin to laughter. Kant's experience of disgust encompasses elements of physical, aesthetic, and moral judgments<sup>14</sup>. Menninghaus perceives disgust as the ultimate axiological counterpart to beauty and the most potent anti-aesthetic stimulus, however, one that cannot achieve complete supremacy over the "ideal". Such a victory would signify the cessation of the possibility of experiencing profound negation and the end of art, which thrives on its internal diversity and, for this reason alone, cannot be based solely on a single stimulus: disgust<sup>15</sup>.

Mary Douglas, in her anthropological work *Purity and Danger*<sup>16</sup>, explores the evocative relationship between purity and impurity. In Douglas's concept, disgust derives from a profound internalization of the notions of order, specifically the rules of purity and impurity. According to Douglas, disgust is an evolutionarily valuable, intuitive psychological response that can be modified through the process of socialization, much like taste or preference. In Douglas's framework, purity and impurity signify acceptance and rejection by the community, respectively. Douglas also introduces the concept of dirt, which she understands as a disruption of order. She writes, «there is no such thing as absolute dirt. Dirt exists only in the eye of the

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<sup>14</sup> Cfr. A. LISIECKA, *Pedagogiczne spojrzenie na kategorię wstrętu w sztuce popularnej. Propozycje interpretacyjne dla wybranych fenomenów* [Pedagogical perspective on the category of disgust in popular art. Interpretive proposals for selected phenomena], Lublin, UMCS, 2022.

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. W. MENNINGHOUSE, *Op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. M. DOUGLAS, *Op. cit.*

beholder».<sup>17</sup> Sarah Ahmed has also highlighted the cultural-affective dimension of disgust, emphasizing that disgust is not a response to the inherent properties of an object but rather a perception held by an individual who possesses knowledge of the repulsiveness inherent in the object<sup>18</sup>. In Ahmed's perspective, disgust is contextual and remains entwined with mechanisms of knowledge, power, and history.

German philosopher and sociologist Norbert Elias also recognized the role of disgust in the development of social control. Elias referred to emotions such as disgust, shame, and embarrassment in his works. He used these concepts interchangeably, focusing more on the consequences of these emotions rather than their genesis. Based on historical analyses, he argued that disgust plays a significant regulatory role in nearly all areas of human activity, from dining etiquette and fulfilling natural and sexual needs to interpersonal relationships and aggression. The feeling of disgust serves to distinguish socially desirable and undesirable attitudes, and its strength lies in that individuals internalize its rules during the socialization process so that it guides them without their conscious awareness. The "desirable-undesirable" mechanism directs the process of civilization<sup>19</sup>. William Ian Miller<sup>20</sup> characterized disgust as a moral and social emotion. In his view, disgust justifies judgments and is used to individuals and things in a specific order.

Another perspective on disgust is the concept of the abject. Julia Kristeva introduced the theory of abjection in her *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* in 1980. Kristeva's work is a transdisciplinary philosophical, anthropological, and literary study in which she seeks to answer the question, «What is it that is neither an object nor a subject and, in consequence, affects us as the impossibility of its survival or functioning?»<sup>21</sup>. The abject is an imprecise concept. Anything that threatens the internal (identity) and/or external (society) ancestor can become abject. Disgust also encompasses elements such as food, filth, waste, and feces, with the most repulsive

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<sup>17</sup> M. DOUGLAS, *Op. cit.* p. 31.

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. S. AHMED, *Op. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. A. LISIECKA, *Op. cit.*

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. W. I. MILLER, *The Anatomy of Disgust*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1997.

<sup>21</sup> A. LISIECKA, *Op. cit.*, p. 69.

being the corpse – “the pinnacle of disgust”<sup>22</sup>. Disgust pertains to what disrupts identity, the system, and order, and what does not adhere to boundaries, places, and rules. It dwells in between, is ambiguous, and mixed. The father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, contributed significantly to the reflection on the presence of disgust in art. In Freud’s theory, disgust is strongly correlated not only with sexuality but also with aesthetic culture; it represents a kind of antithesis to the aesthetics specific to a given culture<sup>23</sup>.

In recent years, American philosopher Carolyn Korsmeyer has enriched the modest aesthetic discussion of the presence of disgust in art. Korsmeyer views disgust as a fully-fledged and highly complex aesthetic category, one that invokes a transformation in the viewer reminiscent of the Romantic shift from horror to sublimity<sup>24</sup>. According to her, disgust is an affect/emotion that is instinctual (visceral), reactive, and discomforting. Due to its nature, when deliberately evoked by art, disgust has a decisive impact on the overall meaning of the work. Disgust takes on various forms, often nuanced, such as humorous, repulsive, tragic, profound, ironic, unsettling, melancholic, or vulgar. The reactions it elicits can be strong or subtle, and although few of them are pleasant, disgust can become a legitimate source of aesthetic satisfaction<sup>25</sup>. While in psychology, disgust is considered one of the strongest negative emotions, paradoxically, repulsive objects in art can evoke positive reactions in the viewer. The seemingly primitive feeling of disgust takes on diverse, often nuanced forms in works of art.

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<sup>22</sup> Cfr. J. KRISTEVA, *Op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. A. LISIECKA, *Op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. C. KORSMEYER, *Gender w estetyce* [Gender and Aesthetics: An Introduction], translated by Anna Nacher, Kraków, Universitas, 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Cfr. C. KORSMEYER, *Disgust and morality*, in «Philosophy Compass», 7/11, pp. 753-761, 2012.



### 3. *Disgust in Art*

Representations of ugliness and disgust have always existed in art, but they were not always accompanied by an independent discourse. It was only in the 18th century, as Menninghaus pointed out, that disgust was granted "citizenship rights" in the realm of art<sup>26</sup>. Prior to this, disgust marked the "boundary of aesthetics" and stood in opposition to beauty. Disgust as an independent aesthetic category only emerged in art in the 20th century. In earlier epochs, representations of disgusting objects neither aimed to evoke revulsion per se nor constituted the essence of the artwork - they rather played a secondary role. It was only in the 20th century that what is considered disgusting achieved the status of artwork. Earlier eras variously highlighted disgust in art, creating their own catalogs of grotesque imagery, including various monsters, freaks, and human-animal hybrids<sup>27</sup>. The Middle Ages indulged in allegorical personifications of death and monstrosity<sup>28</sup>, the 'dark and ugly' Gothic foregrounded extraordinary and supernatural events surrounded by an aura of mystery and melancholy, the Sturm und Drang period ignited the spark of rebellion, and Romanticism developed an evocative relationship between nature and imagination. However, it was only the avant-garde of the early 20th century that opened the world of art to entirely new values, including disgust<sup>29</sup>.

References to disgust can be found in contemporary art, especially within the social and feminist movements. A particularly "disgusting" trend in contemporary art is abject art, which draws on Kristeva's theory. Abject art deconstructs the symbolic order, questions established meanings and opens a field for discussions that extend beyond aesthetic discourse. Abject art fits into the aesthetics of shock, aiming to shake the viewer and provoke them to ask often difficult questions about the essence of their own humanity<sup>30</sup>. The diversity of practices and artistic explorations also encompasses

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<sup>26</sup> Cfr. MENNINGHAUS, *Op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> Cfr. A. LISIECKA, *Op. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> Cfr. U. ECO, *Historia brzydoty*, translated by Justyna Czaplińska, Poznań, Rebis, 2007.

<sup>29</sup> Cfr. A. LISIECKA, *Op. cit.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem.*

shocking and provocative actions at the intersection of art and life. Contemporary artists are pushing the boundaries of art and societal acceptance. The broadening horizons opening to areas previously absent in art have started to encompass provocative themes related to the body, illness, aging, sexuality, gender, and eroticism, as well as the violation of moral taboos, the desacralization of the sacred, and political engagement in the artistic discourse<sup>31</sup>.

#### *4. Goals in Aesthetic Education*

Art has always played a significant role in educational thought. Even ancient Greeks recognized its educative and formative potential. Pythagoras considered music as the most “educational” form of art, perceiving it as an expression of the perfect harmony of the universe<sup>32</sup>. Music was believed to influence the development of moral attitudes and contribute to the formation of inner harmony in individuals. According to Aristotle, engagement with art was meant to foster intellectual, moral, and emotional growth, as well as provide relaxation and entertainment<sup>33</sup>. Aristotle placed particular importance on the cathartic effect of tragedy which, by evoking intense and extreme emotions in individuals, served a therapeutic function leading to purification, alleviation of inner conflicts, and enrichment of an individual’s experiences<sup>34</sup>.

Considering art’s enduring presence in education, the term "aesthetic education" surprisingly emerged relatively late, specifically in the late 18th century in Friedrich Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. As the author of the first work in the history of philosophy to emphasize the educational role of art, Schiller saw art as a tool to realize social harmony through cultivating inner harmony in individuals, an

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<sup>31</sup> R. SOLIK, *Sztuka gorszenia, czyli o zgorszeniu jako doświadczeniu dzieła. Konteksty i uwarunkowania* ["The Art of Iconoclasm, Or About Iconoclasm as an Experience of The Artwork. Contexts And Conditions"], in «Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia de Cultura», IV 121, pp. 25-36, 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Cfr. I. WOJNAR, *Estetyka i wychowanie* [Aesthetics and Education], Warszawa, PWN, 1964.

<sup>33</sup> Cfr. Ivi.

<sup>34</sup> Cfr. Ivi.

achievement possible only through art<sup>35</sup>. Similar utopian views on the educational role of art were presented by John Ruskin. Until the mid-19th century, aesthetic education was primarily elitist and associated mainly with social refinement<sup>36</sup>. In the 20th century, however, art, especially creative expression, gained the status of an educational tool enabling comprehensive personal development<sup>37</sup>. Herbert Read, one of the key figures in the concept of education through art in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, formulated the idea that art offered a chance for the moral rejuvenation of individuals and humanity<sup>38</sup>.

Polish theory of aesthetic education, shaped in the 1960s and 1970s by Irena Wojnar, is a well-structured pedagogical concept intricately linked with other disciplines focusing on human beings, society, and culture, such as philosophy, aesthetics, psychology, and sociology<sup>39</sup>. The foundation of the Polish theory lies in humanistic philosophy and the pedagogy of culture. The theory posits that various cultural works, by expanding an individual's awareness, open up a world of values and enable a better understanding of life. The interpretation of these works plays a crucial role in understanding the nature of the human essence<sup>40</sup>. This theory suggests that modern aesthetic education should utilize various forms of cultural texts and artworks. It should be carried out with a spirit of pluralism and multiculturalism to contribute to the development of the whole personality of an individual. This encompasses aspects ranging from aesthetic sensitivity and moral orientation to the

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<sup>35</sup> Cfr. Ivi.

<sup>36</sup> Cfr. B. KWIATKOWSKA-TYBULEWICZ, *Wychowawcze aspekty sztuki współczesnej. Z perspektywy pedagogiki krytycznej* [Educational Aspects of Contemporary Art. From The Perspective of Critical Pedagogy], Warszawa, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2016.

<sup>37</sup> Cfr. A. LISIECKA, *Op. cit.*

<sup>38</sup> Cfr. H. READ, *Wychowanie przez sztukę* [Education through art.], Wrocław, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1976.

<sup>39</sup> Cfr. I. WOJINAR, *O edukacji estetycznej – głos pedagoga humanisty* [On Aesthetic Education - The Voice of a Humanist Edukator"], in K. WILKOSZEWSKA WILKOSZEWSKA (Ed.), *Wizje i re-wizje. Wielka księga estetyki w Polsce*, pp. 872-875, Kraków, Universitas, 2007.

<sup>40</sup> Cfr. K. PANKOWSKA, *Teoria wychowania estetycznego w zmieniającej się rzeczywistości* [Theory of Aesthetic Education in a Changing Reality], In K. WILKOSZEWSKA WILKOSZEWSKA (Ed.), *Wizje i re-wizje. Wielka księga estetyki w Polsce*, pp. 872-875, Kraków, Universitas, 2007.

capacity for critical thinking and creativity<sup>41</sup>. Embracing such an approach means not limiting oneself to acquainting students with works of art and their interpretation but, through contact with artworks, shaping in them an attitude of an open mind and respect for democratic values. This entails discussing morality.

### *5. Artworks, Disgust, and Moral Questions (Orlan)*

Carolyn Korsmeyer<sup>42</sup> noted that disgust is an extremely bodily emotion, uniquely focusing our attention on physical sensations. It is closely linked to bodily reactions, such as nausea, and usually requires a sensory trigger or imaginative element. Just as horror explores deep aspects of the sublime, the experience of disgust emphasizes the importance of physical embodiment. The body never exists in isolation from the social world: solely as a biological being. There is no “natural body” – it is always defined through cultural and social processes<sup>43</sup>. Therefore, the body in (disgusting) art will serve as a starting point to illustrate certain moral issues important from an educational perspective. The works of Orlan, an artist associated with the body art movement, are an example.

Orlan is a contemporary French artist born on May 30, 1947, in Saint-Étienne, as Mireille Suzanne Francette Porte. Orlan’s artistic endeavors revolve around questioning the status of the body in Western European society and its condition when confronted with new technologies in the near future. She gave her first performance entitled "Action Or-lent: les marches au ralenti dite au sens interdite" at the age of seventeen in her hometown of Saint-Étienne in 1964. During the performance, she walked through the city’s one-way streets at a slow pace against the traffic. Orlan employs a variety of media in her art, including painting, sculpture,

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<sup>41</sup> Cfr. I. WOJNAR, *Op. cit.*, 2007.

<sup>42</sup> Cfr. C. KORSMEYER, *Op. cit.*, 2008.

<sup>43</sup> Cfr. Z. MELOSIK, 2007. *Ciało jako przedmiot studiów kulturowych* [The Body as an Object of Cultural Study], in A. GROMKOWSKA-MELOSIK (Ed.), *Kultura popularna i (re)konstrukcje tożsamości*, pp. 115-130, Poznań-Leszno, Wyższa Szkoła Humanistyczna, 2007.

photography, film, poetry, dance, and theater, using them to express controversial and often blasphemous content. Central to her work is a reflection on the status of women in contemporary social, political, and religious discourse. She identifies herself as a neofeminist, postfeminist, and alter feminist. Her own body is the primary material of her work because she views corporeality as the foundation of the world and art<sup>44</sup>.

The body art movement, Orlan belongs to, emerged around 1960 and encompasses a diverse range of artistic approaches. It includes performance art, in which artists directly engage with the body through improvisation, choreography, happenings and staged events. In addition, body art extends to a variety of media, such as painting, sculpture, photography, film, and video.

This art form often delves into issues of gender and personal identity. Significant emphasis is placed on exploring the complex relationship between the body and mind. This exploration takes the form of physical endurance challenges that push the limits of the body and test the mind's ability to endure pain.

Body art may also emphasize visceral and disturbing aspects of the body. Recurring themes are contrasts, such as the interaction between clothing and nudity, inner and outer, and individual body parts and the whole. In some cases, the body is used as a tool to convey language and communication<sup>45</sup>.

The following section will present some of Orlan's works that use disgust to ask moral dilemma questions education also faces.

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<sup>44</sup> Cfr. M. DANCEWICZ, *Estetyka i etyka performansów ORLAN jako odpowiedź na idealizację ciała w kulturze przyszłości*, in «Prace Kulturoznawcze», 15, pp. 271-279, 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Cfr. I. FRANKIEWICZ-OLCZAK, 2012. *Body art – ciało, sztuka, technologia. Od ciała ułomnego do bezawaryjnego humanoida* [The aesthetics and ethics of ORLAN performances as a response to the idealization of the body in the culture of the future], in «Przegląd Socjologii Jakościowej», 8(2), pp. 228-241, 2012.

5. *Le baiser de l'artiste. Female body, Sexuality, and the Provocative Violation of Boundaries (Sanctity)*

In 1977, Orlan created a performance entitled *Le Baiser de l'Artiste* (The Artist's Kiss) that solidified her position as a controversial feminist artist. During the Paris International Contemporary Art Fair (FIAC) at the Grand Palais, visitors could purchase a kiss from sexually exposing Orlan for five francs. Alternatively, for the same price, they could light a candle beneath a photograph of the artist dressed as Saint Teresa of Ávila. A life-sized cardboard stand of Orlan/Teresa, inspired by the work of Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini, was placed right next to the artist. Each participant in the performance could choose between two archetypal representations of women - Mary and Mary Magdalene. The performance/installation also incorporated the ambivalent nature of the symbolism surrounding the Baroque figure of Saint Teresa<sup>46</sup>.

Orlan directs the viewer's attention to how culture shapes femininity. Society dictates what characterizes an 'ideal woman', what she should be and what she should not be. Often, this process involves harmful stereotypes that limit women's development that would stem from their individual needs and predispositions. Socialization can reinforce a 'social order' in which a woman's position depends on a man. Women are confined to the private sphere (the home), and their bodies and sexuality are controlled (perceived as instruments of reproduction and male sexual stimulation). Oppression is ingrained in the process of socialization<sup>47</sup>. For centuries, women's status in society was marginalized. Even in democratic countries today, women's rights to make decisions about their own lives, bodies, and sexual spheres are legally and culturally restricted. Orlan's work raises questions: Is a woman sentenced to choose between being a saint (pure) or a sinner (impure)? Why are only women categorized this way? How are holiness and sinfulness manifested aesthetically? What

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<sup>46</sup> Cfr. M. DANCEWICZ, *Op. cit.*

<sup>47</sup> Cfr. B. KWIATKOWSKA-TYBULEWICZ, *Op. cit.*

distinguishes religious ecstasy from physical ecstasy? The performance *Le Baiser de l'Artiste* addresses the issue of the social construction of femininity prevailing in Western European culture and its contemporary consequences.

### 7. *The reincarnation of Saint Orlan. Female body or a woman who is her body*

Orlan continued her exploration of the female body in a long-running and controversial project involving plastic surgeries. She performed her first plastic surgery on herself on May 30, 1987, her fortieth birthday, thereby initiating the cycle known as *La Reincarnation de Saint Orlan*. These surgeries were documented and presented to the audience in as films and photographs, featuring graphic details in a provocative pop culture style. Orlan underwent a total of nine procedures, called *Interventions*, which took place between 1990 and 1993. Concurrently, she embarked on the “Self-hybridations” project, an extension of her surgical actions. “Self-hybridations” was a series that included masks, sculptures, paintings, and photographs in which the artist’s image, primarily her face, was digitally altered and combined with elements of pre-Columbian, African, and Native American iconography<sup>48</sup>.

Both in the cycle *La Reincarnation de Saint Orlan* and *Self-hybridations*, Orlan raises questions: What does it mean to be a woman in today’s world? Polish pedagogue Zbyszko Melosik observes that contemporary women, under the pressure to be attractive, shape their identity through two factors: the body and sexuality. A woman doesn't just look— she is her appearance. The pursuit of external beauty and the cult of youth have become some of the most significant challenges faced by women. To meet cultural demands and get closer to the ideal, women are willing to sacrifice a lot of time and money, and even endure pain<sup>49</sup>. Contemporary women are entangled in

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<sup>48</sup> Cfr. M. DANCEWICZ, *Op. cit.*

<sup>49</sup> Cfr. B. KWIATKOWSKA-TYBULEWICZ, *Op. cit.*

contradictions: the compulsion to be attractive is linked with the compulsion to be submissive (to men, to motherhood). In her work, Orlan portrays the darker side of this race for youth and physical attractiveness. She presents a caricatured image of the aspirations of millions of people shaped by culture. Disgust is closely related to laughter. Orlan 'chuckles' as she questions the boundaries and foundations of what we call beautiful and desirable. Why do we desire this particular beauty? Looking at the modified and distorted busts of the artist, we may wonder at what point beauty transforms into oddness. Just as in art, in life, obvious beauty has become 'dull.' Ugliness evolves toward a category of beauty. Disgust replaces fascination. People endowed with natural appearances often modify them, refine them, and engage in body art<sup>50</sup>, just as Orlan has done for many years. In the "Self-hybridations" cycle, by using deconstruction the artist also touches on themes of cultural appropriation and the interplay of aesthetic qualities that constitute a 'new' understanding of beauty and ugliness. What is beauty? Is it a quality itself, or is it a variable, kaleidoscopic collage? Why do we want to put on masks imposed on us?

*8. Symposium de performance. A report from the Hidden Realm*

Orlan's pivotal year in her artistic journey was 1978. During her organization of the *Symposium de Performance* in Lyon, she was struck by intense pain, necessitating her immediate transportation to a hospital for an ectopic pregnancy surgery. Remarkably, Orlan had the procedure filmed, and the recording was swiftly transported by ambulance to the l'Etablissement Lyonnais d'Art Contemporain, the venue hosting the symposium. Orlan's physical absence was compensated for by video footage captured within the confines of the operating room. What distinguishes this event is Orlan's pioneering role in treating a medical operation as an artistic medium. This marked the inception of her endeavor to intertwine biology and technology, the

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<sup>50</sup> Cfr. A. LISIECKA, *Op. cit.*



biosphere and the technosphere as her primary and integrated content carriers<sup>51</sup>. In essence, this incident underscored her journalistic approach to a sphere that typically remains private, breaching the boundaries of intimacy and entering the taboo territory usually concealed from casual observers.

Orlan's artistic pursuits inherently provoke ethical and moral controversies. Nevertheless, it is paramount to regard her as an artist and evaluate her actions within the realm of art theory. What is intriguing here is the foresight that Orlan seemed to possess. Today's era of social media is marked by unprecedented social exhibitionism. People share their most intimate moments online, even involving their children. Furthermore, television programs have eradicated taboos by displaying everything. This raises questions about whether certain limitations are necessary, as not everything should be made public and not everything has to be watched like an entertainment show. The transmission of content (including visual content) online poses a significant issue from the perspective of visual literacy. Equally important is the awareness that every individual possesses an intimate world and unique sensitivity that need not be subjected to collective discussion and random comments. The rapid advancement of technology and artificial intelligence, along with the associated ethical dilemmas, present an immense challenge for educators tasked with supporting individuals in their lifelong development.

### *9. Discussion*

Contemporary art, exploiting the category of disgust, can play a relevant role in aesthetic education, challenging traditional notions of aesthetics and pushing the boundaries of art. This form of art often elicits strong emotional responses, inviting viewers to confront their preconceived notions and biases, to rethink reality from an ethical perspective. Art that incorporates elements of disgust challenges the

conventional understanding of beauty in art. It encourages students to think critically about why certain things are considered beautiful while others are deemed disgusting. This can lead to discussions about cultural and societal norms that shape our perceptions of beauty and determine what is socially acceptable. Many artists who use disgust as a category in their work aim to make social or political statements. This provides an opportunity for students to delve into discussions about the role of art in addressing societal issues, such as environmental degradation, body image, consumerism, etc. Discussing the ethics of creating and displaying such art is also crucial in aesthetic education. It helps students grapple with questions about artistic freedom, responsibility, and the potential impact of art on individuals and society.

Disgust is a powerful emotion. Incorporating this category of contemporary art into aesthetic education encourages students to think critically, challenge their assumptions, and engage with art as a dynamic and evolving form of expression. It fosters a deeper appreciation for the diversity of artistic approaches and encourages students to explore their own creativity in unconventional ways.

THEATRE AND EDUCATION  
BETWEEN THEORIES AND PRACTICES.  
A BRIEF STORY OF A WORKSHOP EXPERIENCE

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SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. The transformative power of performance. – 2. The theatrical Workshop for healthcare professions students. – 2.1. “Tabula rasa”. – 2.2. The stories of others. – 2.3. A possible pedagogical practice. – 2.4. Students’ feedback.

*1. Introduction: The transformative power of performance*

Object of research both in performing arts disciplines and in social sciences, the relationship between artistic practices and community processes is today at the centre of a renewed interdisciplinary interest, which takes into account on one hand the scientific evidences on the relationship between arts and well-being, and on the other hand the demands related to forms of cultural welfare aimed at rethinking the connections between culture and society, also in terms of activating civic sense and participation<sup>1</sup>. The research on the effects of arts on health and well-being, as demonstrated by a recent report from the World Health Organization<sup>2</sup>, has defined in the last twenty years an increasingly broad field of study, simultaneously with the increase of practices developed in different Countries around the world. From the analysis conducted by the WHO on over 3000 studies and 900 articles from the international scientific literature, not only the role of the arts in promoting health, in

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<sup>1</sup> R. PALTRINIERI, *Il teatro all’Università. Riflessioni sulla costruzione di cittadinanza culturale*, in I. RICCIONI (Ed.), *Teatri e sfera pubblica nella società globalizzata e digitalizzata*, Milano, Guerini e Associati, 2022, pp. 52-55.

<sup>2</sup> D. FAN COURT, S. FINN, *What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review*, in «Health Evidence Network synthesis report», n. 67, 2019.

prevention, management, and treatment of disease, across the lifespan, but also it is emphasized the influence that the arts can have on the social determinants of health, such as the development of social cohesion or the reduction of inequalities and injustices.

From this point of view, if the effectiveness of *performing arts* in strengthening social bonds and synchrony with others is demonstrated, connecting scientific evidences to new models of political action that value the dimension of creativity, and its transformative capacity on individuals and on the community, is one of the generative possibilities of that integrated system from which we started to reflect on the re-signification of community growth processes based on cultural participation. In this perspective, speaking about cultural welfare is an opportunity to «reason about the social value of culture and, at the same time, focus on the impact that culture and the arts have not only as an intrinsic value, that is strictly related to artistic content, a value that can be considered the essential part of cultural experience, but above all as an institutional value», referring to «how cultural organizations behave when they activate relationships and relations with different *stakeholders* and *asset holders*, contributing to strengthen the growth and resilience of the local community»<sup>3</sup>. In order to develop greater awareness around these issues, both from citizens and cultural organizations, and from the perspective of *governance* strategies, what seems to emerge is a double challenge, stratified at multiple levels. The fact that the culture system generates sustainable development means, first of all, sharing the responsibility for it equally among cultural operators and different subjects – publics, public opinion, funders, *policy makers* –, considering the effectiveness of the repercussions on communities and territories – more or less lasting, more or less significant – in relation to the overall quality of the context<sup>4</sup>.

At the same time, it is a matter of reversing the view that simplistically and banally places the arts in the sphere of cultural consumption aimed at entertainment, to

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<sup>3</sup> R. PALTRINIERI, *Il teatro all'Università. Riflessioni sulla costruzione di cittadinanza culturale*, cit., p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> P. DUBINI, “Con la cultura non si mangia”. *Falso!*, Bari-Roma, Laterza, 2018, pp. 110-111.

recognize them, rather, in their quality of relational resources, capable of communicating individual needs and social responses. Ultimately, and perhaps this is the most difficult challenge, theoretical and operative proposals that involve the combination of culture and society entail the need for a radical change of perspective, starting first of all by estimating how profitable investments in culture are, in light of their collective and community value and the systemic effects that derive from them, fuelling the continuity of transformative processes and tracing the direction for the creation of sustainable development<sup>5</sup>.

Intimately intertwined with “human praxis”<sup>6</sup>, the artistic experience is thus returned to a declinable social function, once again, in terms of plural interactions, which reactivate the original bond between art and life, without reductionistic attempts but rather exalting the political responsibility of art towards man’s aspiration to orient himself, to know himself, to relate and act towards change. We can imagine placing at this crossroads between art and life the performative practices recognizable in the procedural logics of the so-called Social Theatre<sup>7</sup> that, programmatically, feed on overlaps between performative and existential dimensions, indicating a heterogeneous set of experiences and reference models, extremely fertile in terms of the intertwining between research and action and, perhaps for this reason, irreducible to any attempt to give it a unique identity<sup>8</sup>. It is in the “space of non-belonging” inaugurated by Social Theatre that «the relations between theatre and society can be formulated regardless of ethical or aesthetic constraints, supporting actions that, in their implementation, manifest an unexpected beauty, not artistically formalized, and a possible change, not socially programmed»<sup>9</sup>. And it is always here that a space of play opens up, permeable in an artistic and social sense and destined

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<sup>5</sup> Ivi, p. 113.

<sup>6</sup> G. W. BERTRAM, *L’arte come prassi umana. Un’estetica*, ed. it. by F. Vercellone, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> C. BERNARDI, *Il teatro sociale. L’arte tra disagio e cura*, Roma, Carocci, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> F. FIASCHINI, *Teatro sociale: gesto e spazio di gioco*, in IDEM (ed.), *Per-formare il sociale (I). Controcampi. Estetiche e pratiche della performance negli spazi del sociale*, Roma, Bulzoni, 2022, pp. 43-46.

<sup>9</sup> Ivi, pp. 49-50 (translated by the Author).

to generate new and heterodox possibilities of proximity between human beings, where the concept of “utility” is understood in terms of “taking charge”, in the recognition of a common state of need that makes us akin to ourselves and mutually dependent, not being reserved for isolated, marginal, disadvantaged categories, but deeply concerning the human condition<sup>10</sup>.

For reasons like these, the vast phenomenon of Social Theatre, which develops in Italy since the late Eighties, presenting itself immediately very complex and fluid on the methodological, operational, and theoretical level<sup>11</sup>, ends up involving, in the plurality of contexts in which it takes shape, also the fields of health promotion and education for didactic and therapy professions, stimulating innovative project setups, such as those that gave life to the “Social and Community Theatre Centre” at the University of Turin (2014), and generating forms of applied research, in the sign of interdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration between institutions.

From this point of view, the intuition of the power of art for health and well-being is inscribed in an increasingly rich field of theoretical contributions and experimental initiatives, inheriting the lesson from the pedagogical masters of the twentieth century on the relationship between theatrical practice and work on oneself and on the *ensemble*, from Stanislavskij to Grotowski, and rethinking theatre as a place of learning and transformation, outside the confines of spectacular entertainment.

A pedagogical and human space, protected by the “as if” of art and play, in which «ordinary people – who are not theatre professionals – find a condition of freedom and absence of judgment that is propaedeutic to listening to themselves as body/mind, building connection with others and exercising creative imagination»<sup>12</sup>. It is here that theatre is recovered «as a meeting of knowledge, authentic interhuman experience, self-discovery and transformation»<sup>13</sup> bringing it back to the authentic and original

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>11</sup> G. INNOCENTI MALINI, *Breve storia del teatro sociale in Italia*, Imola, Cue Press, 2021, pp. 11-14.

<sup>12</sup> A. ROSSI GHIGLIONE, *Arte, benessere e cura. La potenza del teatro*, in «Pneireview», n. 2, 2015, p. 41 (translation by the Author).

<sup>13</sup> M. DE MARINIS, *Il teatro dell'altro. Interculturalismo e transculturalismo nella scena contemporanea*, Firenze, La casa Usher, 2011, p. 13 (translation by the Author).

dimension of ritual-play, celebration, and acting on the quest for “efficacy”, «fundamentally understood as the real action of the actor on the spectator, of humans on humans, but also - and primarily - as *work on oneself*»<sup>14</sup>.

For a provisional conclusion of these preliminary notes, we observe how the political direction implied in the artistic and cultural processes of performative nature located in the bed of Social Theatre can refer us to the disciplinary paradigm of Performance Studies and, specifically, to the political-civic commitment that Richard Schechner attributes to them, in the sign of a proposal both utopian and playful that invites to take seriously those who play and those who create spaces equipped for play and art<sup>15</sup>.

At the base is the awareness of the political potential of performing arts, through which practicing the human qualities of relationships, training to recognize alterity in oneself and others, developing a sense of community, the meaning of presence, the value of experience in contrast to individualism, isolation, passivity<sup>16</sup>. But there is also the affirmation of the creative dimension of theatrical play as an ideal model of possible society, in which to explore differences with others without hiding or ignoring them, and in which to experiment collectively with shared solutions to interpersonal and group conflicts, practicing active participation in transformative processes linked to the power of imagination. In his reflections on play and ritual, referring to a definition by the anthropologist Victor Turner<sup>17</sup>, Schechner highlights how play reveals to us the possibility of changing our goals and reconfiguring what our culture asserts to be reality, challenging power devices and seeking within an only apparently unproductivity, ways to express, negotiate, or subvert rules and behaviours, namely the ability to support or, conversely, overturn social structures, fuelling the aspiration

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<sup>14</sup> Ivi, p. 183.

<sup>15</sup> R. SCHECHNER, *Il Nuovo Terzo Mondo dei Performance Studies*, ed. it. by A. Jovičević, Roma, Bulzoni, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> M. DE MARINIS, *Per una poetica della performance. Il teatro e la comunità a venire*, Spoleto, Editoria e Spettacolo, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> V. TURNER, *Brain and Culture*, in «Zygon. Journal of Religion & Science», n. 18, 1983, pp. 221-245.

for change that underlies countless human practices: among which, precisely, the performative one.

For the purposes of this paper, we will try to verify how the relational play activated in a theatrical workshop can function as a pedagogical tool that allows participants to experience alterity, starting from the one that inhabits us, working on individual resistances, on encountering the other from oneself and from the group as a model of community based on listening, looking, presence.

In particular, we will analyse the Workshop organized at the end of the lessons of “Disciplines of Performing Arts”, held by the Author, for first-year students of the study course in Therapy of neuro and psychomotricity of developmental age, at the Department of Human Pathology in Adult and Developmental Age “Gaetano Barresi” of the University of Messina, in the academic year 22/23.

The Workshop took place in the afternoon of December 11<sup>th</sup> 2023, with the collaboration of the theatrical author, actress and director Cristiana Minasi, and with the participation of the students, who were asked to re-elaborate, in written form, the Workshop experience. Students’ feedback and the conversation with Cristiana Minasi, recorded at the end of the Workshop, are the starting materials on which this paper is structured.

The aim of the Workshop was to reflect with the students on the effectiveness of the combination of different disciplinary paradigms in professional training in the health field, and to stimulate in them greater awareness from the perspective of a desirable «humanization of medicine»<sup>18</sup>, which renews itself in contact with the knowledge of the arts, integrating new practices with protocols based on the technical-scientific dimension, valuing the symbolic component of care and putting back at the centre of the therapeutic process the relationship between human beings.

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<sup>18</sup> A. ROSSI GHIGLIONE, *Teatro e salute. Le ragioni di un incontro, le prospettive di ricerca*, in EADEM (Ed.), *Teatro e salute. La scena della cura in Piemonte*, Torino, Ananke, 2011, p. 22 (translation by the Author).



## 2. *The theatrical Workshop for healthcare professions students*

### 2.1. “*Tabula rasa*”

Deconstructing prejudices about theatre, understood exclusively as a place of entertainment and fiction, and investigating the connections between theatrical practice and relational processes, within the paradigm of care: this could be the meaning of the work on oneself and interpersonal dynamics experienced by participants in the theatrical Workshop, proposed as a working path within the broader investigation of theatre and well-being, identifying in this specific modality, particularly widespread in Social Theatre, an extra-daily space-time in which to open the festive and liberating dimension of theatrical “as if”<sup>19</sup>.

The appointment was in the gym, inside the building where classes are usually held. The students arranged themselves in a circle, together with the professor Katia Trifirò and the Workshop facilitator Cristiana Minasi. The structure of the Workshop was designed in three phases:

1. Collective discussion on central themes;
2. Proposal of exercises on body, voice, and movement, in relation to others, within a specific space;
3. Biographical-memory game starting from some objects, both personal and from others.

Describing the stages of the process means questioning the initial objectives, the obstacles encountered, and the results obtained, especially regarding the resources enabled in the participants. But it also means focusing on the resistances (cultural, structural, personal) that can be addressed through theatrical practice in a context such as the hospital, integrating the performing arts disciplines into science teachings.

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<sup>19</sup> A. ROSSI GHIGLIONE, A. PAGLIARINO (eds.), *Fare teatro sociale. Esercizi e progetti*, Roma, Dino Audino, 2011.

These aspects have been investigated in the dialogue, partly reported here, with Cristiana Minasi, who in addition to her artistic activity is conducting, as a PhD student, research on the relationship between actor, spectator, and environment.

«The Workshop fascinated me because of its specificity and also because of the difference compared to all the other circumstances I have experienced» says Minasi. «I rarely work with professional actors, preferring liminal situations, alongside those who come from the everyday life, that of non-actors. In this case, I knew I was dealing with people who did not have theatrical training, so I approached students with total openness; I wanted to wait for them to express themselves even regarding their expectations. The starting material was the absolute “tabula rasa” of preconceived ideas they had about theatre, which were deeply questioned by work that translated into an awareness of their position, of being there, in that moment, in that condition of active participation with all the others, in a shared gaze towards something that had to do with the unknown, because essentially they believed they had an idea about theatre that was then totally contradicted during practice. It is an opportunity to highlight that, probably, some certainties need to be dismantled, conveyed by a perspective that is that of fiction, falsification, verisimilitude: in reality, theatre has to do with the profound truth of existence and above all with being in relation. The results were evident, because all preconceived conditions were eliminated and what remained in them was a feeling of listening, participation, a sense of disorientation. It is always very interesting to work with non-professionals, without burdening the encounter with didactic content but, rather, working through subtraction, according to the poetics that characterizes my pedagogical path».

Regarding the initial phases of the Workshop, Cristiana Minasi affirms:

I started by asking what issues could potentially relate to their vocation and future profession. The dialogue that started pushed everyone to look each other in the eyes: a practice that they progressively began to discover, with difficulty, turning to their peers from one side of the room to the other, starting from a common object which was theatre. Rays were created, as if an energy was generated that needed to be exploded.

So, we moved outside, out of the room, outdoors, where we started working on space, voice projection, body perception, first individually and then as a group. It was there that they began to free themselves, to play and to understand how in a typically university context one could also experience the feeling of stepping out of the usual frontal dimension, to which they are generally accustomed.

### *2.2. The stories of others*

«The third phase that characterized the meeting was related to the theme of objects, in relation to autobiographical narration» Minasi explains. «I proposed to them to place in the centre of the circle created with their bodies, one next to the other, a series of objects they had on them, something from their everyday life and very simple. Those who wished, entered the centre of the circle, and had the opportunity to tell, through three objects, a personal story that did not necessarily belong to their individual existence, but that in a sense had to do with it. We passed through matter to tell our poetic vision of a potential biography; the students talked about themselves, about a true “I”, even if invented, starting from objects that belonged to others, and this created extraordinary connections between them, suddenly. All this could happen because in the game, and in the stories, they turned to their peers, progressively involving them in the narrative. Thus, a very deep relationship was created because it allowed the participants, in the fictional dimension, to find in the other something imaginary, but also deeply present, resonating in existence, evoking something that extended beyond reality and that became much stronger than reality itself.

The goal was to make them understand what it means to deal with the stories of others. One must be able to manipulate, with imagination, one’s own existence, perhaps even through games about objectual connections that lead into memory and open up to opportunities of spread in owns personal life. To engage, in a dimension of

care, with others, one must first know how to deal with oneself, even with one's own impulses, which are often dormant dreams and dormant tendernesses that are eager to emerge in a recovered time, like familiar and everyday objects that become something else - an undelivered gift, a clock -. Surely all this gives rise new possibilities and encounters that even the facilitator never manages to imagine in their power, because they intimately deal with each person's personal stories and then with the unexpected relationships that are created. Paradoxically, the fact that girls and boys did not know each other created a harmony that perhaps does not occur between people bound by friendship. A quest for delicacy, for a lightness that never went beyond, the "said" that also contained the "unsaid," desire mixed with reluctance. A series of elements that made them understand the importance of opposition, which is also what I mainly work on. What hides behind a way of doing and being within things that only needs to be touched to find energy with its perfect opposite: in this case, the psycho-physiological resistances that we carry in our movements and that tell something. Through the Workshop, the students can taste these limits on themselves, in order to deal with the limits of others».

### *2.3. A possible pedagogical practice*

«The resources that are now defined as "skills" are extraordinary and greatly underestimated, given that a theatrical Workshop puts people in a position to deal with themselves, which is necessary in order to begin to deal with others - concludes Cristiana Minasi, summarizing the experience -. If one does not have the ability to listen, a condition for which the prerequisites are often lacking in everyday life, as well as for silence, for slow time, the quality of interpersonal relationships is compromised, as it also risks happening in the urge that characterizes the performance of healthcare professions. An operator, like a doctor, must have the time to recognize the power of

slow time, of the process, of acquiring a series of skills in the relationship with others, even through a gesture of contact.

I believe this is fundamental because the hospital is the context where the dimension of fragility is best revealed: one must be able to recognize one's own fragilities in order to know how to deal with those of others. It is a too delicate matter, which does not concern only the field of health. Through Workshop practice, it is possible to intervene by promoting everyone's potential, supporting personal work on oneself, and helping relationship processes. In terms of training, it would be important to involve teachers, those who work in social services. But, more generally, there should be the strength to bring theatre everywhere, with the awareness that it is a matter of physical and not just intellectual nature, which necessarily involves cultural, social, political processes: knowledge cannot be transmitted except through experience.

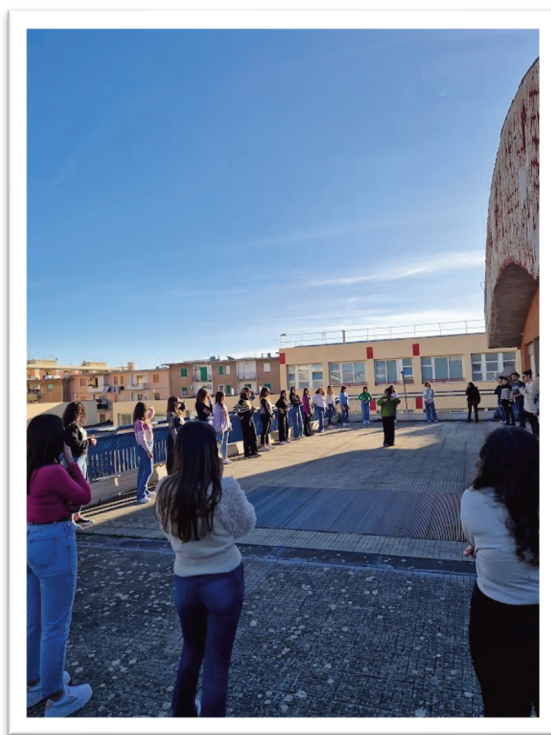


Fig. 1. A moment from the theatrical Workshop included in the course of “Disciplines of Performing Arts”, taught by Professor Katia Trifirò (Academic Year 22/23), for first-year students of the Degree Course in Therapy of neuro and psychomotricity of developmental age (Department of Human Pathology in Adult and Developmental Age “Gaetano Barresi” - University of Messina).

#### *2.4. Students' feedback*

In the final part of this paper, we will focus on the results of the theatrical Workshop, based on the personal reflections by the participants. Each of them was asked to recount the experience lived, freely elaborating its meaning through a written text, starting from the questions that emerged in the last part of the Workshop and discussed together in the same circular dimension as the initial phase. In particular, participants were encouraged to inquire about the kind of effects that could arise from such a practice both on the personal level of individual growth, as human beings before future healthcare professionals, and on the social level of interpersonal relationships. As can be seen from the texts submitted by the students, of which some excerpts are reported in this paragraph, the Workshop represented an opportunity to explore entirely new parts of themselves and to experience a deep connection with others, outside the routines of daily life, which however inevitably ends up being charged with a new potential, stimulating in each of the participants the acquisition of new personal and social awareness and the activation of stronger and more authentic relationships within the group.

Interweaving these aspects, most of the matured and shared considerations, first during the group discussion and then in the personal texts, focused centrally on the formative value of the Workshop experience compared to «a path of conscious personal growth» (Federico B.). Defined as «a real journey of self-discovery» the Workshop was a place where one could «listen better to the body, become more aware of the body in space and of the body in relationships with others» starting from the perception of the body itself as «an effective means of communication capable of conveying relevant information, which each of us must learn to grasp» because «the body engages the person's entirety in interaction» (ibidem). Unshackled from entertainment logic, the theatrical paradigm is thus discovered and experienced in its relational essence: «Starting from a word that defines theatre, “the other”, this

experience made me understand how much closeness there can be between realities considered always very distant such as art and care» (Miriam L.).

Feeling called into play, with one's own body and emotions, pushed the participants to have a total experience of presence, as a quality that mobilizes the physical part, prompted to act and respond to the instructions provided during the exercises, and the emotional part, towards «self-listening» (Luca S.) and the discovery of «a plurality of "us" that we have within us» (Claudia P.). Working on oneself, in Workshop practice, offers the opportunity to deeply connect with one's uniqueness, exploring "strengths and weaknesses" as someone writes, to learn more about oneself and gain greater self-confidence, transferring acquired skills into interpersonal relationships: «Due to my shyness, I have always found it difficult to express my thoughts and emotions, but at that moment, through play, I felt free and comfortable and managed to express my feelings calmly» (Greta C.); «This experience has helped me manage emotions, improve relationship approaches, establish a relationship based on the right balance. I understood how important it is to work on one's strengths and weaknesses. And I understood the importance of developing communication skills, such as empathy, patience, and respect, fundamental tools for work, social, affective, educational contexts» (Maria Luisa T.); «Theatre helps overcome insecurities - indeed, failures do not diminish the value of the person - it teaches and educates to respect, listen, empathize, and get to know ourselves better» (Beatrice A.).

Regarding this last observation, it is worth noting that, during the collective reflection at the end of the Workshop and then in some texts, the possibility of interpreting the stumbling block, the "failure", the error not as a stigma destined to devalue the subject, but as an element from which to learn new paths in the process of personal growth emerged. It is about focusing the effort not on the perfect execution of the exercise, but, once again, on how one can learn, from oneself and from others, to creatively manage obstacles: «One thing that struck me a lot in doing this Workshop was not giving importance to mistakes, as Cristiana repeated to us several times that we should not be ashamed of making mistakes. All this reassured and

strengthened me and improved my self-esteem, which had decreased due to my previous university path» (Giorgia C.). The protected environment of the theatrical Workshop thus creates conditions for initiating a process of self-discovery free from the dramaturgies of everyday life, where, as someone else writes, «it is allowed to get to know and express oneself without being judged» activating «a safe environment to express oneself without shame» (Annalisa I.). Furthermore, the search for shared solutions revealed the importance of collaboration towards achieving a common goal, which is only possible by listening to each other, respecting their timing, developing observation skills; skills necessary, for example, for exercises where participants are asked to speak without overlapping each other: «I realized how difficult it is not to overshadow the other, how difficult it is to leave space for the other» (Vanessa S.).

From this point of view, regarding group dynamics, it is clear how the relational ties within the class have strengthened, overcoming individual resistances and the protected boundaries of the self towards a trusting openness to others and the construction of a collective “we” of which each has begun to feel an active and integral part, well beyond the time of the Workshop: «The experience was very useful for creating bonds with colleagues that do not stop at appearances and hearsay, but are based on trying to understand more about the ‘other’ in front of us» (Sara C.); «Through play, we managed to strengthen our group by creating a sense of unity» (Greta C.); «The theatrical activity carried out was of great help for the relationship among us colleagues. Some of the exercises helped us remember our names, because knowing each other for only a few months, we haven’t had the opportunity to interact with everyone» (Caterina L.); «I believe that each of us, with our uniqueness, has contributed to each other’s enrichment» (Maria Luisa T.); «This meeting allowed me to get to know a new world of which I had never been part, but above all, it helped me see my colleagues in a different way and I learned to know them better» (Francesca S.); «The activity I liked the most was the one where we had to look into each other’s eyes; although at first it was embarrassing, it was nice to meet each other’s gaze and



smile, sharing some of the emotions we were experiencing at that exact moment» (Vanessa S.).

The process of discovering the other and mutual understanding required facing, individually and together, the feelings of discomfort and embarrassment generated by entering the space of the relationship, through exercises that work on listening, physical contact, or gaze: «Doing the various exercises at the beginning I felt a sense of discomfort, linked to the fact that besides sharing the classroom with colleagues there had never been an opportunity for real contact, and moreover the level of confidence was very low. After a while, I started to feel comfortable and part of the group, after all, they too were performing the same movements as me. Looking into each other's eyes, touching each other, collaborating, laughing, and irony created a connection, giving us the opportunity to show ourselves in our identity» (Gaia R.). Furthermore: «Although initially the exercises caused some difficulties, later an atmosphere of complicity was created in the group. It became easier to put oneself in the other's shoes and share and understand others' emotions, despite the superficiality of the relationships up to that moment. What impressed me the most were the sensations felt and the ability to stimulate empathy starting from 'simple' actions, which could seem 'trivial' but which encompass much more» (Laura M.); «During the Workshop hours, I felt 'connected' with my colleagues, going beyond the distance that university seriousness, schedules, and commitments force us to have, I discovered myself in a new context» (Miriam L.).

All the proposed exercises contributed to this "connection," but in particular, the one of the "raft," on which several students focused: «the 'raft' exercise made me understand that one should not think of oneself as individuals but as part of a community, because our actions inevitably influence it» (Annalisa I.); «Exercises like this allowed us to perceive the other and act accordingly» (Sara C.); «I was particularly struck by the 'raft' exercise, which allowed me to fully understand how through movement we enter into relation with the environment and with others. It allowed me to reflect, moreover, on the concept of belonging to the group,

indispensable for the achievement of a common goal» (Federico B.). Another exercise that was particularly effective, from the participants' point of view, is that of inventing a story starting from personal objects placed at the centre of the circle formed by the girls and boys, which, according to everyone, allowed mutual discovery in a completely new way, revealing authentic parts of each other despite the fictional framework: «Although they were invented stories, they reflected the essence of my colleagues, and therefore helped me discover new parts of their character» (Francesca S.); «What struck me the most was the theatre's ability to transform common objects into instruments of narration and emotional expression; each of us felt free to express our emotions and sensations. We learned that theatre is not only an art form, but also a tool that allows personal growth and the construction of meaningful relationships, while stimulating imagination» (Greta C.).

The creation of a common vocabulary, generated by work practices and the sharing of moods, limits and fears, small and large achievements, in addition to decidedly revealing the positive balance of the experience, recorded through participants' feedback, is perhaps the strongest and most significant sign of a need to express oneself to which theatre, always, offers resources irreducible to any other artistic language.

DILEMMA.  
AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION INTO THE MORAL DEVELOPMENT  
OF ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG PEOPLE THROUGH ROLE PLAY

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SUMMARY: 1. Educating for moral autonomy. – 2. Moral development in Kohlberg's stadial theory. – 3. An empirical investigation on moral development. 3.1. Conduct of the research. - 3.2. Data analysis. – 4. Conclusions.

*1. Educating for moral autonomy*

The question from which this research originated is: "How to educate for moral autonomy?".

This is a relatively recent issue in the history of pedagogy – and in Italy in particular – since it only arises when, with the birth of democratic societies, freedom is recognised for all citizens: a freedom that manifests itself in all dimensions of the person and, above all, in moral freedom.

Before reaching this political milestone, moral education, at least in public schools, consisted of an inculturation practice: in other words, a transmission of socially shared moral norms, which left little space for the free reflection and initiative of the subjects. And even after this political achievement, very little was practiced in public schools in terms of moral education, just as very little was theorized in other educational contexts.

As a result, moral autonomy is now commonly considered as a natural goal of growth, even if sociological research then gives us a picture of extreme moral fragility and weakness in young people: an indication of an educational need in this regard.

Now, in order to understand how to intervene in this as well as in other educational 'gaps', pedagogical research pursues a number of fundamental steps:

1. it brings clarity around the meaning of the educational end to be achieved (in this case, moral autonomy);

2. it sheds light on how pedagogical reflection has approached this end in order to assess its appropriateness or otherwise and to identify precise educational goals to be achieved;

3. explores, with reference to such goals, the state of reality in the youth population;

4. based on that state of reality, adapts those objectives to the present situation by constructing an educational project.

Well, the present work lies precisely within this research *process*, more precisely at the third step, in order to explore the state of reality, with regard to moral autonomy, in the youth population.

It immediately became clear that such an investigation, which involves the sphere of beliefs, emotions and rationality of the subjects involved, required a complex instrument capable of embracing all three of these dimensions. In this direction, the role-playing game was chosen as the most suitable device for reconnaissance investigation.

The psychological perspective that emphasizes the moral development of the child under a determination of precise stages is of a cognitivist nature and is due to the work of the first scholars in the field, namely Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg.

The research conducted by the two scholars focuses on understanding moral development at various stages of individual growth. Piaget's stadial model and, in particular, his theory of the transition of morality from a *heteronomous* to an *autonomous* stage inspired the research and theory of Lawrence Kohlberg, which was central to the empirical investigation conducted in this paper.

The hypothesis underlying the research was that, through a role-playing game based on examples of the “moral dilemmas” in Kohlber's theory – for which there is

often no 'right' answer, but reasoned solutions<sup>1</sup> – it was possible to measure the participants' level of moral autonomy according to the stages of Kohlberg's theory.

## 2. *Moral development in Kohlberg's stadial theory*

Kohlbergian research used a methodology based on *moral dilemmas*: namely, cases in which the individual is confronted with hypothetical problems and has to take a decision on how to act, justifying that choice. The most famous case invented by the American scholar is the well-known "Heinz dilemma".<sup>2</sup>

Kohlberg's interest focuses more on the motivation of the response, rather than the response itself. Depending on the answer given to the dilemma, the subject will be able to reveal his or her state of moral development as that answer can be placed in the *stages of moral development* defined by Kohlberg.

Kohlberg, in fact, extended the analysis of the stages theorized by Piaget to cover the period of adulthood through the identification of three levels of moral reasoning.

As he explains:

One way to understand the three levels is to think of them as three different types of relationships between the self and the rules and expectations of society.

From this point of view, Level I corresponds to a pre-conventional person, for whom social rules and expectations are in a sense external to the self; Level II corresponds to

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<sup>1</sup> R. VIGANO', *Psychology and Education in L. Kohlberg. An ethics for the complex society*, Milano, Vita e Pensiero, 2000, p. 198.

<sup>2</sup> «In Europe, a woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. He paid \$200 for the radium and charged \$2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together about \$ 1,000 which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said: "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug-for his wife. Should the husband have done that?» (L. KOHLBERG, *Essays on Moral Development, Vol. I: The Philosophy of Moral Development*, San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1981, p. 19).

a conventional person, in whom the self has internalized, or identified with, the rules and expectations of others, especially those of the authorities; Level III corresponds to a post-conventional person, who has differentiated his or her self from the rules and expectations of others and defines his or her values in terms of self-imposed principles.<sup>3</sup>

Each of these three levels is subdivided, in turn, into two stages, so that the entire path of moral development consists of six stages.

### *3. An empirical investigation on moral development*

Since only the last two of the six stages of Kohlberg's theory manifest moral autonomy and represent the expression of the moral person in a democratic society, we can say that they therefore constitute the ultimate goal of a moral education today. Indeed, as Kohlberg himself stated, it is not for everyone to achieve.

The following empirical investigation was aimed to identify a viable project of moral education starting precisely from the staged functioning of our moral development as psychological research has shown. To do so, a key step was to investigate the adolescent reality with reference to the achievement of the third Kohlbergian level.

It was not the intention of this research section to develop the entire moral education project, but to test the diagnostic tool that allows an analysis of the starting situation underlying such a project. To this end, the chosen investigative tool was the role-playing game which, suitably modulated on the subject of moral development, can provoke the emotional and cognitive involvement at once typical of a psychological situation of moral dilemma.

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<sup>3</sup> L. KOHLBERG, *Moral stage and moralization: a current formulation and a Response to Critics*, Basel, Karger, 1983, p. 173.

A survey involving a minimal sample, according to the criteria of qualitative research in pedagogy, of adolescents and young people from various parts of Italy was conducted during June- August 2020. The survey details are outlined below.

### *Purpose*

The research activity aimed to arrive at a survey of the state of the art regarding the moral choice ability of adolescents and young people, testing the effectiveness of a tool such as role-playing to validate its suitability for this survey purpose.

### *Goals*

Each individual research activity pursued the goal of ascertaining the level of moral development according to the stadial model identified by Lawrence Kohlberg and testing the survey instrument.

### *Sample*

Adolescents and young people between the ages of 13 and 25, divided into 3 groups of 4 components each, for a total of 12 subjects<sup>4</sup>, who met on a telematics platform<sup>5</sup>. They came from different Italian cities: Naples, Messina, Rome, Brescia, Milan and Udine.

Only the results of the first sample of adolescents will be presented in this article.

### *Time*

The research took place over 3 months, engaging each group of subjects in 9 activity sessions.

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<sup>4</sup> Since this is a qualitative research, the sample selected is not intended to be representative of a universe; therefore, it is not concerned with reaching a certain number, but rather with conducting an in-depth analysis. (See S. MANTOVANI (ed.), *Field research in education. Qualitative methods*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> Meetings were held through the online communication platform *Discord* and through the support of the *Roll20* website for virtual dice rolls and the compilation of participants' game sheets.

*Tool*

The tool chosen to pursue the stated objectives was the role-playing game *Dilemma*, created from scratch specifically for the research. It is a narrative-based game with no fixed setting that places players in different problematic situations, faced with which they must make moral choices.

The narrative background of the game features a people of extra-terrestrial beings, called *Freemen*, who come from a planet called *Freeland*. The *Freemen*, since the dawn of their society, have managed to identify and implement what the thinkers of our world have always sought: an absolutely perfect way of experiencing freedom.

As time went by, however, they began to wonder what life might be like on other planets, where moral values and widespread ethics did not coincide with their own.

Thus, many expeditions to other planets began, in order to study and understand what goes on in other societies. Those who left, however, first reset their own moral conceptions, so that they would not be influenced in their judgements and would fit in as well as possible.

The different settings in the game refer to the different situations that the *Freemen* gradually encounter on planet Earth and place them in a position of choice.

The way in which *Freemen* fit into the environment occurs in two stages: in the first stage they materialize in the environment but are invisible to others; in the second stage, after taking in the situations around them, they may decide to interact by taking on appearances of their choice and making themselves visible to others.

*3.1. Conduct of the research*

After an introduction of the participants within the group and an illustration of the game, each group, by mutual agreement, chose a game setting based on their preferences. Five game settings were proposed: a high school, an office, a hospital, a



family environment and a large city. The following were subsequently chosen: a high school, an office and a hospital.

The players in the first group were: Andrew, Joseph, Gabriel and Matthias (three belonging to the 16-18 age group, and one 13-year-old). The context chosen by the group was a high school. The three game sessions are illustrated below:

### *Session 1*

Players materialize in the schoolyard just before classes begin. Several environmental inputs strike their attention.

First, the widespread rumors surrounding the school dance to be held the following evening.

Second, an act of bullying toward a first-year student named Leonardo, which is taking place a few meters away from their location.

Finally, the group notices that on the other side of the pitch, a woman is parking in a stall reserved for teachers. The woman seems to be purposefully ignoring the vandalism. Players are, therefore, asked if they wish to intervene, and if so, to state the manner of their intervention, as well as the reasons for their choice.

PLAYER	INTERVENTION
Andrea	NO <b>Rationale:</b> I want to observe how far such an act can go right under the sunlight.
Joseph	YES <b>Act:</b> I would like to appear as an ordinary adult and pretend to be the parent of another student. <b>Rationale:</b> Acts like this should not exist in the most absolute way.
Gabriel	YES <b>Act:</b> I agree with Joseph's choice and would like to assume the form of his wife. <b>Rationale:</b> I agree with Joseph.
Mattia	NO <b>Rationale:</b> I would first like to understand why the teacher behaved the way she did. I prefer to intervene later.

After identifying intervention situations and roles, actions are carried out as described below:

Joseph and Gabriel decide to intervene in reference to the bullied boy. When the players approach the bullies (intent on throwing the unfortunate boy's books on the floor and tugging at his backpack), the latter take off running inside the institution. A brief dialogue with Leonardo reveals that such behavior is commonplace and that those boys often harass teachers as well. Mattia points out the connection to the strange behavior of the teacher who ran away from the parking lot. Seconds after helping Leonardo pick up his books, the little boy runs toward the hallways. The players turn invisible again.

The corridors of the institution are empty and the students are in their classrooms. Passing by the door of a restroom, one of the players performs a “listening test”<sup>67</sup> to hear a male voice that seems to anxiously mumble unintelligible words. A boy about 18 years old appears to be spinning in circles as he nervously scratches his head. The

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<sup>6</sup> This is one of the game mechanics of the *Dilemma* system. "Trials" are tests that players must pass to succeed in certain actions (such as the one mentioned above). The Game Master asks the player to roll the dice, and if the result is higher than the imposed value, the test is considered passed.

group decides to go inside the room and listen to what he is saying. The players learn that someone seems to be threatening the boy about a drug problem.

After a few seconds, the boy comes out of the bathroom but his cell phone falls on the floor; he does not seem to notice it. Andrea asks to use an “intervention”<sup>7</sup> to grab the cell phone and notice that the latter bears the words, “*Cell phone of Federico Tempi.*” After a few seconds, the device vibrates because of a message that has just arrived from a certain “*Happy*”: “*Lunchtime. We need to change location: meet me behind the cafeteria. Alone.*” Andrea adds to her “inventory”<sup>8</sup> the cell phone.

Players are, therefore, asked if they wish to intervene, and if so, to state how they wish to intervene, as well as the reasons for their choice.

PLAYER	INTERVENTION
Andrea	<p style="text-align: center;">YES</p> <p><b>Act:</b> I want to respond to the message by saying that I will be present.  <b>Rationale:</b> If that boy has a drug problem, it could extend outside the school. I want to identify the drug dealer and bring it to the attention of the institution's authorities to avoid other similar situations.</p>
Joseph	<p style="text-align: center;">NO</p> <p><b>Rationale:</b> "Showing up to someone for something like this could take a heavy toll on the kid. Better let him handle it; maybe remember the time and keep an eye on him. We should also return the cell phone since the message came now and he couldn't read it."</p>
Gabriel	<p style="text-align: center;">NO</p> <p><b>Rationale:</b> "Joseph is right. Let's take his cell phone back and stay out of it. This is not about two books thrown on the floor; this is a different situation here."</p>
Mattia	<p style="text-align: center;">YES</p> <p><b>Act:</b> "I want to change my voice to be similar to Frederick's and call the number to talk to this <i>Happy</i>.  <b>Rationale:</b> Guys, are you kidding? We're talking about drugs, not candy! We have to help this kid</p>

<sup>7</sup> This is one of the game mechanics of the *Dilemma* system. Intervention allows the player to make his or her character take any physical form and get into the swing of things.

<sup>8</sup> This is one of the game mechanics of the *Dilemma* system. The inventory allows the player to store certain items from the setting and be able to use them at any other time.

The playgroup spent about 30 minutes in discussing which decision is the right one.

There were two sides:

- Mattia and Andrea joined their arguments by leveraging the moral responsibility of intervention to prevent this and other future cases, as a pusher decided to make this school a "hunting ground" for his business.
- Gabriel and Joseph leveraged, instead, the practical side of the situation; not knowing the threat, they preferred to remain impassive but on guard at the same time.

[*Game Master's comment*: an overlap between game experience and real-life experience was detected (during the final part of the discussion).

One of the players related some facts that seemed very close to his life and also raised his voice to make his arguments as true and unique, leading to a very intense discussion with the opposing side. The involvement of the scene was one of the highest detected during the adventure].

The group, following the discussion, then unanimously decided to respond to the message: first by calling back the number (found to be busy) and then responding to the message with a "*I'll be there.*"

The players left the bathroom to return to the hallways, which now appear to be populated by a large number of students intent on changing books for upcoming classes.

Some posters taped to the walls show a portrait of a boy who appears to have won the election to the title of *school representative* and reads, "*Roberto Salgemini, the perfect representative...for the perfect school!*"

A man with a well-polished chest tag looks at the poster: it is Principal Veroni, a tall figure with a dark complexion and thick white hair.

Unexpectedly, Mattia decides to use his intervention to take Andrea's mobile phone from his inventory and appear to the headmaster as a student.

PLAYER	INTERVENTION
Mattia	<p style="text-align: center;">YES</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Act:</b> "I steal from Andrea's inventory the cell phone found in the bathroom and give it to the principal!"</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Reason:</b> "I just can't take it, waiting to meet the pusher? This boy needs help! NOW! It's not easy to talk to someone about it: surely he won't</p>

Mattia catches the group off guard and reports to the principal what he saw in the bathroom and the message he read on the cell phone. The man is stunned and grabs the cell phone, telling Mattia that he will take care of it himself.

The players did not take Mattia's choice well and demand more teamwork from him. Mattia, for his part, says that teamwork should sometimes be put on the back burner as it congests and hinders decisions that should be immediately made without even thinking. Joseph, followed by Gabriel, attacks Mattia saying that now the boy involved (Frederick) will have to undergo even more mental pressure and anxiety, not to mention the practical consequences it might have. Andrea does not approve of Mattia's selfish behavior but does not seem to want to condemn him totally for his act.

[*Game Master's Comment:* Andrea asks Mattia about why he wanted to act so independently. Andrea responds with verbatim words, "*When we care about our own health and the health of others, we group together many more values than you might think.*"]

*Session 2*

The session restarted with the interrupted dialogue that the group continued to have after the sudden decision made by Matthias. The tones were heated but this time they left the boundaries between play and reality well delineated.

The hallways begin to empty but a girl with very short hair and dressed almost like a boy remains on the stairs; she seems to be very sad and pensive. As you approach you will be able to hear a group of girls passing by her and taunting her, calling her a "*lesbian.*"

Players are, therefore, asked if they wish to intervene, and if so, to state how they wish to intervene, as well as the reasons for their choice.

PLAYER	INTERVENTION
Andrea	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>YES</b></p> <p><b>Act:</b> "I would like to appear as a paper airplane launched from who knows where and arriving at the girl's feet."</p> <p><b>Rationale:</b> "It is a very common problem of sexuality: accepting oneself is a value."</p>
Joseph	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>YES</b></p> <p><b>Act:</b> "I will launch the airplane."</p> <p><b>Motivation:</b> "A wonderful idea from Andrea! A word of comfort in an environment like a school is always a godsend."</p>
Gabriel	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>YES</b></p> <p><b>Act:</b> "I would like to look like a janitor and intimate the girl not to stay in the halls for long and then offer her a handkerchief."</p> <p><b>Motivation:</b> "Perhaps by finding comfort in the eyes of an adult she will realize that she is not alone."</p>
Mattia	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>NO</b></p> <p><b>Rationale:</b> "These are problems that must be dealt with by accepting oneself and not giving a damn about others. Being gay is not a problem: love is the same for everyone."</p>

I noticed that the group got very close to the "sexuality" issue and showed a lot of empathy for the girl, defining themselves as almost totally agreeing to give her a little relief. Mattia, however, showed more firmness in his words that I could not define. The discussion, after Mattia's last words, immediately became heated and the other three players called Mattia's motivation very harsh. The girl, after the interventions, felt much better and after handing the janitor the letter that contained clues about her homosexuality, she headed with a smile to the upper floor of the school.

The group decides to go up the stairs and is confronted with a peculiar situation: a woman wearing a nametag similar to the principal's is holding a very expensive-looking pink wallet in her hands. The lecturer looks around, as if undecided about what to do. Inside the wallet are 50 Euros.

Players are, therefore, asked if they wish to intervene, and if so, to state how they wish to intervene, as well as the reasons for their choice.

PLAYER	INTERVENTION
Andrea	<b>NO</b> <b>Reason:</b> "There are far more important problems. I prefer to let it go."
Joseph	<b>NO</b> <b>Rationale:</b> "I agree with Andrea. I think she can very well decide for herself, given also her position and certain values that teachers should respect."
Gabriel	<b>YES</b> <b>Act:</b> "I would like to appear as a student; the wallet is pink, this would bolster my credibility." <b>Rationale:</b> "I'm lying to myself about the ownership of the wallet but this chick is still human and my comrades don't get it."
Mattia	<b>NO</b> <b>Reason:</b> "I support Joseph and add that first and foremost those who lost their wallets should be more responsible."

Much of the group, unexpectedly, decided not to intervene and observe the teacher's decision. Gabriel specifically asked to intervene **after the** teacher's choice so that he could observe her choice. The woman decided to take the money and leave the wallet on the floor. Gabriele, at this point, took action by picking up the wallet and asking the woman if she had seen anyone around. The tense lecturer said that she had not seen anyone and that she was sorry that someone had taken the money. Gabriel preferred to retreat, taking the wallet with him and adding it to his inventory. The group, after railing against the woman's character, discussed in depth the values that a person in the role of a teacher should possess for themselves and their students.

Lunch time arrived and the group decided to split up: Mattia and Andrea went to the meeting place with the drug dealer while Gabriel and Joseph went to the food court.



*Mattia and Andrea (drug issue).*

Behind the cafeteria, there appears to be a large room leading to the anteroom of cold storage.

Sitting on a box is a bald man intent on eating vegetables from a transparent container.

The group remains invisible in the room when Federico (the student involved) enters the room. The two look at each other for a moment, after which Federico refers to the man as "*professor*." This is Tiziano Castaldi, the school's vice principal and chemistry professor. The professor seems to be blackmailing Federico: the boy, in the past, was caught by Tiziano smoking marijuana and has since threatened to fail him and turn him over to the authorities if he did not start dealing his stuff. Federico is in distress as he no longer wants to continue this life of fear. The boy, not yielding to blackmail, has already failed once for misconduct under pressure from the vice principal.

The warned principal seems not to arrive, the players are, therefore, asked if they wish to intervene and the reason for their choice.

PLAYER	INTERVENTION
Mattia	<p>YES</p> <p>Act: "I would like to appear as the principal and block it."</p> <p>Rationale: "This school is full of problems, and this one really crosses the line."</p>
Andrea	<p>NO</p> <p>Motivation: "I want to observe Matthias."</p>

Mattia intervenes and unexpectedly the vice-principal greets him with a phrase that leaves the group stunned, "*Oh! Finally you've arrived Veroni*." The group realizes that the principal and vice principal agree to threaten the boy. The latter throws himself to his knees and begins to cry, saying that he is living a nightmare and cannot

go on. Mattia, appearing as the principal, approaches the boy to reassure him but it is too late: the boy pulls out a gun and shoots the vice principal.

The play session, at this point, focused entirely on the choices made about the issue. The group discussed intensely what was done and what was possible about the boy's issue. Matthias, especially, chided the group for wasting time behind purely unnecessary issues such as the question of sexuality and wallet.

Conversely, the group scolds Matthias for underestimating minor moral issues and that everything can escalate into something bigger.

*Gabriel and Joseph (school cafeteria)*

At the same time as the drug issue, an issue takes place in the school cafeteria. A boy attracts the attention of the two players: Roberto Salgemini, the school representative. The latter is intent on talking in a rather concerned tone with a girl who seems to be listening to him very attentively. As they get closer, the players discover that Roberto is talking to his friend about a particular act he has committed: his parents are very proud of his grades and school goals, but it seems that not everything he has done is "his own doing."

He has cheated in many tests and falsified many of the grades by taking advantage of his position on the school board. The girl is left alone after a few seconds and appears to be conflicted.

*Session 3*

The session resumes behind the girl's back. Players are, therefore, asked if they would like to intervene, and if so, to state how they would like to intervene, as well as the reasons for their choice.

PLAYER	INTERVENTION
Joseph	<p style="text-align: center;">YES</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Act: "I would like to appear as a friend of the girl who overheard the conversation."</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Rationale: "I could advise you on what to do. Honesty is important, and trust has to be earned."</p>
Gabriel	<p style="text-align: center;">YES</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Act: "I would like to appear as the sister of the friend chosen by Joseph."</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Rationale: "I can't stand blowhards, but I'm conflicted about Roberto's motivation for doing this: family is often a reason for reckless actions."</p>

The discussion was very long. The girl, Sara, turned out to be Roberto's girlfriend, and she has been keeping the secret inside for a long time: her boyfriend is often the victim of pressure from his father but she knows that he is not a bad guy and that perhaps revealing his actions to the class council would stop this series of unjust acts of his but, at the same time, she is afraid of losing him and ruining his reputation. After a long discussion, the girl has decided to reveal everything and that she is willing to lose him rather than let his misdeeds pass.

A gunshot, however, breaks the tranquility, and within 30 minutes the school is stormed by the police. The group reunites and the story ends with the aftermath of the whole adventure.

- Federico is taken away by the police and charged with murder. The boy will explain everything, and Principal Veroni will be arrested.
- The short-haired girl will *come-out* a week later at the prom and find, contrary to her predictions, many people supporting her.
- Sara reveals what she knows about her boyfriend who, blinded by anger, decides to leave her. Some time later she acknowledges her faults and (after the wrath of her father and mother) decides to follow only her life.
- The teacher who stole the money from the wallet will go unpunished.

3.2. Data analysis

The game dynamics through which participants expressed their positions with respect to different problem situations, activating their moral reasoning, enabled the pursuit of the two research objectives: that of attesting to the participants' level of moral development and that of testing the survey instrument.

With reference to the first objective, the responses to the game prompts of the three groups of participants were recorded and analyzed in relation to the various stages of moral development theorized by Kohlberg.

Below are the graphic representations and analyses of Group 1's responses to the 5 moral questions proposed by the game in correspondence to the stages of moral development theorized by Kohlberg.

	Group 1																			
	Andrea					Joseph					Gabriel					Mattia				
Situations	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
No Position	x			x	x		x		x			x				x			x	x
Stage 1						x					x									
Stage 2																				
Stage 3																				
Stage 4		x								x										x
Stage 5																				
Stage 6			x					x					x		x					x

Table 1. Graphical representation of the answers of group 1 to the moral questions proposed by the game in correspondence to the stages of moral development theorised by Kohlberg

It is observed that, in the table, most of the choices made by the players (13 - 18 years old) fall in *No Position*, a total of nine cases. These are followed by five choices located in *Stage 6* (*i.e.*, the stage that for Kohlberg corresponds to full moral

autonomy of the subject). Next there is Stage 4 (i.e., the stage that corresponds to the moral tendency to maintain social order and respect for laws, with three cases), followed by two in *Stage 1* (i.e., the stage in which the person totally delegates moral responsibility to an authority), while there is only one case in Stage 5 (i.e., the stage that sees in the person a morality that arises from within). Finally, none of the players' choices fell into *Stages 2* (corresponding to a selfish attitude) and 3 (corresponding to an attitude of overcoming selfishness, but not yet with an autonomous morality).

It is noteworthy, in reference to the cases of those who chose *No Position* in the various dilemma situations in which they participated, that Andrew and Matthias do not act immediately out of a need to learn more about the situation and initiate moral reasoning. It is therefore a choice that signals moral autonomy. Differently, Joseph and Gabriel do not act to avoid problems; the situation is larger than their scope; therefore, they avoid it or tend to delegate it. These are logics that are repeated in the other situations.

#### *4. Conclusions*

Kohlberg's theory suggests that adolescence is a period when a transition from heteronomous to autonomous morality begins and develops.

Finally, it should be noted, with reference to the cases of those who chose "No Position" in the various dilemma situations in which they participated, that the children do not act immediately out of a need to learn more about the situation and initiate moral reasoning.

An analysis of the data reveals a situation in which there is a prevalence of responses denoting moral autonomy and a tendency toward discussion and moral reasoning, although there were cases in which players preferred to remain silent, abstain, or delegate any interventions to external authorities.

This picture can be read as a physiological course of play since the members of the three groups belong to an age group that places them in the midst of adolescence and early youth: an age group in which, according to Kohlberg, indeed the transition from heteronomous to autonomous morality should be fully developed.

From observation, then, of the level and mode of participation in the game activities, it can be concluded that this tool fully meets its intended purpose, since it involves cognitive and emotional involvement equal to the involvement that would intervene in a real dilemma situation.

It will be the care of further experimentation and administration of *Dilemma* in various age groups to enable its further refinement and validation.

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