

STRATEGIES FOR TRAINING AND INCLUSION: STORYTELLING

STRATEGIE PER LA FORMAZIONE E L'INCLUSIONE: LO STORYTELLING

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to underline the importance of Storytelling as a tool to promote training and inclusion processes. The construct of inclusion, declined in the school environment, is an expression of meaning and significance and allows the maximum possible development of everyone's abilities and potential. Storytelling allows you to broaden your cognitive sphere and allows you to express emotions.

Obiettivo del presente paper è sottolineare l'importanza dello Storytelling come strumento per favorire i processi di formazione e inclusione. Il costrutto dell'inclusione, declinato nell'ambiente scolastico, è espressione di senso e significato e permette il massimo sviluppo possibile delle capacità e delle potenzialità di ciascuno. Lo storytelling permette di ampliare la sfera conoscitiva e consente di esprimere le emozioni.

KEYWORDS

Inclusion, Training, Storytelling
Inclusione, Formazione, Storytelling

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Introduction

The storytelling can be considered as the hallmark of humanity and it is corroborated by its universal and pervasive character. Every day we receive proposals from the many narrative agencies we come across during daily conversations. We spend much of our time telling stories to other individuals, and half of this time is spent producing and interpreting spontaneous narratives. The act of narrating acquires a heuristic value comparable to problem solving: if on the one hand it deals with conveying meanings, on the other hand it is committed to constructing the meanings themselves. As human beings, we tell stories to make sense of our experiences: the narrative mind, addicted to meanings, is a factory that produces stories predisposed to identify meaningful patterns (Bruner 2006). How individuals learn to "do things with words" (Austin 1962) has been a hotly debated question in recent decades. Chomsky's theory suggests the presence of an original disposition, i.e. a package of innate abilities that resides in specific brain areas, responsible for language processing and other forms of learning (Baldi and Savoia 2018). Starting from an observation of the mental processes involved in the elaboration of stories, in line with the idea that narration is the founding principle of cognitive structures, it is possible to affirm that the mechanisms responsible for the organization of experiential data have a predominantly narrative character. In this regard, an analysis of the formal aspects of the story allows us to define narration as a strategy of recapitulation of experience, that is, of the narrative world that follows the developments of the narrated events. In an attempt to outline the contours of the mind from which the ability to tell stories comes to life – an ability that contributes to defining human nature in a profound way – this paper aims to show the effectiveness of narrative practice within complex training courses and in educational contexts.

1. Autism Spectrum Disorder

The word "Autism" derives from *Autòs* and means "oneself", it indicates a relational closure and consequently communication and social difficulties. It is a neurodevelopmental disorder that arises in the first 2 years of a child's life and mainly involves language and social interaction, manifesting itself through stereotyped and repetitive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The term autism was first used in psychiatry by Eugen Bleuler in 1911 to describe one

of the symptoms of schizophrenia, which found isolation as one of its main characteristics. We find ourselves in a historical period in which psychiatric disorders converged into neuroses, affective diseases and schizophrenia and attempts were made to diagnose them in children just as in adults, showing little attention to them. Childhood psychiatric disorders were then confused with schizophrenia. In the 1940s, Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger made major changes to the definition of autism as an independent diagnostic category. In 1943 the Austrian psychiatrist, Leo Kanner, published "*Autistic disturbances of affective contact*", highlighting the common characteristics of eleven children observed. From a relational point of view, they preferred solitary play and had difficulty forming meaningful bonds, tending towards isolation. From a communicative point of view, a delay in learning and difficulties in interpersonal communication was highlighted, mainly due to the literal interpretation of what was said to them. All of the children observed had a good memory and repetitive behavior characterized by stereotypies. The psychiatrist focused especially on one child, Donald Triplett, who seemed to manifest a state of serenity when left alone, moreover, he noticed that when the child referred to himself he spoke in the third person. Hans Asperger was the second pioneer in the field of autism, having helped to bring about great innovations in the field. In his research, Asperger's also describes subjects with few and repetitive interests who liked to spend time alone but did not have linguistic and cognitive deficits. During the conversations, it was noticed that in these children the non-verbal behavior was not consistent with the topic being discussed. They had a good memory, however, they had difficulty in complying with social norms. While for Asperger's the symptoms of the disorder do not manifest themselves in the first years of life, Kanner speaks of early childhood autism, to emphasize the onset at birth. Despite the research and innovations made by Kanner and Asperger, in the DSM I, published in 1952, autism still did not find a proper place but was still considered a symptom of schizophrenia. Towards the end of the 1970s, the conditions for a definition of autism as an independent syndrome began to emerge, also thanks to the intervention of the English psychiatrist Michael Rutter. Rutter, starting from Kanner's considerations, stated that symptoms should emerge early and manifest themselves through communication and relational difficulties, the presence of rigidity and atypical behaviors. In 1980, the category of "childhood autism" was introduced into the DSM III, defining it as *Generalized Developmental Disorder*, meaning "a class of disorders, biologically determined, with onset before the age of 3, characterized by abnormalities in social interaction, impaired verbal communication, and limited repertoire of interests and activities." A few years later, with the publication of the DSM, the diagnosis of autism

presupposes the impairment of 3 areas: social interaction, communication, repetitive interests. With the publication of DSM IV in 1994, the diagnostic category of Generalized Developmental Disorders, also called *Pervasive Developmental Disorders* (PDDs), included:

- Autistic disorder;
- Asperger's Syndrome;
- Childhood Disintegrative Disorder;
- Rett Syndrome;
- Pervasive Developmental Disorder

It is in 2014 with the publication of the DSM V that the most significant turning point occurs, including the syndromes previously listed under the category of Autism Spectrum Disorders. The word "spectrum", in Autism Spectrum Disorders, indicates the variety through which the disorder manifests itself, grouping various syndromes in a single category based on the elements of similarity and differentiating them by degrees of severity. With the DSM V, Autism Spectrum Disorders are defined according to two criteria (and no longer three as in the previous DSM): Qualitative impairment of social interaction and communication, referring to:

- Deficit of socio-emotional reciprocity, consisting of the inability to enter into a relationship with others;
- Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors, linked to atypical eye contact and body language or lack of facial expressiveness and comprehension;
- Deficits in the development, management and understanding of relationships, referring to difficulty in pretend play or disinterest in others.

Symptoms should come on early and should limit the child's daily functioning, requiring help. Functioning also depends on intellectual and linguistic abilities which affect the level of severity of the disorder (Gallese, 2006). It should be noted that this level can change over time depending on the contexts in which the person is inserted. As far as executive functions are concerned, we observe:

- Difficulty inhibiting a response;
- Deficits in the planning of actions;
- Deficits in cognitive and emotional flexibility;
- Attention deficit disorder

The causes of autism are still unknown, but for a long time they were attributed to a psychopathology of the parents. This was the theorization carried out by the psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim who, in 1959, published the work *The diagnoses of autism can be found in all countries of the world, it is not a rare condition and in*

recent years cases are increasing. This is because research is advancing, allowing more diagnoses to be determined. An interesting element that has emerged is the relationship between autism and epilepsy, so much so that we can speak of comorbid epileptic comorbidity for about 30-40% of cases with autism. These percentages increase in cases of intellectual retardation. For this reason, many scholars focused their research on the detection of organic damage to the brain. In addition, the presence of intellectual disability in many autistic patients increasingly suggested a neurobiological cause. Also in the biological field it has been highlighted, for example, that some children with autism have a very large head circumference and others, on the other hand, very small.

2. Autism and Cognitive Competence

People with autism, in addition to difficulties in the language and relational areas, also have an impairment of the simulation mechanisms that allow them to repeat the behaviors implemented by others. Lack of imitative ability can limit the autistic person's learning autonomy. In general, they tend to avoid eye contact and have difficulty recognizing other people's thoughts and emotions (Muratori, 2020). The person with autism must, necessarily, be considered as a person who learns differently than others, therefore, the teaching methods must be calibrated to his characteristics and consider his learning style. It is considered of primary importance to be able to exploit the peculiarities of the syndrome to help the child in learning, for example to insist on repetitive interests (Gaus, 2007). From a communicative point of view, the difficulties manifest themselves differently according to the specificity of each one: some do not speak, others express themselves with echoes (they repeat what they hear others say) others are able to speak correctly. Autism is not a learning disorder but its characteristics, such as a lack of imitative ability, can hinder the process (Orsolini, 2019). In addition, the latest research has shown that autism does not always present in conjunction with intellectual disability and is often diagnosed in children with good underlying functioning. Generally, people with autism tend to favor the visual channel: visual aids, such as images, photographs, diagrams, facilitate and improve the autonomy and communication of these people, resulting in valuable aids for achieving greater independence in daily life.

3. The narrative: story and evolution

The term *narration* comes from Latin and means "to make known an action." It could be said that the narrative was born with the very birth of man, since there is

no civilization that has not made use of it to transmit its knowledge and traditions (Smorti, 2007). It is an important interpretative tool that has allowed man to be able to know the world in which he lives and make it known to posterity through the written form. In ancient times, beliefs were handed down through the use of myths and legends. In the fourth century B.C., Plato used the story, in the form of *a myth*, to explain borderline concepts that were difficult to interpret and to make his teaching more usable. Myth is a fictional tale, in which real topics are dealt with with the purpose of explaining the mysteries of the world, the meaning of life and answering questions about human existence. For example, with the "myth of the cave" Plato expressed his vision of knowledge, while with the "myth of the winged chariot" he illustrated his theory of the soul. Plato presented his myths using *dialogue*, since it "aims to strip the soul of prejudices and appearances and lead it to contemplate what is beautiful and good." Plato's dialogue originates from the teachings of his teacher Socrates who, as is well known, used *orality* to allow his interlocutors to "give birth" to the truth. It serves to develop critical and creative thinking, to create relationships between interlocutors and to give everyone the opportunity to express themselves and to confront those who have an opinion different from their own, as it consists in the relationship of an "I" with a "you". According to Plato, myth, however simplistic, could be in support of rational thought, that is, of the *Logos*. For the scholar Mario Vegetti, one of the functions of myth is that of a didactic strategy for the understanding of the philosophical message, through the use of images.^{tag} Storytelling has always existed and consists of a spontaneous mechanism that involves all peoples and all cultures. In 1986, the American psychologist Jerome Bruner defined narration as a *peculiar cognitive form*, distinguishing two types of thought with which one can manage and organize knowledge of the world but also structure its experience:

- paradigmatic thinking, i.e. concrete and analytical thinking, typical of the scientific field that aims to resolve ambiguities;
- Narrative thinking, based on the criterion of verisimilitude, deals with people, relationships and imagination. It is linked to the desire to expand one's knowledge, but also to knowing how to listen and to be able to choose.

According to Bruner, narratives are characteristic of the ultimate cognitive modality and allow for a deep knowledge of ourselves and a subsequent revelation to others. The stories we tell allow us to make a part of ourselves known. Narrative thinking is therefore based on the construction of stories, organized through a specific structure that refers to very specific elements, such as *cause and effect*, *spatio-*

temporal and emotional *and* relational *elements* . Bruner identifies nine attributes of narrative thinking presented in Table 1:

SEQUENTIALITY		Succession of thunderstorm of narrated events.
PARTICULARITY	And	In narration to people of reference.
CONCRETENESS		
INTENTIONALITY		Events are driven by aims, opinions, feelings, and moods.
REFERENTIAL OPACITY		The story must be coherent rather than realistic, as it talks about the feelings of the characters and not It is interesting to distinguish the true from the false.
MODULARITY		Importance of context for understand the events narrated.
HERMENEUTICS		
VIOLATION	OF	There are breaks of normality, events and turning points.
CANONICITY		
PENTADIC COMPOSITION		In a narrative we always find five elements: an actor, an action, a purpose, a scene, an instrument, organized according to an alternation of balance, imbalance, recomposition of balance.
UNCERTAINTY		Use of language metaphoric and lack linearity.
BELONGING TO A GENDER		Each narrative takes on a constant tone and style.

Table 1. Narrative comprehension (our elaboration)

Narrative thinking tries to represent the verisimilitude of the world and for this reason it takes place in everyday life, where it is necessary to make choices. The choices to be made cannot wait and therefore must be free from the complex concatenations of deductive thinking. Bruner, speaking of narrative thinking, recently identified two characteristics:

- interpretative dimension, configuring itself as a founding and stabilizing element of a culture and, at the same time, an innovative tool of the same;
- dimension of the narrative creation of the self, i.e. dimension of subjective construction but also openness to the other.

Storytelling is a universal tool that allows us to make sense of what is happening in the world, to combine past experience with future experience, and to build our own identity as it allows us to tell ourselves about ourselves to others (Grey, 2016). Storytelling allows us to broaden our sphere of knowledge, both of ourselves and

of others, but also of the world around us, helping us to find answers to the questions we ask ourselves every day; It allows us to make ourselves known and express our emotions. Emotionality plays a crucial role in the cognitive process of the human being, since there is no knowledge without an emotional component, in fact, all our memories are linked to the emotion we felt.

4. Storytelling at school.

Storytelling is a technique that has as its main purpose the attribution of meanings to everything that surrounds us. It is a social practice widely used to create memory, but also as a learning or entertainment tool. According to the American psychologist Daniel Taylor, we are all the product of the stories we have lived and heard, which is why storytelling can be considered a formative tool for the construction of meanings. The story has the characteristic of being able to express various meanings, taking the form of an opening to the world. According to Bruner, the school must "cultivate its narrative capacity, develop it, stop taking it for granted." This is with a view to considering narration as a valid educational and training tool thanks to its interpretative property that allows us to recover the meaning of the teaching-learning activity. The subject, through narrative practice, is able to be more involved in the learning process because it allows a greater awareness of himself and the surrounding world. The American psychologist and pedagogue considers storytelling as a means of transmitting values and, for this reason, recommends the use of fairy tales starting from kindergarten (Johnson et al., 2015). It is necessary to make a distinction between fairy tales and fairy tales: fairy tales, generally, are short stories with animals that behave like human beings, while fairy tales represent a narrative whose stories concern fantastic events or characters and whose purpose is formative or moral growth. According to the Italian writer and pedagogue Gianni Rodari, the fairy tale is the place of possibilities, since it is configured as a cognitive tool of the world (Nordberg et al., 2015). Fairy tales offer new educational perspectives, expanding everyone's imaginative abilities and allowing a continuum between emotional aspect and rationality, helping the child in his growth. Narratives tend to emotionally engage the reader or listener who will be able to attribute meaning to them through the correspondence of real events that they experience in the first person. Through stories, children can learn to recognize the emotions they feel, to name the feelings and emotions of others, developing empathy and emotional intelligence that will help them cope with everyday life and relate to others (Eco, 2020). For this reason, it is appropriate for the teacher to use this teaching tool to help children, already in early childhood, to develop these interpretative skills of themselves and of

others. It must start from childhood and continue in all school grades, since this tool can be a valid support for pupils who have particular needs, more or less serious. They are especially valuable aids for children who have an emotional deficit, such as students with Autism Spectrum Disorders, who demonstrate difficulties in managing emotions. It would be appropriate, for people with these difficulties, to act didactically to allow them to recognize and understand their own and others' emotions, helping them to express them. Knowing one's own and others' emotions means being able to enter into a meaningful relationship with others and, for those with difficulties of this type, it is a tool to help with social interaction (Tigoli et al., 2012). In the case of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, it would be appropriate to associate the narratives with a series of images and/or photographs in order to improve and facilitate memorization. The teacher plays the important role of supporting the student's entire cognitive process, identifying the techniques and strategies suitable for achieving the set educational objectives, taking into account the skills and abilities possessed by the student, considered elements from which to start to implement this process. In this way, it provides *scaffolding* to compensate for the gap between what is being called upon to do and the student's limited abilities, thus helping him or her to improve the skills possessed through the development of skills. The teacher must understand the cognitive style of the student with autism spectrum disorder and create a suitable course of study that allows him/her to progress.

5. Narrative Process and Storytelling

Storytelling is the art of telling stories and has ancient origins, precisely because the telling of stories, as already mentioned, is a practice that has always been used by men to communicate and relate to each other. The practicality of this tool is given by the ability of our brain to synthesize information at a multisensory level when it is presented to it in the form of a narrative. Since 1993 it has become a teaching methodology that seeks to highlight and explain reality, expressing emotions. Storytelling consists of learning through the telling of stories, which is why it is widely used in education, configuring itself as an inclusive learning method. It is an educational strategy that makes it possible to overcome the many problems that afflict students at school, as it allows them to learn while having fun, reducing the risks associated with attention deficit and, consequently, learning; it allows you to understand and compare yourself with others, strengthens identity, self-esteem, recognition of the other and personal growth (Mittino, 2013). Storytelling allows

the student to build *StoryBoards*, i.e. a sequence of images that visually tell a plot, using a textual mode (creating dialogues, a different ending to a known story, a fictional tale) or a multimedia mode (narrating emotions through photography, creating narrative videos). Today we talk more and more about Digital Storytelling, i.e. the narration of stories through the use of digital tools and elements in different formats (text, images, video, audio). This tool allows the acquisition of transversal skills, such as self-awareness, learning to learn and the development of digital competence. It develops creativity and the ability to relate to others, to express one's own emotions and to understand those of others (Figure 1). The construction of a Digital Storytelling is developed through eight fundamental steps: the initial idea; Research-Explore-Learn; Write the script; the Storyboard; Search for images, audio and video; the composition; online sharing; The final reflection.

Figure 1. Digital Storytelling Process



The final step is dedicated to reflection that allows you to analyze the activity carried out and the results obtained, understood not only in a didactic sense but also in an emotional and relational sense (Ohler, 2013). Storytelling is also a valid tool for the training of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, especially through the creation of Social Stories. *Social Stories* are intervention strategies, created in 1991 by Carol Gray with the aim of improving the social skills of people with autism. They consist of short stories, which follow specific structural criteria, to help children with difficulties understand how to behave in certain situations and for the management of interpersonal relationships. They are constructed with reference to concrete facts or events, are written in the first person, and are often

accompanied by illustrative images. A Social Story is a story that tells, through text and illustrations, a social situation that is of significant value for children with autism who, as we know, have abnormalities in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interactions and imagination, together with a restricted repertoire of interests and activities. Their way of seeing the world may be different than children with typical development. According to Carol Gray, simple Social Stories must contain *descriptive sentences, i.e. accurate descriptions, subjective sentences, i.e. information about what others think, and directive sentences, i.e. information about the most appropriate type of behavior to implement in that particular context*³². It will be important to use images, read and repeat the story to allow easier memorization.

Conclusions

The analysis carried out showed how an activity that has always existed, such as storytelling, has developed to this day, taking on forms that are still evolving. The narrative, as we have seen, was born with the aim of handing down traditions and to allow men to enter into relationships with each other. Over the centuries, it has increasingly become a teaching tool, useful for simplifying very complex concepts. Through narration, great scientists, philosophers and scholars have expressed themselves to theorize and make understood their thoughts that have been the basis of great discoveries. Today, in the post-modern age, we find ourselves using the same tool in different forms, through the construction and programming of robots. In this way, we allow digital natives to get in touch with technologies that are closer to their way of thinking. We are talking about a phenomenon, this of educational robotics, still in development which, certainly, in the future will be more easily within everyone's reach, also for economic reasons that are currently out of the way of many's budgets. We must conceive of these educational robots as a product of our time that in the coming years will increasingly take on the characteristics to be destined for the multitude. Just think of the first computer or mobile phone, initially inaccessible economically but which over the years have become tools owned by everyone, regardless of social background. We live in an era that has allowed us to witness great inventions and the future can only improve them, always respecting human beings.

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