

Analisi delle relazioni razionali ed emotive in contesto di contaminazione formativa

Analysis of rational and emotional relations in a context of formative contamination

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Abstract

This article aims to report observations related to a project of “educational contamination” in which disabled adults spend time in a nursery, becoming reference figures for children. Their intervention is mediated by educators who guide the parties not only in coordinating school time, but, above all, in managing relationships and emotions. The association of the terms “rational and emotional” with reference to the relationship indicates the possibility of obtaining emotional well-being by making use of one’s thinking skills in a rational and constructive way (Ellis, 1993).

Questo articolo intende riportare le osservazioni relative ad un progetto di “contaminazione educativa” in cui, a rotazione, gruppi di adulti disabili, sono introdotti in un contesto di asilo nido a diretto contatto con soggetti in prima infanzia. Attraverso la relazione razionale ed emotiva teorizzata da Ellis (1993), diventano le figure di riferimento per i bambini. Il loro intervento è mediato da educatori che guidano le parti non solo nel coordinamento del tempo scolastico, ma soprattutto nella gestione delle relazioni e delle emozioni. L’associazione dei termini “razionale ed emotivo” con riferimento alla relazione indica la possibilità di ottenere il benessere emotivo facendo uso delle proprie capacità di pensiero in modo razionale e costruttivo (Ellis, 1993).

Keywords

Adult disability; Early childhood; Pedagogical Contamination; Emotional Intelligence.

Disabilità adulta; Prima Infanzia, Contaminazione Pedagogica, Intelligenza Emotiva.

Introduction¹

This work aims to observe the dynamics of the relationship which take place within a contamination project involving an adult group of people, with cognitive disabilities, placed in a nursery. The inclusion requires that the disabled person interacts with the children having the opportunity to experience one's self as a reference adult figure, aimed to satisfy the needs of children. The introduction of the disabled person is not for business purposes, although it is demanding, but it has an inclusive and enabling purpose. Their introduction provides that they spend their time in the nursery for two or three hours of activity per week, for a duration of service of about six months. This choice has been taken in order to manage the difficulties that most people, with cognitive disabilities, demonstrate within a professional environment, not so much in the practical performance of the role, but in the management of work "pressure" constituted by comorbidity of urge.

The proposed analysis is transversal because it reflects on the different pedagogical areas necessary for the educational agency to stimulate both neuro-psycho-social and motor development of children, and to increase emotional intelligence, critical thinking and the skills of autonomy of the disabled adult.

The study takes its assumptions from reflections on the development of emotional awareness. At the time of his birth, the child experiences feelings and perceptions, in relation to the others, that according to some authors can be defined as emotions (Ekman, 2008). Through this relationship, in particular through the representation of oneself and of the other, mental activity is shaped and processed. Emotional development is directly proportional to cognitive development: the acquisition of the most complex social emotions and the ability to manage them imply a broad cognitive articulation (Bosi, 2001).

Primary emotions (joy, sadness, anger, disgust, fear) are aroused and activated by perceptive inducements, while all the others depend barely and exclusively on an activity of thought that can also be unrelated to specific circumstances. Fear, for example, can be aroused both by a stimulus and by a thought, such as the child's concern for his mother when she comes out of his visual field (AA.VV. 2000). Emotions are discriminated from an early age, especially as they are linked to basic feelings of pleasure and displeasure, as well as their manner of expression and their management. They are strongly influenced by cultural belongings. These are complex learning mechanisms which do not occur only by imitation. On one side, there is the learning of rules and complex cognitive distinctions such as knowing how to discriminate emotions, thoughts and contexts, on the other hand empathic learning or emotional decentralization.

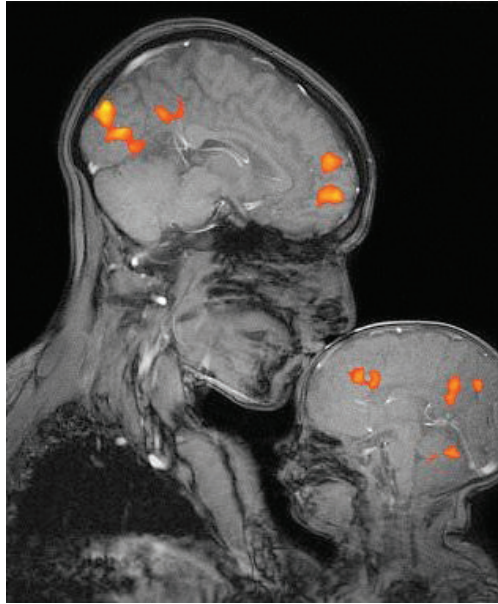
Within any educational intervention, emotions represent the main foundation of cognitive learning. There is no learning without emotion and there is no education without emotional involvement (Vygotskij L. S., 1934a). The educational relationship is based on forms of gratification or disapproval and reinforcement. The child's development proceeds through experiences of frustration and gratification and both can be internal and external (Bosi, 2018):

- Internal frustrations are determined by the child's sense of powerlessness, the need for dependency and for centrality;
- External frustrations come from the decisions of adults and from having to be submitted to their rules;
- Internal rewards emerge from doing, from the pleasure of the game, from the sense of competence and success;
- External rewards are linked to the forms of approval, acceptance, confirmation by the adult.

¹ Il manoscritto è il risultato di un lavoro collettivo degli autori, il cui specifico contributo è da riferirsi come segue: Stefania Morsanuto paragrafi 2 e 3 e 4; Margot Zanetti paragrafo 5; Francesco Peluso Cassese paragrafi 1, Introduzione e Conclusioni

The rewards are transformed into positive perceptions, in forms of self-approval and they play an important role in the learning process as they determine safety, self-confidence and contribute to the construction of one's sense of self-worth. On the contrary, frustrations create a sense of inadequacy and non-acceptance of the self in the child.

This leads to a single affirmation: there is no learning without emotional relationship, or rather without the relationship between the newborn and the mother or with any caregiver. It is this relationship that builds, supports the child's motivation and ensures that there is a positive emotional response (Goleman, 1995).



This MRI image shows researcher Dr Rebecca Saxe cuddling her baby, with the brain regions responsive lit up. The image was created by MIT: researchers have found that the brains of babies as young as four months old process vision much alike as adults do.

The MRI scan reveals the moment in which a child's brain recognizes its mother. The visual cortex is the part of the brain that processes all the visual information. It is highly specialized in areas that process specific images such as faces.

Children as young as four months behave like adults, suggesting that these brain skills develop during the first months of life.

The learning process is based on intrinsic motivation and on inhibition and identification mechanisms, processes that initially involve primary reference figures, her parents, and subsequently extra-family figures such as teachers and peers. The child imitates and identifies with the people she loves and from whom she wishes to be loved.

Emotional education starts from the first days of life through the words, actions, modalities of those who take care of the child. It is influenced by the way of being, the personal relational mode, the management of emotions and the feelings of the adult (Camaioni, Di Blasio, 2007).

1. Emotions and their expressions: innate or culturally learned?

There is no universally accepted definition of emotion, as well as of feeling. Considering the emotional reaction as triggered by something that different brain systems consider important for the well-being of the subject (Ekman, 2008), for a long time in the neuroscientific world it is

believed that the word “emotion” is just a label (Le Doux , 1996). The brain systems that generate emotional behaviours are preserved by numerous layers of evolutionary history. What is necessary to be discovered, therefore, is not so much what, for example, is a state of conscious fear or the consequent responses, but which is the system that detects the danger. Feelings and physiological reactions attributed to them are both effects caused by the activity of the system, which operates these functions unconsciously. The consequences are formed by different aspects orchestrated by the brain (Le Doux, 2012).

The debate concerning systems, conventionally called “emotions”, is enormous: their definition, but also their contents, and their expression are matter of discussion. Are the emotions innate or culturally acquired? Do the names used to describe them have the same internal content? Are the physiological and muscular reactions to those internal states universally recognizable?

Following a Darwinian evolutionary line, emotions are innate and universal inner states as well as emotional impulses to physical action, obviously including facial expressions (Ekman & Matsumoto, 2011). The brain of the newborn has already both the fundamental themes, or triggers of every single emotion on a general level, and the variations, that are the specific events. These reactions are triggered so quickly that the person is not aware of the mental processes that elicited them. Evaluation mechanisms are considered automatic and it is assumed that there are many. Instead, within the same line of thought, there are those who only consider the themes as innate, while the variations would be culturally acquired.

In contrast, there are researchers who believe that emotions are conceptually and culturally constructed in their entirety (Barrett & Russell, 2015). People would experience an emotion conceptualizing an affectional feeling. Emotional experience is thus an act of categorization guided by an “embodied” knowledge of emotion (Barrett, 2006). Indeed, literature shows that emotion cannot be measured objectively and that many of the emotional experiences are not psychologically primitive (therefore simple and universal). If emotions are experiences built with a conceptual act, the way people learn the emotional categories and use this knowledge determines *a priori* what they see and hear, for one’s self, based on natural feelings of pleasure or displeasure. An infant therefore, not yet possessing the level of cognition necessary for conceptualization, would not experience any emotion if not somatovisceral, motor and sensory states which will be framed in a given content only with the learning of language (Barrett & Russell, 2015). Until that moment they would not be definable as emotions. The awareness of previous experiences and the guides that the child will have to understand and categorize them will be fundamental.

This last aspect is of great importance: although the two schools of thought reported here diverge on almost every aspect, for both the education to the understanding of the sensations considered emotions is fundamental. Emotions are in fact something that happens to the subject rather than something that he makes happen. There is so little control over them, that they can flood the consciousness: at this point in evolution, in fact, the brain presents connections which start from the emotional, “limbic”, systems and reach the cognitive ones, more numerous and stronger compared to those in the opposite path (Le Doux, 2012). It is therefore essential for a better emotional and cognitive development that from an early age the sensations defined as “emotion” are understood, guided and educated, regardless of the aetiology attributed to them.

2. Pedagogy of relationships

What builds the child’s personality and mind is the relationship with the adult. However, to make the educator’s feelings and emotions an educational resource, it is necessary to be aware of them.

The main element in the profession of the educator is the knowledge of oneself, of one’s own emotional dynamics and of the awareness that one’s personal history, experiences and ex-

pectations influence the educational style.

At the same time it is necessary to be aware that the personal way of being is in turn influenced by relationships.

Emotional awareness derives from a process of growth and personal commitment and it is never a definitive acquisition. Each educator must reflect on his own emotions, on the discomfort and intolerance that each child gives him, because the impression of each of them can be conditioned by the aspects mentioned above. The same can be true for the learner: his misunderstood emotional and relational difficulties influence his perception of the educational figure and this can create complications in the relationship.

Empathic listening therefore becomes fundamental especially in facing certain behaviours such as restlessness, discomfort and aggression.

The educator must predispose his self to listening and to the emotional decentralization of the child (Hoffman, 1991; Winnicott, 1968). From the educational figure, in fact, the child receives on one side feelings of affection and well-being and reinforcements for the construction of a positive identity, on the other side, can receive feelings of hostility or annoyance that lead to a development of a negative identity (Zanetti, 2018). This can make him feel unworthy of attention and love and lead to low self-esteem with his correlates. In the latter case, the learner will look for confirmation of his unlovable nature through a continuous request for attention, in a completely instinctive, unconscious manner, putting the adult in difficulty and assuming an obnoxious and provocative behaviour towards him.

The empathic understanding, therefore, lays the foundation for a good overcoming of the difficulties that can arise between educator and child. This can find a possible resistance especially in conditions of discomfort for the child, such as the moment of the separation between him and the parent at the entrance of the nursery. In order to understand the child it is also necessary to consider the context in which it is inserted, which is at the same time physical, relational and emotional, and to figure out the reasons and meanings of his behaviours (Bosi, 2018).

The child needs stable emotional reference points in order to be able to grow, explore, orientate and compete by feeling protected and included at the same time.

In the 0-3 age group the foundations are laid for what will be the child's personality through the first relational experiences. A central role is occupied by the nursery school and the educator. In particular, the latter will become a point of reference. The quality of the relationship that the educator will establish with him will be decisive (Bosi, 2018).

Emotions, feelings and emotional dispositions implement and determine a unique relationship between each child and educator. The connection is in continuous evolution through the design of strategies aimed at approaching, meeting, and building mutual knowledge (Bosi, 2001).

2.1 Relations between peers

The peer group is one of the fundamental pillars both for the evolution of relationships and for the emotional support of each child (Winnicott, 1974). It has a dual function:

1. It stimulates social skills such as solidarity, the ability to resolve conflicts, to share and to compare oneself with others;
2. It represents an emotional gym where sensations like reassurance, acceptance and recognition come into play.

The group of children becomes a space for meetings, emotional exchanges, confrontations, support and discoveries, a place where first relationships are established and the sense of fraternity is experienced. But to make the relationship within a group as equal as possible, the educator must support, promote and mediate that link so that the child maintains his own subjectivity and feels he belongs to the context.

2.1.1 Relations between colleagues and the insert of the cognitive disabled

The collective dynamic within an educational group is a very complex experience as the group is an interdependent global unit composed by people who are able to express behaviours, values, culture, emotions and thoughts beyond every individual member and that must be able to work together, to collaborate, to share and to produce (Lewin, 1936).

The group dimension is one of the peculiarities of the nursery: there are groups of children, parents, educators, who are intertwined in everyday life. Each expressed content can affect the individual person, the group itself and the groups they communicate with. Unlike other school orders, in the nursery the educator does not work alone but he works in a team with the other colleagues, those present in his own section and those of the other sections, as it is up to the whole group of educators the task of elaborating the educational project and planning it, in relation to the age of the children and according to two institutional criteria:

1. the implementation of the regulation, the formation of the sections, respect for the numerical relationship, participation in social management and the relationship with families;
2. collaboration.

Group building is a tortuous process that requires the personal questioning of each individual from an intellectual and emotional point of view. The group can become a resource only if it is made up of people who have been able to fit together in mutual knowledge and respect (Bosi, 2011).

It is necessary to not underestimate the difficulty in maintaining stability over time which, even if previously achieved, it is put to a severe test when new operators entry. Both the arrival and departure of each element represents a critical moment for the group that requires new changes and new relational arrangements.

The creation of an “accepting”, “facilitating” context, available to welcome the other and to recognize his value requires availability and time dedicated to mutual knowledge, to the listening to the other, to tell him the story and the history of the nursery, to illustrate the educational project, the organizational structure and the strategies.

Within this framework it is inserted the figure of the disabled adult who arrives in this space and to the children with a personal baggage of “knowledge” acquired during his life, through the observation of the family and the people with whom he normally interacts. The nursery is the place par excellence in which the natural knowledge of child care has been transformed into a technical-scientific knowledge (Morsanuto, 2017).

Through this “contamination” the person with disabilities learns to select useful knowledge and transform it into immediately applicable skills. The operator rediscovers a simple and direct way of communication: in emotional meanings, empathic, transmitted in non-verbal and kineshetic forms (Morsanuto, 2017).

In addition to a process of adultization of the disabled that is experienced as a responsible and reference figure for children (Morsanuto, 2017), through observations relating to this activity it was noted that both the disabled adult and the children showed empathic actions and they had more control over their emotions.

This shows that emotional intelligence can also be implemented in a condition of cognitive delay. Goleman (1998) identifies five areas of competence for emotional performance:

1. Regulation of the emotions of the Self, or the ability to emphasize pleasant emotional states at the expense of negative ones.
2. Awareness of emotions, both in oneself and in others in order to manage various situations.
3. Motivational trends in order to channel emotions towards achieving goals.
4. Empathy.
5. Social skills.

According to Ellis' Rational Emotional Behavioral Therapy (REBT), suffering stems from personal beliefs, not life events. According to this theory we behave according to a scheme A B C:

A: event activating a thought, elicits a state of stress;

B: evaluation of oneself (inner dialogue) or others, are automatic thoughts, which can be rational or irrational, even negative;

C: emotional and behavioural reaction to thoughts (a consequence of B).

According to Ellis, therefore, to deal with a difficult situation it is important to act on irrational thinking and evaluate in favour of rationality. REBT argues that mental thoughts and attitudes are the main motives of emotions. Realities and emotions can therefore be negatively affected. Ultimately these cognitive distortions are wrong forms of thought.

Through the simplified ABC model, it is possible to intervene with the disabled person and help him to recognize his moods and those of children, to communicate with them adequately, managing and mediating emotional distress in front of failure (Fasciano, 2015).

To act change it is necessary to identify the irrational beliefs and the mental attitude that cause problems and refute them so that the old certainties lose control over emotions. (Fasciano, 2015). This leads the person with disabilities to open up to new emotional situations and to act a process of "cognitive restructuring".

3. The pedagogy of space

Space, for the child, is an opportunity to play, it is an emotional fact, not an architectural structure full of furnishings and materials.

The nursery, like the house, is the place where complex and diversified relationships between the child, the environment and others take place; it is the space where experiences, memories and affections are developed, through which the learner constructs her own identity, where he moves, manipulates, knows, explores, transforms, plays and feels emotions. The child lives in space, acts on it, builds paths, activities and develops strategies of exploration and appropriation. The use that the child makes of it and the way he moves in it reflect his personality, his evolutionary needs. A careful observation of this relationship will give the educator the knowledge of the child and his growth phase (Bosi, 2001).

The educational practice highlighted that the child needs to have boundaries and traces for his orientation, knowledge and understanding. Every single area of the educational space evokes solicitations of affectivity (disguises, trades, etc.), of motility (routes), of cognitive commitment (joints, explorations, manipulations, water games, etc.) and stresses that allow the child to create his own existential project in the relationship with reality (Bondioli, 1985; Saitta Restuccia, 1991).

Materials and toys, integral parts of space, are normally classified by the adult in cognitive, affective and motor (Bulgarelli, Dallari, Saitta, 1983):

- Cognitive: materials, games and toys that stimulate exploration, discovery and reasoning.
- Affective or transitional: chosen to meet the needs of tenderness and reassurance. These can be soft toys that evoke emotions and moods just by simple contact;
- Motor: stimulate motor skills and movement in space.

The typology of materials, their richness in shape, quality and quantity, their predisposition, their location and the way they are offered to children show the pedagogy of the nursery and the educational climate within it (Bosi, 2001).

Materials represent the educator's working tools and therefore on one hand they must have a very precise and stable location that corresponds to the functionality and the meaning given within the educational project; on the other hand they must be carefully chosen both with re-

spect to their quality and with respect to the quantity in relation to the present children within the section, in order to avoid conflicting situations during their use.

The disabled adult is included in this setting. The mediation of the educator is fundamental in relation to the spaces too. This will allow him to show himself secure at the eyes of children by developing a sense of initiative, also by proposing them diversified activities.

4. The pedagogy of the game

The game represents the inner reality of the child because it is born and is configured by the unconscious, by impulses.

It can be experienced both as a spontaneous mode of expression and psychic elaboration and as an emotional experience in which perceptions, desires, conflicts, fears and emotions find a form of display, elaboration and resolution, giving the child a sense of mastery and control over reality. In the game, anxiety turns into pleasure even where it evokes a painful content.

According to Freud the game assumes a cathartic role, a role that is taken up by Anna Freud and by Melanie Klein. In details, Klein considered the game as a natural way of expressing of the child and as a fundamental means of communication with him (Klein, 1932).

Child's play is not only a game activity, but it is also a job, a way of exploring and mastering the outside world and intrinsic sensations. It becomes a projection of anxieties, conflicts, frustrations and aggressiveness on the external reality. However, this also applies to the child's use of the materials and games themselves, especially during manipulation activities. These activities help the child to free himself from all the aggressive and destructive tensions and impulses and to give them a positive, pleasant and at the same time creative and constructive meaning (Winnicott, 1974).

The educator, in providing the child with all the elements necessary to transform his impulses into creative acts, from finger painting, to plasticine, to glue, to all the so-called "dirty" materials such as clay, earth or sand, not only offers the child the pleasure of "messing around" but also of "playing" with one's emotions. The same happens in the play of dramatization: through the exchange of roles the child realizes a process of integration of what in reality is experienced as separate or lost.

The game does not need a specific teaching because the child does it naturally and needs only an appropriate context in which to do it. It must also not be used for purposes unrelated to the activity itself as if it were a source of distraction, entertainment or evaluation.

Thanks to these characteristics of spontaneity, the playful activity is suitable to stimulate the interaction between disabled adults and children. His role in the game begins before the direct relationship with the child through the construction of the environment, the right emotional climate and the choice of materials appropriate to the age and evolutionary needs of the learner. Playing means "getting involved" in a total manner, on one hand in the care of the environment in a general sense, on the other, in the awareness that when you enter or join the child's game it is only to support it, to prolong it and to enrich it.

Looks, words, sounds and anything else accompany the child's daily gestures and activities in the nursery; everything, every object that will first be named, told, explained and offered, then during growth, will be commented, confirmed and encouraged. The more the child is young, the more he will seek, even with his eyes, the approval and encouragement of the adult as a need for confirmation, often necessary for the serene continuation of the game. This relationship will strengthen not only the self-esteem of the child, but above all the adult subject's one with MRI.

It is important, therefore, that the game is not disqualified, defined as a recreation, as a non-productive activity, devoid of any value and of any meaning that causes disengagement and inability to take responsibility. In fact if its importance has been widely recognized since the last century in theory, it seems to be often denied in practice (Bettelheim, 1987). Instead, it must be promoted and encouraged, mediated by the educational figures of reference.

5. The pedagogy of care

The value of care represents the most important and most qualifying aspect of the educational project and of the educational activity with the young child, since most of the time spent at the nursery is a time dedicated to both physical and mental care of him, necessary for his growth and well-being. Taking care of the young child involves numerous activities such as nourishing, washing, changing, sleepings, comforting and cuddling, that is, caring strategies that involve a direct relationship with the child's body.

The child's body transmits requests, manifests needs, asks for trust and confidence, while the adult's body transmits availability, security and containment. Taking care of the child's body means taking care of the child as a person and, through the methods of physical contact, he acquires a first awareness of a bodily self, with pleasing boundaries and emotions and a first awareness of the existence of another self-significant (Bowlby, 1972).

Furthermore, through these methods of care, the child makes experiences from an emotional and communicative point of view.

Taking care of the child is also a pedagogy, a pedagogy of accompanying the child's growth day by day (Fortunati A., Tognetti G., 1994).

The routine scans the time spent in the kindergarten with regularity and it is composed of stable and recurring events.

By routine we mean not only the time of change, of sleep, of food, of snack, but also of the entry and the exit from the nursery school, a moment full of meaning, rituals and transition. Separation and detachment from the parent take on a particularly important aspect in educational practice and it can affect the routine of the whole day both for the child, for the educator and for the parent. It is necessary to pay particular attention to the structuring of a routine that can facilitate the child and the parent in the experience of "separating" and "meeting again".

Various inconveniences may occur due to the expectations of all the subjects present. The educator's task is therefore to capture what is happening, put emotions into words, to facilitate and sustain the moment.

Even for adults with cognitive disabilities, approaching the game not only for personal pleasure, but to actively involve children is a complex activity that implies different areas: psychoanalytic, phenomenological, cognitive, relational, empathic. The creativity of spontaneous play enhances non-verbal communication and empathic relationship. Self-awareness is integrated through experimentation: attention is no longer placed exclusively on one's own pleasure, but oriented to the others. Feeling part of a welcoming and non-evaluative context (such as the group made up of very young children), the possibility of sharing emotions and being able to recognize them in others even at the kinesthetic level, allows access, through the mediation of the educator, to a path of elaboration of anxieties and acceptance of oneself and one's own conflicting feelings. The materials used in the game, their sharing with children through contact and sensory recognition, develop thought processing skills, transitioning them from abstract to concrete, leaving traces and prompting immediate reactions in children.

Conclusions

These observations aim to support developmental pathways, cognitive and emotional abilities in adult disability, alternative to the classical ones of educational and rehabilitative intervention. The analysis focused more on the reception environment precisely to show that the inclusion of the disabled person does not destabilize the host setting, but the initial diversity becomes a resource and a value. This opportunity allows also society to clear an obsolete and provincial vision of the disability as a mere user of services and to re-evaluate it in a perspective of resource and as an active part of society.

The development of this work will try to demonstrate, through the administration of two

tests, to adult subjects with disabilities the concrete possibility that emotions and critical thinking can influence each other. Moreover, by intervening on each of these aspects we can favour both the development of critical thinking and, at the same time, the understanding and expression of emotions.

Through an analysis guided by an observation form we will monitor the cognitive, psychological, emotional, social and motor development of children.

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