STORYTELLING AS A TOOL FOR TEACHER TRAINING, SELF-AWARENESS AND DYNAMIC LEARNING

LO STORYTELLING COME STRUMENTO PER LA FORMAZIONE DEGLI INSEGNANTI, LA CONSAPEVOLEZZA DI SÉ E L'APPRENDIMENTO DINAMICO

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Double Blind Peer Review

ABSTRACT

The paper describes the theoretical premises and methodological framework that led to a training proposal for lower secondary school teachers and for their students highlighting the educational value of literature. Narrative thinking connects experiences, encourages reflection on one's own existence and self-awareness. The model improved teaching practices and relationships, offering active tools for the classroom. Technology supported this process of reflection and self-education.

L'articolo descrive le premesse teoriche e il quadro metodologico che hanno portato a una proposta di formazione per gli insegnanti della scuola secondaria inferiore e per i loro studenti, evidenziando il valore educativo della letteratura. Il pensiero narrativo collega le esperienze, incoraggia la riflessione sulla propria esistenza e la consapevolezza di sé. Il modello ha migliorato le pratiche didattiche e le relazioni, offrendo strumenti attivi per la classe. La tecnologia ha sostenuto questo processo di riflessione e autoformazione.

1. Ongoing Teacher Training: Another Reason Why

The social, cultural and technological transformations of recent decades, accelerated further by the pandemic, have made it increasingly urgent to act in two directions. On one hand, there is a need to respond effectively to the needs of new generations. On the other, there is the need to increase teacher training activities already in place. These activities aim not only to improve and update teaching practice and deepen disciplinary skills, but also to develop transversal skills.

These are opportunities designed to foster professional networks among teachers, encouraging the exchange of best practices and the building of a cohesive and dynamic educational community, promoting collaboration and sharing. Above all, however, these are occasions through which each teacher can enhance his/her own role by engaging in a reflection on lived experiences, leading to greater self-awareness, with benefits not only on a professional level, but also on a personal level and in terms of emotional growth.

To effectively navigate the complex relational situations that can arise in a classroom context, a teacher has to possess not only strong instructional and disciplinary skills but also communicative and socio-emotional abilities (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Teaching professionalism, in fact, does not end with the transmission of knowledge; it also encompasses the ability to create a positive, inclusive, and motivating relational climate, one in which not only each student can feel recognised and valued, but also the teacher himself experiences the teaching-learning dynamic as a moment of satisfaction and existential fullness.

Indeed, to establish authentically empathetic relationships, it is first necessary to cultivate these same qualities within oneself. Caring for others, therefore, requires self-care (Jennings et al., 2019, 222); one cannot support the emotional and relational well-being of others without a solid foundation of inner balance. In the educational context, this means that teachers, in order to be truly present and available to their students, has to develop practices of emotional self-regulation and personal well-being. The adoption of self-care-centred techniques not only promotes physical and emotional health for teachers but also enhances the quality of their interactions, contributing to the creation of calmer, more serene and functional learning environments (Schussler et al., 2016, 140). In this sense, educational relationship training also – and perhaps primarily – passes through a path of inner work and personal development.

In this perspective, the teacher is not only a mediator of meaning and a facilitator of meaningful learning, able to understand and capable of reading the emotional needs of the group and of individuals, but also someone who, while teaching, re-thinks and re-learns, reshaping himself or herself through these experiences and insights (Bertagna, 2017).

In this light, ongoing professional development should not be seen as merely technical, content-based or content-related; rather, it becomes a transformative space (Boffo, Iavarone, Nuzzaci, 2022), capable of profoundly influencing the teacher's identity. Far from being a mere periodic update, it takes the form of a learning and self-reflection process, in which the teacher is called upon to get involved, to engage, to renegotiate his or her knowledge and to critically examine and question his or her own educational practices.

In this sense, one can speak of a true *scholé* (Bertagna, 2017) – a time freed from the urgency of efficiency, in which teaching reveals itself in its fullness as a meaningful experience for the teacher as well. *Scholé*, understood as qualitative and reflective time, represents a privileged space in which the teacher can reclaim and reappropriate the deeper meaning of educational action, moving beyond a merely performative logic and reopening up to the possibility of learning while teaching.

Within this framework, educational practice can be considered authentic only if experienced by the teacher as *Kairos*, as an opportune, dense and meaningful moment, capable of generating transformation. It is not a one-sided and unilateral action but a relational encounter that calls upon the teacher's identity, inviting deep listening to both the other and the self. When teachers recognise the educational experience as *kairotic*, they open themselves to the possibility that every teaching situation can be an opportunity for renewal, growth, re-working and re-elaboration of their own professional and existential experience.

A central element of this process is the development of transversal competences, such as communication skills, emotional and relational management, cognitive flexibility, problem-solving, critical thinking, cooperation, and resilience. These abilities not only facilitate the daily classroom management and the interactions with students and colleagues but represent also essential tools for dealing with the complexity and unpredictability of the contemporary school context.

These elements are equally essential for all education professionals, who are called not only to transmit knowledge but also to form aware and responsible individuals.

Particularly relevant is the role of self-awareness, assumed as the ability to understand one's own emotions, motivations, beliefs, and attitudes. Only when teachers learn to recognise their strengths and areas for improvement can they gain greater mastery over their educational actions. This kind of self-awareness fosters authentic listening and adaptability, making the teacher more attentive, open, and attuned to students' needs.

An ongoing training focused on self-awareness, sustained throughout the entire professional career, can also help counteract the risks of isolation, burnout, and demotivation – phenomena increasingly common in schools characterized by heavy workloads and growing performance pressure. Teaching, in fact, can become fertile ground for emotional and physical exhaustion that undermines both teacher well-being and the quality of educational interactions. When the emotional burden exceeds an individual's threshold of tolerance, it can lead to growing impatience toward students, accompanied by negative attitudes and a marked inability to perceive and respond effectively to their educational needs (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020). Such attrition also affects collegial dynamics, hindering collaboration among peers and colleagues and fuelling a sense of professional isolation. In some cases, the accumulation of such difficulties can result in a deeper crisis, even leading to the concrete risk of leaving the profession, with significant implications for the educational system as a whole.

On the contrary, investing in ongoing professional development strengthens a sense of belonging and intrinsic motivation, supporting teachers in their personal and professional growth.

Overall, then, ongoing training should be conceived as a fundamental pillar of teaching professionalism, not only for its updating function but, above all, for its capacity to activate transformative processes that impact the teacher's identity, self-efficacy and relational quality. Promoting this kind of training means investing in a more human, reflective school, capable of accompanying new generations with awareness and competence.

2. Storytelling as a reflective and transformative practice for identity and self-awareness

One of the most effective tools to initiate this educational, thus, transformative pathway is storytelling. It can originate a process of self-reflection and

empowerment for teachers, while also fostering in students the development of critical thinking, self-awareness and narrative competence as tools for interpreting reality.

The category of narrative thinking, introduced by Jerome Bruner (1996), is one of the fundamental ways through which human beings organize their knowledge. Unlike logical-scientific thinking, which proceeds through abstraction and generalization, narrative thinking weaves events, emotions, and meanings into a coherent plot. To narrate is to give meaning to life, to make experience understandable and to bridge the fractures of daily life with the thread of a story.

It is not surprising, then, that narration plays a central role in education. Educating through stories is not a rhetorical device, but a way of aligning with the natural modes through which one learns and grows. The story that is heard, read, or interpreted becomes a medium through which humans learn to think about themselves and about the world.

The concept of narrative thinking recognises storytelling as the mode through which human beings make sense of their experiences. Through storytelling, individuals select, order, and interpret events, placing them within coherent plots that justify their significance.

In the contemporary educational context, storytelling – far from being a mere ancillary technique – proves to be a primary method of organizing knowledge and constructing both personal and collective identity. Storytelling thus becomes a key to individual and collective growth, promoting more dynamic, reflective, and participatory learning.

As pointed out by Paul Ricœur (1986-1988), literature does not merely offer a series of shareable temporal experiences, but it represents a hermeneutic device capable of shaping one's understanding of the self and the world. Literary narration, in fact, becomes a laboratory for the construction of meaning, a crossroads of interpretations where the narrative dimension of identity takes shape. Through storytelling, one decides which meaning to attribute to events, which connections to establish between past, present and future. In this sense, narration is a powerful tool not only for learning or acquiring knowledge, but for becoming.

Literature and storytelling, as embodied acts, do not simply transmit information: they stage consciousness in action, characters who live, act and feel. Each "paper hero", each narrated figure becomes a mimetic model through which the reader can identify and experience, indirectly but authentically, possible existential paths (Bertagna, 2018; Mazzini, 2023). It is precisely on this ability to evoke other lives,

through which to better understands one's own, that underpins the educational function of storytelling.

In light of these reflections, the potential of storytelling becomes clear in re-elaborating a teacher's professional and existential experience, and thus in fostering the development of transversal skills. Each reader may activate an empathic identification with literary characters, initiating an inner dialogue, a process of mirroring and identity reworking, that can lead to real changes in one's way of acting, living, and relating to others. This power, proper to literature and reading, if used in didactic contexts can therefore also lead teachers and students to a different and renewed self-perception and, consequently, to a change also in their own way of teaching and learning.

By confronting themselves with literary texts, teachers can reread their personal and professional experiences, discovering in the stories of narrative characters possible analogies, contrasts and projections. In the same way, students have the opportunity to explore, in an honest way, their own journey, both personal and educational and to acquire the coordinates to disentangle themselves in the tortuous path of life and school, refining future action.

The act of reading thus becomes a space for self-reflection mediated by fiction, capable of revealing truths beyond the constraints of personal biography.

Neuroscientific research, particularly through the discovery of mirror neurons (Iacoboni, 2008; Rizzolatti, Sinigaglia, 2006). has further legitimized this pedagogical intuition. When reading a story or witnessing a narration, the brain activates as if it were experiencing firsthand what happens to the character: it feels their joy, pain, and fear. Narrative fiction thus becomes a practical exercise in empathy and decision-making, a space where possibilities for action and behaviour can be safely and symbolically explored.

This mimetic process, this mental simulation, strengthens neural connections that enable us to understand and act in the world. In other words, reading stories prepares us for life, because in the narrative *fictio* "simulating" is equivalent to "doing". Every story told contributes to the construction of cognitive and emotional maps. In this sense, storytelling is never a passive activity, but a training ground for life. That is why one can rightly speak of narrative *phronesis* (Bertagna, 2018, 47-52): through storytelling, one exercises practical wisdom, learning to recognise situations, assess implications and take a position.

Literature, therefore, makes intelligible and experientially accessible experiences that could never be lived directly, but, at the same time, it helps to find renewed

values for those that have already happened, to not indulge in them and to re-signify them for one's own formation. In this sense, narrating means building coherence, establishing relationships, bridging discontinuities of experience. In a fragmented and accelerated world, like the contemporary one, storytelling becomes a form of resistance against dispersion – a symbolic act of recomposing existence.

Through self-narration, the subject elaborates an image of his or her own experience which, while being selective and interpretive, allows for the construction of a coherent identity.

Considering all this, it becomes clear how significant it is to conceive both initial and ongoing teacher training, as well as student learning pathways, as true laboratories of narrative self-awareness.

For teachers, this means being guided in the critical re-reading of their own educational practice and actions, learning to recognise the implicit narratives that shape how they teach and relate to others.

For students, on the other hand, it means accessing learning environments that encourage the emergence of their own voice, the recognition of their emotions, and the construction of a dynamic and dialogical self-concept.

In both cases, storytelling becomes a transformative tool: it promotes a reflective stance, enhances self-awareness and awareness of others, and contributes to forming more responsible individuals, capable of navigating the complex web of experiences, roles and values that define everyday life. In this perspective, educating to storytelling and through storytelling is equivalent to educating to awareness, responsibility, and care for oneself and for the world.

3. The narrative that shapes our essence: the outcomes of a training proposal

Through the lens of storytelling, a world unfolds where stories not only tell our reality but also shape our essence; it is like embarking on an inner journey that defines and transforms us, becoming a refuge where our being evolves through the logos of life. James and Minnis (2004) themselves claim: 'Stories define us, shape us, control us and create us'.

In this contribution, as already mentioned, we present the results of a training proposal for secondary school teachers in which narration becomes a 'tool' through

which teachers can firstly initiate a reflection on their own experiential experience, recovering meanings as well as developing individual thought in relation to collective structures of meaning and, subsequently, by presenting the same narrative modality to the students, they can also undertake a path of reflection with the latter and thus of education, self-education and self-awareness, thus triggering a process of empowerment and engagement. It was also intended to assess the effectiveness of this training and its impact on the teachers' educational practice and the development of the self in the students involved through the administration of a short open-ended questionnaire.

The training, which took place during the month of October 2024 for 20 hours divided into four afternoon meetings, involved 25 teachers of various disciplines from an I.C. in the province of Taranto. During the first meeting, after an initial warm-up phase, the same teachers, in order to reflect on the role of the teacher and the relational dynamics within the school institution, selected from the various proposals, the text: *Lettera a una professoressa* by Lorenzo Milani (2023), a provocative but basic text, which stimulates a profound confrontation on the meaning of teaching and educational justice, the right text to activate critical autobiographical writings. We started, therefore, from the epistemology of narration as an educational and psycho-pedagogical tool to deepen the aspects related to autobiographical narration and self-awareness also in relation to the teaching function, and then moved on to the reading aloud of the text, to personal and collective reflection, and then to autobiographical journaling, followed by moments of group discussion and debriefing. Each phase included theoretical reflections, moments of practice and concrete debriefing.

In a second phase, which took place in February 2025 for a package of only 10 hours, 4 of the teachers trained and adhering to the "PON-FSE" re-proposed the same methodology to the 30 students, already attending class I of the secondary school, of the 2 classes created that then joined the project. During these hours, divided into several days, the reading of a text, personal and collective reflection, and the subsequent autobiographical narration were re-proposed, to which was added the creation of digital storytelling where the students, through apps such as Book Creator and Canva, gave life to cross-media digital books, using the texts, images, audios and videos created by them - also thanks to the use of AI - to express their educational journey. In particular, they started with an animated reading aloud of a text. The teachers chose to propose to the pupils the text: *Il libro degli errori* by Gianni Rodari (2011). Rodari has a clear, engaging and never banal writing. His style,

even when simple, conveys profound content with a musicality that conquers children and young people and facilitates understanding: in this book, with its simple and profound language, there are several themes such as: Respect for rules and differences, Empathy towards the other, Awareness of emotions, Management of conflicts and relationships, themes perfectly in line with the Goals for the Development of Skills provided for in the National Indications and with concepts similar to those addressed by the teachers during the training course.

The same phases of the training course then followed: personal and collective reflection and the creation of an autobiographical journal. The last meetings were dedicated to digital storytelling, the product of which, created individually and/or in groups, was "converted" into a cross-media digital book - in that in addition to the text there were also images, audio, video, avatars - followed by moments of group discussion and debriefing.

Among the digital products created are:

-Personal stories of school reflection where some students recounted a significant moment in their school or personal lives, exploring the dynamics of relationships with teachers, peers and family

-Relaboration of the literary text: some students reworked the text they read, creating an alternative version of the story, imagining new endings.

-Collective stories: some students, divided into groups, collaborated to create digital stories on educational or relational topics, representing different points of view through imaginary school characters.

The decision to also add digital storytelling to an already meaningful training course stems from the conviction that storytelling, especially if mediated by technologies, by actually putting people at the centre of the teaching-learning process, in fact satisfies the demands for a more creative, more attractive and more effective approach in terms of nurturing the classroom climate. Berret himself (2005) argues that the use of digital storytelling "is a highly motivating strategy that allows for concrete and visible reflection on one's practices"; at the same time, it is an excellent tool to activate both individual and group comparison and reflection, increase empowerment by taking into account everyone's learning styles and enhance certain strategic dimensions such as decision-making self-efficacy (Chrisholm et al., 2013), thus ensuring the inclusion of each and everyone.

These cross-media narratives represent a new 'border territory', not yet fully defined and explored: a space within which the intrinsic metamorphic energy of works of literature and the creativity and attractiveness of technology can combine.

The visual mode with which the story is presented is attractive: the young reader, at first a writer, is projected into the fantastic, magical space of a book waiting to be discovered; he or she can literally enter the intricate flow of the story, interact, through the various senses, with objects, environments and characters, as well as exploit the functionalities that allow connections between its parts, while being within a fundamentally linear and accomplished textual structure (Barca, 2023/A). Narrative, as a pedagogical/didactic tool, acts as a catalyst in encouraging students to share their subjective experiences, weaving an educational tapestry that fosters self-recognition and interpersonal awareness. This narrative process invites students to explore the complexity of their personal identity and the social dynamic around them, facilitating a shared construction of knowledge that dismantles the barriers of educational (Jehangir, 2010) and implicitly social marginalisation. The implementation of storytelling in educational contexts offers a twofold advantage: on the one hand, as an educational practice it is useful for teachers to stimulate critical thinking and create interactive, engaging and motivating activities; on the other hand, it stimulates students, urging them to a deep critical analysis of other people's narratives and supports them in making an integrative synthesis that correlates these narratives with personal experiences. This process is consistent with the cognitive vertices of Bloom's Taxonomy (Anderson et al., 2001), such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation, which represent the highest goals of critical learning (Flynn, 2004). Through this analytical practice, students acquire greater clarity about the options available to them when confronted with similar situations, thus promoting the autonomous development of critical thinking and decision-making.

From the questionnaire administered to the teachers at the end of the training course, it emerges that the use of narration opened up spaces for personal but also professional awareness and development: narration thus proved to be an effective tool in the ongoing training of teachers. Specifically, examining the answers to the questionnaire - although it is not possible in this context, due to textual limitations, to make an in-depth analysis - shows that the use of narration enabled teachers to reflect critically on their teaching practice and to develop new ways of interacting with colleagues and students, using a more empathetic and conscious perspective. Thanks to the reflective path, teachers developed greater methodological confidence and self-awareness, with benefits not only on a professional level, but also on a personal level, integrating lived experiences and new certainties; finally,

the training path "provided" teachers with an active and effective methodology to be reused in the classroom.

Narrative, therefore, has become the key to access an infra-subjective, structurally vertical dynamic, through which each reader-teacher or reader-student will have the opportunity to form "self as other" (Ricoeur, 2011) and to grow, giving "order and measure to an ever-improving self" (Bertagna, 2018).

In the questions posed to the teachers on the impact of this methodology on the students, it was emphasised that through digital storytelling the students, now digital natives, were able to reflect on their own experiences and develop narrative skills promoting personal awareness and emotional growth. Collective reflection and group work certainly facilitated the development of assertive communication, positive relationships, collaboration, mutual understanding and critical reflection in school contexts. At the same time, an increased development of transversal skills such as critical reflection, creativity, empathy and collaboration emerged in both teachers and students. The only weak point - noted by three teachers - is the lack of specific training on digital storytelling, as the sudden evolution of digital media requires continuous and targeted updating in order to keep up with the times and be "smarter". The school is in fact, today more than ever, called upon to a multiple articulation of interventions, in an attempt to reconcile the need for a culture consolidated over time with the new technologies to prepare the future citizen of the world (Barca, 2024). Methodological innovation and technological innovation must, therefore, proceed in unison in an attempt to co-evolve in order to truly be bearers of change, but at the same time, there is a pressing need to increase the capacity of the new digital natives, through a 'thermostatic function' - in the words of Postman - to actively manage the sudden changes, to be resilient, inclusive, competent, exercising the need for continuity in change (Barca, 2023/B).

The sample examined, although representative, is certainly not significant of a population as large as that of the teaching staff, so generalisability is obviously limited, but the positive results, also from the students, were a reconfirmation of the real effectiveness of this narrative-didactic proposal in the training of teachers and the subsequent impact on their working practice. Narrative combined with digital, therefore, is not only experienced as an active and effective teaching methodology, but a true educational style that stimulates the dynamic evolution of one's professionalism and the personal identity of the educator and the educand (Denning, 2002).

Author contributions

The contribution is the result of shared work. Alessandra Mazzini is the author of paragraphs 1 and 2. Alessandro Barca is the author of paragraph 3.

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