A PEDAGOGY OF POSSIBILITY: THE DRAMA-EMBODIED WORKSHOP AS A CO-EDUCATIONAL DESIGN PRACTICE

PER UNA PEDAGOGIA DELLA POSSIBILITÀ: IL LABORATORIO DRAMMATICO-ABILITATIVO COME PRATICA DI PROGETTAZIONE CO-EDUCATIVA

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Abstract

In this work, we will try to trace epistemologically the trajectories that guided our research in the double perspective of embodiment and workshop practice, starting from a project we carried out at the kindergarten. We will focus on the setting of the drama-embodied workshop, based on the scientific paradigm of Embodied Cognitive Science. We will try to give this practice an accurate definition, clarifying any possible overlapping with the practice of theatre as it is commonly known. Finally, we will describe the characteristics of a project that we have carried out in a kindergarten trying to outline the limits and the possibilities of use for inclusive teaching, that recombines the children's being, skills and abilities.

Nel presente lavoro cercheremo di rintracciare epistemologicamente le traiettorie che hanno guidato la ricerca, nella duplice prospettiva dell'embodiment e della pratica laboratoriale, a partire da una progettazione concretamente realizzata nella scuola dell'infanzia. Ci soffermeremo sull'inquadramento del laboratorio drammatico abilitativo, fondandolo nel paradigma scientifico delle Embodied Cognitive Science. Cercheremo di dare a tale pratica una definizione accurata, disambiguando eventuali sovrapposizioni rispetto alla pratica del teatro così come comunemente inteso. Descriveremo, infine, le caratteristiche di un progetto concretamente realizzato nel mondo della scuola dell'infanzia cercando di tratteggiarne i limiti e le possibilità di impiego per una didattica inclusiva, ma soprattutto ricombinatoria per il proprio essere e per le proprie competenze ed abilità.

Keywords

Embodied Cognition, Theatricality, Workshop, Kindergarten

Embodied cognition, Teatralità, Laboratorio, Scuola dell'Infanzia

The present work stems from the need to observe, investigate and understand the impact of designing extracurricular school activities, such as the drama-embodied workshop on the

teaching dynamics, given integrated and inclusive classroom management. We will link this analysis to the complex situation that school institutions experience in terms of environments and contexts as structured and differentiated learning places (Calvani, 2011). We refer to a school that is not only a place for knowledge construction but a real community of practices embedded in the social system in which the school acts and, to some extent, is acted upon (Striano, 2012). This community learns and reflects on what it has learned, understanding reflexivity as a functional device for its self-regulation based on the complex nature of the intentions and retroactions it generates (Striano, 2012). Action analysis makes it possible to discover which organizing concepts the subject uses to define their operational choices (Pastrè, 1999). The objective is to reflect pedagogically on the real action. In this case, the real action is the activation of a project at the kindergarten, which is a place of choice for such structural educational activities aimed at gaining social skills and independence (Heckman, 2008). This project consists of a workshop activity that involves artistic languages and the embodied approach (Gibbs, 2005) that uses the powerful corporeality of theatricality. It is unraveled between two delicate contexts because they are transitional, borderline places between learning subjects: on the one hand, the kindergarten, with its doing, being and being in doing, runs the real risk of standardizing what it offers (Sylvia et al, 2004, 2007); on the other hand, a dynamic and lively workshop practice is considered as a real possibility of renewing the learning experience. Boundaries that need to open up to the logic of the pathway:

> [...] a path is a route to someone. Whoever is used to walking along paths, identifies by instinct - a grown, educated instinct - the place where one can enter someone else's house. He respects the path and respects its boundary. (Canevaro, 2006, p. 13)[1]

To enter these new houses we need a basic element of mediation: the project.

> Building a project, knowing how to do it, is a mediator. It can refer not only to a professional but also to a design, a structure, in which we place both professionals and others gradually. [...] Mediators become interesting because they give us the possibility of creating gaps, spaces, flexible joints between the different elements of reality, managing to overcome the compression that a catastrophe may have caused, preventing us from distinguishing the various components that form reality itself. (Canevaro, 2006, p. 35)

We need co-educational, targeted and extended planning. It needs to be co-educational because it is built in the practice of the relationship with all the actors involved in the learning scene, from teachers to learners (Fornasa, 1999). It needs to be targeted because it derives from observation (Bortolotti, Sorzio, 2014), which is contextualized in practice, attentive to the physical and relational environments in which one intervenes, aware of the subject's centrality as a learning body. It needs to be extended because it is open to all and attentive to each one. It is not generalized but individualized; it doesn't refer to generality but individualization. In other words, it needs to be extended because each individual has to express themself and properly take shape (Gadamer, 2014) as a subject carrying an intrinsic complexity (Morin, 2015).

Scientific framework

To provide a scientific framework for this work, it is necessary to draw attention to three key aspects that characterise the educational process as a practice of human learning, in a narrative and context-oriented perspective (Bruner 1990; Smorti 1994), namely: the central role of the

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[1] All citations have been translated by authors.

body in the learning process (Caruana and Borghi, 2013), the places where such process takes place (Gamelli, 2012), and the workshop activity as a teaching methodology and search for meaning (Sibilio, 2011). We cannot but start from the primary place where every learning dynamic takes place – the body as a place of embodied cognition:

> [...] the flow of information from all sense organs and the constant interaction with the environment determine how the brain takes shape. (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p.177)

As a lens for interpreting corporeality as the core of every cognitive acquisition of the human being, as well as the meeting point between subjectivity and intersubjectivity, we adopt the scientific approach of Embodied Cognitive Science, with particular reference to the Embodied Cognition paradigm. (Caruana e Borghi, 2013).

> A human body does not exist on its own but only in relation to others. Bodies are near and far, touch or look at each other, dance together, build worlds. Bodies reflect feelings and knowledge, tell stories that have been lived and foreshadow future visions. (Gamelli, 2012, p.111)

Within this ongoing relationship between the body and the environment (Bottino, 2012), the former shapes its knowledge of the world, overcoming the scientific conception that considers it a mere object of evaluation to ultimately acquire the dignity of a cognitive subject (Author, 2015). Going beyond the scientific theories that claim the dependency of the body on the brain in biological, psychic and social processes of adaptation and learning, ECS is also a science in constant evolution, with new research and discoveries. In the present work, we will refer to ECS as a scientific paradigm that allows us to understand, design and operate in learning and teaching environments.

> The space speaks, and the child speaks about it, he/she describes it because the child inhabits the space with his/her whole self. Living the space is a profound dimension, and the child exercises it with his/her mind and body. The child establishes a perceptive-motor and emotional relationship with the space, giving meanings to colors, smells, shapes, voices and noises. All this allows him/her to experience feelings of safety and trust that he/she will later use in his/her relationships with the outside world. (Bosi, 2013, p. 78).

Several models have used the ECS paradigm as a scientific approach to education and art (Esrock, 2010). In particular, the experience of having extended bodily boundaries as a true immersion in literature and art receives particular attention from Esrock, who proposes a bodily, trans-somatic reading process that includes everything related to enteroception, a true emotion that brings a sense of individuality to the process. The environment where a child lives must allow exploration, discovery, competence acquisition; it must welcome and support; it has to allow an immersive experience in a dense emotional and relational network that appears as a life context (Caggio, 2003). The workshop can activate the subject's cognitive, physical and emotional resources enabling the subject to express and experience relationships with him/herself, with the other and with physical objects. The drama-embodied workshop brings into play multiple dynamics concerning the singularity of the individual and his/her ways of relating to a group; in a multiform and complex process, it represents the place of action and communication, and of the need for research. A place of practice, of the practical (Bricco, 2001). Since the workshop is a physical and relational place, the place of *experiri*, (Crispiani, 2016) a human being entering it must necessarily give rise to a process of acclimatization that allows him/her to be in the world and for the world; that allows the individual to relate, to communicate, to intervene on the processes of knowledge of the reality that surrounds him/her (Herrmann, 2009). Therefore, in a workshop setting, the process of acclimatization is a process of communication:

> [communication] fulfils the process of acclimatization, which I would like to consider as the dominant thought (Leitgedanken) of all kinds of education (Erziehung) and learning (Bildung). (Gadamer, 1999, p.14)

Although arising from the theatrical practice, the drama-embodied workshop does not necessarily end with a representation - it leads to the construction of an unprecedented tool through a personal, playful and relational path, of a new and exclusive alphabet for the knowledge of the Self and the Other. We can try to define the workshop practice as systemic (since it involves the human being on many levels) and complex (since its effects are not limited in space and time but are settled in the complex phenomenon of human learning). It cannot be reduced to simplistic definitions and needs to be seen in its ecological entirety and its constitutive complexity. The workshop as a human learning process has little to do with theatre as a performing practice. If theatre delegates to actors the performance of a dramaturgical and directing idea, the workshop cannot subordinate the individual, being it the pedagogical focus of every activity, to the needs of the creative idea of an operator or a teacher. Imagining such an activity as a container of the infinite possibilities of human expression, a box without boundaries, its guidelines of meaning should be as follows: the shared and coordinated planning (Fornasa,1999) of the activities with the educational figures; the attention (Duncan, 1984) for the objects and the relationship with the physical reality; the reflection (Massa,1990) on the methodology, the method and the operational tools; the care (Mortari, 2015) and the attention for the complex human relational dynamics that occur during the activity. Theatre, if lived in the urgency of acting, reflecting and relaunching meanings and signifiers is a formidable tool to access the experience of one's inalienable complexity. (Oliva, 2008)

The methodological procedure of the research

Having clarified the main aspects of the drama-embodied workshop in the light of the Embodied Cognitive Science, we can illustrate the methodological framework of the research, defining methods, context, timing and intervention tools.

Context and participants
The target group consists of 26 children from 3 to 5 years old from the "Carlo Collodi" kindergarten in Pianello Vallesina, a town of about 3,000 inhabitants in the province of Ancona.

Method
The research method is action research (Lewin, 1946), with particular reference to participatory action research (Cunningham, 1976) to compare traditional didactics with alternative, workshop and body-based didactics, to appreciate the differences in approach and the possible effects on learning.

Timing and intervention modalities
In about three months, the following steps were agreed upon and realized: 3 preliminary planning meetings with the teachers were held to evaluate the starting situation and elaborate the work objectives; 12 workshop meetings with the pupils were held by the facilitator with the teachers. Each meeting would last between 30 to 55 minutes (depending on the workgroup responses to the stimuli and requests). Each meeting was divided into three parts: first, a physical warm-up (which involves the same game repeated in each session with increasing difficulty); second, a core activity (which involves the execution and development of some games having characteristics related to the functional objectives); finally, a greeting moment that concludes the session and represents a sort of ritual (Pitruzzella, 2004). At the end of each

session, there is a feedback meeting with the teachers on the workshop activities, and a feedback meeting between the teachers and the workgroup. Here, the feedback would be expressed through picture graph activities and verbalizations. Three extracurricular meetings were arranged in between sessions for the evaluation of the activities between teachers and facilitator; also, one final restitution meeting for comparing the data and elaborating a narrative evaluation of the effectiveness of the intervention.

Observation and data collection methods
In this phase, the teachers outline observation and data collection methods based on ethnographic observations by the facilitator of the workshop and semi-structured observation grids. A semi-structured observation grid was produced to be filled in after each meeting by the teachers and the facilitator.

Meeting n.:

Sheet: Teacher A

Cognitive area: 1- spatial awareness, point a)

Activities: spatial activities and games

Activity presented by the facilitator	Group reactions	Significant reactions	Notes
Activity #1: Form a circle holding hands in a progressively smaller space.	At first, the group is not able to perform the task. After a few attempts, the pupils begin to occupy the space correctly.	K. is likely to leave the group repeatedly; D. abstains from the activities altogether.	The facilitator had to get the children's attention several times. Duration: about 12 minutes.

At the end of each meeting, the children were given a graphical elaboration with a record that was documented by the teachers each time. All the data processed and catalogued during the research were compared and discussed in the final restitution meetings with the teachers, producing the pedagogical reflections reported in the conclusions of this work. At the end of the project, an cognitive autobiography was proposed to the teachers to describe their experience narratively.

Outcomes of co-educational design

The objectives
The primary outcome of the co-educational design was the analysis of the didactic and learning needs of the group made by the teaching staff and the workshop facilitator, based on a narrative approach (De Angelis, Vitale, 2017) and a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach in terms of an assessment for learning (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, Wiliam, 2003). In effect:

> We have left behind the notion of evaluation as the concluding act of a learning process aimed exclusively at assessing the results achieved. On the contrary, we have moved towards the idea that evaluation is a pervasive and continuous activity that involves all the phases of the learning process, starting from the objectives, the methods of conducting the process itself, and the methods of assessing the results achieved. (Giannandrea, 2012 p.272).

The elaboration of the teachers' narrative perspective led to the subsequent formulation of the objectives:

- to create together a safe place where everyone can feel "good", at ease and can carry out their activities in a peaceful and playful atmosphere;
- to create a well-defined self-image;
- to acquire spatial awareness;
- to acquire an awareness of the Other;
- to improve attention spans;
- to enhance psychomotor skills and abilities;
- to strengthen personal autonomy, self-efficacy and self-control;
- to convey new and simple behavioral norms;
- to encourage group integration and cooperation.

Cognitive areas and activities planning
After identifying the objectives, the main areas of intervention were identified with particular reference to the psychomotor area (Cottini, 2003):

COGNITIVE AREA 1: Spatial awareness
a) Management of space and body;
b) Spatial relationship awareness;
c) Sensory awareness.
ACTIVITY AREA: Spatial games, proxemics, psychomotricity, construction and deconstruction of spaces, sensory paths.
CA 2: Relationship and contact.
a) Work on relationship and physical contact;
b) Work in pairs, small and large groups;
AA: Relationship games, acquaintance. Physical games.
CA 3: Time awareness and management.
a) Construction of a timeline;
b) Respecting work and waiting times;
AA: Time-based games. Time management.
CA 4: Use of objects.
a) Management and use of objects;
b) Imaginative use of objects;
d) Relationship with the object.
AA: Games with objects, spatial construction with objects, fantasy games.
CA 5: Music experience.
a) Time-rhythm management;
b) Emotionality and music;
c) Music with/of the body;
AA: Music games, music-making, emotional work.
CA 6: Storytelling.
a) Listening to and remembering a story;
b) Inventing and playing with stories;
c) Lexical enrichment.
AA: Storytelling games, imagination, comprehension, recombination of narrative elements.
CA 7: Dramatization.
a) Dramatizing a story autonomously in small and large groups;

b) Sharing stories;
AA: Dramatization games and imaginative improvisation. Roleplay.

Learning outcomes assessment
The meetings took place in a playful and peaceful atmosphere, with the full participation of the children. Meeting after meeting, their feedback and minutes of the experience were recorded and documented. The constant meetings with the teachers were fundamental to discuss the experience in a setting different from everyday school life, clarify doubts, ask new questions. Moreover, they turned out to be a place for dialogue and reflection on the experience (Massa, 1997). These meetings have become the place of choice for the pedagogical elaboration of interventions. Narrative assessment by teachers allowed them to metacognitively retrace the processes both about the outcomes experienced with the children (student assessment) and for the evaluation of teachers (teacher appraisal) in a multidimensional perspective of assessment (Galliani, 2015). As an example, we present an excerpt from the cognitive autobiography of one of the teachers:

> The objectives outlined in the project were numerous, complex and articulated in all functional areas but the few meetings held were not sufficient for the children to achieve them. The activities presented were stimulating for all the children and mainly focused on improving the organization of space and time. This exercise allowed the children to enhance the control of their bodies and strengthen their spatial and temporal awareness, both as individuals and as a group.

Following the data analysis of the observational tools concerning the objectives outlined in the co-design phase, it was possible to observe that in most of the children attention spans during the activities were extended and prolonged; the pupils felt they were the protagonists of the experience, that they lived without being forced but according to shared rules; they better structured their self-image and their perception of self-efficacy, respecting their characteristics, peculiarities and attitudes; they respected each other's time, possibilities and styles, improving their areas of autonomy and self-control; the activities allowed them to better organize their coordination skills, the management of their bodies, space, time and relationships. Some critical points concerning some children concern the management of shared spaces and rules; a degree of impatience with the activities proposed during the last lessons was also noted (therefore the course was remodeled with different proposals shared with the teachers). In the teachers' perception, the hours of assessment and discussion of different proposals were very effective.

Conclusions: for a pedagogy of possibility

Some critical reflections on the possibilities and risks of the teacher's educational and learning activities have emerged from the pedagogical analysis resulting from the workshop practice. Every day, those who work in education run many risks, but one in particular: that of confusing the instrument of project implementation with the project itself. This is a dreadful mistake because the risk is to leave the words on paper and not make them alive. The risk is to make a formally perfect job but practically impossible. There is a risk of making the word empty, promised, unfulfilled. The primary objective of teaching is the person, not the tool (Rivoltella, Rossi, 2012). Here lies the heart of the responsibility of those who help design life: to go beyond the form to access the substance, the meaning, the possibility. We are talking about the need to make the subject able to make mistakes (Andreoli, Provasi, 2011) and help the subject to take responsibility, accessing their

resources to deal with every aspect of their existence, including disappointment, frustration, difficulty. Not solving problems, but enabling the subject to solve them. In this sense, it was necessary to go beyond the very concept of inclusion: not simply acting on the person to include them but working on and in the world so that it can become inclusive (Salis, Milito, 2017), allowing the free recombination, whether effective or ineffective, of the person in the social, community, human fabric. Morin reminds us of the need to make complex choices driven by complex thinking (Morin, Ciurana, Motta, 2018), especially in the field of education. The teacher, crystallized in his professionalism, risks abdicating his active role as a facilitator to assume a reductive character of a mere educational official. Such risk has been pointed out by the teachers involved in the project. To avoid this dangerous tendency, Morin outlines a possible solution:

> Teaching must cease to be merely a function, a specialization, a profession. It has to become a mission to transmit strategies for life. Transmission requires competence, but it also requires a technique and an art. (Morin, Ciurana, Motta, 2018, p.114)

How can we bring technique and art into the teacher's professionalism, integrating and combining them to achieve a complex dimension of teaching?

> This mission must begin with the planning of an institutional action that will allow six strategic guidelines to be embedded in different educational spaces, following the different levels of learning, for a citizenship action that articulates the children's experiences and knowledge and for a permanent contextualization of their fundamental problems. (Morin, Ciurana, Motta, 2018,pp.114-115)

Being a teacher in today's school implies being an aware citizen of our world; it implies the responsibility of one's thinking and acting in showing not only a simple direction but a range of possible directions. It is necessary to undertake a conscious path of integrated and shared planning (Author, 2021), from an ECS point of view that can allow the didactic action to be incorporated into the formative action itself. Designing has to transmit the possibility of building knowledge. The task is arduous: there is an underlying need for a new look at a new world. A view that can grasp humanity and design the possibility of being in continuous and constant evolution, dichotomously divided between progression and regression, resistance and revolution, movement and stasis. In this new and complex scenario, the perspective of the re-modulation of the learning strategies (and, in a certain sense, of the concept of learning itself) is set: to be the place of choice for the processes that characterize the long, recursive and tiring path to the humanization of life (Lacan, 1976).

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