

## **REPRESENTATIONS, LANGUAGES AND INCLUSIVE PRACTICES IN NURSERY SCHOOL UNDER THE SIGN OF THE BODILY CREATIVITY OF TEACHERS AND PUPILS**

### **RAPPRESENTAZIONI, LINGUAGGI E PRATICHE INCLUSIVE NELLA SCUOLA DELL'INFANZIA SOTTO IL SEGNO DELLA CREATIVITÀ CORPOREA DI DOCENTI E DI ALUNNI**

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#### **Abstract**

The contribution intends to propose some theoretical-operational hints concerning the plurality and multidimensionality of the educational languages adopted, developed and strengthened in the nursery school that, due to its structural flexibility, represents a school grade where the inclusive perspective has the possibility of being authentically valorised. In this context, the didactic dimension of corporeity emerges, capable of involving and connecting teachers and children in cognitive pathways broken down from the logic of distance imposed by the pandemic and aimed at the generative foundation of renewed and dynamic educational processes. The didactic itineraries presented and described make positive use of the performativity of body language, which the figure of the teacher as actor-animator-director draws to build inclusive practices within the industrious educating community of the pre-school open to divergent, regenerative reflections and actions.

Il contributo intende proporre alcuni spunti teorico-operativi, inerenti la pluralità e la multidimensionalità dei linguaggi educativi adottati, sviluppati e potenziati nella scuola dell'infanzia che, per sua flessibilità strutturale, rappresenta un grado scolastico dove la prospettiva inclusiva ha la possibilità di essere autenticamente valorizzata. In tale contesto, emerge la dimensione didattica della corporeità in grado di coinvolgere e di connettere docenti e bambini-e in percorsi conoscitivi scardinati dalla logica della distanza imposta dalla pandemia e rivolti alla fondazione generativa di processi educativi rinnovati e dinamici. Gli itinerari didattici presentati e descritti si avvalgono positivamente della performatività del linguaggio del corpo, al quale la figura del docente come attore-animatore-regista attinge per costruire prassi inclusive all'interno dell'operosa comunità educante della scuola prescolare aperta a divergenti, rigenerative riflessioni e azioni.

#### **Keywords**

Nursery school, corporeity, actor-director teacher, inclusive design, creativity

Scuola dell'infanzia, corporeità, docente attore-regista, progettualità inclusiva, creatività

#### **1. Introduction**

The nursery school is an educational place that is particularly receptive to new and fertile experiences of being, doing, acting and feeling enhanced by the multiple and widespread expressive-creative languages defined by L. Malaguzzi as “the hundred languages” (Edwards et al., 2014). This school segment is spontaneously interested in welcoming, understanding and

developing the motivations and resources of each child, accompanying and supporting them in their developmental journey. The peculiar identity of the pre-school, based mainly on flexibility, modularity and didactic-organisational adaptability, contributes to the affirmation of inclusive education aimed at the recognition, valorisation and acceptance of differences and diversities by making children the protagonists of the caring, intentional and conscious educational care (Mortari, 2019) resulting from the authentic and receptive listening by their teachers. In today's nursery school, until recently dominated by the strong discomfort of social isolation due to the global health emergency (Canevaro & Montanari, 2020), there emerges the new figure of the teacher, a training professional animated by a renewed, regenerated and sustainable didactic action aimed at the active participation of all pupils with their diversity and differences. The richness of differences can be welcomed and recognised with care and delicacy within the structurally inclusive context of the pre-school. This set-up aimed at enhancing the heterogeneity of playful-creative languages, curricular flexibility, and the possibility of modifying and experimenting with innovative organisational and relational models is predominantly characterised by workshop teaching devoid of the rigidity typical of linear programming models. The adoption of instances and project paths formulated according to the contribution of operational strategies and inclusive methodologies, favours the development of capability (Nussbaum, 2014), of possibilitation, of motivation, of a sense of trust, adopting the multiple expressive languages -corporeal, theatrical, expressive, musical, scientific, relational (Galanti, Pavone, 2020)- with a view to sharing feelings and emotions, and the acquisition of knowledge through meaningful and concrete playful experiences. In the nursery school as a characteristic and privileged place to tell and tell about oneself, first and foremost through the body, teachers and pupils have the opportunity to express their biographical experience dialogically in an evolutionary perspective, through the co-construction of customised project paths, aimed at removing obstacles and barriers to learning and participation (Ainscow, 2020). Operating in a determined educational space-time (Rossi, 2011) based on the creation and consolidation of a cohesive climate of co-design between curricular and specialised teachers, pre-school teachers are called upon to implement and promote inclusive educational pathways that are coherent and attentive to the plurality of the young learners' educational needs that enable them to "cast their gaze forward" (Giaconi, Rodrigues, & Del Bianco, 2019, p. 25) aimed at the search for new regenerative connections between needs and opportunities. In the post-pandemic period, the propulsive drive of body language opens up the dialogue of bodies, in bodies, between bodies that move and represent themselves, not only as original and unrepeatable human forms but as movements that determine the space and time of the educational relationship (Gomez Paloma, 2009). Restoring the performing power of corporeity (Carlomagno, 2012), in order to bring teachers and pupils closer together, represents a sort of emotional compensation to children, especially those of pre-school age, who are particularly tried by the distressing experience of the reduction and/or deprivation of sociality, experienced and sedimented in their emotional memory, following the shocking pandemic events (Vicari & Di Vara, 2021).

## **2. The teacher as actor-animator-director of/in the teaching scene**

In accepting and recognising the heterogeneity of the special needs of all pupils, as unique and unrepeatable subjects, the adoption of multi-perspective educational languages - gestural, motor, theatrical, musical, relational - becomes a rich educational opportunity to promote the development of the capacities, different abilities and autonomy of each one. From this point of view, the teacher's knowledge is nourished by an ethical responsibility oriented towards the

Other that takes the form of a body capable of nourishing the teaching-learning process through, precisely, bodily mediation represented metaphorically by the figure of the teacher-actor-entertainer-director that lends itself particularly well to describing the current task of teaching, as Morin (1999) rightly argues.

«The functional character of teaching reduces the teacher to a mere employee. The professional character of teaching leads to reducing the teacher to the expert. Teaching must once again become not just a function, a specialisation, a profession, but a public health task: a mission. A mission of transmission» (p. 32).

The power of teaching is restructured, generated and regenerated in the creation and intentional design of optimal learning conditions for all pupils, no one excluded (Canevaro & Malaguti, 2014). In the creative school (Robinson & Lou, 2016), teachers play specific roles ranging from engaging with pupils, providing them with accessible and sustainable teaching tools, to always devising new educational opportunities by adapting strategies to the needs and possibilities of professional practice. In the classroom that takes the form of a theatre, the teacher becomes aware that effective teaching is a process of continuous adaptation, evaluation and response to the participation of all pupils. In recognising himself as an actor among other actors, he takes on the complex representation of the changing and mutating everyday reality (Goffman, 1969) contributing, in an energising and purposeful way, to the co-construction of the school scene. The strong intertwining between theatrical dramaturgy and didactic representation makes the latter, therefore, comparable to theatre where the teacher plays multiple roles through a wide range of actions and communicative languages of a verbal, non-verbal (Argyle, 1993), gestural nature enriched by the characteristics of the voice, posture, movement, mimicry, eye contact, etc...

«Didactics does not simply ‘resemble’ theatre, it does not have a relationship of analogy with it (the elements of the one are also recognisable in the other) as we often read in much organisational literature in which the extrinsic relationship between training and theatre is often announced in the title of the work, denouncing it as ‘metaphors’ [...] Didactics is theatre and as theatre it has to do with the dramaturgical arrangement of the elements that make up the performance: actor, spectator, place, time, text. Didactics is a form of dramaturgy, didactic dramaturgy» (Rivoltella, 2012, pp. 159-160).

The new spaces of today’s didactics promote a new conception of theatricality and communication in teaching-learning processes centred mainly on the presence of the body as an indispensable, and not peripheral, aspect of the educational relationship. Starting from experience as generative knowledge (Jedlowski, 2008) of every thought and every action of the body, the didactic potential of the performing arts (Carlomagno, 2020a) is solicited and comes alive in a motor, sensory and emotional sense thanks to the necessary and decisive mediation of the teacher (Damiano, 2013). Each teacher is an active part of a theatrical event staged in the classroom of which, often, he or she is the acting pole by taking the stage, moving, speaking, sometimes acting out or reading stories, trying to channel attention to his or her actions, requests and questions, trying to arouse interest in what he or she is proposing and to encourage dialectical interaction between the contents proposed, between himself or herself and the pupils. These skills make the act of teaching real and alive, not only through content and argumentation, but by appealing to the creativity of the mimesis of bodies in situ-action (Rivoltella, 2017) as an intense, profound and involving process that allows the teacher and

pupils to reciprocally share skills, experiences, emotions, knowledge and attitudes of care in an inclusive key (Morganti, 2018).

### **3. Animating with playful creativity: some inclusive educational proposals**

Designing as a valuable guiding compass in the hands of the teacher helps to structure and organise the educational setting within which the space of life, imagination, manipulation, perception, contamination and fluid involvement with things, objects and the body takes root and takes shape (Nigris, 2003). This process interactively, dynamically and recursively connects the teacher-actor-director to the pupil-spectator and vice versa, in the unfolding of the plot of the educational-didactic itineraries proposed and set up for the participation of all pupils, in an inclusive perspective. In this sense, the pre-school, a school order of a flexible and open nature, represents a characteristic and privileged context for the realisation of personalised and differentiated itineraries to safeguard the participation and learning of all and each one (UNESCO, 2004). In the ad hoc designed educational setting, the teacher coordinates and promotes the engaging playful paths that develop in the multidimensional spaces of the section and of the school itself, giving life to narrative representations, developing inclusive processes and emotional support (Iori, 2009), promoting and socialising a rich and stimulating plurality of languages -gestural, motor, verbal, graphic, symbolic, plastic, relational, artistic, mathematical, creative, musical, etc... The following are two preschool projects aimed at promoting and conveying the value of inclusive languages (Zappaterra, 2022) designed to give voice to the plurality of the educational needs of pupils, both with and without special needs, by means of a didactics that is accessible to all and sustainable for all (Cottini, 2019; Canevaro & Ianes, 2022) conceived as the “art of life” by the teacher animator. The project entitled *Little piece, in search of the lost identity*, stems from the educational awareness that “the child communicates, expresses emotions, tells stories, using the various possibilities that body language allows”, as the National Indications (Miur, 2012) remind us. The section in which the project in question was implemented is part of a comprehensive school in the province of Rimini. It is a heterogeneous section made up of twenty-two pupils aged three, four and five, including Michele, aged five, who has “special educational needs - his functional profile presents a bilateral hearing impairment of medium degree - who possesses appreciable resources such as: good attentive and intuitive skills, interest in motor activities. Among the critical aspects, Michele shows a certain insecurity in free play activities in the large group to which he definitely prefers those in the small group. The aspects to be strengthened mainly concern vocabulary, as well as personal self-esteem and self-efficacy. The group-section proves to be predominantly collaborative despite the fact that the participation of some is inconstant during the proposed educational-didactic activities due to difficulties with attention spans. The project had as its frame of reference the field of experience *The Self and the other* supplemented by stimulation from the field of experience *Images, sounds and colours*. The conjunction of these educational-didactic dimensions gave rise to the following learning objectives: 1. to perceive and recognise oneself; 2. to become aware of being different and different from others; 3. to rework works of art using different modes of expression; 4. to represent oneself graphically; 5. to stimulate collaboration and industrious creativity (Pinto Minerva & Vinella, 2012). The learning unit was divided into three phases that took place in the second part of the school year, respecting an organisation of space and time favourable to the construction of a flexible and inclusive educational environment, also thanks to the adoption of diversified teaching strategies (play, circle time, collaborative learning, peer tutoring, small group activities). The first activity saw the entrance into the section of *Little*

*piece*, a character born from the fictional fantasy of L. Lionni (2013) physically interpreted by the teacher, who showed the children a curious suitcase containing books on the human body of various formats, sizes and types -sensory, pop-up, audio books, silent books- reproductions of portraits created by famous artists: *The girl with the turban* by J. Vermeer, Van Gogh's *Self-portrait*, Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, Picasso's *Portrait of Dora Maar*, Matisse's *Woman with a Hat*. Michele was personally involved in opening the suitcase and discovering its original contents. Afterwards, *Little piece* entertained the children by telling his story. The pupils were invited to make use of the didactic material made available to them, while the teachers made a video, which was then projected on the Lim and socialised in the classroom. The recording of the emotions and the verbalisations produced during this surprising encounter made it possible to promote and activate active listening and fertile sharing of the emotional meanings experienced by the children (Riva, 2004). The classroom circle time concluded the trigger episode of the learning unit. In the second phase, the children were the protagonists of some ludic-motor activities: the photo game, the guess-mate game and the mirror game. These educational experiences, conveyed by body language, enabled them to identify themselves, to recognise themselves on the level of personal identity, strengthening their sense of belonging to the group-section. Michele took part in the educational-didactic proposals, showing particular involvement in body expression, which represents an experiential area where his self-esteem and confidence can best develop. In the fourth step, a graphic-expressive-art workshop was organised in the section. The teachers set up large white sheets of paper on the floor and on the table on which the children, divided into small groups, could creatively colour according to their favourite expressive techniques (tempera, finger paints, wax paints, sponges, watercolours, collage, indian ink, etc...). The pupils were invited to reproduce, in a personalised way, the works of art brought to them by *Little piece* using a variety of tools and materials (fabric, tissue paper, tulle, cotton, corks, cardboard, scissors, glue, recycled materials, sponges, pongo, recycled materials, etc...) as a testimony to the children's refined artistry. Michele participated in the final activity, in the small group, supported by a fellow tutor. The project was documented by means of: photographic reportage and video -published on the school website- narrative reports by the teachers and the university intern. With a view to self-evaluation, the teachers drew up a narrative report with the aim of carrying out a critical review of their own work, so as to make any adjustments in a reflective perspective, adopt changes, become aware of undesirable effects and propose improvements. In addition, a collective poster was made in which the images referring to the activities carried out were reproduced. Each child took it in turn to graphically mark their enjoyment of the activities carried out. The second learning unit entitled *The happiness in movement* is inspired by the significant contribution of motor education in the integral and integrated formation of the person, in accompanying pupils to grow and evolve. The child tells his story, his experiences, his emotions through movement and the body, the use of space and the relationship with the group. The set of playful narratives, illustrated below, aim to encourage the expression of fundamental emotions, to offer children opportunities for contact and conscious confrontation with the involving emotional-body dimension (Ceciliani, 2015; Sibilio & D'Elia, 2015). The National Indications (Miur, 2012) emphasise, in fact, that the child "takes pleasure in movement and experiments with postural and motor schemes, applies them in individual and group games, also with the use of small tools, and is able to adapt them to environmental situations inside the school and outdoors". The section in which the project in question was implemented is part of a comprehensive school in the province of Pesaro and Urbino. It is a homogeneous section of twenty five-year-old pupils, including Lucia, a sensitive and cooperative child with mild cognitive delay. The section is made up of curious and lively pupils who contribute to creating a positive climate

favourable to cooperation. Participation is active while learning is subject to some criticalities concerning inconstant attention spans during the educational-didactic activities. The didactic activities planned were developed taking into account the following learning objectives referring to the prevailing fields of experience *The body and movement* and *Images, sounds and colours*: 1. to enhance knowledge of the bodily self; 2. to express different emotions with the body's creativity; 3. to participate with pleasure in free and guided movement activities; 4. to accept, respect and share rules in movement games; 5. to represent emotions artistically and graphically. *The happiness in movement* learning unit was divided into three phases that ran through the second part of the school year, taking into account both the inclusive organisation of time and space and the use of different teaching strategies: play, circle time, workshop teaching, small and large group activities. The protagonist of the triggering activity was Mrs. Happy, physically interpreted by the teacher, who brought the children in the section a surprise: a maxi parcel. After prompting the pupils with a few questions about its contents, Mrs. Happy invited Lucia to open the mysterious parcel, which contained structured educational material - books of various formats and types, boxed games- on the subject of emotions. Afterwards, the children were involved in a circle time after having been left free to enjoy the material at their disposal. In the second step, the pupils, divided into subgroups, were offered workshop activities carried out synchronously in different corners of the gymnasium to discover, get to know and recognise the main emotions, primarily happiness. The following play and body experiences carried out fostered contact between the children through serene affectivity in a pupil-friendly context: 1. Let's walk on bubble wrap: what fun to walk on bursting bubbles! 2. Foot game: let's try to imagine our happy feet. How could they move? 3. Hand game: with our hands we can cuddle, cuddle, give hugs! 4. "The body speaks" game. What position does our body assume when we are happy? When we are sad? 5. Motor routes of happiness and sadness with different tools -hoops, ropes, perforated cones, cylinder cushion, supports. The workshop ended with a relaxation activity in which the children listened to their bodies and their emotions in a safe space, with Zen music playing in the background. During the activities in the gymnasium, Lucia was able to involve herself personally, being motivated to develop her resources, especially those of a collaborative nature. The concluding part of the educational-didactic project *The happiness in movement* was carried out as part of the institute's annual continuity project, included in the PTOF, entitled *Let's emotionalise*, which the final year kindergarten pupils and the first year primary school pupils took part in. The following play activities were carried out in small mixed groups -childhood and primary- on specifically scheduled days: 1. emotion bingo; 2. emotion thermometer; 3. emotion clock; 4. emotion domino. Lucia took part in the continuity activities alongside a fellow tutor, towards whom she shows affectionate attachment. The project was documented by means of: photographic reportage and video -published on the school website- narrative reports by the teachers. In order to adopt effective ways of self-regulating the teaching-learning process, the teachers drew up a final narrative report aimed at a critical review of their own work, in a reflective key. In addition, a collective poster was made in which the images referring to the activities carried out were reproduced. Each child was invited to choose and paste the smiles -smiling, doubtful and sad- corresponding to the level of satisfaction with the activities carried out. In summary, the school experiences described propose a focus on the relationship between corporeal creativity and inclusive languages that intercepts the performative and communicative abilities of teachers and pupils in a space of reciprocal and authentic listening. Body language and gesture, posture and presence, listening and empathy represent powerful relational resources capable of transforming and increasing learning and participation from an inclusive perspective. Starting from the exploration of body language codes as stimulating and valuable

sources of motivation and interest, it is necessary for the educational intervention to make use of inclusive practices where facial expressions, hand movements, postures, tone, timbre and rhythm of the voice, proxemics and physical contact play a decisive and effective role. Valuing and empowering the body means entering into empathic and profound educational relationships that have a greater chance of holding the attention of teachers and pupils, of organising engaging didactic activities, and of improving the school climate as aspects aimed at characterising a valuable pedagogical route on a child-friendly scale, open to all and to each one (Vullo & Lucangeli, 2021).

#### 4. Conclusions

The educational activities presented as an example, in the previous paragraph, recall a concise cross-section of didactic dramaturgy (Rivoltella, 2021) represented as a live act in nursery school where languages, actions, meanings, symbolologies and practices contaminate, merge and mingle productively on the school stage. Teachers and pupils are, at the same time and with marked evidence, actors-spectators and actors-directors, protagonists-users according to a didactic plot that makes them reciprocally significant and signifiers, in the name of a *cognitive and empathic osmosis* (Carlomagno, 2020b) capable of transforming, changing, activating, renewing and rediscovering the body, emotionality, affectivity and thought. The relationship between theatre and didactics, absorbing the effective cultural and anthropological action of bodily performativity (Turner, 1993), brings to light the biographical and autobiographical dimension of the teacher and of the students, enhancing it in an extraordinarily creative way, increasing the ability to seek the presence of the Other and to be present in the Other, according to an educational action aimed at governing the complexity of cognitive and relational processes. Supporting and promoting the growth of each pupil, broadening the horizon of educational experiences, creating a relational climate that fosters cooperation in the group and personal autonomy are some of the opportunities connected to the virtuous staging of the various masks and faces, adopted, concerted and shared by the teacher-educational director and his pupils-actors-viewers in search of a scenic perspective that is as creative and inclusive as possible (Canevaro, 2013).

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