

Joining together for understanding

Barbara Biagioni¹

It is a widespread opinion that the driving force behind any evolutionary process is the exchange of information with the surrounding environment, an exchange that occurs during the entire life cycle. Our existence is filled with communicative acts; even silence or our absence from a situation transmits a message, informs, and communicates. Everything is communication and the development of communicative competence is closely related to the development of culture in human beings.

It follows that human behaviour does not only comprise adaptive interactions with the surrounding environment, typical of every living being, but also of relationships developed in a context constructed around conventions, values, opportunities and constraints, and with each acting subject's personal contribution, which plays a part in determining the progress of the communicative process. In human beings, in fact, semiotic ability is not limited to satisfying primary needs; in humans even those needs related to the emotional sphere and to the fulfilment of dreams become inalienable. For human beings the use of representative semiotic codes, a symbolic universe aimed at ascribing sense and value to experience, to each individual's background, not only in factual terms, but also in metaphorical terms, comes into play. Citing Fabbri Montesano and Munari: «Thinking in images and thinking in stories presupposes a particular relationship between constructing ideas and having sentiments. It is in thinking through images and stories that the individual can save the unity of his/her being, producing new forms of relations and knowledge»².

Metaphors are in fact used to communicate new ways of thinking since they are simultaneously magical and logical, subjective and objec-

¹ Directress of Iside Istitution of the Municipality of Grosseto

² D. Fabbri Montesano, A. Munari, *Strategie del sapere: verso una psicologia culturale*, Bari, Dedalo, 1984, p. 38. The quotation has been translated from the following: «Pensare in immagini e pensare in storie presuppone un rapporto particolare tra il costruire idee e l'avere sentimenti. È nel pensare per immagini e per storie che l'individuo può salvare l'unità del suo essere, producendo nuove forme di rapporto e di conoscenza».

tive, internal and communicative, reconciling opposite poles. Thinking and communicating through stories, images, and metaphors is a more appropriate way of defining relations in a system of values. Writing and painting, just as the modern language of multimedia, are the historical result of the construction of social meanings through the exchange of inter-subjective information.

Thus the ability to integrate and interact in a social context to construct one's own way of thinking by sharing and negotiating meanings and signs becomes an essential element for personal growth in a situation of continuous communication. In this approach to communication, its function in the construction of a personal worldview through relationships with others is more important than its social role.

In the semiotic universe that human beings have constructed, some representations and configurations have lasting universal social connotations due to the function that they have always performed within society: the family with its parenting function and school with its teaching function.

As Vanna Iori notes in her research regarding "lived space": «There is not a single space but many spaces; spatiality is a property of human existence and space influences behaviours and emotions. Among the possible elaborations of space according to its specificity of use, values and functions, we may identify an educational space, distinguished as that space in which an educational relationship is developed, in which transmission of culture and existential transformation occurs, according to an educational project»³.

Even the way of thinking about education is subordinated to the way in which the dominant culture is structured, family and school being the privileged contexts chosen by the human social system to begin the process of acculturation, the transmission of knowledge in each community, aimed at self preservation and perpetuation.

If behaviour is culture and the cultural and behavioural characteristics of a society are transmitted through teaching and learning, based on the type of social structure assigned to the family and the school system,

³ V. Iori, *Lo spazio vissuto: luoghi educative e soggettività*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1996, p. XVI. The quotation has been translated from the following: «Non c'è un solo spazio ma molti, la spazialità è una proprietà dell'esistenza umana e lo spazio influenza i comportamenti e le emozioni. Tra le possibili elaborazioni dello spazio secondo una specificità di usi, valori e funzioni, si può individuare uno spazio educativo che si caratterizza come lo spazio entro cui si sviluppa una relazione educativa, una trasmissione culturale e una trasformazione esistenziale in ordine ad un progetto educativo».

we can understand what kind of attention a society pays to the process of education, and the kinds of norms and values it wants to transmit.

It may be affirmed that for a long time, the family and its parenting function, despite the latter being one of the most significant commitments in a person's life, have been considered a private affair and childhood has been viewed as a productive investment, depriving girls and boys of the right to be recognized as persons, interlocutors worthy of being listened to and guided in the construction of their future.

In the Middle Ages childhood was considered neither a subject for reflection nor a semantic category: unawareness, as absurd as it may sound, is usually associated with freedom. There was, at the time, a "common education" consisting of the experiences of everyday life. Only in the 16th and 17th centuries would society begin to think of childhood as an investment for the future, especially the bourgeoisie, which was beginning its social ascent and felt the need to perpetuate the rights acquired in its progress towards success and to maintain its social status. Thus the first institutions geared towards education with the objective of preparing the future bourgeois social class were born.

Since then, the collocation of the family within society has also changed. In fact, a different balance was achieved between productive and reproductive roles and functions, the first being, until the 1940s, entrusted to men, and the second to women. The increase in literacy skills as well as the advent of mass media have since then created a context in which the circulation of information should have changed to a great extent the concepts of childhood, parenting and schooling, and thus the entire concept of education.

After the birth of a child, the roles and balance within a couple change, especially with regards to the new responsibility of caring for a newborn. To this day, though, little seems to have changed with respect to the sharing of tasks traditionally assigned to men and women. The mother is still in the frontlines; it is still she who must use her own resources to sustain the new adventure of parenthood and at the same time try to achieve her own self fulfilment, the latter being an inalienable right of any human being.

Childhood, although considered a social and cultural condition, with a psychological identity and social status, is still not free from views related to productive mechanisms. Outside of cultural circles specifically geared towards education, there is a general state of solitude and insecurity on the part of the adult world in its dialogue with this "reality"; as a result, children seem to be viewed more as constraints rather than as resources to be chosen as active interlocutors even in the growth of the adult.

The general feeling is that in society the welfare and tutorial functions regarding the care and custody of children, rather than support for their socio-cognitive development, continue to prevail, even after a period in which, along with the claims of feminism, the right of children not only to a physical and psychological well-being in the strictest sense of the words, but also to an affective and emotional well-being, had also been demanded.

To this day, a nursery school pedagogical national charter defining educational parameters for all children still seems to be a long way off. The school system is constantly being subjected to changes regarding study programs and human resources, but its pedagogical and structural framework is still centred on results, returns and performance, with only a superficial glance at its processes, relationships, communication and sentiment. In agreement with Montesano and Munari, it seems necessary to state that both teachers and educators still liken the increase of knowledge to the construction of a building.

The question of Piaget's stages of development is still assimilated to this view, so that the concept of stage of development is likened to a floor of a building, and the different stages to the rising levels of a building. In the name of Piaget the educational approach that supports the child in the construction of his/her own building by furnishing him/her only with the necessary bricks and teaching him/her how to stack them so that the building is solid is still being justified. Even the construction of which Piaget speaks is neither linear nor cumulative, but a continuous reconstruction without any privileged direction. The bricks must be substituted with the concept of a dynamic network of interconnected events in continuous motion so that evolution becomes a mutual adjustment and co-evolution.

There is a need for institutional action (the charter of rights of the child, legislative interventions safeguarding childhood and adolescence, actions taken against the exploitation of minors etc.) to constantly recall the adult world to pay more attention to childhood, meaning that childhood and children are still considered to be an investment that is not very different, except in procedure, from the logic of financial support of one's issue.

Being considered persons rather than individuals is still a goal to be attained. The social perception of the other as a bearer of values and competences that, apart from their quality, contribute to the construction of the historical and cultural context and of our own identity is still far away.

An individual's singularity and original objectivity is still acknowledged, but his/her personal history is de-contextualized. As Ferdinand Tönnies underlines: «While in a local community individuals are bound

in spite of any separation, in society they are in fact separated, and they remain separated, for all their bonds»⁴.

Yet the exchange of opinions, experiences, collaboration, solidarity, and shared meta-knowledge do not give way to a loss of personal identity, on the contrary they reinforce it. In the communicative process reciprocal understanding and knowledge come together; many minds are open to a common narrative universe, to a story, which contributes in orienting the human being on such a complex map called reality.

Evidently, the socio-cultural objectives of our society are different. Hence families, nursery schools and schools with their social distinctions, are left to face each other, each with its own idea or concept of childhood, different and in many cases contradictory. As Jerome Bruner also notes in his research, the very same concepts of merit and performance constitute the expression of a social objective aimed at establishing distinctions, distance and marginality.

There is a need to promote interventions that enable families and educational contexts to go beyond the educational approach related to the acquisition of competences to embrace a view of education that pays attention to emotions, sentiments, thoughtfulness, all components of personality necessary to face the challenges that reality constantly places in front of us.

Despite the fact that in their childhood state girls and boys continue to be viewed as the property of adults who want to direct and organize them, projecting onto them their fears, prejudices and productive objectives, and despite the absence of a systematic and constructive institutional debate on the idea of childhood and education, many local realities have developed policies which are mindful of childhood and supportive of parents.

In these contexts, learning implies a synergistic interaction between the life experience and abilities of each single person. The family, nursery school and kindergarten are all legitimised as diversified contexts that allow everyone access to developmental opportunities and as places where it is possible to create a self-reflexive identity, an "I", based on sharing, reciprocity and negotiation. In these contexts, the educational process, especially in the area of childhood services, is connected to the heritage of acquired knowledge, beliefs and symbols (language, art, myth, ritual) of each person involved: parents, educators, and children.

⁴ F. Tonnies, *Die soziale Frage*, Berlin/New York, Walter de Gruyter, ed. Cornelius Bickel, 1989. The quotation has been translated from the following: «Mentre nella comunità locale gli individui sono legati malgrado ogni separazione, nella società sono di fatto separati, e restano separati, malgrado ogni legame».

The starting point is the idea that it is important to reflect on how we know, rather than on what we know, and on the fact that knowledge is constructed through relationships between people by means of a dialogistic approach, and through a thinking process centred on «us» rather than on “me”. The objective is to find a common ground for the construction of a shared universe of values and knowledge to be used as a starting point that will consent the realization of a common story with which each person may identify.

The construction and maintenance of the sense of belonging to a group is in fact essential in guaranteeing that children be allowed to move in a diversified psychological space having recognizable points of reference, especially because they are bearers of personal and social differences. In these educational contexts, children have the right not only to express their inalienable needs without them being prejudicially considered bad habits, but also to obtain an answer from the adult world that is not limited to a simple «no!».

Planning and organizing the learning process requires a relationship between other local contexts with the certainty that no one context may act upon another but may only guide it following the path of negotiation and active listening.

To cite Etienne Wenger: «The creation of channels of communication to set forth and combine different knowledgeabilities, to share a vision, means fully recognizing our reciprocal existences»⁵. Designing a learning process that allows the co-evolution of all the people who constitute a historical and cultural context also means stressing the importance of communication through forms of documentation of the history that is being constructed, and which is configured as a privileged social space of information and exchange between people: documenting means succeeding in making oneself understood.

Working towards being understood also means recognizing the descriptive function of language, both verbal and visual, and the power of language to construct reality. Documentation places the emphasis on the predisposition of the modalities of information diffusion with respect to the different users (internal and external), and is considered by many to

⁵ E. Wenger, *Comunità di pratica*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2006, p. 262. The quotation has been translated from the following: «La creazione di canali di comunicazione al fine di emettere, combinare i diversi saperi, condividere una visione, significa riconoscere a pieno le reciproche esistenze».

be that mental action which, after having analysed and categorized the contents of a situation, identifies the significant units of information and defines the relative procedures of testimony and diffusion.

Documentation gives value to life experiences, and encourages their transfer, transforming them into available resources for the development of a more qualified reality. Through documentation, traces of educational events are maintained with the intent of providing a theoretical and practical memory that allows a constant communicative circularity. As a form of constant feedback for both the operative group and the families, it allows the development of an extended system of intervention that interacts directly with the wider socio-cultural system of which it is a part. The documentation of educational events may then encourage reflection on «the world of childhood», and create continuity with other formative services and with the general public.

As Aldo Fortunati also notes in his many studies, documentation is a fundamental aspect of educational planning in that it is bound to the complex web onto which are woven the contexts of experience and everyday occurrences in the life of a child in nursery school, thus contributing to the construction of an external, public, inter-subjective memory of experiences.

The personnel's experience of continuing education on the subject of documentation and of project planning exchanges with families that is underway in the nursery schools and kindergartens of the City of Grosseto has the following ambitious aim: to allow all the adults that are part of the educational space to construct opportunities for interaction and communication to promote understanding rather than judgement, active listening rather than the defence and reinforcement of one's own reference system, and conflict management as a positive resource from which to begin constructing processes that are different from those adopted until now.

Kindergartens and nursery schools are to be considered privileged meeting places where diversified requirements and requests converge, needs which cannot be left without a project plan and procedures through which the adult, first of all, is placed in the position of thinking back on his/her own needs and dreams and, through the sharing of experience, of understanding and accepting the needs and dreams of others, adults and children alike.

As Jerome Bruner notes, an effective education always strikes a precarious balance both in the culture and the groups that sustain it, and when its interpretative range is reduced to a monotonous routine activity, the more general capacity of systems and individuals to adapt to change and an ever-evolving reality is also reduced.

For this reason a constant investment is necessary both on education as a form of information, so that professionals may be oriented in the field of academic research, and on education as an act of inter-subjective reflection on life experience.

Education of a merely transmissive nature has already been replaced by a formative approach that values the concept of learning through participation and involvement, and which focuses attention onto specific procedures.

In Grosseto, such a course of action has been undertaken through of a series of meetings of a theoretical and practical nature aimed at rethinking the methodologies used in documentation, albeit using previously tested educational experiences as a point of departure.

Furthermore, other educational interventions have been set up with the help of families, such as the establishment of “discussion groups” made up of parents who meet to share their experiences, and an educator or teacher in the role of facilitator. These communication mediators, in their role as active and empathetic listeners, help bring to light personal experiences and views in a relational group dynamic of a symmetrical nature.

Moreover, a link has been established among early childhood services and families by means of a didactic project that, with the establishment of a children’s library and lending system, has the objective of promoting the importance of narration as communicative exchange. This, in turn, has led to reciprocal knowledge, the sharing of meanings, emotions and a co-evolution of all the interlocutors.

Finally, wanting to favour a children’s culture that is not the result of acculturation processes that are merely transmissive, but rather the result of a dynamic dialogue among equals, opportunities for comparison of ideas and debate have been provided with the objective of publishing a periodical on early childhood, to the drafting of which both childhood services operators and parents have collaborated and will continue to do so in the future.

These experiences will be better illustrated in detail in the reports presented by the coordinators that the City of Grosseto has engaged to carry out this complex project.

In conclusion, Paulo Coelho effectively summarizes the question of our being in the world, both as children and as adults, when he writes: «it’s easy to understand that someone in the world awaits you, whether it’s in the middle of the desert or in some great city. And when two such people encounter each other, and their eyes meet, the past and the future become unimportant»⁶.

⁶ P. Coelho, *The Alchemist*, New York, Harper Luxe, [1988] 2006, p. 98.