

## The educational relationship between parents and children in the thinking of Giovanni Bollea

Daniela Sarsini<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

Il contributo esamina il pensiero di Giovanni Bollea a proposito della relazione educativa che intercorre tra genitori e figli. Attraverso una messa a punto dei concetti di educazione, formazione e istruzione viene chiarito il nesso tra formazione e cura sotteso alla produzione di Bollea. La formazione intesa come cura si declina anche come «crescita reciproca» e dunque non solo come crescita dei figli, ma anche degli stessi genitori. La famiglia è dunque un sistema in trasformazione e nello stesso tempo una «rete di sostegno» per i suoi componenti. Il contributo termina sottolineando l'attenzione riservata da Bollea alle attività ludiche nel loro promuovere il benessere dei bambini.

**Parole chiave:** Giovanni Bollea, formazione, genitori, figli, benessere.

### Abstract

The article examines the thinking of Giovanni Bollea on the educational relationship between parents and children. By outlining the concepts of education, formation and instruction, the author clarifies the nexus between formation and care running through Bollea's work. Formation meant as care also signifies 'mutual growth', and therefore not just the growth of the children, but of the parents as well. Hence, the family is a transforming system and at the same time a 'support network' for its members. The paper concludes by underlining Bollea's attention to play activities in promoting children's wellbeing.

**Keywords:** Giovanni Bollea, formation, parents, children, well-being.

In *Genitori grandi maestri di felicità* [Parents, great teachers of happiness] Giovanni Bollea (2005) underlines the importance of educating children to have a sense of belonging, from nursery to secondary school. In so doing, he uses the metaphor of the «courtyard» as a place for meeting, playing and socialising, and on several occasions he invites educators and teachers to deal with their pupils' formation, alongside their

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<sup>1</sup> Professore ordinario di pedagogia generale e sociale, Università degli Studi di Firenze.

necessary instruction. These very topics – sense of belonging, socialisation, formation – already belie a strong educational foundation to his thought and similarities with the bases of pedagogy.

Pedagogical reflection indeed makes a distinction between *education*, *formation* and *instruction*, considering them the three main processes to favour and orient developing subjects' growth so that they may achieve autonomy, participation and socialisation.

The first – *education* – is multifaceted and complex. Interpreted by pedagogy as a *family of concepts*, it comprises activities and processes that are very different from each other. On one hand, education implies the adult's capacity to favour the growing subjects' development, enabling potentials and inclinations to emerge (from the verb *educere*) in a sort of 'unravelling' of innate talents; on the other, since it also derives from the verb *edere*, education is also seen as nourishing, bringing up, *care* and support (affective, dialogic, cognitive, relational) of the 'man cub', involving intentional action by the adult.

Precisely owing to its many semantic facets, education has long been considered a weak and generic concept, lacking scientific rigour, while in reality its dynamicity and plurality demonstrate how central and pervasive it is. Indeed, there is no aspect of civil society that does not operate in an educational sense: the family, cultural institutions, school, the different compartments of the state; and there is no social life or society that has not organised and institutionalised the cultural transmission to new generations of standards, behaviours and values.

Therefore, education is at the same time a spontaneous and intentional process, aimed at individuals and social groups with characteristics that, sometimes shared, sometimes divergent, are nevertheless always plural and complex.

The category of *formation*, unlike education, indicates the personal process – distinct to every subject – of growth and development. Not dictated by cultural or social standards, it is built on the basis of the choices made by all individuals during their existence, concerning above all the interior aspects, namely those linked to self-awareness and enrichment of their human condition. This growth/development is based on interaction with all the sedimented forms of culture: from studying to reading, arts to travel, writing to music, etc., as a 'spiritual exercise' that gives completeness and dynamicity to the subject's making, and constitutes the formative destiny of every human being.

Formation, therefore, the key category underlying pedagogy, appears as the mediation between individual conscience and cultural objectivity.

It has no chronological or topological limits. What is more, it forms a relationship of continuity/discontinuity with education: continuity since there is no formation without conformation to rules, languages and shared values, or without learning the know-how, techniques and knowledge assimilated through *instruction* – a process appertaining to school first of all; discontinuity since formation implies a personal existential project that goes beyond education to take the unique and unrepeatable form assumed by single individuals in the story of their existence, which is also, and always, the story of their *formation*.

Indeed it is no coincidence that Bollea indicates formation as the main route to the construction of a complete and integral identity which is realised, both at school and in the family, when value is set by personal maturity and social integration. The classroom, in particular, should not just be the place of instruction and learning knowledge, but should also represent the opportunity to experience living together with others in a solidaristic and comprehensive manner, in the same way as the family environment should be the place for *care* and embracing/safeguarding human vulnerability.

In *Le madri non sbagliano mai* [*Mothers are Never Wrong*], Bollea goes further, defining this formative role as a «parallel school» (1995, p. 72) that is indispensable and fundamental for growth, and he considers the dialogical and communicative dimension as the basic aspect of «new pedagogy» (ivi, p. 118) which should underlie educational action. With regard to the parents-children relationship, he then underlines another aspect quite dear to pedagogy, namely that to recognise the alterity of the other whom we take care of is to welcome and acknowledge their originality and uniqueness. Indeed, *care* works on a twofold level: towards oneself and towards others. In addition, inseparably from this, care becomes the vehicle of personal identity the very moment it promotes and endeavours to deal with difference. Hence a rapport of reciprocity and hospitable reception is established between the actors in the relationship, inducing comprehension and that which Bollea defines as *mutual growth*. For their parents, children – the author underlines – are not just the representation of «affective joy», nor even, «in the philosophical sense, a psychological projection of the Self into the future», but the «capacity to modify the adult by acting as a mirror» (ivi, p. 119). This, it seems, can be considered a quite significant passage, recalling the therapeutic method that Bollea used with children and adolescents which mainly sought to comprehend and take interest in individuals' specific characteristics, while accepting their weaknesses and fragilities and not making depersonalised or standard generalisations. His attention to the

single person, to the specific case, rather than to standardised treatments of a technical or pharmacological kind, also shows the care that he took over the human person as a unit and as diversity to be safeguarded and protected. It also shows his ethical commitment to assume the burden of his patients' formative growth, while striving for a wise and reflective as well as passionate and empathetical relationship.

In the same way, he called for conscious parenting, based on communication and frank and open dialogue, envisaging an interpersonal relationship based on «care of the heart» and «mind» as the inspiring principle and source of support. The family constitutes – Bollea underlined – a fundamental *support network* in order to implement that very humanisation and individualisation process which every individual must follow and draw up. And this support can only be a care activity.

Lastly, I would like to recall another aspect of Bollea's thinking with a great educational and formative value: play activity. Several times not just in his work, but also in his interventions, Bollea underlined the importance of play, the expression of fantasy and creativity, in childhood growth. The right to play needs to be safeguarded not just because the children need it, but also because it is always connected with pleasure, gratification and imagination. It lies at the very core of formation precisely because it develops all the aspects of the personality and is the mainstay of the subject's integrity. Furthermore, while bringing out individual characteristics, play activities also favour and facilitate group relations. Each participant in the game can live several, perhaps contrasting or opposing, situations at the same time, thus it provides a precious training ground where the children can try out different roles, according to divergent perspectives. Play, owing to the very fact that it fits reality to subjective necessities and needs, has great utopian and transformative strength, welding external experience to each child's cognitive potential. Hence, it is an activity that needs to be favoured and valued, also owing to the levity and involvement that it nourishes and arouses.

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