

Literature and Art: narrative paths for social-emotional education

Finally in Italy we are talking about social-emotional learning; *#1oradamore* is the name of the media campaign promoted by Italian journalists, artists, psychologists, researchers, and sociologists to promote the introduction of social-emotional education in Italian schools. To share feelings and take care of emotional life is an essential cultural action, especially during adolescence when social behaviours begin to take shape and approaches to and dynamics of relationships strengthen.

In other European countries gender education replaces and broadens social-emotional education, separating it from sexual education, and becoming a specific lesson or off-shoot of diversity education with particular attention paid to gender awareness. Social-emotional education therefore requires an interdisciplinary effort that aims to eradicate gender stereotypes, led by teachers sensitized and trained, flexible and open to discuss strong instructional methodologies.

For example, some French primary schools are experimenting with the device “ABCD de l'égalité.” The teachers involved, led to reflect upon formal and informal aspects of the adopted instructional methods, have at their disposal a virtual platform to share tools, resources (theoretical and practical examples), and to create useful activities to promote equality and eliminate the prejudices located at the root of discrimination.

Based on this experience, the leadership of the French primary teachers union, SNUIPP-FSU, has suggested that teachers not use books that “spread gender stereotypes” but rather those that “step off the beaten path and away from clichés about boys and girls making children think about their own sexual identities.” The resources shared on the web platform are related to literature and art. For example, Renoir's painting ‘Madame Charpentier et ses enfants’ offers many pathways to understand the artwork. While examining the painted figures we could ask who are the characters, guess their stories, reflect upon their facial expressions, how they look, what clothing was permitted and the significance, as well as how clothing has since changed and why with all of the related social implications.

Artistic creations reveal meanings, values, and histories. They are made by and show people, and teenagers are harbour a marked interest in the people and their stories.

Art and literature are rich places to venture in search of sensations and signs, archetypes, spaces of movement and metamorphosis disoriented and then oriented to reach what the Hellenic poet Callimaco named *aitia*—the origin of things.

A story is a plastic matter—a soft, malleable, elastic, faithful form. It is a symbol, a way through, an imitation and paraphrase of human nature. Stories are lived by figures who personify human passions and fears. Imagination ties to memory and at the same time releases itself, returning, then needing contours.

Literature and art are maps of feelings that suggest continuous exploration and teach of the beauty of time, of waiting, of concentration, of solitude. Literature is the place where Sebastian seeks refuge in Mr. Coriandoli's bookshop in *The NeverEnding Story*. Teenagers try on and can be overwhelmed by emotions; stories help convert emotions into feelings and are a cultural transformation. Feelings are cognitive and affective at the same time and bring with them the inevitable, necessary experience of boundary that, although frustrating, strengthens and opens hearts to desire, empathy and compassion.

“To live among images,” as Hillmann asserted, helps confusion. Teens need to recognise themselves, to find sense, and, in the conflicts that emerge, seek resolution and map out their own identities. To recognise oneself helps to catch a glimpse of a continuous path, curious windows opening upon new spaces and stories; to talk about love and loyalty with Rostand and his Cyrano; and to find it difficult to understand the waiting, to deride it but secretly enjoy the perseverance and then, luckily, to dream of it. Then to discover that Cyrano really existed—as well as his prominent nose—and harbored a secular cosmic feeling so strong, seeing that which we nowadays theorize and systematize. Then to talk about his “journey on moon” and embrace Luciano and the “true story” turning a curve which quickly crosses centuries and regions and returns to Dvořák and his Ninth Symphony listened to by astronauts during the moon landing of 1969.

Narrative interlaces and illuminates experiences.

The instructional resources are not only about content; the opportunity to learn to dedicate oneself to process is also precious. It is as difficult and extremely important to learn to pause at an idea or image when thousands of them crowd our vision and loudly demand attention. It is a quality exercise and as Marco Belpoliti declared, it is “training for introspective altruism.”

Literature and art are symbolic activities in which we can find our own emotional space and experience and express possibilities and new frontiers. A story, told or painted, is synthesis and representation. It creates sense accompanying emotions with a form of awareness on the path to reach areté, the ancient Greek virtue that was far from an aesthetic meaning but was entirely human and possible and expressed becoming passionate about ourselves.

Art and literature demand attentiveness, and that attentiveness allows us to arrange daily fragmented experiences into pictures, complex mosaics, and to interact with words in a creative way—to make of them something personal. We are able to see ourselves through the expedient narrative of disconnect that helps us find distance necessary also for a relationship with oneself.

To emotionally identify with situations, to project experiences and contexts, renders the sharing of the universality of human emotions and solicits attentiveness that is at the origin of care of the self and, therefore, of empathy.

“Even if Kafka did not pray—and this we do not know—he still possessed the highest degree of what Malebranche called, ‘the natural prayer of the soul’: attentiveness. And in this attentiveness he included all living creatures, as saints include them in their prayers” (Benjamin, 1934).

Aknoledgements

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