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Gender and Affectivity Awareness in Kindergarten: An Educational Pathway for Boys, Girls and Their Teachers

Barbara Segatto* and Anna Dal Ben**

Abstract: The issue of gender identity education is at the heart of learning processes related to the equality-disparity dichotomy, positioned longitudinally between the various levels of education and generating broad debate on educational and social levels. Gender and affectivity education appears fundamental to promote positive relational interactions among young people, freed from stereotypical models that are often internalised in the cultural circles to which they belong. In the Italian educational context, there are few concrete teaching experiences on these topics, despite research showing the importance of presenting these topics from earliest childhood. This paper presents a research-action pilot project involving 40 four-year-old boys and girls and their teachers at two municipal kindergartens in north-eastern Italy. The educational pathway showed that boys and girls clearly distinguish between male and female, although the distinction does not concretely affect their choice of characteristics, attitudes, preferences and emotions. As concerns educational figures, the study revealed a significant training need, involving the teachers themselves in understanding and deconstructing gender stereotypes.

Keywords: gender education, equal opportunities, affectivity, childhood, training

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Theoretical context

Despite efforts to promote gender equality, and despite formally having access to the same educational opportunities, boys and girls, and men and women still differ in terms of their aspirations, motivations, performance, participation and recognition in both education and the professional world. Research has shown that these differences cannot be explained by an intrinsic basic lack of ability or a different character on the basis of gender (Hyde, 2005). Indeed, the differences tend to increase with age, becoming evident during adolescence (Evans, Schweingruber & Stevenson, 2002; Retelsdorf, Schwartz & Asbrock, 2015).

Socialisation in the family and schools is decisive in widening gender disparity, preventing people from reaching their full potential. As they observe their environment, children learn to associate masculinity and femininity with certain characteristics, including physical differences, social roles and cultural modes, adapting their own behaviour based on reference adults, parents and teachers to align themselves with the gender norms typical of their home culture (Bem, 1981; 1983). Most people who grow up in the same cultural context share similar gender patterns related to corresponding cultural stereotypes. Although these stereotypes are being violated and their boundaries broken down every day, given the widespread changes in male and female roles and activities, their content does not appear to have changed much overall through the years (Prentice & Carranza, 2003; Ghigi, 2009; Crespi, 2008).

In particular, in the education context, stereotypical expectations concern the vocational interests, skills and aptitudes attributed to pupils, strongly impacting the educational careers of boys and girls. In this sense, the family becomes the stronger socialising agent: parental figures serve as models, sharing their knowledge and expectations, rewarding desired behaviours and discouraging those deemed less appropriate (Carli & Bukkato, 2000; Gelman, Taylor & Nguyen, 2004; Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2002; Hagan & Kuebli, 2007; Galligan & Kuebli, 2011; Granié, 2010; Morrongiello & Hogg, 2004). Interesting studies in this sense relate to the toys parents choose and use (Kollmayer et al., 2018; Wood, Desmarais & Gugula, 2002; Cherney et al., 2003; Li & Wong, 2016): research shows that, although parents explicitly deny basing purchases on gender disparity, clear cultural models assigning what is preferably female or male do influence the choice of one toy over another. Another study (Dresel et al., 2001) showed that parents consider STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects as less suitable for girls, and languages and teaching as less appropriate for boys. In addition to being clearly linked to a cultural stereotype, this result should also be examined in the light of the personal experience of the subjects who, reasoning in rela-

tion to their children's future professions, may have considered some careers as being less hostile than others. This mechanism favours the current horizontal segregation in the job market (Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2003; Triventi, 2010; Tomasetto et al., 2015; De Vita & Giancola, 2017; Guerrin, 2018; Sala & Bosisio, 2018). With regard to school performance, while PISA data (OECD, 2014; 2015) do show that boys have better results in mathematics and girls in reading, what is striking is that these performance differences persist in students' motivations, with males considering themselves to be better at mathematics and females stronger in the humanities and social skills (Fiore, 2018; Meece, Glienke & Burg, 2006; Wigfield et al., 2002).

As regards the world of school, and educational contexts more generally, research also shows stereotypes in teaching similar to those identified in parents (Jones & Dindia, 2004; Tiedemann, 2000; Wolter, Braun & Hannover, 2015; Abbatecola & Stagi, 2017). These preconceptions lead teachers to provide different feedback to girls and boys, producing similarly different motivational consequences: for example, in scientific subjects, girls are more often praised for commitment and effort, and boys for ability (Zorman & David, 2000).

In order to avoid gender disparity in education, educational systems should base their work on networking available scientific knowledge: teacher education should include knowledge of the causes linked to gender disparity in student performance and motivation, and propose a critical analysis of how teachers contribute to these disparities, albeit unintentionally. This includes a deliberate reflection on the fact that gender stereotypes restrict individual possibilities and potential.

Educational figures should therefore be capable of promoting learning motivation and self-regulation in all students regardless of their gender, maintaining a positive view of heterogeneity, which becomes a fundamental teaching matrix, leading teachers to actively promote students' social skills and their ability to deal with diversity. This reflection should not stop at gender stereotypes, but be expanded to include ethnic, national or religious stereotypes that already impact the living contexts of children and adolescents. Reflexivity appears to be a promising opportunity for these challenges, allowing all children to express and use their potential without being hindered by stereotypes. Furthermore, many studies have consistently demonstrated the school's role in preventing gender-based violence among young people and in promoting relationships based on tolerance, respect, equal opportunities and against all discrimination. Additionally, gender education helps bridge the gender gap and gender disparity in educational results, access to employment, education, and political and media representation. It also helps prevent violence and discrimination, supporting welfare assistance and the work-life balance (Cretella, 2018, p. 19).

Promoting gender and equal opportunity education: The school's role in the Italian context

Many recommendations at the European level contain clear rules regarding the provision of gender education. Some of the most recent are Recommendation (2007)17 on gender equality standards and mechanisms; Resolution 2008/2038(INI) of the European Parliament on how marketing and advertising affect equality between women and men; Resolution 2013/2116(INI) of the European Parliament on eliminating gender stereotypes in the European Union; resolution 2014/2217(INI) of the European Parliament on progress on equality between women and men in the European Union in 2013; recommendation CM/Rec(2010)5 to member states on measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity. Moreover, the Beijing +20 roadmap¹, in strategic objective B4, "Develop non-discriminatory education and training", defines the need to incorporate the innovative knowledge of women in the reform proposals of the school, the university, teaching, as well as to promote cultural development and education to respect the gender difference, aiming to attain gender parity by 2030.

In Italy as well, albeit with greater difficulty than other countries, a series of legislative reforms have been proposed in recent years seeking to introduce the topic of gender disparity and equal opportunities in the school contexts. However, instead of reflecting a real awareness of all the influences impacting boys' and girls' relational styles and life paths, these initiatives appear more to be knee-jerk reactions to reports of violent crimes, such as femicide, violence and bullying. Furthermore, these proposals have often met with broad public and political opposition reflected in major anti-gender campaigns that are totally contrary to improving awareness of these issues (Marzano, 2015; Fornari, 2018).

In reviewing the current Italian legislative panorama, it seems interesting to mention the Documento di Indirizzo sulla Diversità di Genere (Gender Diversity Guidelines)² of 2011, the result of a Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) and the Ministry in charge of gender equality. These guidelines, which unfortunately have received little attention or application in school contexts, recommended the development of teaching sensitive to gender disparity and examining the need for appropriate teacher training resulting from Law 169/2008 introducing "Citizenship and the Constitution" teaching. Also significant is Legislative Decree 93/2013 launching the 2014-2020 extraordinary Action

¹ Retrieved from: <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/Beijing%20full%20report%20E.pdf>

² Note 5148 from the Ministry of Education, University and Research, MIUR, of 21/06/2011.

Plan against sexual and gender-based violence. In article 5, subparagraph 2b, it requires that the plan promote education on relationships and against gender violence and discrimination in the curricula of every grade, in order to increase awareness, inform and train students, and prevent violence against women and gender discrimination, including through appropriate discussion of the issue in textbooks. The Legislative Decree was issued following the ratification of the Istanbul Convention (Law 77 of 27 June 2013), considered the first legally binding international instrument aimed at creating a comprehensive regulatory framework for the protection of women against all forms of violence. Article 16 of Law 128/2013, on urgent measures in education, university and research, provides for the mandatory training of school staff to improve skills relating to education in affectivity, respect for diversity and equal opportunities, and overcoming gender stereotypes. Finally, in July 2015, Law 107/15, the so-called “Good School” law, entered into force, reforming the national education system and reorganising the laws in force. Article 1, subparagraph 16 of this law requires the implementation of the principles of equal opportunity by encouraging schools of every level to offer education in gender equality, the prevention of gender-based violence and all forms of discrimination, in order to inform and raise awareness among students, teachers and parents.

Despite the clarity and centrality of these issues, the enactment of this law generated misunderstandings, fears and scaremongering, to the point that in September 2015, the Ministry of Education was forced to publish a document assuaging parents’ concerns on the so-called “gender theory” specifying that the law intended to promote and safeguard the centrality of respect for the person and differences. Nevertheless, gender education continues to be hindered by defamatory accusations and struggles to promote initiatives, projects and training aiming to make every form of education “gender education”, i.e. respectful of people and of the different forms of expression of flexible and dynamic identities, allowing students to recognise themselves in multiple references and models (Cardellini, 2017, p. 78). Today, although gender equality is included in Ministry programs, the topic is addressed almost exclusively in ad-hoc experimental projects, and has not found broader or transversal application in everyday teaching. This mechanism primarily involves early years (kindergarten and early grades of primary school), since it is often believed that addressing content related to gender disparity and equality with children of these age groups may be premature and not especially useful, since children are believed to have a greater understanding starting in late childhood and preadolescence (Bernini, 2014). However, quite the opposite is true; it is essential to deal with these topics starting from nursery school, because children begin constructing their own individual identity around the age of three, interacting in a structured

and instrumental way with the world around them, and internalising social constructs of female and male, as well as stereotypes (Soci, 2015). National guidelines for the kindergarten and primary school curriculum (Ministerial Decree 254 of 16 November 2012) are very precise in this sense, tasking the school with providing appropriate supports to ensure that every person develops an aware and open identity, and a full recognition and guarantee of freedom and equality, while respecting the differences of all and the identity of each. So, one of the aims of kindergarten education is to support and promote the development of the individual identity, and gender differences are but one of the aspects related to this topic: who am I, how am I made, what was I like when I was little, how did I become who I am and who will I become, what do I like and what don't I like, what do I know how to do and what have I learned to do, what is my family like and who are my friends. These are some of the questions that children raise and that help define the flow of a personal history that makes it possible to understand the child in flesh and blood (Veronesi, 2005). This pathway appears essential when we realise that reflecting on gender identity and disparity from a very young age neither assumes nor ignores what it means to be male and female or how to define one's own gender identity within the biological and social dimensions, thus enriching reality and making ourselves "broader" and therefore more fulfilled (Selmi & Turrini, 1980).

Methodology and limitation of the research

The diffused absence of educational path addressed to children that attend the kindergarden inside the Italian territory has brought us to develop an educational path called "Princes, Princesses, Kings and Queens" by analysing similar experiences conducted in Italy³ and the reference literature: we identified the most appropriate topics and the tools to be used with the children on this topic. A research-action has been therefore realized in two kindergarden's classes in Padua (a city of some 200.000 inhabitants located in the Veneto region of north-eastern Italy) to be able to verify the interest and the ability of understanding the themes of the gender equality from children aged 3 to 5 years old, as well as to raise awareness the teachers in comparison to such contents.

Wishing to produce certain effects in the information collection step as well, it was considered appropriate to use the action-research model (McNerney & Hall, 2017; Mertler, 2016) in order to create "action learning", which favours learning processes based on practical experience, partic-

³ Amongst others projects: SCOSSE Project "School makes the difference", 2014; Project "Gender stereotypes, educational relationships and childhoods", 2012; Project "School and Gender: growth paths", 2011.

ipation and the actions of all actors involved (Moretti, 2014; Kaneklin et al., 2010; Levin, 2008). This approach allowed the active involvement of the institutions concerned (Municipality, School, University and Families), with the Municipality promoting the project in local Schools, suggesting the University researchers concretely manage the educational pathway together with the participating teachers, who in turn presented the educational proposal to the children's Families. The two classes that participated in the action-research were identified through the active involvement of the coordinators of the school services of the Municipality of Padua. An information meeting on the project and its aims was set up for all teachers of the municipal kindergarten: at the end of the meeting teachers were asked to express their interest in joining. Among the classes of teachers who had expressed interest, we then proceeded to identify two classes that would allow to have a group of participants sufficiently heterogeneous for social class and citizenship of children. We so selected: a school inserted in a residential district with a medium concentration of immigrant families and a school inserted in a popular district with a high concentration of immigrant families. Finally, it was decided to accept the indication of the coordinators to select only the intermediate class of the kindergarten which, not experiencing either the problem of the initial adjustment period that of closing the cycle, could show greater willingness to experience. The age of the children (4 years) therefore represents the element of continuity transversal to the two class groups. This age group was chosen knowing that, although children internalise social constructions related to gender roles with related stereotypes in their family and/or educational living contexts from earliest childhood (Smith, 2009; Truffelli 2012; Leonelli, 2011), they are also fully capable of deconstructing these models and developing different perceptions if stimulated in this direction. In all, 40 children and six teachers participated in the project: in relation to gender, there were slightly more boys than girls (24 males and 16 females); and as regards ethnicity, the children were predominantly Italian, with only one-quarter of the children of foreign origin (all "second generation"). Finally, all of the teachers involved were women.

Before starting activities in the classroom, we held a second meeting with the teachers of the classes participating in the project to discuss the operational proposal: the general topics identified focused on the construction and deconstruction of gender identity and roles, education on differences, recognition of others and, finally, affectivity and feelings.

So, this first phase focussed on sharing the objectives and instruments with the teachers, which also made it possible to provide a clearer picture of the project to the children's families. Indeed, to guarantee a satisfactory educational experience, it was fundamental to establish a constant and

cohesive relationship among researchers, schools and families right from the start.

The second phase involved the action-research itself. The recreational-educational pathway was divided into five two-hour workshops, held on a monthly basis: this allowed the children to see the project as a sort of fixed appointment, guaranteeing continuity for the topics. For each workshop, we sought to subdivide the activities to ensure they were not overly demanding in terms of duration and concentration, in line with the abilities and skills of the children's age group: reading was alternated with group play, drawing and/or sharing content that was raised.

The activities were led by the teachers since it was considered that the children would be more receptive to the educational proposal if presented by the reference figures with whom they had already established a relationship of trust and had daily contact. It was decided to divide the class into two homogeneous subgroups of about ten children each at certain times to allow everyone to fully experience the discussions and to participate actively.

For project evaluation, materials were collected on an ongoing basis through external observation by two researchers who recorded the children's dynamics in small and large groups and their performance of individual activities, in addition to collecting and analysing the work produced. Moreover, at the end of each workshop, the teachers were invited to reflect on the programme using a SWOT analysis (Helms & Nixon, 2010; Coman & Ronen, 2009; Evans & Wright, 2009), in order to identify its strengths, weaknesses, risks and opportunities. Over time, this made it possible to recalibrate the interventions according to the teachers' perceptions and the children's reactions.

The project has also some relevant limits, first of all the lack in the collection of structural variables of the participants. In fact, it was decided to request parents to join the project without collecting structural data on the children and the members of the families of origin and avoiding to ask parents and teachers to fill questionnaires on attitudes and behavior of the family with respect to the topic. This choice was made to encourage greater participation in the project by families, as the high distortion triggered by the media in Italy on the subject of gender education in other contexts, had led to the failure of similar initiatives (Fornari, 2018). We hope that future research on these issues will be more structured and enjoy a climate of greater availability on the part of teachers and families, thanks to the approach produced by this first experimentation. A second limitation is given by the local nature of the project: the results obtained cannot be considered explanatory to the issues investigated but rather as indicative for future research hypotheses.

Results

Identity: Perception of oneself and of others

Beginning at the age of three years, children begin experiencing a more structured awareness of themselves and of the world at school. Therefore, the topic of individual and group identity becomes central both to their relationship with adults, and to group dynamics among peers. So, we sought to investigate what kind of perception children have with respect to themselves in the present and to reflect with them on a hypothetical future, to explore possibilities of individual evolution: in this age group, children's thinking begins to move away from the present, looking both to the past and the future (Piaget & Zamorani, 1967).

A first tool to enable reflections on the topic of identity was the self-portrait: the children were instructed to draw themselves, starting with an empty silhouette of a human face with no anatomic features except for the shape of the ears. The use of the silhouette helped to guide the children with respect to representation, which was then left completely free. This activity was received positively, and with their teachers' assistance, the children first identified what the silhouette was and what was missing from it. The teachers then reviewed the anatomical parts of the face and body to assist the children in their drawings. All of the children, each according to his or her own skills and abilities, completed the task.

The drawings can be subdivided into two main categories: realistic self-portraits with the use of colours and shapes actually reflecting physical nature and individual characteristics; and imaginative self-portraits, where the colours and shapes used do not reflect reality. Some children also added elements not belonging directly to themselves, such as a background landscape, or other figures, primarily family members.

The second activity involved the reading of a story entitled "Il grande libro dei mestieri" (Puybaret, 2014), which describes people's jobs: in space, in the forest, in the city or in the sea. Presented using colourful and richly detailed illustrations, all of the jobs consistently involve two characters, a boy and a girl, who can both dream of doing anything. This story was explained and repeated several times by the teachers, who read the book with the children, triggering discussions on identity perception in the future: "Who will I be and what I will be?". This stimulus led the children to create a new representation of themselves, again through drawing, with each child asked to explain his or her drawing at the end of the activity. Again, the children's responses could be divided into two main distinctions: those who used one of the jobs presented in the story and those, instead, who proposed work performed by their parents or other reference adults (Table. 1).

Table 1. Activities offering guidance to the future. Children's answers.

Jobs presented in the story	Jobs performed by reference adults
Boy: "I want to make cakes"	Girl: "I want to be a paediatrician, a doctor who helps children"
Boy: "I want to ride a horse"	Girl: "I want to be a mummy"
Boy: "A firefighter"	Girl: "I want to be a lawyer like my mummy"
Boy: "I want to drive a submarine"	Boy: "I want to be a gardener like my daddy"
Boy: "A pirate"	Boy: "When I'm big, I want to build airports"
Girl: "A dancer"	Girl: "Build houses"
Girl: "Drive a police helicopter"	
Boy: "I want to be a policeman"	

The distinction of gender roles appeared irrelevant in relation to what the children imagine as possible future jobs for themselves: in the dialogue, they do not categorize activities by gender, even when pressed to do so by their teachers. The study reveals that they believe that every job can be done by both genders, even when the activity is still socially stereotyped in our country, such as a dancer or firefighter. The immediate link established on the basis of identity compared to reference adults is significant: de Caroli (2005, p.16) stressed that the greatest effort of category construction is accomplished during childhood, the evolutionary period in which concepts are acquired via a difficult process of hypothesis checks, based on retaining or eliminating concepts in relation to experiential confirmation or disconfirmation. Experiences in the families of origin, then, already become the vehicle for constructing individual identity in this age group where children apply these models in relation to themselves based on a positive representation of parental roles in a social context.

Differences: Gender and mutual respect

Within the process of socialisation considered in its entirety, we also find the construction of gender identity: while sex is biologically determined, what is appropriate for one sex or the other in a certain cultural group is instead the result of a social construction (Truffelli, 2012, p.136). So, the topic of gender disparity was applied more specifically based on the concept of mutual respect and acceptance of individual differences. Two narrative tools were chosen to address the topic: the first was a book by Giorgia Vezzoli (2014): "Mi piace Spiderman... e allora?"⁴ which addresses the theme of gen-

⁴ The book tells the story of Chloe, a six-year-old girl who has to choose a rucksack for primary school. However, Chloe is not attracted to the usual girly backpacks with pictures of princesses or bunnies, but wants a Spiderman rucksack instead. This request worries her parents who, however, agree to the purchase. During the first days of school, Chloe's classmates poke fun at her rucksack, considering it unsuitable for a girl. The situation is resolved by Chloe's mother who explains that everyone is free to like different things. Although the book also deals with other issues, it was decided not to present them to the children because they were considered overly complex in terms of content and time.

der stereotypes; while the second was the illustrated book “Ettore, l’uomo straordinariamente forte!”⁵ by Magali Le Huche (2013), which deals with the issue of gender equity, proposing positive collaboration models.

Both stories were adapted for animated reading using Kamishibai ⁶: this technique is very effective in capturing children’s attention, making it possible to shorten the original stories, which are often excessively long and complex, to a manageable size in terms of content and time. Above all, this technique provides visual cues that can easily be recalled even at a later time. At the end of the stories, the children expressed some opinions on them, proposing a vision that favours the importance of individual preferences with respect to gender distinctions that, although present, do not appear binding.

Girl: “Spiderman is for girls, too”

Boy: “I have a superheroes rucksack”

Girl: “When J. showed me his boy shirt, I liked it more than mine”

Girl: “Girls are strong, too”

When the teachers invited the children to consider the existence of “boy things” and “girl things”, the children again showed that they were open to differences, grasping the importance of respecting the tastes of others.

Girl: “Everybody can like things”

Boy: “If I like something, it’s not for boys or for girls”

Girl: “I like to play with boys’ toys, too”

Boy: “I like stuffed animals and dolls, too”

Boy: “You shouldn’t make fun of your friends”

In addition to the readings, a game was proposed to reflect on possible categorisations of objects and daily activities on the basis of gender membership: the game “Mondo and Monda” (Fregona & Quaranti, 2011) encouraged children to view external reality by considering how the things around them are used and by whom. Two boards were presented, one representing Mondo (male) and the other Monda (female). The children took turns drawing from a deck of cards depicting objects and daily activities (e.g. table, chair, sink,

⁵ Ettore works at Circus *Extraordinaire* with acrobats, dancers and jugglers, all of whom are extraordinary. However, the admiration enjoyed by Ettore, an extraordinarily strong man, triggers the envy of two lion tamers who decide to ruin his image by revealing his secret. In his secret place, the extraordinarily strong man follows his true passion: crocheting. So, on a windy day, the lion tamers lay a trap for Ettore and reveal his secret. The extraordinarily strong man is very sad when the other circus artists mock him. But then, a terrible typhoon strikes the circus, blowing away the big top, the fabrics and all of the clothes. So, Ettore teaches everyone how to crochet so they can replace everything they have lost, showing the importance of respect for others and helping those in difficulty.

⁶ *Kamishibai*, which literally means “paper play” is a Japanese storytelling technique. It is a sort of theatre that uses paper images to tell stories instead of puppets or marionettes. A voice tells the story and the images move as the story progresses, involving the spectators in the atmosphere described.

washing machine, vacuum cleaner, ball, toothpaste, star, sun, river, computer, video game, teddy bear, horse, panther, book, dishes, apple, hammer), then decided whether the card was “male” or “female”, placing it on the appropriate board.

The game was played in two subgroups, allowing the children to discuss the choices of positioning of the cards. In both groups, the children autonomously considered it appropriate to place most of the cards in the centre, between the two boards, explaining that many of the things could be both male and female. Clear distinctions were made for a bikini, which was placed in Monda, and a truck and a cap, which were placed in Mondo by one group. In the second group, only the bikini was considered clearly feminine and placed in Monda, while after a long discussion, even the vacuum cleaner that had divided the group was placed in the common area. The game also allowed the children to experiment with mediation and reaching a consensus among peers: for the cards on which there was no agreement, the children were helped by their teachers to vote on a choice, accepting the decision of the majority without difficulty.

By working on the differences/similarities continuum, the children were able to place themselves in a differentiated and unique manner along the spectrum of possibilities, while maintaining the advantage of belonging to a group and identifying positively with it (Fregona & Quaranti, 2011). Furthermore, learning to express one’s opinion while respecting that of the peer group, and possibly even changing it during the process, was an important result on the educational level because it strengthened the dynamics of mutual respect. Again, in this case, it was observed how the children drew useful ideas to categorise external reality from their experience in their families of origin.

Affectivity: Emotions and caring

Emotional skills are a very important component of the child’s socio-affective adaptation, since by learning strategies to cope with frustration, anger, fear or despondency, they develop greater resources for overcoming adversity and for establishing positive relationships with others (Pietro, 2014). Right from the very earliest infancy, child use emotional pre-verbal dialogue with reference figures to build attachments that direct how they explore the world, developing a cognitive and emotional “theory of the mind” (Grazzani Gavazzi & Ornaghi, 2011) that enables them to predict the behaviour of others, since they are equipped with an internal world composed of feelings, intentions, desires, beliefs and affection (Cherubin et al., 2013). Between the ages of three and six years, children begin assigning names to emotions, differentiating them and seeking to understand them. So, it would appear essential to support this path of emotional awareness at an educational lev-

el, in order to assist children in identifying their feelings, legitimising the expression of mixed and different emotions, and helping them to apply the correct strategy to respond to the feeling being experienced (Saarni, 2007). To address the topic, we used the story “Inside Out Box of Mixed Emotions”⁷ (Candau, 2015), taken from the Disney and Pixar animated film “Inside Out”, that the researchers believed to be already known to many children. The emotions used in the books are joy, anger, sadness, fear and disgust, because they belong to a set of basic emotions shared by different cultures (Oatley & Duncan, 1994). Because they are common emotions in daily life, they are familiar to preschool children both at the level of emotional experiences and at the lexical and semantic levels.

In this case as well, the Kamishibai technique was used to animate reading: the children approached the emotions during the narration, since they were encouraged by their teachers to reproduce the facial expressions or gestures representing each emotion.

A drawing activity was linked with the story, and the children were asked to choose an emotion and draw something that made him or her feel that way: most of the children chose joy (19 drawings), followed by anger (11 drawings, chosen mostly by boys) and disgust (6 drawings). Sadness and fear were marginal (4 drawings).

Again, the children associated events experienced in their daily lives with the emotions, mostly related to parental figures, especially to the mother:

Girl: I’m happy when mummy makes pizza
 Boy: I am happy when mummy buys me toy cars
 Girl: I’m happy because mummy gave me a ribbon with her perfume on it
 Boy: I’m happy when mummy gives me a hug
 Boy: I’m angry when mummy gives me a spanking
 Boy: I’m angry when mummy gets angry
 Girl: I’m sad when mummy scolds me
 Girl: I’m sad when mummy and daddy go to work
 Girl: I don’t like the broccoli that mummy buys

Some of them identify the emotion chosen with other figures that they consider important, such as friends, siblings and relatives:

Girl: It makes me happy to play with my friends
 Boy: I get angry when I don’t win a race or when granddad scolds me
 Girl: I get angry when my brother takes my toys

Finally, other children represented the emotions in relation to specific activities such as:

⁷ To stimulate thinking in children, the book presents the five emotions, giving examples with respect to the objects, activities and events that can trigger them.

Boy: I'm happy when I think about playing football for Padua and Venice when I'm big
 Boy: I like to go on the slide
 Girl: I'm sad when things get broken
 Boy: I get angry when I can't do something, like a puzzle
 Girl: I don't like salad
 Girl: I don't like spiders
 Boy: I'm afraid of the dark
 Girl: I'm afraid of monsters under my bed

To continue the discussion on emotions, we used a second illustrated picture book entitled "Il filo emozionato" (Viola, 2016), which presents the main emotions and explains the corresponding facial expression, for example: "Anger: *Somebody stole my bicycle. Show your teeth, GRRRRRRRRRRR*". By looking at the book in small groups, each child was able to verbally express some thoughts in relation to individual emotions, comparing them with the others.

Girl: I'm happy when mummy lets me play with her phone
 Boy: I'm sad when I argue with my sister
 Boy: I'm sad when mummy and daddy do bad things like punish me even when I didn't do anything wrong. I tell them, but they don't listen to me.
 Girl: I get angry when my brother breaks my toys
 Boy: I'm afraid of Halloween

The discussion on the emotions the children experience ended with a teacher's intervention, emphasising that every child is entitled to feel different emotions depending on the situation and that every emotion is both relevant and different. Finally, emphasis was placed on the value of others' emotions and the importance of respecting them.

In relation to the sphere of emotions, it was considered appropriate to also address "caring" for others and then discuss the importance of understanding the needs of those who are close to them. In order to enter this dimension, four cards were distributed showing situations of family life (kitchen, bath, sickness, cleaning), where two puppies need help from someone else. The children were then asked to draw who they felt was most appropriate to help in the situations (Fregona & Quaranti, 2011). Overall, the children had no difficulty in understanding the activity or in adding subjects helping in the scenes: in most cases, it was the dogs' mother or the child's mother. In some cases, especially in the kitchen and bath scenes, a father figure was also proposed, which could be the "daddy dog" or the child's father. It was interesting to note that some children spoke of and drew themselves in the scenes, claiming to be able to help the puppies themselves.

Girl: Apo and Gin's (the dogs) mummy helps them clean the house
Boy: My mummy checks their temperature
Boy: The puppies' daddy makes their food
Boy: My daddy helps me take a bath and he can help the doggies, too
Girl: I can help make them something to eat and set the table because
I always help my mummy at home
Boy: I drew myself helping the dogs clean

The children show an ability to identify parental figures as playing a caring role that is also recognised in respect of the outer world: once again, this shows how experience in their families of origin is the first vehicle for learning the dynamics of caring for and understanding others. The fact that some of the children placed themselves in the role of caregiver leads to a further consideration on gender roles that again appear in the background of their imagination, bringing individual propensities and competencies to the fore.

Educating others and educating oneself: opportunity and criticality

Today, proposing reflections on gender equality and disparity in school contexts, especially in kindergarten, a place of socialisation and of identity construction secondary only to the family of origin, requires clarification and reassurances on the topics, content and mode of action.

In conducting the action-research, it was therefore essential to assist the teachers not only in conducting the workshops, but also in sharing topics, tools and activities. Despite this, not all of the staff involved received the inclusion of the project within their educational pathway positively, sometimes proving hesitant to collaborate with researchers and to propose the activities to their pupils. Participant observation and SWOT analysis revealed that some teachers saw the project as being forced on them, with respect to both its content already planned within the educational offer, and to the use of time and the children's skills. Some saw it as an evaluation of their own professional skills. This attitude was revealed through a continuous attempt to delegate the workshops to others and in a lack of willingness to re-present the topics outside the experimentation period, in the time between workshops. This attitude was interpreted as a lack of training and preparation in relation to the themes in question. Nevertheless, most of the teachers involved showed great interest and involvement in the project, being cooperative and proactive, thus allowing wider reflection and consequently a greater understanding of what the children and their families were dealing with. Thanks to these teachers' awareness of the importance of deepening such content, they welcomed the project as an opportunity to learn new tools and skills.

In particular, the SWOT analysis concretely identified the strengths and opportunities of the project, as well as its weakness and risks.

The pathway was received positively overall, especially with respect to the proposed themes and the children's good participation in the activities. Dividing the class into subgroups was strategic to allow all of the children to play an active role in the discussions and in the individual and group educational proposals. With respect to the tools, the use of animated readings and rest and play periods between structured exercises was essential to maintain the children's attention. As regards the limits, we should emphasise the need for more time to perform the individual activities, and allowing more time for the content to sink in, due to its complex nature for children in this age group. The time limit was also considered a risk because, given their complexity, the themes could be difficult to understand and not generate any significant result with respect to the effort. In terms of opportunities, the project is innovative for the topics addressed, allowing children to experiment with discussion and open dialogue that are difficult to propose in normal school activities. At the end of the workshops, the teachers reported a greater sense of confidence in the children and an improved ability to challenge themselves, including in their relationships with their peers.

Conclusions

The project experimented with an innovative educational proposal in local kindergartens, creating collaboration between the institutional figures involved and allowing the teachers to try new operational tools and to examine new topics in depth.

The literature shows that children internalise preconceived roles and models already in earliest childhood. The context analysed did not show any significant results in this sense, demonstrating that children of this generation experience diversified models, are urged to take into greater consideration individual tastes and characteristics, while considering those of others, and are open to equality and equity. Working on mutual respect, on differences and similarities, and on emotions and affectivity made it possible to understand how these prompts are appropriate and understandable for children of this age, and favoured discussions among peers. It was also significant to observe how experiences within the families of origin guide the children in these topics: parental figures represent the primary reference in relation to the construction of masculine and feminine, mutual respect, and the expression of emotions.

Teaching affectivity and equality in these contexts implies proposing and conducting an experience that touches the participants' subjectivity: it is not limited to providing tools to concretely address these issues, but above all creates a space in which children can begin to gain an awareness of themselves and of the world around them, and in which adults can acquire skills

to assist them in this process. It appears appropriate to allow each child to start from his or her own individuality to enter in the complexity of the dynamics of relationships with others, including both specificity and differences, and valuing their desires and their characteristics. So, the educational environment is called to provide useful tools to allow children to deconstruct the social environment in which they live, and to reformulate their own vision of the world based on mutual acceptance and respect. To do this, it is equally necessary to encourage a full understanding of the issue by teachers who directly experience many aspects of role stereotypes and are therefore called to deconstruct them, to gain a sufficient awareness of them to be able to work on these issues and address them in a constructive manner in school contexts. This appears particularly important in the light of the profound manner in which families delegate educational aspects to the school at this time in history (Nicola, 2017).

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