SUNSET OF EMPATHY, TOOLS AND DIGITAL FAIRY TALES IN THE POST-MODERN AND POST-PANDEMIC SCENARIO

TRAMONTO DELL'EMPATIA, STRUMENTI E FAVOLE DIGITALI NELLO SCENARIO POST-MODERNO E POST-PANDEMICO

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ABSTRACT

At the end of the 20th century, the importance of the emotional-affective and social-relational dimension of people was neglected in favour of the cognitive sphere. The pandemic exacerbated the crisis affecting adolescents and young people, with effects such as anxiety, isolation, and compassionate rather than empathic relational modes. An educational research path, based on narrative and reflexive methodologies, aims to show how these difficulties can be overcome by promoting conscious inclusion.

Alla fine del XX secolo, l'importanza della dimensione emotivo-affettiva e socio-relazionale delle persone è stata trascurata a favore della sfera cognitiva. La pandemia ha acuito la crisi degli adolescenti e dei giovani, con effetti quali ansia, isolamento e modalità relazionali compassionevoli piuttosto che empatiche. Un percorso di ricerca educativa, basato su metodologie narrative e riflessive, si propone di mostrare come queste difficoltà possano essere superate promuovendo un'inclusione consapevole.

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[1] The present work is the joint work of the authors; however, for the purposes of attribution of the individual parts, it is subdivided as follows: Abstract, is attributable to the three authors; Francesco Paolo Romeo §§ 1; Alessandro Barca §§ 2; Mariella Tripaldi §§ 3.

1. From the waning of empathy to the dawn of a new affective responsibility in relationships

Around the subject of emotions, more generally the emotional-affective dimension of the person, there has been much talk for some time now, at least for a good twenty years, even outside the purely scientific debate.

It means, in other words, that the issue concerning affectivity has gradually gained interest compared to the traditional issue of 'cognitively' if one allows the term to be used, which for much of the last century has as it was polarized the attention of scholars and researchers interested once in understanding the vices and virtues of memory as a mental function (Cornoldi, De Beni, 2009), another time in analyzing the possible types of attention.

In this regard, it would seem that the very first research conducted by H. Gardner on people's exclusive worldviews (1983, tr. it. 1987), which in fact looks at it through ever different mental 'lenses', i.e. multiple intelligences and not a generic and exclusive intelligence, in some way launched an interesting debate, even a naive and popular one, on the importance of delving equally into emotions, feelings, and then prosocial behavior.

When Gardner, among others, spoke at the beginning of the 1980s of personal intelligence (which can be declined into intrapersonal and interpersonal), he somehow urged the reader and the expert alike to consider the person's mind, and therefore also their minds, always 'in the plural', since it is precisely the Other than oneself and the most varied contexts of life and learning that nourishes and grows.

We could also say that the intellect, just as the neural development of the brain has been reaffirmed by neuroscientists with greater certainty again in the late 20th century thanks to the use of brain-imaging technologies (Blakemore, 2018), is an experience-dependent one that therefore needs the group and the wider community to fulfill itself (Romeo, 2021).

When, a few years later, D. Goleman (1995) explored the subject of emotional intelligence in greater depth, the construct more readily became part of the vocabulary of schoolteachers, other specialists, and ordinary people who tried to use it whenever they spoke of children, young people or themselves.

We say deliberately because the construct is complex and multidimensional and only specialists in the field have delved into it - mainly in the field -, understood it well and can explain it more extensively.

Suffice it to say that A. D'Amico recently spoke of awareness of one's emotional states and thus of meta-emotion (a reflection on one's and other's emotions).

For example, suppose one has had significant experience in training on these issues with teachers at school or participates as a teacher in workshops in specialization

courses for support activities for pupils with disabilities. In that case, one can certainly understand from the outset the interest, but at the same time a modest knowledge of the subject.

It is necessary, therefore, not to remain on the surface of the discourse, but to descend into the depths as, moreover, the construct we are analyzing urges us to do concerning the personal emotional-affective dimension.

If we want to continue with this discourse, everyone seems to be able to discuss empathy, to define themselves as empathic 'beings' without any doubt, but in the end, only a few put it into practice at school as in other learning contexts, knowing how to maintain the right emotional distance between putting oneself in the 'shoes' of the other - to understand especially their suffering and needs - and 'undressing' them without becoming entangled in them.

Few, in the words of C. Lévy-Strauss quoted in M. Augé (1992), are capable of methodologically controlling that limitless process of objectification of the subject in which the understanding of individuals and openness to the other create, in those who say they are empathic we have said, a sort of apprehension that induces them to proceed by successive objectification of a part of themselves.

Conversely, when one is especially faced with pain, the risk is that the object of research (individual, group, organization, institution, etc.) is totally 'subjectivized', i.e. the emotional distancing useful for support collapses and one becomes involved in the vicissitudes of others.

In doing so, however, if we fail to govern the emotional distance that exists between implication and distancing, we cannot help others; indeed, the risk is that suffering will be perpetuated over time.

This happened, for example, to thousands of students who lost their families during the COVID-19 pandemic, often without seeing them or celebrating them through the usual funerals.

Often at school, once the decrees on social distancing had been passed, we witnessed compassionate rather than empathic behavior (Romeo, 2022), whereby students embraced each other and cried for a long time over their losses, suffering in unison - compassion derives from the Latin "cum patior" and means 'I suffer with' - but failing to place themselves on an affective plane to stimulate a resilient reaction.

The questions that arise then are: who teaches students to be empathetic? to be resilient? even to cope with the massive traumas that have been placed before their eyes in the last four years? (In the complex scenario that they try to simplify every day, one must also include the various wars that are burning the planet as we write).

To be even clearer, and within a pedagogical perspective, resilience, as well as empathy or the ability to process massive and relational trauma, perhaps through conscious use of metaphors or, for the youngest children, mental images, are the result of specific didactics that go beyond the disciplinary to embrace the wholeness of the person and consequently can only be learned if there are adults capable of teaching them.

This, however, does not seem to be the case, since the pandemic has highlighted, like a neon yellow marker, the fragility of our school systems (too often focused on grades and performance and not on faces and life stories), educational and social systems (too often incapable of establishing a fruitful dialogue with adolescents and young people).

As a result of a world made up mostly of in-listening adults, that is, adults unable to 'keep in mind the mind' of our minors and young people who attempt to simplify such complexity, it has happened that since the start of the pandemic and up to the present day, certain criticalities have emerged that as lasting reactions over time, as symptoms if you like, are the irrefutable sign of existential suffering that deserves specific attention and care.

Referring to other, more punctual works on the subject (Romeo, 2022; Romeo, Paparella, Tarantino, 2022), the dysfunctional reactions we discuss manifested themselves through:

(a) alexithymia and Callous-Unemotional personality traits that are sufficiently stable over time, i.e. with a generalized inability to find the appropriate words to recount one's emotional mental states in the different phases of the pandemic that persists today.

(b) behavior denoting a certain emotional detachment from events and others, i.e. superficial affectivity together with a lack of assumption of responsibility.

(c) tendency to demythologize the self, i.e. to portray themselves as extremely vulnerable and unable to perceive themselves as resilient despite the severe ordeal they have been through in recent years without any special support or educational tools, contrary to the ego-strengthening or overestimating tendency observed by J. Gottschall (2014) in people's accounts.

d) excessive blaming of oneself contrary to the self-exculpatory tendency of the narrative (Ibid.), whereby failures are almost always attributed to external causes.

But for the writer, it is certainly the many narrative closures, and the consequent depressive drift that has affected pre-adolescents and adolescents since the start of the pandemic, of which we only became aware when childhood and adolescent neuropsychiatry and pediatric hospital emergency rooms reported a percentage of

admissions for suicide attempts and self-harm 40% higher than in previous years, that still worry us greatly (SOLE 24 ORE, 2023; Testi, 2021).

The latter is a fact, i.e. the tripling of suicide attempts in the age of development, which we interpret from the autobiographical-narrative perspective and thus as the extreme and widespread difficulty of minors in our country, but not only in Italy, to tell their life story due to the lack of narrative spaces and communities that should be placed in their regard as great 'ears' listening to the evolutionary and lately unheard needs (among others, of sexual orientation and in the construction of gender identity, i.e. the debated issue of today's gender fluidity).

Otherwise, from a purely biological perspective, the thousands of young people who have reported to specialists that they 'have little reason to live' in recent years would have the genes involved in their mood disorders within them.

There is certainly a genetic risk in the development of such disorders, as science claims, but genes alone would not explain such widespread maydays.

At this point, we wonder whether the paradigm recently advanced by the writer (in press) on the 'zombification' of the youth soul is not the right theoretical framework for interpreting the real and symbolic deaths of the life projects of many of our minors and millions of young people in conditions of existential deprivation and multi-deprivation in our country (Istat, 2023).

If this is the case, another pedagogical path must soon be taken. Which one?

Certainly, to plan and not just imagine the arrival of a new dawn that will bring to light the emotional-affective dimension (now in the shade) of children and young people in Italy, we could hoard the different contents and intrinsic value of fairy tales and fables; stories that convey meanings with a high educational and training value even by revisiting them digitally and making them available to an audience of children and young people.

2. The fairy tale: educational/didactic tool and flywheel of emotions, empathy, creativity and values

Fairy tales play a crucial role in child's education as they significantly stimulate their creativity, imagination, and empathy. There is no denying the extraordinary influence of fairy tales on children's growth and development, making their importance difficult to underestimate. They are a powerful educational tool that enables children to discover new worlds, face their fears, and develop an open and inclusive mindset.

The fairy tale, like drawings, games, and dramatizations, teaches without having to explain as it conveys metaphorical messages that are essential in linguistic but also

cognitive and emotional development. The metaphors on which the fairy tale is nourished have, in fact, the task of communicating, through mental images, a message that is not always easy for a child to understand, activating processes of identification, developing thought activities and symbolic functions, and supporting the construction of increasingly complex thought processes (Votta, 2021).

Thanks to these unique stories as Bruno Bettelheim (2015) has repeatedly emphasized, children are able not only to learn important moral values, but also to acquire new and interesting knowledge, face their fears and personal challenges, and speak to each differently according to their different ages and stages of development. Each child can draw a different meaning from the same story depending on his or her emotions, interests, and needs. A variety of personal meanings are derived, which facilitate the child's identification, first in one character, then in another, depending on the problems that afflict him or her at the time. Furthermore, fairy tales are an incredible means of creativity and artistic expression, as Italo Calvino pointed out, who considered them to be 'perfect narratological machines' (Brand, 2020).

Fairy tales are bridges linking past and future, myth, and reality (Trinci, 2024); their influence continues to transform entire generations, inspiring them to be critical, creative, and altruistic thinkers, preparing them to face an uncertain but rich future of possibilities. They are an immense cultural treasure that should never be underestimated or forgotten: every word, every character, and every moral in these stories is a precious gift that is passed down from generation to generation, stoking the fires of imagination and fantasy. They take children, or anyone who approaches them, into enchanted worlds, populated by magical creatures and extraordinary situations that enchant, involving everyone in a whirlwind of emotions and allow them to daydream (Votta, 2021).

To children, fairy tales teach important life lessons, helping them to grow up and face the challenges they encounter along the way; they are like open windows to the world, offering an exciting journey through the heaths of eternal fantasy (Articoni, & Cagnolati, 2020), evoking deep emotions and feelings and prompting young readers and listeners to empathize with the characters and consider their problems as their own.

Children's early, constant, and continuous exposure to stories seems to be positively connected with both emotional and cognitive development, as well as with the subsequent acquisition of reading and writing. Thanks to oral 'frequentation' with narrative text and books of fables or fairy tales, the child begins to learn terms, rules, and organizational features of the written language, long before entering school and beginning 'formalized' literacy (Barca, 2021, p.48). It is

thanks to them that the adult comes to establish a unique bond with the child, allowing him or her to access his or her emotional world to help him or her not only to understand but also to name certain feelings and emotions and, very often, even to manage them; "knowing how to recognize, understand and manage one's emotional sphere and that of others is fundamental for every person, but even more so for children, especially in the pre-school period and in the first years of school when they begin to discover the world of emotions". (Arlati, 2019, p. 7-10). Fairy tales not only allow children to understand the complicated world around them but also to name and process complex emotions and to learn fundamental values such as friendship, love, and compassion: they teach them to embrace diversity, respect others, and discover the value of each person (Barca, 2023/a). As we read fairy tales to children, their words imprinted on the page come to life and are transformed into unforgettable experiences. Thanks to the fascinating characters and engaging storylines of fairy tales, children can easily identify with them, explore different perspectives, and become more aware of important issues such as social justice, respect, courage, honesty, and loyalty. The adventures of princes and princesses, heroes and heroines inspire young and old to follow their dreams, to face challenges with determination, and to believe that good always triumphs over evil. Fairy tales give hope and teach that even in the darkest situations, there is always a light that can guide us to happiness. They give a passport to fantastic worlds where anything is possible, inviting us to travel through enchanted realms, meet fabulous creatures, and overcome insurmountable obstacles through the power of imagination. Every time we share a fairy tale with a child, we are giving them a treasure that will shine forever in their heart.

Fairy tales connect us to our cultural roots, creating a deep connection with past generations and preparing the ground for future ones (Barca, 2023/b). They are the common thread that unites all cultures of the world, a universal language that unites us as human beings (Ungaro, 2023); they are like wings that allow children to develop their imagination and creativity, making them fly to new horizons, discover unknown worlds and experience extraordinary adventures. While time passes and generations follow one another, fairy tales remain as solid as rocks, offering comfort and wisdom to anyone who approaches them.

As demonstrated, storytelling, and particularly, the fairy tale, is a fundamental means for the balanced growth of the individual, but it is equally basic to create a favorable environment that enables children to learn in a meaningful way, in a relational and creative context that promotes active listening and confrontation. It is, therefore, necessary to further implement the narrative-autobiographical approach in the educational practice of schools of all levels and, why not, also in

universities. (Balzaretti, 2003). This model facilitates the construction of critical thinking, the consolidation of conversational, comprehension, narrative, and metalinguistic skills as well as the development of wide-ranging emotional competence.

This requires overcoming a traditional view of education, which only lets the cognitive aspects prevail to the detriment of the emotional ones, thus enabling us to espouse an idea of Global Education, founded on the conviction that educational practice should not consider intellect and emotions, body and soul as separate but entities that 'dialogue' and co-evolve. Global Education is not content with literacy and education according to disciplines but aims at understanding and accepting others, eliminating stereotypes and prejudices, valuing communion with nature, orienting oneself amid complexities and reducing them to simple expressions, adapting to supra-dimensions and rapid changes, to look for means to progressively prepare a future, for ourselves and for those who will come after us (Standish, 2014) without forgetting or in any case underestimating the stresses that technological evolution produces at home, at school, everywhere.

3. Digital fairy tales as the narrative and reflexive practices for recognizing emotions and breaking down stereotypes from an inclusive perspective.

In a time, in which technology seems to almost take over, schools, and universities, cannot disregard it just because they are convinced that it is not, due to misconceptions or prejudices, a real didactic mediator nor for fear of not being up to the task of teaching with and through digital tools the basis for an innovative, active and engaging didactics (Morcellini, 2024).

It is necessary to set in motion a process of reconstruction of new forms of fluidity - which characterized previous times - capable of setting aside great divisions and consolidated dichotomies such as nature/culture, subject/object, and individuality of the subject/conventions of the social context. This requires new ideas, generative, centered on a 'human project', capable of reconstructing the meaning of everyday practices concerning a 'hemodynamic world', available to transformation, open to utopia, and real enough to contemplate the dream (Dipace, Fornasari, De Angelis, 2024 p.9).

Thanks to new devices, for example, at school are available a wide range of multimedia resources and an infinite number of innovative learning tools. From artificial intelligence applications that automatically adapt teaching content to the needs of each pupil, to virtual reality that enables immersive and engaging experiences; the use of digital technologies can radically transform the way pupils

learn and teachers teach with the possibility of personalizing the teaching/learning path, experimenting with interactive teaching methods and facilitating collaboration between pupils and teachers globally without neglecting another aspect that is very relevant in the learning process: interest. Digital tools as well as tools arouse curiosity, attract learners' interest, motivate them to go further, try, and try again, develop new levels of collaboration among learners, and the active promotion of interactivity during teaching activities (Gratani, 2023).

The interest in technology and related tools have certainly not led to the abandonment of the printed storybook - to return to our focus - but the interest of the new digital natives in these devices has fostered the so-called cross-media narration where the unfolding of the story takes place through multiple distribution channels, to create a single, but modular, integrated and enveloping entertainment experience in which, at least ideally, each of the media involved provides its specific and distinct contribution to the advancement of the story (Peperoni, 2009, p.41); where written forms, iconic signs, music, kinetic images, narrative voice, as well as animated and talking avatars, *escape rooms* and educational app games seem to be concentrated within it, in a narrative syntax that develops unpredictably and engagingly (Cuozzo, 2023).

But why do new generations prefer digital fairy tales to traditional ones? While traditional fairy tales are mainly based on oral and written transmission, digital fairy tales offer readers the opportunity to interact with the text, explore scenarios and characters in a highly dynamic and engaging way, and create personalized connections with the story's plot. This new approach to fairy tales allows for greater personalization of learning experiences, enabling users to be the authentic protagonists of the narrative (Ricci & Maggi, 2022). Digital fairy tales aim to transform the reading experience into an immersive experience, enriched by breathtaking animations, compelling sounds, and engaging interactivity, creating a unique and exciting sensory experience for readers of all ages. One of their distinctive features is the possibility to customize the narrative path. Readers can choose between different options and decisions that influence the course of the story, giving them a sense of control and actively involving them in the plot. The interaction, typical of multimodal storybooks, stimulates the readers' imagination and fantasy, allowing them to explore different possibilities and discover alternative endings. Digital fairy tales indeed offer numerous educational advantages: children can touch, drag, and interact directly with story elements, enhancing cognitive skills and developing hand-eye coordination as well as critical, linguistic, and narrative skills of the students. By interacting with multimedia content, learners can develop divergent thinking and improve their understanding

and production of written texts, enriching their vocabulary and enhancing their ability to express themselves fluently. Moreover, digital fairy tales foster creativity and imagination, encouraging students to construct original stories, learn to structure complex narrative sequences, and develop new scenarios (Rosa, Mori & Bongiorno, 2023).

With them, it is possible to experience a unique and unprecedented emotional and cognitive involvement, in which readers feel part of the story and can experience emotions and feelings in an even more intense and real way (Gramigna & Poletti, 2021). The emotional and affective involvement of pupils is total in reading, but especially in the construction of digital narratives as not only is their interest deeply stimulated, but also active participation and effective memorization of information is encouraged. Thanks to digital fairy tales, pupils can develop a deep and authentic emotional connection with the fascinating characters in the stories, as well as with the suspenseful plots. At the same time, teachers can establish an even deeper connection with their pupils - especially the youngest ones - who feel involved, interested, and motivated in the learning process. When they can identify with the characters and situations presented in digital fairy tales, an even more intense and meaningful emotional bond is created that favors the acquisition of new knowledge and skills in an extremely engaging, stimulating, and lasting way (Gratani, 2023).

The importance given here to digital fairy tales lies in the possibility of stimulating pupils' imagination and creativity, counteracting stereotypes and prejudices, fostering motivation and self-esteem through interactive and engaging tools, and, considering the importance of emotions in the learning process, their use presents itself as an opportunity to foster meaningful and lasting learning, laying the foundations for innovative, active and engaging teaching (Morcellini, 2024).

In light of the above, it seems obvious, therefore, to rethink the school not only as a formal place of training and learning but as a container, a treasure chest full of hidden treasures that can only reveal themselves if those who hold the keys to the chest allow the little ones to express themselves freely and creatively in all forms and ways, to recognize and manage their emotions, to listen to others and to listen to themselves, to love and to be loved. For this reason, during a workshop with the students of the CdL in Primary Education, interactive digital fairy tales were created, the focus of which was emotion, and indirectly, the breaking down of stereotypes and prejudices, through various apps such as Book Creator for the digital book, Voki for the avatar, Wordwall, Genial.ly, LearningApp and others for gamification within the fairy tale. Reflection focused on how to bring out, through creative writing, the emotions in the fairy tales created, so that they could also be recognized by the academic course to become pupils' Teachers, the ultimate beneficiaries of this

collaborative work; at the same time on how to maintain, even in a virtual environment, the authentic link with the practice of writing and reading and on what could be the most appropriate, functional and inclusive ways to foster the students' well-being.

The idea was therefore to experiment with a new form of collaborative writing that could have a clear and positive impact on emotional and learning processes and help develop a positive and empathetic collaborative climate within the group. Carefully analyzing the digital fairy tales produced by[2], the commitment, diligence, desire to collaborate and share and, above all, the creativity of these students becomes immediately clear. With imagination but also competence, in just a few hours they invented original and inclusive fairy tales - which take into account the various difficulties of the students and their learning styles - full of emotions, symbolism, the desire to break down prejudices and stereotypes, but also the desire for a happy ending, where the child in each of us emerges.

As education professionals, we must continue exploring the wonderful world of fairy tales, supporting and encouraging their dissemination in every corner of the globe (Bocci F, Castellana G, De Angelis B., 2023). Let these magical narratives continue to nourish the minds and hearts of children around the world, inviting them to lose themselves between the pages - paper or digital - of books and let them communicate their emotions and let their imaginations take off in free flight.

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[2] We report only some of the links of the digital books produced as not all students consented to their publication:
https://read.bookcreator.com/3aGG6ZhHDmRlOVQa0FRs9jm1FBU2/JBOepsDASpeYBtkmqu0W9w?fbclid=IwAR2aqDuGm_1IluB0MwUSHN9FntZEN_t_JSI2Th5piaOTbajnx4HOGahm8Rc
https://read.bookcreator.com/L4y5GIaD4CM1GwvKEXhwZV8jDvs2/XtdjAjq4Q6eUIfjdfL2xbA
https://read.bookcreator.com/urGkD6Pp8whj00iaLm0JU9nTJDC3/WNMXDt8VTsW92yeXg6qr0A
https://read.bookcreator.com/R1l8aIdg0CciLgbJOzY50NyJ62O2/Jq2dajUHT9e_mgTctyC61w
https://read.bookcreator.com/VuJ1L2DWK1VcaD19RIgnOZCxCUS2/Bkqp_ZqNTuu53TwCwWaPSw
https://read.bookcreator.com/vjthdMUWaKcOVolJD5yC16aBoHw1/mPqfF3rSSMe5adQp8FtZNw

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