

SUSTAINABILITY AS CARE AND EDUCATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY: A GENERATIONAL CHALLENGE

LA SOSTENIBILITÀ COME CURA E RESPONSABILITÀ EDUCATIVA: UNA SFIDA GENERAZIONALE



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ABSTRACT

The paper proposes a theoretical-critical reflection on the epochal challenges facing today's younger generations. Among these, sustainability is surely one of the most pressing and complex for humanity as it requires investing in intergenerational solidarity. Young people have the potential to lead us to a more sustainable future, but it is our collective responsibility to empower and support them in their efforts, ensuring they have the knowledge, tools and educational opportunities to build a more equitable and regenerative world for all living beings.

L'articolo propone una riflessione teorico-critica sulle sfide epocali che le giovani generazioni si trovano ad affrontare. Tra queste, la sostenibilità è sicuramente una delle più sfidanti e complesse per l'umanità poiché presuppone un investimento nella solidarietà intergenerazionale. I/le giovani hanno il potenziale per condurci verso un futuro più sostenibile ma è nostra responsabilità collettiva responsabilizzarli e sostenerli nei loro sforzi, fornendo loro le conoscenze, gli strumenti e le opportunità educative per costruire un mondo più equo e rigenerativo per tutti gli esseri viventi.

KEYWORDS

Sustainability, young generation, care, educational responsibility, best practices.

Sostenibilità, giovani generazioni, cura, responsabilità educativa, buone prassi.

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Introduction

In the 21st century, the world has faced a multitude of challenges that have reshaped our societal norms, perceptions, and priorities. From 2001 to the present day, our planet has witnessed unprecedented events, catastrophes and upheavals: from the 9/11 attacks to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, life on Earth has been confronted with deepening and increasingly global inequalities, uncertainties, and asymmetries (UNESCO, 2023). Today's world faces interconnected issues such as the spread of new poverty and inequality, the restriction of democratic spaces, the exploitation of natural resources, the alteration of environmental balances, etc. Among these challenges, sustainability is surely one of the most pressing and complex for humanity since it involves "meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to realize their own" (WCED, 1987). In this sense, the road to a sustainable future is embodied in intergenerational solidarity. The urgency of the challenges we face requires immediate action, and young people have the potential to lead the way to a more sustainable and equitable world. It is our collective responsibility to educate, empower and support them in their efforts, ensuring that they have the knowledge, tools and opportunities to build a better future for themselves and for generations to come.

Based on these premises, the paper explores the critical relationship between sustainability and younger generations, emphasizing the importance of educating and empowering the youth to take proactive steps in preserving our planet.

1. Shaping our future: educational challenges for young generations

The planetary emergency caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus has affected all spheres of human life, going on to redefine many aspects of our actions and activities. This is especially true for the younger generations who, because of COVID-19, have had to completely reshape their daily lives. The youngest members of society have paid the highest price, and we cannot forget the profound effects the pandemic has had on their growth and development. Isolation, social distancing, separation from friends, extended school closures, and forced confinement have not only disrupted young people's routines but have had a significant impact on their psycho-social well-being. "Being a teenager" during a global pandemic was particularly intense for many young people worldwide. At first, lockdown might have felt like a break

or an unexpected holiday, providing extra time at home. However, as time went on, many found the situation unbearable. Each child approached this period differently, but it is clear that the pandemic significantly impacted their development, sometimes leaving a lasting mark on their future growth (Ammaniti, 2020). Research has shown that the distress experienced by young people during this time often manifested as anxiety, sleep disturbances, eating disorders, increased irritability, and depression (Segre, Campi, Scarpellini, Clavenna, Zanetti, Cartabia, Bonati, 2021). Especially for pre-adolescents and adolescents, this historical period contradicted the natural impulses of their life stage (Erikson, 1968), where exploration and social interaction are crucial for developing self-awareness and identity (Barone, 2009). Consequently, they had to navigate growing up in solitude, facing numerous changes with limited opportunities for experimentation and lacking peer interaction (Save the Children, 2020). We should recognize that under such circumstances, the complexity of the growth process increases significantly, becoming more exhausting and challenging: lockdown has restricted, if not entirely halted, numerous typical adolescent activities such as self-exploration, external world discovery, and therefore suspended all those activities that normally provided meaning, sense, structure and rhythm to everyday life, fundamental for a correct and positive emotional, cognitive and social development. Unsurprisingly, the web and social networks, remained perceived by younger generations as a realm capable of fulfilling their developmental needs (Di Bari, 2020). Within that virtual space, adolescents could investigate and experiment their own identity, to draw inspiration from new role models, to distance themselves from their family at a time when, due to forced isolation, it seemed to be literally impossible, to maintain contact with one's peers and even to have the chance to establish new friends without the limits that distance, even in normal times, would pose. Simultaneously, we must acknowledge that the "lockdown generation" grew up in atypical development conditions, isolated from the world, disconnected from their community, confined to their homes, perhaps too small to contain everything that adolescence entails, perhaps too narrow to be able to allow your own self to flourish (Maltese, 2021). Separated from everything and everyone, adolescents in the digital age found themselves in seemingly stagnant and frozen time, stuck in the stillness of a terrifying present, laden with uncertainties and doubts (Mancaniello, 2020).

The fears and apprehensions experienced during the pandemic did not subside but rather escalated among young generations. The lockdown generation had to adjust to an environment centered around protection and safety; however, now that the world has returned to a semblance of “normalcy,” they face an even more turbulent and troubling reality, creating a spiral of anxiety. While the lockdown generation encountered a period of uncertainty and compelled change marked by quarantines, restrictions and social distancing, today’s generation confronts additional scenarios characterized by rising fear and concern about the future. It is understandable to have concerns in a world that is becoming increasingly warmer, more populated, and less ecologically stable. As journalist David Wallace-Wells states, young people are growing up in a “uninhabitable, unfair, polluted” planet (Wallace-Wells, 2020) where extreme weather events are becoming more frequent and severe, where social tensions, armed conflicts, and civil wars becoming more common, where natural resources are being depleted and poverty affects countless families and communities globally, threatening the livelihoods and survival of millions. Younger generations must also contend with the consequences of an unstable global economy that frequently disadvantages them: unemployment, underemployment, or precarious work conditions hamper their ability to save, invest in their futures, or even start families. Another significant challenge that they are facing is the digital and technological revolution which, while offering unprecedented access to information and connections, also presents new and complex frontiers. For example, the phenomenon of “doom surfing”, where individuals spend excessive time reading negative news on digital devices, has grown during the COVID-19 pandemic and continues to spread, especially among the younger generation. This behaviour leads them to “detemporalize” the present, diverting their attention from the “here” and “now” and fostering a sense of helplessness over their surroundings (Prisco, 2021). Misinformation and doom scrolling exacerbate anxiety, making it difficult for young people to disconnect from a perpetual cycle of worry. The constant connection to digital devices and real-time information (often negative or alarming) does not provide them the chance to “disconnect” or experience moments of serenity. The pressure to stay up-to-date and the fear of missing out on online social dynamics can heighten anxiety. This can result in feelings and attitudes of indifference, boredom, resignation, confusion, and demotivation, stirring inner tension between the impulse to act and resistance (Sandrini, 2022). Time spent in front of screens and away from face-to-face interactions has led to social isolation and addiction to likes, retweets, and

comments. Very often, this digital overload leads the younger generations to retreat from the real world into the virtual world, with disastrous consequences for themselves, their families, and their societies. U.S. psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues that these processes can cause young people to develop “super anxiety” (Haidt, 2024), a chronic distrust towards the world and the future, leading to moral and psychological fatalism. A prime example is “eco-anxiety,” which is not only a chronic fear of natural disasters, climate change, and worsening environmental conditions but also distress that hinders existential planning (Prisco, Isch Lopez, Romero Moñivas, 2024). For the younger generation, this is particularly harmful as it can lead to “inner despondency” and “emotional stagnation,” resulting in feelings of helplessness, inadequacy, and despair (laquinta, 2022).

In conclusion, the main challenges facing the younger generation are deeply interconnected and span the environmental, economic and social sectors (Rockström et al., 2009). The climate crisis, economic precarity, digital saturation, systemic inequality, and identity pressures combine to create a unique and often overwhelming experience for today’s youth. While they continue to push for change and adapt in inspiring ways, they cannot shoulder these burdens alone (Malavasi, 2020). Addressing these challenges requires a collective effort that includes intergenerational solidarity, shared responsibility, institutional reform, and a genuine commitment to social justice. Only by recognizing and addressing the root causes of this unsustainability (Sachs, 2015) can we aspire to build a better future where young people not only survive but thrive.

2. Educating in Fragility: youth agency and experimental turns for an ecology of care

In the dynamics of our time, a new psychic and symbolic condition is emerging—still lacking a systematic and definitive *logos*, yet already densely inhabited by symptoms, tremors, and restlessness. It is a condition named generational eco-anxiety, deeply and widely experienced by an increasingly large segment of the younger population (Innocenti, 2022). It would be reductive to speak merely of a fear of the future; what is at stake is an ontological anguish, born from an intuition of the world’s fragility, its irreversible exposure to climate crisis, and the imminence of a time that does not promise salvation, but transformation (Albrecht, 2011). As Timothy Morton writes, we live immersed in the “hyperobject” of climate change—

an entity that surpasses us, envelops us, and evades our normal cognitive tools (Morton, 2013). The eco-anxious generation is not merely marked by fragility but stands as a witness to an epochal event: the human entry into the geological awareness of its own impact. Eco-anxiety is, in this sense, the tragic form through which the contemporary subject recognizes the end of anthropocentric innocence. Moreover, this liminal condition, if inhabited pedagogically, can be transformed into a threshold. Where adults tend to repression, young people choose exposure. They do not deny the catastrophe—they name it; they do not exorcise it—they inhabit it. Eco-anxiety, from symptom, can become a device of consciousness, a point of ignition for a new, radical, and transformative mode of thought. From this perspective, the task of pedagogy is not to anesthetize discomfort, but to accompany it, to translate it, to recognize it as the embryonic form of a new ethic. The eco-anxious generation carries an implicit knowledge, an intuition that precedes language: a knowledge of interdependence, care, and shared vulnerability—forms of knowledge that fully inhabit an ecological education capable of thinking of the human as part of a living network (Mortari, 2020). In a time dominated by performance-oriented logics and extractive models of development, pedagogical reflection cannot evade the critical task of interrogating the epistemological architecture that underpins education. The ecological crisis is not only environmental (Barbiero, 2011); it is ontological and educational, and it demands a radical revision of the modern educational project, one that rethinks itself in the direction of not just technical, but existential sustainability (Giovannini, 2018; Sachs, 2015). The models of economic rationality—folded upon simple yet pervasive axioms like competition, profit, and limitless growth—have long since colonized the language of education and pedagogy, transforming originally relational concepts into tools for measurement and control. This semantic colonization has had profound effects: schools, universities, and training contexts have increasingly aligned with a paradigm of having, in which knowledge is reduced to a resource, competence to performance, and intelligence to capital. Thought oriented toward being—toward openness, unpredictability, otherness—has been marginalized, often silenced. The recent global ecological crisis, however, has cracked open a fissure in this framework: it is no longer possible to conceive education as a neutral activity, nor formation as mere preparation for employment. An ethical and political turn is imperative. It is precisely here that experimental pedagogy can play a decisive role—not only as a site of methodological innovation, but as a hermeneutical laboratory, a space of symbolic resistance. To this end, it is

helpful to return to the distinctions drawn by Erich Fromm between being and having, where having imposes a dictatorship of immanence, erasing elsewhere, dissolving the unforeseen, and anesthetizing desire (Fromm, 1976); and likewise to the more recent proposals of Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, who urge a rethinking of the very notion of “wealth,” shifting from human capital to capabilities (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999). In this view, to educate means making the concrete exercise of one’s rights possible—first and foremost, the right to speak, to relate, to participate in transformative ways. This approach translates into pedagogical practices that make the word not a vehicle of vertical transmission, but an act of care, a gesture of symbolic co-construction. It is what Malavasi has called the task of “teaching the human”: restoring to formation its anthropological vocation, capable of cultivating the symbolic, relational, and affective dimensions of existence (Malavasi, 2020). To support this shift, a new lexicon is needed. We need words that are no longer instruments of classification, but gestures of alliance. Words that do not dominate, but safeguard. That does not sever but connect. A pedagogy that truly wishes to respond to the challenges of the present must be attentive to the margins, to faint voices, to learnings that emerge offstage. It is precisely in this territory that the new youth agency is emerging, gaining momentum in recent years through ecological, social, and cultural movements. Figures like Greta Thunberg, with their stripped-down, essential rhetoric, have shaken the collective imagination, restoring centrality to the youthful word—not as folklore, but as knowledge, as political gesture, as pedagogical intervention. This epistemological shift directly calls into question experimental pedagogy, understood as a space for research and action capable of gathering the emerging demands of contemporary education (Cambi, 2010). How can education today embody a paradigm no longer rooted in domination, appropriation, and performance, but in listening, care, and reciprocity with the living world? What is needed is to imagine—and in some cases already enact—new forms of ecopedagogy, capable of intertwining knowledge with experience, cognition with sensibility, and education with transformation (Mortari, 2020). One promising avenue is that of a narrative pedagogy of landscape, which restores to the territory its symbolic, affective, and biographical value. The goal is not to teach the environment as an external object to be studied, but to help individuals build a deep, inner, poetic relationship with it. Writing, storytelling, imagery, and speech become instruments for giving voice back to the Earth, for recognizing its traces in our memory, and for narrating—and thus healing—the rift between humans and

ecosystems. A second trajectory opens where education meets urgency, and learning moves beyond classroom walls into the public square. The 'piazza' (*agorà*), a symbolic space of alterity and conflict, can become a new classroom, where the youth voice is exercised not to repeat but to intervene. Here, education becomes political experience in its most original sense: that which concerns the common good, shared responsibility, and possible futures (Bertolini, 2005). Speaking in public, writing manifestos, organizing assemblies—all become situated, embodied, and transformative learning. A third proposal involves a pedagogy of walking, understood as a slow, embodied, relational mode of inquiry. Walking together—students, teachers, educators—along trails, through landscapes, in silence and in speech, restores density to educational time and epistemic value to the body. Each step is an act of attention, each pause, an opportunity for reflection. Walking becomes both method and metaphor: for an education that seeks no shortcuts, that accepts the effort of encounter, and that recognizes knowledge in slowness. Finally, one may envision forms of ecological aesthetic education, in which the language of art—particularly theatre, performance, and symbolic gesture—becomes a medium for processing the world's pain, for imagining alternative horizons, for rendering visible what would otherwise remain unsaid. Emotion is no longer an obstacle to knowledge, but the very matter of learning. The stage becomes a shared space of reflection, where body and voice become the voice of the planet. These experiences, still minoritarian though they may be, speak to an education that is not content with mere transmission, but takes on the task of transformation; that does not form only competencies, but consciences; that prepares not only for work, but for life. In them, we find a pedagogy that refuses neutrality, does not fear utopia, and understands experimentation as an ethical and methodological act. Experimental pedagogy, in this sense, is not a specialized field, but an epistemic and existential posture: the desire to continually question forms of knowledge and seek new ways of inhabiting the educational world. It is the capacity to listen to youthful voices, to re-signify language, to imagine other worlds. As Elsa Morante once wrote, "the world will be saved by children". Perhaps not only because they represent the future, but because they already inhabit a time that the adult world has forgotten how to see. They carry upon their shoulders a fragile, precarious, interdependent present. And yet, in that fragility lies the possibility of a new beginning. Our task is not to disappoint them. Our task is to educate toward hope—not as a consolatory illusion, but as a radical form of responsibility. All these experimental practices converge on a fundamental point: the pedagogical

rehabilitation of the word, understood not merely as code, but as ethos. A word that does not simply transmit information but builds worlds.

3. Eco-sustainability as an integrated system of relationships

In this regard, Roberto Farné (2018) reports on the “unbearable heaviness of education” when it creates gaps between rich and poor countries and inequalities in access to education, rather than fostering equal opportunities for all. The same applies when education for sustainability is reduced to mere proclamations of idealistic or ideological principles. Education for sustainability is - or should be - ontologically active, meaning it should be concretely enacted and practiced. It is in the interdependence between theory and practice that the exemplariness of actions and attentiveness in “ecological care” emerges—something “even children can do and understand, provided that the educational environment in which they grow (and the adults responsible for it) commits to it in a concrete and visible way” (p. 53). Since the drafting of the earliest foundational documents of the sustainability culture—such as the 1987 Brundtland Report—the need to “act locally and think globally” has emerged. That is, to activate shared and widespread participatory practices aimed at caring for the commons and encouraging individual responsibility. Appealing to everyone’s ecological conscience is crucial in order to foresee and protect others and the common good from the consequences of individual actions. The possibility of the individual to impact and drive long-term change in the broader system is well known to mathematicians and physicists who postulated the “butterfly effect”.

In the field of pedagogy, in 1954, the biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, together with his multidisciplinary team, developed the General Systems Theory. He started from the assumption that every system is in relation with its environment, ultimately extending the systemic-relational approach to the study of educational dynamics. Bertalanffy equated each educational agency to a dynamic and open system, like an organism “in a (quasi-)steady state, maintaining its mass relationships constant through continuous exchanges of material components and energy, and engaged in an ongoing exchange of matter with the external environment” (von Bertalanffy, 1983, p. 196).

Thus, sustainability does not concern only environmental issues, but the entirety of the various dimensions of human development, which at present is clearly “unsustainable”.

The recognition of the multifactorial nature of development is the novel, innovative, and revolutionary feature of the Global Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015). Through the pursuit of 17 goals to be achieved by 2030, it aims to fight economic, social, cultural, and gender inequalities worldwide. Each country is committed to defining its own sustainable development strategy by involving and integrating all social components: businesses, the public and private sectors, volunteer organizations, schools and universities, research centers, educational and informational institutions—all working to actively care for the common good and discover a collective *We* that welcomes and includes all personal identities.

Maria Grazia Riva (2018) identifies sustainable participation practices as the keystone for establishing a necessary culture of sustainability: “one of the fundamental foundations of this culture of sustainability, which we must nurture in young people and all citizens, lies in a non-individualistic and non-private conception of knowledge, social actions, and the design of events, schools, and educational services. The culture—necessary for sustainability to become reality—must be based on the idea of ‘caring’ for shared social goods” (Riva, 2018, p. 34). And what greater social good is there than the relationship between people, especially between generations? Despite its intrinsic intangibility, the relationship—produced and experienced within and through the interactions of the agents forming that collective *We*—assumes a materiality of its own and ascends to the status of a recognized and legitimized good (Donati, Solci, 2011). In facilitating, accompanying, supporting, and giving meaning to identity-building and shared meaning-making processes, education plays a fundamental role. It is within relational dynamics, everyday occurrences, digital environments, and offline contexts that individual identities are shaped: the Self, flexible and accustomed to change and transitions, defines itself in relation to an unforeseen and unpredictable You, with whom it constitutes a *We*, constantly engaged in intra-, extra-, and inter-systemic relationships. Personal identity is therefore formed through an ecological attitude toward the surrounding environment, specifically via the process of attributing meaning to life experiences. In the encounter with otherness, the dialogical Self is refined—capable of constantly building and deconstructing itself,

thus renewing itself through personal interactions and exchanges with the environment.

Today, in an era of fragile, unstable, and revocable relationships, more than ever, the culture of sustainability represents a form of social capital. It reveals the level of civic cohesion in a society, the solidarity among its members, and their collaboration with institutions (Malavasi, 2022). In the digital age, narrative practices represent a privileged pedagogical tool for revealing both personal and shared meanings attributed to subjective and interpersonal experience. Jerome Bruner (1988; 1992) already regarded storytelling as the first and fundamental tool of knowledge and interpretation available to the socio-culturally situated subject.

Now as then, storytelling is rightly placed among the actions of educational care, as it allows latent experiential content to become accessible and facilitates the emergence of associated meanings, emotions, and repressed or suppressed relationships. In this way, the individual enters into relationship with themselves, with others, and with the world, adopting an ecosystemic perspective that interconnects each individual with their external environment. "It is in this context that the authentic 'ecological' essence of storytelling resides, capable of triggering the search for relationships and interconnections that lead to a systemic view of educational phenomena and learning processes. From this perspective, storytelling can become a potential ecological device, capable of creating deep connections between the individual, nature, and all living and non-living beings that inhabit the earth" (D'Aprile, Bufalino, 2024, p. 79). An attitude we might call eco-pedagogical allows us to perceive reality as an integrated system made up of people, objects, and nature, in deep and essential interrelationships.

Caring for these relationships opens and leads to a personal disposition toward eco-sustainability. Educating people to care for relationships is a properly adult responsibility—especially of an adult pedagogy aware of each human being's necessary connection with nature and the world: "a contact that needs not be sought out, because it already exists—indeed, if it didn't, it would be impossible or perhaps even unimaginable; just as it would be unimaginable for a person to exist outside the world, separated from Mother Earth" (Paparella, del Gottardo, 2023, p. 7). Moreover, pedagogical tradition is rich in figures and experiences of eco-sustainable education. Just think of Maria Montessori (1850; 1948; 1950; 1952), her

discoveries about nature and how children's minds function, and her vision of cosmic education.

Far from nostalgic retreat into the past, Raniero Regni (2024) recently questioned ChatGPT, asking it to impersonate Maria Montessori in an interview exploring, among other topics, the relationship between humanity and nature. According to AI, today Maria Montessori would still affirm: “humanity is not separate from nature, but an integral part of it. Every individual must recognize their responsibility toward the environment and understand that human well-being is closely tied to the health of the planet. From early childhood, it is essential for children to develop an intimate and respectful connection with nature. This connection is built through direct experience, observation, and care for living beings. [...] Education must teach children that every action has an impact and that it is possible to live sustainably without harming the environment. [...] Contact with nature also promotes the development of important social and emotional skills. When children work together to explore a natural environment, they learn to collaborate, share, and respect one another’s space and time. Furthermore, the tranquillity and beauty of nature have a calming and restorative effect that helps children develop concentration and reduce stress. Children’s natural affinity for nature can also be nurtured and strengthened through education” (pp. 103–107). The AI-generated Montessori concludes and synthesizes current eco-sustainable thought as follows: “technology can be a powerful tool, but it must be integrated into an educational context that also values human connection, hands-on exploration, and creativity. [...] It is essential to create educational environments that respect and nourish children’s innate curiosity and capacity for self-learning, thereby preparing future generations to live in harmony with themselves and the world around them” (ibid., p. 136).

4. Interweaving stories, care and responsibility: educational practices for an ecology of formation

Faced with epochal challenges like the climate crisis and growing inequalities (UNESCO, 2023), alongside widespread eco-anxiety affecting younger generations (Haidt, 2024), pedagogy needs a radical rethinking of its goals. Merely acquiring sectoral skills or informing about global issues is inadequate; cultivating an authentic ecology of education is essential (Mortari, 2020). This approach requires

a commitment to fostering care - an ethical disposition towards oneself, others (human and non-human), and the environment (Mortari, 2020) - and instilling a deep sense of responsibility for the present and future (WCED, 1987). It demands moving beyond educational paradigms fixated on performance, competition, and instrumental rationality (Fromm, 1976; Giovannini, 2018) to practices that nurture the person's emotional, relational, ethical, and symbolic dimensions (Malavasi, 2020; Nussbaum, 2011).

In this context, storytelling, especially literature for children and adolescents, serves as a teaching aid and a valuable learning environment (Chambers, 1993). Stories intertwine cognition and emotion, making complex concepts accessible and “thinkable”. Through characters, plots, and fictional worlds, young readers vicariously encounter diverse situations, explore moral dilemmas, and develop empathy: the ability to “feel with” another, understanding their perspective and emotions (Nussbaum, 1995). This identification process, known as “transport” in narrative theory, fosters deconstructing prejudices and constructing an ethics of care based on recognising common vulnerability and interdependence (Mortari, 2020). Literature thus becomes a vital gymnasium for socio-emotional skills (SEL), training self-awareness (recognising one's emotions), hetero-awareness (understanding others'), relational skills (negotiating meanings), and responsible decisions (reflecting on characters' choices) (Goleman, 1995).

The formative potential of narrative (Bruner, 1988) is realised through diverse textual forms and practices, outlining an authentic ecology of education rooted in the ethics of care. This approach values a plurality of narrative resources, recognising each type's role in learners' development. Illustrated books, for example, transcend their traditional association with early childhood as complex semiotic devices (Terrusi, 2017). The interaction between verbal and iconic codes cultivates observational skills and aesthetic sensibility, promoting care for the complexity of the phenomenal world.

Genres like fantasy and science fiction offer metaphorical tools for exploring contemporary “great fears” - from ecological collapse to systemic injustice, as noted by Wallace-Wells (2020) - and stimulate speculative imagination. They create mental spaces for envisioning alternative futures and modes of coexistence. Additionally, narratives grounded in history and biographies of influential figures (e.g., environmental activists) exemplify civic engagement and resilience,

facilitating vicarious learning and inspiring young readers to embrace their collective agency for social change.

Oral traditions, stories, fairy tales, and myths possess significant pedagogical value. These narratives, seen as custodians of ecological wisdom and relational worldviews, can counter anthropocentric thinking, echoing Morton's (2013) reflections on non-anthropocentric ecological approaches.

- The pedagogical effectiveness of these narrative practices improves when integrated with active teaching methods. This aligns with authentic formative experimentation, reflecting Cambi's (2010) emphasis on holistic engagement, resulting in specific didactic approaches;
- Narrative landscape pedagogy uses stories to interpret local stratifications, fostering a responsible connection to the environment through site-specific activities like walking and writing;
- Walking pedagogy merges storytelling and walking for embodied learning, combining bodily rhythm, sensory perception, and imagination (Careri, 2017; Guerra, 2017);
- Ecological aesthetic education uses literature for expressive workshops, facilitating the affective engagement with environmental issues and mobilising the body as a narrative tool (Mortari, 2006).

In this approach, developing critical literacy is essential. It involves not just passively enjoying stories but critically analysing them, including media and advertising narratives, to expose stereotypes, consumerist ideologies, and anthropocentric views. This enhances young people's ability to engage in public debate with awareness and an independent voice (Bertolini, 2005). Critically used, digital environments can provide valuable spaces: innovative collaborative digital storytelling can address issues of care and responsibility, advocating for reflective technology use instead of pitfalls like “doom scrolling” (Prisco, Isch Lopez, Romero Moñivas, 2024).

Implementing this narrative pedagogy requires educators to possess literary and methodological skills, along with ethical and relational sensitivity. It is essential to choose quality texts that represent a plurality of voices and cultures, stimulating thought without imposing answers. Creating a climate of trust and mutual listening in the classroom is crucial- a safe space for doubts, difficult emotions, and divergent opinions, facilitating authentic dialogic discussions. The educator models this by

sharing their emotional connections to the stories, demonstrating vulnerability as strength and care as a daily practice.

Conclusions

In conclusion, embracing storytelling as the foundation of a pedagogy of care and responsibility goes beyond introducing a new teaching method; it signifies a commitment to the transformative power of stories in cultivating critical minds, sensitive hearts, and industrious hands that act with awareness and compassion. Recognising that our epochal challenges require education beyond fragmented knowledge, we aim to form individuals of integrity, capable of navigating complexity with ethical courage and creativity (Malavasi, 2020). Stories serve as powerful catalysts: they break down rational defences, resonate emotionally, and reshape our cognitive and value frameworks. They enhance our ethical imagination, enabling us to envision the consequences of our actions, empathise with others (human and non-human, present and future), and recognise our interconnectedness with the planet (Mortari, 2020; Morton, 2013).

This approach focuses on revitalising the word in its ethical and aesthetic entirety, contrasting sharply with the fleeting, utilitarian, and often divisive communication prevalent in many modern contexts. By juxtaposing the fragmentation and urgency of the present with the reflective slowness that effective storytelling demands, we foster a deeper level of listening—to ourselves, others, stories, and the world—while welcoming ambiguity and complexity, rejecting simplistic views. As a result, narrative practice in educational settings transforms into a space for authentic dialogue, where participants collaboratively construct meanings, appreciate diverse perspectives, and view language as a tool for connection rather than division in the collective search for understanding. This practice embodies a continuous commitment to communicative responsibility. Embracing this perspective goes beyond merely learning new techniques; it requires embodying a pedagogical stance grounded in radical faith in human potential to learn, forge meaningful connections, and act towards a more just and sustainable future. This stance entails humility through acknowledging the limits of one's knowledge against the backdrop of vast global issues; vulnerability in being open to questioning and evolving through stories and interactions; and active hope, seen not as naive optimism but as a strong belief in the possibility of positive

transformation, with education playing a vital role in this process. Consequently, the educator becomes a guide in co- learning and meaning- making journeys, a companion in exploring the deep existential and ethical questions elicited by stories. Ultimately, investing in this narrative educational approach paves a road toward sustaining education itself. Such education nurtures emotional and relational dimensions, tying learning to deep significance and communal commitment, combating burnout and disengagement, while rekindling motivation and passion among both students and educators. Equipping individuals with essential adaptive skills - like empathy, systemic critical thinking, collaboration, and creative resilience (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999) - ensures learning remains pertinent in navigating an uncertain and complex future, transcending short- term performance metrics. It interlaces the past, present, and future, drawing on the lessons embedded in narratives to shed light on current challenges and foster intergenerational responsibility (WCED, 1987). Ultimately, this approach plays a crucial role in shaping citizens who are not only adept but also wise, compassionate, and actively engaged in collaboratively creating a more equitable, supportive, and regenerative world for all beings (Sachs, 2015), and who continue to learn and evolve in a perpetual dialogue with the rich tapestry of human histories and the nurturing planet.

Author contributions

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