

NEW FRONTIERS OF TEACHING AND LEARNING.
FROM SYMPTOMS TO USEFUL CONSTRUCTS FOR UNDERSTANDING TEACHING AN
OPPORTUNITY FOR EMANCIPATION FROM SELF AND FROM PANDEMIC TRAUMA

NUOVE FRONTIERE DELL'INSEGNARE E DELL'APPRENDERE.
DAI SINTOMI AI COSTRUTTI UTILI PER INTENDERE L'INSEGNAMENTO OCCASIONE DI
EMANCIPAZIONE DA SÉ E DAL TRAUMA PANDEMICO



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ABSTRACT

In light of the multiple forms of fragility observable in developmental age and among young people that the health emergency and other emergencies of our time have amplified, provocatively enclosed within the paradigm of the "zombification of the youthful soul" (Romeo, 2024a; 2025) or within a theoretical *framework* that interprets the most visible and popular project mortification as the result of a world of inattentive adults who are generally incapable of satisfying their developmental needs, the contribution identifies a minimal constellation of constructs in an attempt to prevent the risk of *necrodidactics* at school (Barca, Liverano & Romeo, 2025).

Alla luce delle molteplici forme di fragilità osservabili in età evolutiva e fra i giovani che l'emergenza sanitaria e le altre emergenze del nostro tempo hanno amplificato, provocatoriamente racchiuse entro il paradigma della "zombificazione dell'animo giovanile" (Romeo, 2024a; 2025) ovvero all'interno di un *framework* teorico che interpreta la più visibile e popolare mortificazione progettuale come il risultato di un mondo di adulti disattenti e tendenzialmente incapaci di soddisfarne i bisogni evolutivi, il contributo individua una costellazione minima di costrutti nel tentativo di prevenire il rischio di una necrodidattica a scuola (Barca, Liverano & Romeo, 2025).

KEYWORDS

Sviluppo emotivo a scuola, resilienza, agentività, abilità sociali ed emotive.

Emotional development at school, resilience, agency, social and emotional skills.

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1. Highlighting educational failures

The SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, one of the *massive traumas* that mankind has recently overcome, has 'yellowed what doesn't work'¹ especially with regard to the fragility of adult-governed school, education and social-health systems and, consequently, of our children, pre-adolescents and adolescents.

Like a sharp stroke of neon yellow highlighter, the health emergency has metaphorically emphasised the hegemony of adult-centred thinking incapable of fully and genuinely assuming the point of view of young and very young people bewildered by events - of *mentalising them*, as P. Fonagy and colleagues (2005) would say - and therefore of satisfying a whole series of needs, even new ones (such as those of listening, memory and narration, play as a tool for learning and decoding social reality and the social and economic reality of the world). Fonagy and colleagues (2005) - and therefore to satisfy a whole series of needs, even *unheard* of ones (such as those of *listening*, of *memory* and *narration*, of *play as a tool for learning and decoding social reality and not just of consumption and competition*, of *exploration of the emotional self*, still in *sexual orientation and in the construction of gender identity*, of *bonding*, explorers-emancipators, etc.) emerged precisely because of a new and more *complex and more complex* approach to the issue of the sexual orientation of young people.) emerged precisely because of a coping with the emergency that took place largely in the absence of conscious reflection and conceptual and emotional tools specifically prepared by decision-makers and, more generally, by adults of reference.

However, we must say that children, adolescents and our young people were already grappling with other emergencies of a time that is now accelerated, hyper-connected and symbolically liquefied in its affective bonds (Bauman, 2002), as are precisely the *social emergency* and the *educational-parenting emergency* (Annaloro, 2015; Romeo, 2020), so the pandemic has only highlighted since the early 2020s the gaps historically and organically present in the educational orientations of research, formal and informal education (Vertecchi, 2020).

In particular, on the family side, these shortcomings concern, among others a parental function as never before attenuated in modern-contemporary society; an educational relationship deeply threatened by a generalised mistrust in the society of uncertainty that on the one hand sees 'helicopter' mothers often adopting *over*

1 P. Siani, paediatrician, parliamentarian and Vice-President of the Parliamentary Commission for Childhood and Adolescence, told Radio Crc Targato Italia on 28 October 2020.

controlling educational styles (Ginott, 1969; Romeo, 2019) limiting autonomies and, on the other hand, maternalised (Quilici, 2010) and affectionate fathers like *plush toys* (Novara, 2009) no longer able to teach rules and therefore easy to crumble like 'shortcrust pastry' (Romeo, 2021c) before their children's demands; finally, an insufficient verbal interaction between parents and children in terms of the duration and quality of narratives that has produced, especially in children, a significant contraction of the lexicon due to an electronic bailiwick that is increasingly a substitute for educational care (Barca, Romeo & Tripaldi, 2024).

In fact, many authors have observed how today's parents have tended to become incapable of practising in the family that indispensable *educational verticality* for the development of their children (Aime & Charmet, 2014; Parrello, 2018), since due to a widespread *infantilisation of adulthood* (Bernardini, 2012; 2013), the roles and functions of care are often inverted to the point of soliciting bizarre but dangerous Oedipal imitations and inversions (Romeo, 2021b) and favouring in everyday life a true unionisation of the parent-child relationship (Del Pizzo & Incoronato, 2019).

These are all changes, in a negative sense, of a parental posture, if one allows the term to be used here, for which parents are not solely responsible, since it should also be remembered how western society, pressed by epochal changes, has seen the *dynamics of building a trust relationship* over the decades in particular overturned: if in the past granting and obtaining trust was an action through which communities were built, now it is necessary to understand, perhaps step by step, whether the Other really deserving of personal credit (Paparella, Romeo & Tarantino, 2024).

As a result of this, is an increasing replacement of the anthropological *trust-trust* pair with the *distrust-challenge* pair, as the wars still going on (another of the current crises) unfortunately testify

On the school side, the shortcomings concern instead the students' difficulty in combining understanding with action; the bureaucratisation of school organisation due to a consumerist *throwaway* logic of learning; the still excessive investment on the cognitive and meta-cognitive dimension of the student rather than on the emotional and meta-emotional dimension (i.e. on his emotional awareness and maturity) (D'Amico, 2018) and consequently on that affective dimension that by right affects both the teaching-learning and evaluative processes and the school institution as a whole (Mengoni *et al.* 2021; Romeo, 2021a); finally, the paradoxical substitution, in a neo-liberal key, of the didactic-educational language (the pupil, his life story, his value, his face and at the same time the teacher's gaze as

fundamental tools for developing the emotional competence of both, etc.) with the economic one (the client, the educational offer, the *performance*, the grade, the curriculum, the campuses, etc.).

Those just described are therefore only some of the gaps that already placed the pedagogical discourse in "muddy waters later shaken further by the storm produced by the Covid-19 pandemic" (Vertecchi, *op. cit.*, p. 6).

The *virus*, C. Silva and A. Gigli (2021), was a revelation not only of the dysfunctional relationship existing between the human species and nature, but first and foremost of an adult 'gaze' on the needs of the developmental age, if not blind at least myopic.

And this educational myopia, if you will, which paradoxically risks even at school to focus on symptoms and disorders and not vice versa on the educational and didactic potentials of students in difficulty (Goussot, 2015; Zappella, 2021), has unfavourably influenced the mental health especially of children with *Special Educational Needs* (BES).

In this regard, the authors wrote (*Ibid.*, p. 9):

"The 'adult-centric' view, which in our opinion has characterised the cultural attitude of the past year, has resulted in a further passivisation of young people: at all stages of the pandemic, children and adolescents have been placed in the condition of 'mute spectators', where the adult world made decisions that often denied their interests and demanded that they passively carry out, as 'good boys', the orders and rules imposed on them".

Our point of view regarding the mental health of minors and young people is instead to understand it as the result of a broader industrious contribution, through which it is possible to represent their minds as fruit that ripens from a patient and skilful cultivation that has taken place in several sowing fields and at the hands of several farmers: the family, certainly, the school and then the other agencies and institutions of the community.

In other words, we are saying that the 'educational intentionality' of which T. Grange spoke (2021, p. 50), together with that systemic-ecological vision indispensable in the human sciences to understand the phenomena that present themselves before our eyes, have in general been lacking in the reasoning of contemporary adults, so that the disconnect between the pedagogical discourse

and the albeit valuable experiences carried out by most during all phases of the pandemic emergency has been gigantic.

The lack of a conscious criteriology of educational action has thus exposed the young and very young to having to cope alone with the obvious *relational* and mass *traumas* of the last five years.

Such as the pandemic, but also the war emergency that would shortly thereafter inflame parts of our planet (Bearzi & Tarantino, 2022).

Already starting from that first exploratory survey of the health condition of children between 4 and 10 years old carried out online in Sardinia after the first months of the health emergency (Pisano & Cerniglia, 2020), it was certainly difficult to simplify the complexity of the historical moment, so that in the developmental age and in the transition to adult life of young people (18-35) we still witness today a series of dysfunctional reactions that concern both their affectivity and those behaviors expressed precisely in the attempt to manifest it and find useful contexts to understand it and adults alternative to the family thanks to which they can learn to govern it.

Yet, it would seem that the responsibilities (civil and above all criminal) linked to the various *in-abilities* that minors have manifested and still manifest in recent years in learning and living contexts - think of the increase in bullying also in its digital form, the phenomenon of *baby gangs* to that of the *maxi brawls* of which we have become aware at the turn of the second and third Covid-19 waves, and if we want, also to the increase in the number of admissions and admissions to child and adolescent neuropsychiatry hospital services due to suicidal thoughts and acts of self-harm (Longo, 2021) -, are exclusively concerned with children, adolescents and young people (each time criticised and discredited by the older generations) and not with the adults of reference, and hence the need for the latter to implement truly inclusive teaching educational interventions capable of capacitating and developing those emotional-affective and socio-relational skills that are currently anaesthetised.

Except then to discover, if one intervenes by going beyond operational spontaneism and thus following educational criteria dedicated to those minors who are often already stigmatised as deviants, that the 'intelligent' bullies of the third millennium have parents who are educated and well-to-do above the norm, but nevertheless incapable of 'keeping in mind' their emotions and their life projects (Romeo, 2018), that even cyber-bullies cannot but rely on adults who *are insignificant* from an affective point of view, that juvenile *gang* members know how

to deal with delicate social issues no less if the appropriate contextual conditions are created and, above all, that trust is nurtured in them that in most cases the primary reference figures have not been able to instil and nurture, that those who finally attempt suicide in adolescence only wish to orient their planning by being able to count on adults capable of preparing, as far as possible and especially in uncertainties, a viable scenario where that perception of a closed future (Fenichel, 1951) in which they have suddenly plunged in recent years becomes only a distant memory.

2. The young and very young in the Covid and post-Covid era

We have said that minors inhabiting this time of *multi-level crisis* (Gjergji, 2021), especially pre-adolescents and adolescents, express an existential malaise that primarily concerns the emotional and behavioural sphere - already in response to the first *lockdown* of 2020 (Minozzi, *et al.*, 2021) -, as various researches have since confirmed (Agia, 2022; Unicef & Gallup, 2021).

An existential malaise that, beyond the pandemic, represents for the writer a more structural, lasting and certainly dysfunctional reaction to that society of 'unlistening' or 'intermittently listening' adults (Baldini, 1988), which moreover seems to be amplifying itself by giving rise to a real progression of emotional and socio-relational *in-abilities* in our young and very young.

Even in schools, where *intellectual disability* is traditionally the most certified (68.4%), there is a specific increase in disability that specifically concerns students' *emotional* sphere (24.8%), we could call it *emotional disability* (i.e. *specific learning disabilities*, if certified together with other disorders, *attention deficit hyperactivity disorder* (ADHD) and other *early psychiatric* problems), within an overall picture, also deserving of attention and some reflection, that in our country shows in the school year 2017/2018 an increase in certified disability more generally in state and non-state schools of every order and grade more than double that of the school year 1997/1998 (i.e. in twenty years we have gone from 123,862 to 268,246 students with disability certification) (Salvini, 2019).

Data, moreover, are in line with those released shortly before by the *Survey on the Integration of Pupils with Disabilities*, conducted annually in primary and secondary schools, which show that *behaviour and attention disorders* (17.3%) and those falling within the *affective-relational sphere* (16.5%) account for an overall percentage of 33.8% (ISTAT, 2018).

Coming to the present day, according to another *report* by the *National Institute of Statistics*, pupils with disabilities will reach almost 338,000 in the school year 2022/2023 (ISTAT, 2024).

In interpreting these data critically, we can say that recently the clinical, educational and diagnostic attention has certainly increased but, within a systemic-ecological vision that we must always recall, we cannot help but read the exponential increase of certified *dysfunctional* functioning in our minors, together with the other forms of discomfort that we have previously highlighted, unrelated to the numerous emergencies of our time, among which the educational-parenting emergency that has characterised in particular the transition from the second to the third millennium stands out (Romeo, in press).

Referring back to a more detailed work on the subject (Romeo, 2022b), from the start of the 2020/2021 school year onwards, I observed in particular how adolescents preferred an *internal dialogue* over one with peers or adults, probably employing it as a *coping* strategy.

In other words, lacking consciously designed family-external narrative spaces and thus alternative significant adults to parents able to authentically listen to their personal stories in the making, it is as if students have over-exerted *the internal autobiographer* (Gopnik, 2010) in the difficult mental operations of simplifying complexity and making sense of it (Frankl, 2005).

In addition to this reaction played out on an evidently autobiographical-narrative level - in fact, several minors are defined as *alexithymic* (*a* = lack, *lexis* = word and *thymos* = emotion) because they do not find the appropriate words to recount their emotional mental states in the different phases of the pandemic -, it is possible to identify others that photograph a moment of peculiar vulnerability in which young and very young do not succeed in fully manifesting their *social & emotional skills* and, perhaps even less, *networking, campaigning & advocacy skills*.

The emotional-affective and social in-abilities identified by the author of this contribution, the result of interviews and direct observations supported by poorly structured and primarily autobiographical information gathering tools (Trinchero, 2004), are:

a) *Callous-Unemotional personality traits that are sufficiently stable over time*, i.e. behaviour denoting a certain emotional detachment from events, a superficial affectivity towards others and oneself, a lack of responsibility, for example, with regard to the division of household tasks during unforeseen events such as the pandemic, and finally a lack of empathy;

b) *generalised mistrust* by virtue of the anthropological reversal that has affected the dynamics of the construction of the trust relationship since the 20th century;

c) *compassionate and self-compassionate rather than empathic reactions*, i.e. an emotionally intense participation in the other's episodes of grief without, however, being able to place oneself, despite having the intention to do so, on a different affective plane (I do wear the symbolic clothes of the sufferer, but I am also capable of undressing them) from which to empathically solicit a resilient reaction. In other words, the adolescent students, especially when faced with the bereavement of loved ones, experienced moments of total emotional resonance, letting themselves go to often inconsolable tears, precisely because of a feeling of excessive recognition of the suffering of others;

(d) a *tendency to demythologise* themselves, i.e. to portray themselves as extremely vulnerable and unable to perceive themselves as resilient despite the severe ordeal they have been through in the last five years without any special educational tools, contrary to the *ego-strengthening* or *overestimating* tendency often observed in people's accounts (Gottschall, 2014);

(e) *excessive blaming of oneself*, which in some cases has become shame accompanied in addition by anxiety. Contrary to the *self-absolving tendency of the narrative* (*Ibid.*), whereby failures are almost always attributed to external causes, pre-adolescent and adolescent students often blame themselves - in a society that would instead like them to be invulnerable and not weepy - for not having been able to cope with and overcome the pandemic and other crises of the time completely, failing even to highlight the successes they have achieved in any case;

(f) *consolidation of narrative closures resulting in the development of an inner monologue*, thus not of an appropriate reflexivity experienced in the terms of a dialogue with oneself and in relation to the world (Archer, 2009), but a veritable sterile *hyper-reflexivity*, a rumination if you like, which forced many adolescents to imagine a suicidal scenario;

g) *blockage planning and generalised feelings of a closed future among the young and very young*, especially in the age of development where the drive for exploratory and socialising manoeuvres reaches its peak;

(h) instinctive behaviour, heated corporeity and a shift from group to pack logic

3. New frontiers of teaching and learning

In light of the multiple forms of vulnerability highlighted, which I have lately encapsulated within the paradigm of the 'zombification of the youthful soul' (Romeo, 2024a; 2025), i.e. within a theoretical *framework* that interprets the popular projectual mortification in the young and very young as the result of an inattentive adult world that tends to be incapable of satisfying their evolutionary *needs (unmet needs)*, it seems indispensable to identify a minimum constellation of interconnected constructs from which to derive an unprecedented posture of educational and didactic intervention at school.

For the writer, *emotional development*, *resilience* and *advocacy skills* represent some fundamental constructs to be looked at, both in terms of their meaning and their practicability, especially in schools, precisely in an attempt to remediate, totally or partially, those symptoms that still make thousands of students suffer and thus enable them to *re-exist* in the society of uncertainty (Bellantonio, 2017).

If we really want to understand teaching as an emancipatory practice, from those parts of oneself still alienated and at the same time from relational and pandemic trauma, we need to delve into the reasons why emotional development can legitimately be talked about even among the school benches, borrowing a reflection traditionally born and elaborated in the field of evolutionary psychology (Sroufe, 2000).

Referring here, too, to a more detailed study (Romeo, 2020), we can summarise what we are suggesting to teachers by stating that emotional development also concerns the awareness that one's own emotional experiences are first and foremost *an experience-dependent* one, i.e. that the emotions felt in particular by students can be in some way 'orchestrated' (as it was for each person at the beginning of his or her life in the relationship with the primary *caregiver* of reference, usually the mother) by alternative, but significant adults from an affective point of view, as teachers are.

Even if at the moment the tendency observed in the developmental age and among young people is to blame themselves extremely much for the discouragement felt and the negative-toned emotions experienced even five years or more after the start of the pandemic - those who have experience meeting with school students can easily realise how more difficult it is today to open up to a personal narrative in the face of life's problems - it is important to make the most fragile students understand that their inner world is the fruit of the relationships they have formed

in the various contexts of life and learning, and that it is therefore necessary to cultivate new ones capable of orienting it this time in a positive direction.

In other words, we should understand that every adult, especially if they have chosen to engage in a profession that concerns care, can and must become a *capacitating feature* of the learning context they are part of (Romeo, 2022a), i.e. be aware of the very important role in the direction and evolution affectivity that the face and their gaze represent for those who are listening to them (Barca, Liverano & Romeo, 2025).

It is therefore essential that institutions learn again to observe them, to listen to them, to dialogue with them, to look into their faces, aware of the importance of eye contact in terms of an innate and indispensable device for the formation and relationship between people (Militerini, 2019).

Resilience, while respecting the complexity and thus the possible interpretative keys of the construct, should also be seen as a competence taught and learnt in the relationship with adults who are responsive and close in an affective sense, rather than as an innate endowment or a biologically determined characteristic in the person.

The possibility of being able to count on a friendship network, to receive support in adversity, to participate in community life, to still legitimise one's own point of view on things can steer minors and young people, as Anna Freud put it, towards a more than adaptive functioning in the face of traumatic events (Freud & Burlingham, 1943).

At the time when the above-mentioned authors were writing, the construct did not yet appear as we know it today in their contributions, but it was already understood how the possibility of coping with and overcoming massive or relational trauma was strongly linked to a kind of *didactics of resilience*, whereby one becomes resilient if someone teaches one to be so.

Recalling for our reasoning on school some *resilience skills*, outlined in an exploratory questionnaire of the care functions that can be expressed in the family thanks to the professional contribution of the Social Service of Taranto and a *scoping review* regarding parenthood (Agrati, Beri & Romeo, 2025; Romeo, 2024b), we could say that for: to having a grip on events, adapting easily to complex situations, asking for external help when the situation is complex and difficult to resolve, expressing one's emotions, not trivialising them, naming them, enriching one's emotional vocabulary, governing them, seeing a problem as an opportunity rather than a catastrophe, fully trusting others, still being curious, optimistic,

creative, having a strong sense of *humour*, one certainly needs to be able to rely on *emotional leader* teachers especially in adversity.

Finally, there is an increasing need to make room in our schools, at all levels, for *networking, campaigning and advocacy* skills, assuming that, within a community of practice and reflective learning, the didactic and educational intervention calibrated on these areas is at the same time capacitating those *social & emotional skills* that are currently de-potentialised.

In other words, we cannot merely explain to students what an emotion is, or the difference between a feeling and a state of mind, perhaps by resorting to films or specific readings, but we must encourage the transition from the conceptual to the experiential level and thus - by adopting a contextualist approach that understands places above all for their symbolic value and encounters as a developmental opportunity (Marchetti, 2000) - to design educational and didactic interventions through which the most authentic meanings of their affectivity are grasped and constructed in a shared manner, and not just the didactic contents.

For example, we can have the students themselves organize a themed school assembly, a conference that explores their needs, an exhibition, or even a festival that puts back at the center, first of all in the school agendas, those life projects that currently need guidance.

The passivisation observed at present ultimately requires us to consider this unprecedented direction of research and intervention at the same time, so that a more useful educational and didactic posture is consolidated among teachers precisely by virtue of the long periods of encounter and collaboration, a clear privilege not only pedagogical according to the writer, with children, pre-adolescents and adolescents.

Conclusions

When the school succeeds in valuing the student's wholeness, focusing on his or her emotional-affective dimension, also bodily, and not exclusively on the cognitive and metacognitive one, especially nowadays when reflection has a hard time becoming action, one discovers the many possibilities of intervention that can revolve around the theme of *agentive competences*.

Giving oneself a voice, asserting one's interests, thinking critically and in a systemic-ecological way, analysing the family and community past to which one belongs, possessing dialectical skills and adequate knowledge with respect to a specific

topic, being able to create and strengthen social networks, to plan, interact with the institutions, to know how to relate to interlocutors and binding situations, and still to strategically plan an action, to communicate, to raise awareness, to evaluate performance, to resilience and restiveness in the places of origin, represent as a whole areas of development of specific competences and at the same time objectives to be centred on a new frontier of didactics and education at school, without which our country risks in the short term to lose that spirit of initiative and entrepreneurship that is nourished by the ideas and projects of the young and very young.

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