THE MELARETE PROJECT: THEORY AND PRACTICE OF A KINDERGARTEN AND PRIMARY SCHOOL PROGRAM FOR ETHICAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

The contribution aims to present the theory of ethical education that founds the MelArete project, an educative program designed for kindergarten and primary school students with the aim to engage them in reflection on good, care and virtues. A phenomenological analysis of human being makes evident that caring for and being cared by others is fundamental, and theoretical and empirical research highlight that care is a practice informed by ways of being which are definable as virtues. Socrates points out the importance of the care for the soul, that is not separated from the care for the others and the care for the common good. According to Aristotle, "living well" is one with "doing well"; and to do well means to act according to virtue. After a long period of oblivion, care has come back to the attention of philosophy thanks to Heidegger and Foucault, but it is thanks to female philosophers that care has been deeply analyzed. Recently, even pope Francis referred to the concept of care to reframe a "new humanism", that promotes a better society. According to Ricoeur, ethics is an issue that deals with the care for oneself, for others and for institutions. Starting from these theoretical premises, the MelArete project, which conceives ethical education as educating to virtues in the light of care, is designed. The educative pathways, designed both for kindergarten and primary school, will be described by presenting the activities as well as the findings of the qualitative research carried out in order to evaluate the educational effectiveness of the project.

Keywords: MelArete, ethical education, kindergarten, primary school, qualitative research.

1. Introduction

An educational research should contribute to the enhancement of the educative practice and contexts, and in order to fulfil this purpose it should take as its starting point the real educational problems (Dewey, 1929), faced by educators and teachers in their everyday educative experience. In a society characterized by an evident ethical crisis, which expresses itself with a widespread indifference for the others and for the environment, the difficulty to construct and maintain positive relationships, and a lack of attention and commitment for the common good, schools recognize the importance and highlight the necessity to develop methods and instruments to foster children's ethical flourishing. To address this need, the Center of Educational and Didactic Research (CRED) of the University of Verona (Italy) developed the MelArete project (Mortari & Ubbiali, 2017; Mortari, Ubbiali & Valbusa, 2017; Mortari, 2019), which is structured in: a) an educative program aimed at engaging kindergarten and primary school children in reflecting on ethical concepts and experience, and b) a qualitative study aimed at rigorously evaluating the effectiveness of the realized educative activities for the enhancement of participants' ethical thinking.

Designed in this way, MelArete can be defined as an educative, and not merely educational, research, because it introduces into school new hypothetically meaningful experiences, conceived to represent an opportunity for children's development, and studies what emerges from them in terms of learning outcomes. Precisely, it is a research for, and not merely with, children (Mortari, 2009), because it is designed to represent a good experience for the participants, by contributing to their ethical flourishing. Consequently, it is a transformative, and not merely an explorative, research, because it aims: to enhance the educative contexts where it is realized by improving relationships among children, who are encouraged to develop caring and virtuous postures, and to provide teachers with methods and instruments of ethical education whose effectiveness was rigorously studied. Consistently with the naturalistic epistemology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which prescribes to study phenomena in the contexts

where they appear, MelArete is realized in schools, which are the privileged contexts to study the educative phenomena.

This contribution presents the MelArete project by focusing on: the theory of ethical education on which it is rooted; the educative activities designed for kindergarten and primary schools; and the data collected in the first edition of the program at the end of the educative experience, when participants were required to share with the researchers their final impressions about the project. The qualitative analysis of these data does not only highlight how children evaluated the program, but also some of its educative outcomes.

2. Ethical education as education to care and virtues

The title of the project combines the Greek terms "melete", which means care, and "arete", which means virtue; indeed, the philosophy of care and the ethics of virtue are the main theoretical reference of the project.

A phenomenological analysis of the essence of the human being makes evident that we are relational beings, i.e. ontologically related to the others and dependent from them. However, the others can both nourish and wound our being, and this condition makes us vulnerable. Furthermore, we come to life and leave it regardless of our decision, without having any sovereignty on our becoming, and for this reason we feel fragile. Finally, we have not a pre-formed shape, but we are a bundle of existential possibilities. This is the paradox of our existence: experiencing that our being is "limited in its transience from moment to moment" (Stein, 2002, p. 58) and that we cannot exercise any control on its development, and at the same time discovering ourselves bonded to the responsibility of answering the call of shaping our being, and of making our existential possibilities flourish. Because of these qualities which ontologically define the human being, care is fundamental in life: care is essential to be cured when we are ill or wounded, but also to preserve ourselves in life, i.e. being nourished and protected, and to make our existential potentialities flourish (Mortari, 2022). The ancient Greek philosophy already emphasized the importance of care for life. Socrates recommends to care for the soul (*Apology,* 30b-36c), conceiving the care for oneself as not separated from the care for the others and the care for the common good (*First Alcibiades*, 134c-d). After a long period of oblivion, care has come back to the attention of philosophy thanks to Heidegger (1996) and Foucault (1988); but it is thanks to female philosophers that care has been deeply analyzed: Noddings (1984), Tronto (1993), Kittay (1999) argued the importance of care to understand human ontology and give form to a renewed policy. Recently, even pope Francis referred to the concept of care to reframe a "new humanism", that promotes a better society based on fraternity and social friendship (2020a), an ethical relationship with nature, "our common home" (2015), and a global compact for education (2020b). According to Ricoeur (1992), ethics is a tension, aiming at a good life lived with and for others in just institutions. This "aim" is better defined as "care" (Ricoeur, 1990), so that ethics becomes a discourse that deals with the care for oneself, for others and for institutions. This vision is very fruitful for pedagogy: education can be conceived as an act of care whose purpose is to cultivate in the others the passion for caring for the self, for the other and for the world. Theoretical (Mortari, 2022) and empirical research (Mortari & Saiani, 2014) highlight that care is a practice informed by ways of being which are definable as virtues, in particular responsibility, respect, generosity and courage. The idea that the realization of care implies to act virtuously suggests that to educate to care requires educating to virtues, and this leads to conceive ethical education as education to virtues in the perspective of care.

At this point, a question arises: is education to virtues possible and, if so, how? To answer this question we suggest returning to Socrates's and Aristotle's perspective. Starting from the evidence that it is not possible to find either teachers or students of virtue (Plato, *Meno*, 96c- d) and that "the wisest and best of our citizens are unable to transmit to others the virtues that they possess" (Plato, *Protagoras*, 319e), in *Meno* and *Protagoras* Socrates doubts that virtues can be taught. However, this conclusion can be discussed: indeed, virtues cannot be taught in the sense that they cannot be transmitted as a disciplinary content; it is not possible to make virtues object of instruction, but to learn to act according to virtues can represent one of the purposes of education, conceived as a practice of care for the other. In this way, in fact, the Socratic *paidea* can be defined, which is guided by the intention to care for the other's thinking, in order to make him learn to care for his soul (*Apology*, 29d-e), and to care for the soul requires to cultivate virtues (31b). In *Apology*, Socrates states that "it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day" (38 a), and this statement, interpreted in the light of his maieutic example, suggests that according to him to learn virtues requires to dialogue on them, in order to examine their essential meaning. While Socrates focuses on the importance of dialogically reasoning about virtues, Aristotle thinks that virtues can be learned by practicing them. According to him, the good towards which the human being aims is *eudaimonia*, and reaching this good is 'living well' that is one with 'doing well' (*The*

Eudemian Ethics, II, 1219b; *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 1095a); and to do well means to act according to virtue (*The Eudemian Ethics*, II, 1219a). The structure of the MelArete project combines the Socrates's and Aristotle's educational suggestions, by inviting children both to dialogically reason on virtues and reflect on the experience of them.

MelArete is in dialogue with the two main approaches of ethical education: *character education* and *moral reasoning*. Both these positions are interpreted in the light of care theory, so to give form to an educative program that considers virtue to be a key concept for education (Sichel, 1988; Howard et al., 2004) and that gives importance to the development of critical thinking (Kohlberg, 1981; Turiel, 2010), giving value to the necessity of creating a caring context (Noddings, 2002).

3. Educative activities

The first edition of MelArete focuses on the concepts of good and care, and on the specific virtues of courage, generosity, respect and justice, and it was implemented for the first time in the scholastic year 2016-2017 with the involvement of 106 8-10 y.o. children of four Italian primary schools and 116 4-5 y.o. children of six Italian kindergartens. The programs designed for kindergarten and primary school are structured on the same typologies of activities, but the modalities of their implementation differ according to the different age of the involved children. The first activity is a Socratic conversation on good and care: after the reading of a story, researchers ask children the following questions: "What comes to your mind when you hear the word 'good'?", and then "What comes to your mind when you hear the word 'care'?". These are eidetic questions that invite children to reflect together on the essential meaning of some fundamental ethical concepts. The next activity is aimed at introducing the word "virtue", and then at collecting children's definitions of courage, generosity, respect and justice at the beginning of the educative experience; answers are given in oral way by kindergarten's participants and in writing form by primary school's ones. These specific virtues are deepened during the central activities of the program: for each one of them, a story is presented, after which children are invited to reflect on the virtuous action carried out by the main character. In kindergarten, the stories are animated with puppets, while in primary school they are read by the researchers and presented to the children as an illustrated text. Furthermore, for each specific virtue, vignettes or games are proposed. Vignettes graphically represent an ethical dilemma or problematic situations on which children are required to reflect, in order to: choose the virtuous solution, argue their choice and discuss about it together. The situations represented in the vignettes proposed in kindergarten and primary school have different complexity and in the first case the protagonists are animals, while in the second one the protagonists are children. The games are of different type, including puzzles and memory games, and are proposed as starting point to foster children's reflection on a specific virtue. The last activity of the program requires children to define again what courage, generosity, respect and justice mean according to them; the heuristic reason for this activity is to allow researchers to compare the answers given by the involved children at the beginning and the end of the program, in order to explore the effectiveness of the project in fostering the development of ethical thinking. During the educative pathway, participants keep a "diary of virtues", where kindergarten children draw and primary school ones write virtuous actions carried out in first person or seen carried out by others. At the end of the program, children are invited to answer the following question: "What has remained in your heart and mind of what we have done together this year?". The primary school children answer in written form. Instead, the kindergarten children answer in oral way, and if the child needs a reinforcement, researchers reformulate the question in this way: "What is the most important thing that you have learned in the pathway that we have made together?". The collected data are important to evaluate the effectiveness of the program, because they allow researchers to collect feedback from the side of the children. These data are the object of the analysis process presented below.

4. Analysis method and findings

The children's answers collected at the end of the first edition of the program were 91 in kindergarten and 52 in primary school. The data were qualitatively analyzed, following a methodological crossbreeding (Mortari, 2007) between the phenomenological-eidetic method (Giorgi, 1985; Moustakas, 1994) and the grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Each answer was firstly codified through the attribution of a first level concept or label that synthetically expresses its essential meaning; then the concepts of first level that refer to a common learning dimension were grouped in concepts of second level or categories. The outcomes of the analysis process concerning data collected in kindergartens and in primary schools are the following coding systems, which include the emerged labels and categories. Every label was quantified, to put in evidence how many times it occurred in the analyzed data.

Table 1. Findings from the analysis of the kindergarten children's answers.

CONCEPTS OF FIRST LEVEL	n.	CONCEPTS OF SECOND LEVEL
The virtues object of the path	31	TO KNOW AND ACT VIRTUES
Other virtues	4	
The general concept of virtue	10	
To do good actions	6	
The importance (and the effort) of acting according to virtue	2	
Friendship and its value	5	THE VALUE OF GOOD RELATIONSHIPS
Love	3	
The boundaries	1	
To care	3	
The stories	44	THE ACTIVITIES OF THE PROJECT
The characters/puppets	14	
The vignettes	1	
The games	9	
The diary of virtues	3	
Side activities	9	
The figure of the researcher	2	
To draw and write	1	ABILITIES AND STYLE OF ACTION
To performance	2	
To do the puzzles	1	
Style of action: to work and get engaged	1	

Table 2. Findings from the analysis of the primary school children's answers.

CONCEPTS OF FIRST LEVEL		n.	CONCEPTS OF SECOND LEVEL
The virtues object of the project		15	THE VIRTUES
Specific virtues	Generosity	2	
	Justice	2	
	Respect	1	
The importance of virtues		3	
The done things		5	THE ACTIVITIES
The stories		12	
The characters of the stories		2	
The games		6	
The reflections		1	
The diary of virtues		1	
The group works		1	
Joy		1	THE EMOTIONS
Happiness		2	
Comfort		1	
Fun		1	
Emotions of the conclusive day		1	
To be in company		2	THE MOMENTS OF SHARING
The shared experiences		2	
The educative aim		3	THE POSTURE OF THE RESEARCHER
Kindness		2	
Patience		1	
The concept of virtue		6	LEARNINGS OF INTELLECTUAL KIND
The meaning of virtues		2	
The discovery of virtues		1	
To express the meaning of virtues		1	
How to act virtues		4	LEARNINGS OF EXPERIENTIAL KIND
To be virtuous		3	
Virtue are useful in life		2	
You must be virtuous		2	
To make the others learn virtues		1	

The analysis puts in evidence several aspects related to children's evaluation of the program and its educative effectiveness. In particular, a cross-reading of the two emerged coding systems highlights that the program allows children to learn virtues, at the intellectual and practical level, both in kindergarten and primary school. Indeed, children's answers refer to the effectiveness of the project in fostering both knowledge and the practice of virtues. Furthermore, both in kindergarten and in primary school, the typology of activity that seems to be most appreciated by children is the presentation of

stories. The experience of the first edition of the program, as well as the findings emerged from the final children's answers, have been taken into consideration in the designing of the second edition of the program, focused on the virtues of friendship and gratitude.

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