

## DIALOGUING ON FRIENDSHIP AS POLITICAL VIRTUE: AN EXPERIENCE OF CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

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### Abstract

Citizenship education is an urgency: contemporary sociologists and philosophers describe our society as characterized by indifference, lack of empathy, disengagement in the “common good”, violence and unresponsiveness for social rules. Citizenship is a concept referring to the relational and political dimension of human being that, in Western philosophy, is presented as a “political being”, for whom existing is co-existing, whose “singular-plural” life is strictly connected to the life of the community. The sense of citizenship emerges from the awareness of reciprocal dependency. According to Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*) every being tends to the good; for the human being this good is contemporary personal and political: and that is *eudaimonia*, the good quality of personal-communitarian life. *Eudaimonia* can be reached through the practice of care: for the self, for the other, for the common space. And care is a practice informed by virtues: specifically, care of the common space is characterized by friendship, that is considered by Aristotle as the political virtue par excellence. In conclusion, to live the experience of an engaged citizenship consists in experiencing care and political virtues, above all friendship. Friendship is one of the objects of the second edition of the MelArete project, a program of ethical education designed by CRED (Center of Educational and Didactic Research) of the University of Verona (Italy) to engage kindergarten, primary and middle school children in reflecting on those virtues which are central for the development of citizenship. In this contribution, we will present some texts written by the pupils and the Socratic conversations about friendship, developed during the implementation of the program, in which the children were invited to define this concept. These conversations were recorded, verbatim transcribed and qualitatively analyzed following a methodological crossbreeding between the Phenomenological-eidetic method and the Grounded Theory. Also the written texts were analyzed following the same method. Findings bring to light what friendship is according to the participants and how they experience it. The results are finally discussed in light of the importance of such proposal in promoting citizenship education.

**Keywords:** *Ethical education, citizenship, friendship, phenomenological research, primary school.*

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### 1. Contrasting civic disengagement: An educative challenge

The scientific literature shows that one of the main challenges of the XXIst Century education is the phenomenon called *civic disengagement* (Putnam, 2000; Norris, 2001; Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2013; Albacete, 2014; Kisby & Sloam, 2014; Pontes et al., 2019). Some sociologists and philosophers refer that this attitude is expressed in the form of indifference among the others, absence of empathy, non-disposability in involvement in prosocial actions such as voluntarism, up to real anti-social and violent behaviors (Bauman, 2000; Pulcini, 2009; De Monticelli, 2011; Boella, 2018). Some authors retrieve the origin of this crisis in the decline of the civic virtues in our contemporary society, and solicit the necessity and urgency to redefine them (Hirzalla & Zoonen, 2009; Scheufele & Shah, 2000).

Also teachers and educators who daily meet children in educational contexts, highlight the urgency of facing the challenge through promoting civic engagement (Mortari, 2019).

In international documents engaged citizenship is considered as one of the most important activities for the passage from childhood to adulthood (The World Bank, 2007; Brady et al., 2012).

The concept of civic engagement is not simply definable and this weakens its performative potentiality in educational and political actions (Berger, 2009). Lister (2007) recognizes as a characteristic of civic engagement an action where the youngsters are social stakeholders, able to contribute to society as active citizens. Camino and Zeldin (2002) define it as being able to influence choices in collective

action (p. 214). Zaff et al. (2010) underline that civic engagement includes the exercise of rights and responsibilities, feeling a sense of care for the common destiny of a society or a nation.

In the guidelines proposed by international agencies, the promotion of civic engagement within formal or informal educational contexts is clearly underlined. In the Agenda 2030 the promotion of a good quality education is considered both personal and social (UN, 2015, p. 14). The European Union proposes as a prior educative aim the active and collaborative participation of the youngsters in the community life (European Union, 2016; Gulubeva, 2018).

## **2. Educative research to promote citizenship education: The MelArete project**

The answer to the phenomenon of civic disengagement is the educative action (Lee et al., 2021). But educative work is always a risk and almost a sort of bet, since there is no possibility to be sure that its aim will be reached. That is why it is necessary to carry out a continuous reflection on the educative practice in the scientific form of research, i.e. the radical interrogation on an educative project, from its theoretical foundation to the value of its implementation in the participants' learning. In fact, pedagogy is a practical wisdom that can be carried out in a dialogue between the theoretical research and the empirical inquiry (Mortari, 2009; see Dewey, 1916; 1938). According to Mortari (2019) an empirical research in education can have two different purposes: an explorative one, aimed at understanding what happens in a specific phenomenal area, and an operative one, aimed at putting an educative hypothesis to the test of facts. In a radical adherence to a pragmatist approach (Dewey; Rorty), it is possible and appropriate to design a research which does not only aim to offer to the practitioners some operational suggestions, but is an educative process in itself, offering to participants (students) learning opportunities while participating. This last conception is called “*educative research*” or “*research for children*” (Mortari, 2019): a research that collects data while carrying out an educative project. The planning of an educative research consists in three phases: (a) to elaborate a theoretical proposal able to give a solid framework to educative activities; (b) to design a project in which every activity is planned in order to have both an educative and a heuristic aim; (c) to analyze the collected data in order to understand the learning outcomes in participants' experience and validate the quality of the educative proposal itself.

According to this conception of educative research, we designed a project called “MelArete – At school of friendship and gratitude” aimed at promoting citizenship education in children attending kindergarten, primary and middle school. The name of the project is composed by two different words of the Ancient Greek language: *melete*, that means care, and *arete*, that means virtue. The project represents the second edition of the MelArete project (Mortari, 2019; Mortari & Ubbiali, 2017; Mortari, Ubbiali & Valbusa, 2017): after inviting children in reflecting on the ethical concepts of good and care, the first edition focused on the virtues of courage, generosity, respect, and justice, while the second edition focuses on the virtues of friendship and gratitude.

From a theoretical point of view, in fact, it is possible to refer to the civic engagement as a disposition enlivened by virtues, in particular by friendship. In the classical tradition, in particular in Plato (*Politics*), Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*) and Cicero (*Laelius*), the civic virtue par excellence is friendship. In fact, it is friendship that preserves the free choice of living together among citizens, that free choice of living together and building a free city (the *polis*). This tension, that gives to friendship an ethical direction, makes it the caring relationship that looks for the common good. As every practice of care, also friendship is enlivened by virtues: gratuitousness, helpfulness, attention, delicacy, faithfulness, but also courage and frankness (Mortari, 2022). The theoretical research has laid the foundation for the design of an educative path where children were involved in Socratic conversations (Reich, 2013), discussions around ethical dilemmas, invention of stories and reflecting writing on their lived experience of friendship and its virtues. Every activity was designed with an educative and a heuristic aim, so that we were able to stimulate children's thinking on friendship and contemporaneously collect data.

Among the big quantity of collected data, we chose as object of this paper the Socratic conversations and some written texts, both on the theme of friendship, developed within the implementation of the program with primary school children.

## **3. Implementation of the educative path, data collection and analysis process**

The activities considered here are related to the implementation of the Melarete project during the 2021-2022 scholastic year in three fourth grade classes (number of pupils= 72) of a primary school located in northern Italy. The project program envisaged a total of 6 meetings in which a trained researcher met each class; the activities here of interest were carried out in the second meeting, structured as follows: the researcher presented the story “The jaguars at the school of the forest” which recounts friendship experiences between small jaguars; at the end of the reading the children were involved in a

conversation, starting with some questions such as “Did you like the story? Why? What do you think happens in this story?”. After leaving the room for a while in order to allow the free thoughts of the children, the researcher focused their attention on the theme of friendship by starting from the ideas that emerged from the children themselves and proposed them to give their own definition in writing. After writing, the researcher invited the children to share their definitions by reading them aloud. Starting from the definitions of the children, the whole class was then involved in a Socratic conversation on friendship.

The written texts were first of all anonymized, and then analyzed following a methodological crossbreeding between the Phenomenological-eidetic method and the Grounded Theory (Mortari, 2007; Mortari & Silva, 2018); Socratic conversations were recorded, verbatim transcribed and qualitatively analyzed following the same method, that includes: repeated reading of the data, identification of significant units, labeling and categorization according to a recursive process until the construction of a comprehensive coding system is reached. In particular, the analysis process takes place according to the following steps: each identified significant unit is translated into a descriptive label; the descriptive labels are then grouped into conceptual labels based on the principle of analogy, and a work of recursive analysis continues with further groupings and abstractions, still by analogy, until reaching at first the categories and finally the macro-categories. At the end of the process we arrive at the coding system which states a descriptive theory of the investigated phenomenon, that in this specific case is which definitions of friendship emerge from the children involved in the proposed activities of writing and Socratic conversations.

Since the development of both the coding systems is still in progress, here we present the results emerging from the data analysis carried out so far.

#### 4. Results and discussion

A total of 69 written definitions were collected. The qualitative process of data analysis achieved so far led to the development of the following four macro-categories: “Qualities of friendship”, “Help”, “Goodness” and “Conditions of friendship”. The categories related to “Qualities of friendship” were: respect, connection, feelings, kindness, trust/confidence and sharing. The categories related to “Help” were: to help those in difficulty, care, support/closeness. The categories related to “Goodness” were: to love, to feel good, to do the good. The categories related to “Conditions of friendship” were: do not exclude, do not treat badly. It is interesting to note that within the macro-category relating to the qualities of friendship, children have focused on fundamental values for citizenship education such as sharing, trust, and the virtue of respect. A wide space has been given to the meaning of friendship as help and support, sometimes assuming nuances that expand the concept of help as not only provided to a close friend but “to all”, “to those in need”, “to those in difficulty” (i.e. “Friendship means helping everyone!”; “For me friendship is: [...] helping people in difficulty.”; “For me friendship means that you always have to help people when they need and also be friends.”). In some cases, the virtues of care and gratuity have also been highlighted, as in the following definitions: “Friendship means [...] helping others and without expecting anything in return.”; “In my opinion, friendship is the care of a person [...]”. Even within the macro-categories of “Goodness” and “Conditions of friendship”, some definitions have emerged that go beyond friendship understood as a close relationship but extending it to the others in general, as in the following examples: “Doing good to a friend of yours and to a child you don't know.”; “Wait for others”; “Don't exclude anyone”.

The themes that emerged from the Socratic conversations in the three classes were numerous and varied. The engaged children initially mainly addressed the researcher and gradually involved themselves more and more in a comparison among them: a fruitful dialogue was developed which promoted listening skills, respect for the point of view of others, collaborative skills and critical and reflective skills. By now the analysis of the conversations is leading to the creation of a rather complex coding (still in progress) for the numerous nuances of meaning on the theme of friendship that emerged in the children's thoughts.

The macro-categories emerged so far are “Qualities of friendship” and “Conditions of friendship”, as the first two macro-categories related to the written texts; other macro-categories are under development. In reference to the qualities of friendship, some categories overlap with those relating to the written texts (in particular “respect”, “feelings”, “confiding”) while “the power of friendship” and “the different degrees of friendship” emerge as new categories. With reference to the macro-category “Conditions of friendship” the categories are still under development.

The categorization process is currently continuing and allows us to make the following considerations: the results related to the conversations deepened those deriving from the analysis of written definitions, in particular with respect to the virtues that inform friendship such as respect and mutual help. Children's thinking has been enriched through the development of aspects such as the different degrees of friendship (from closer to less close ties), openness (openness to different ideas,

friendship towards everyone), understanding the reasons of the other, and the difficulties of friendship (i.e. managing jealousy, conflicts, the fear of being teased if you are friends between males and females).

The exchange among children was particularly intense regarding the possibility or not of being friends with everyone: the children in fact confronted each other expressing different opinions. Some of them affirmed that, in order to be friends, it is necessary to have a thorough knowledge and common interests while others showed openness towards helping a companion even if he/she is not really "friend friend", or to play together and ask how he/she is even if they are not really friends. Below are some examples: "If a child is left alone even if he is not my friend, maybe I can always help him because he is always my classmate."; "Actually it's not that I've really become friends with him, but when we meet at the oratory maybe we can play. In fact, last time we played door to door. Sometimes... I tell him: «What's up? How are you?»."; "[...] You have to commit to playing together, to play, and then they become friends."

A particularly relevant aspect concerned the theme of bullying: some children reflected on the possibility of being friends with a bully, or at least with a child who does not behave well. Here too the opinions were conflicting, but it was interesting to observe how, thanks to the reciprocal exchange, some children began to engage in understanding the reasons behind such behaviors, showing a form of empathy. For example, someone assumed that these behaviors are due to the will of proving something (i.e. "In my opinion, since B. sometimes steals the ball from us, it's because, in my opinion, he wants to show the other boys that he's strong and he's good. [...] In fact I understood it a bit and so when we meet at the oratory we play together."), or to the fact of having experienced suffering (i.e. "Why do bullies have, have this behavior, because some have suffered. And so if you're pure in heart and you ask him to be his friend there's a small chance he'll say yes [...] you tell him what his problem is and he can be your friend.") or not being supported by the family (i.e. "Yes, also because they suffered, but also because they have a family that doesn't involve him, doesn't scold him and doesn't love him."). Finally it should be noted that some reflections concerned what makes friendship as such and the values to be pursued for it to come about: the fact that it is important not to exclude anyone but also to have appropriate behaviors in order not to be excluded, and the value of reciprocity and a common commitment.

## 5. Conclusions

The project has shown how it is possible to engage children in particularly fruitful activities in relation to the objectives of citizenship education. Children's definitions of friendship have revealed important potential in reflecting on friendship in ethical terms and for the purpose of the common good; the involvement in Socratic conversations has made it possible to further promote the reflexivity of the children who have come to think about openness to the different and question themselves about the reasons for the negative behavior of the other and how to remedy it. The sharing of definitions in class and the development of conversations has promoted at the same time relational and collaborative skills, becoming an experience of dialogue that respects the opinion of others and fosters to reflect together for a common goal. Overall, the results, while being still in progress, show how a rigorously founded educative project, which stimulates the ethical thinking of children through activities such as reflective writing and Socratic conversations starting from a very familiar experience for them such as that of friendship, can be fruitful and promising in promoting the values of citizenship education.

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