

AN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH TO RE-CONTEXTUALISE THE IDEA OF CARE IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

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Abstract

Care is an essential dimension of human life, but international educational policies in ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care), especially where a neoliberal culture dominates, pay little attention to this paradigm, relegating care to a position of subalternity or interpreting it as a prerequisite to education. If education has the primary intent of favouring the full and integral development of all the dimensions of the person in order to allow each existence to realise its being in the world to the fullest, it is necessary to bring to the centre of pedagogical attention the paradigm of care that is little or scarcely conceptualised, in order to understand how schools, and in particular pre-schools, can be configured as contexts of concrete expression of care. The qualitative research at hand is situated within the ecological paradigm and a naturalistic epistemology, and is based on the generative question "What does a school of care consist of?". Answers to the first analytical question "What is caring?" has been provided by a scoping review analyzing the scientific literature aimed at identifying the scope of the concept of caring: the scoping review included 14 peer-reviewed, English language studies published between 2014 and 2022. The second sub-question "What are the behavioural indicators of caring?" is being investigated starting from a mapping of the behavioural indicators of caring traced in the literature, subsequently put into dialogue with the empirical phase of the research in order to allow for the capture of those indicators capable of defining the specificities of a caring-oriented educational action in early childhood education services through a phenomenological approach. The third question articulation of the research question, "How does the involvement of teachers help to promote the creation of care-oriented educational contexts?" has led to the elaboration, from the perspective of participatory research, of a 3-5 year old curriculum capable of supporting teachers in the creation of educational contexts oriented towards care paradigms. In ECEC, there is a need to move away from dichotomous visions in favour of integrated approaches. In order to do this, it is necessary to reconceptualize the idea of care in education and policy through the ethical and political perspective of care. The relationship that emerged between theoretical and empirical dimensions has allowed to increase the pedagogical knowledge and to qualify teachers' professionalism promoting the development of "schools of care".

Keywords: *Care, education, preschool, participatory approach, teachers training.*

1. Introduction

Although care is an essential dimension of human life (Heidegger, 1976) because it is what allows life to flourish (Plato, 2000) and every existence to realise its being in the world, international educational policies in ECEC (Early Childhood Education and Care) do not place this paradigm at the centre, especially where a neo-liberal culture dominates. They frequently misunderstand the fact that human beings need both to be cared for from the moment they are born, and to care for themselves, others, the world, and nature, in order to respond to the needs of the reality (Lévinas, 1997; Mortari, 2019; Mortari, 2021).

If we agree that education, and early childhood education in particular, must be related to what is essential and necessary in life, then education "can only be education to care through care" (Mortari, 2019, p.16). Education is therefore to be understood as that relational process that promotes in the learner the desire to take care of oneself (Mortari, 2013). To this end, it becomes central to understand how schools, and specifically pre-schools, can be configured as places of concrete expression of care (Noddings 1984, 1992).

2. Design

Qualitative research design is based on the generative question "What does a school of caring consist of?". This initial stimulus is articulated in three subsequent questions: a) what is caring? b) what are the behavioural indicators of caring? c) "How does involving teachers help promote the creation of care-oriented educational contexts?"

3. Objectives

Starting from a perspective of participatory research, this study intends to promote and disseminate good practices within pre-school educational contexts by developing an educational curriculum capable of supporting teachers in the creation of educational contexts oriented towards the paradigms of care. The involvement of teachers in research experiences that promote reflection (Dewey, 1961) is intended to increase the teachers' professional skills (Mortari, 2009) and, consequently, improve the quality of educational action through a better understanding of the ways in which they act in their daily work. The research also intends to contribute to disseminating a research style that combines theoretical and empirical aspects, in the belief that this strategy is the best way to increase pedagogical knowledge while at the same time qualifying teachers' professionalism.

The findings will provide a useful contribution to interpreting the role of the teacher as an 'investigative teacher' (Dewey, 1984, p. 35) or, to put it another way, as a reflective researcher (Schön, 1993; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Such a teacher knows how to legitimise spaces for reflection and the construction of new knowledge *in itinere* during the unravelling of experience grounded in an idea of research characterised by a pragmatic vision and strongly rooted in practice.

Finally, the research aims to contribute to shifting the paradigms of care back at the centre of the pedagogical debate by reconceptualising the idea of care.

4. Methods

In keeping with the phenomenon being investigated (care) and the natural context within which the investigation takes place (the pre-school), the research is embedded within the framework of the ecological paradigm (Bateson, 1984; Mortari, 2007). Within the naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993), the complexity of educational phenomena suggests a qualitative approach. The research philosophy is phenomenologically oriented (Husserl, 2002), focussing on the experiences and attributions of meaning of the subjects involved in the investigation (Mortari, 2007).

4.1. What is caring? The ideas of caring that have emerged in the empirical studies and possible spillovers into ECEC contexts

Answers to the first analytical question "What is caring?" have been provided by a scoping review Arksey & O'Melley, 2005) analysing the scientific literature aimed at identifying the scope of the concept of caring: the scoping review included 14 peer-reviewed, English-language studies published between 2014 and 2022. Some conceptual issues that emerged from the analysis of the selected studies can be summarised as follows: caring is a practice that occurs in relationships within or outside the self, promoting the satisfaction of needs and creating conditions of well-being (Gilligan, 1982; Ruddick, 1993), care has an ethical core that is constituted by the ways of being with others (Mortari & Ubbiali, 2017) and is a relational process that considers the perspective of who is receiving care (Noddings, 2013). More specifically, educational care is characterised by having an asymmetrical nature, which entails the need to be aware that it can easily convey forms of power (Held, 2006). Care in education poses implications that inevitably concern the political dimension (Tronto, 1993) owing to the influence of structural and organisational factors in the very construction of care-oriented experiences (Langford & Richardson, 2020). Going deeper into the concept, the process of Educational Care can be structured in four stages: discerning a need, accepting responsibility, the practice of giving care, and receiving care (Tronto, 2013).

Care is a holistic and multifaceted process characterised by closeness, intimacy, a sense of trust and compassion (Cekaite & Bergnehr, 2018). Within the educational process, it is possible to grasp a relationship between the complexity of the educational proposal and the dimension of ethical care: proposals that are too simple and trivial, a limited level of children's participation, and the poverty of the predisposed contexts do not allow for the manifestation of more complex processes of ethical care (Langford & Richardson, 2020).

In line with studies that interpret caring as a practice that is not confined to meeting basic needs, but considers the development of potential, McCormick (2018) states that children construct caring experiences to reduce the discomfort or pain of others, support relationships, promote positive emotions, improve healthy and safe habits, and ensure the longevity and sustainability of shared resources. Caring is interpreted as a multifaceted construct, characterised by the presence of the following factors: connection, attention, responsiveness, competence and sensitivity (McCormick, 2018). The concept of care is connected to a sense of responsibility, attention to the other and the community: care understood as attention to Self, others and the environment (understood both as a physical and relational place and including non-human living things). Care should therefore be recognised as a reflexive practice, also to counter the widespread focus on the individual child and his or her skills (Hellman, 2016).

The concept of care, understood as a way to stimulate child development, needs to be extended to include the valorisation of differences, including gender differences. (Adriany & Warin, 2014). Some non-anthropocentric theories invite to re-conceptualise care as something that does not belong to the individual, but rather as something that lies in the dimension of encounter (*care-in-the-middle*), has a collective and impersonal nature, neither totally human nor non-human. This vision aspires to promote changes in education, focussing on outdoor education, within a holistic, inclusive and open framework, including through new materialistic approaches (Vladimirova, 2021).

The selected studies invite to re-conceptualise the relationship between education and care from a theoretical and practical point of view in order to act both on the level of professionalism of practitioners and on that of the overall quality in ECEC (Rentzou, 2019), highlighting the need to work towards a different vision of the identity and training of professionals in ECEC (Löfdahl & Folke-Fichtelius, 2015) operating a redefinition of the idea of care according to dimensions linked to the ethics of care (Archer, 2017). It becomes essential to counteract the process of non-visibility or intellectualisation of care so prevalent in a society centred on development and performance, by paying attention to the child here and now, and to his or her well-being, promoting the ability to care for each other (Löfgren, 2016).

4.2. The first empirical phase of the research: Behavioural indicators of care

The analysis of the literature has thus made it possible to answer the first question, "what is care?", and defining it as a practice (Tronto 1993; Held 2006) that is made visible through what Noddings calls "behavioural indicators of care" (Noddings, 1984, 1992), i.e. those ways of being that restore the intent to procure benefit on the part of the one who cares (Heidegger, 1976; Mortari, 2015).

The second question "What are the behavioural indicators of caring?" was investigated starting from a mapping of the behavioural indicators of caring found in the literature (Mortari, 2015, 2022), which was subsequently juxtaposed to the first empirical phase of the research to identify those indicators capable of defining the specificities of a caring-oriented educational action.

The participatory approach to the research involved 18 teachers belonging to three municipal preschools in Correggio (Reggio Emilia), for children aged three to five. The initial data collection tool concentrated on the written narratives of experiences of good and bad care related to their own personal and professional history by the research participants, because narration allows to approach the meaning of first-hand experience, which is particularly fertile in the educational sphere as it is conducive of the knowledge of that which is practical (Dewey, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Mortari 2007).

The analysis of the collected data followed the empirical phenomenological method (Mortari, 2023) and was oriented by certain principles and heuristic actions that also considered certain procedures belonging to grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The choice of method resides in a circumstantial vision, i.e. an evolutionary and emergent vision that conceives of the method itself as something that emerges during the research (Zambrano, 1986; Mortari, 2007) and values the possible intertwining of different methods. According to this perspective, only at the end of the research is it possible to give the method its final form (Mortari, 2009). The analysis of the narratives (60) revealed a coding system organised into 19 conceptual labels, six categories (giving attention; offering possibilities; participating; cultivating the relationship; caring for the self; recognising the other), grouped into two macro-categories (devoting oneself to the other and keeping the other in mind).

4.3. The second empirical phase: Teacher involvement

The third sub-articulation of the research question "How does the involvement of teachers help promote the creation of care-oriented educational contexts?" is being finalised through a participatory approach, aimed at collecting, on the basis of the care indicators identified in the first phase of the research, care practices designed and implemented by the teachers of the three schools involved in the research. The narratives recorded by the participants (Bruner, 1992) in reflexive diaries penned during the development of the experiences will be the subject of a phenomenological analysis, while the

observations made through video recordings regarding the experiences carried out will be discussed by the researcher together with the teachers through the tool of the "stimulated recall interview" (Meijer, Zanting, Verloop, 2002 cit. in Mortari, 2009). The fieldwork will continue with the collection, carried out through audio recording, and analysis of Socratic conversations between the researcher and the children, which will develop from a narrative stimulus (a fictional story) to explore the essence of the ethics of care, as care is oriented towards achieving good, or rather is animated by the desire for good (Murdoch, 2014). To conclude, thanks to the direct involvement of teachers, this last phase of the empirical research will identify forms of participation of the families serviced in the schools, through methods and tools that are currently being defined, in keeping with the evolutionary-emergential research design

5. Discussion

The studies selected highlight that an idea of education is predominant in the ECEC contexts most influenced by the neo-liberal culture, to the detriment of care. Education is understood as the process aimed at promoting the acquisition of competences and skills often strongly linked to the development of the learning content which is part of the curriculum of the subsequent school grades, and linked to an idea of performativity, often measured in terms of performance. Caring is relegated to a secondary status, marginalised or experienced as implicit in educational practices (Archer, 2017), hardly visible in the documentation produced by teachers (Löfgren, 2016; Löfdahl & Folke-Fichtelius, 2015). Care is not considered as a key component in the quality of the profession of teachers (Rentzou, 2019; Löfdahl & Folke-Fichtelius, 2015). There is a need to revisit their role and their professional identity (Rentzou 2019; Cekaite, & Bergnehr, 2018; Bussey, & Hill, 2017). By placing itself within this debate, the research aims to reposition the paradigms of care at the centre of pedagogical and educational issues, interpreting care as a "fundamental category of pedagogical discourse" (Mortari, 2013, p. 36).

6. Conclusions

If education has the task of promoting the full and integral development of all the dimensions of the person through the offer of a multiplicity of contexts of experience (Dewey, 1974), it is then necessary to imagine a philosophy of education that as an antithesis to the utilitarian or consumerist logics that often guide pedagogical and training decisions, takes care to make the potential of each subject involved in the educational process flourish from a cognitive, affective, bodily, spiritual, ethical, aesthetic, ecological and political point of view (Mortari & Ubbiali, 2021). It is therefore necessary to promote an education based on care that interprets educational practice by setting up learning contexts in which each person can find experiential situations to nourish every dimension of his or her being, through the active participation of all the subjects involved in the educational experience. Schools of care take shape through such processes.

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