

EMOTIONAL EDUCATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOL: THE 'JOURNAL OF EMOTIONAL LIFE' AND THE 'VEGETABLE GARDEN OF EMOTIONS'

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Abstract

Today in the fields of philosophy and psychology, many studies concerning emotions are relevant from a theoretical point of view. However, educational theory needs empirical studies that investigate how children can be educated to analyse and understand their emotional lives. With this premise, we developed an educative project to conduct qualitative research. The participants were children in four fourth classes of three primary schools in Verona, Italy.

The project design was intended to facilitate the children's reflections on their emotions, and the research was guided by the following question: 'What ways of affective self-understanding emerge from an educative experience that is structured on the basis of a cognitive conception of emotions?'

During the educative experience, which lasted four months, the children were required to write and analyse their emotions in a personal diary titled the 'journal of emotional life'. In their journals, the children had to write a narrative about an emotion they felt during the day and analyse it on the basis of a metaphor. The metaphor was the 'vegetable garden of emotions'.

The researchers analysed the collected data on the basis of a phenomenological and inductive approach.

The study's results allowed identification of some elements of the way the children develop their affective self-understanding.

Keywords: Emotional education, primary school, educative research.

1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the value of emotional education in addressing the problem of 'emotional illiteracy' (Goleman, 2006) [1], which can be described as people's incapability to or difficulty in recognizing, expressing and managing their emotional lives. Today in the fields of philosophy and psychology, many studies concerning emotions are relevant from a theoretical point of view. However, educational theory needs empirical studies that investigate how children can be educated to analyse and understand their emotional lives. With this premise, we developed an educative project to conduct qualitative research. The participants were children in four fourth classes of three primary schools in Verona, Italy. The project design was intended to facilitate the children's reflections on their emotions, and the research was guided by the following question: 'What ways of affective self-understanding emerge from an educative experience that is structured on the basis of a cognitive conception of emotions?'

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Before developing an educative project concerning emotions, it is necessary to address, from a theoretical point of view, the basic question of whether emotional education is possible. Our thesis is that emotional education is conceivable in light of the cognitive conception of emotions, according to which emotions imply cognitive contents, such as beliefs and evaluations.

Both in the philosophical and psychological fields, we can find authors that sustain the cognitive conception of emotions, rejecting the idea of an absolute separation between reason and emotion. Nussbaum (2001), who proposed a philosophical theory of emotions by recovering and developing an idea of the ancient Stoics, maintains that emotions 'involve judgments about important things, judgments in which, appraising an external object as salient for our own well-being, we acknowledge our own neediness and incompleteness before parts of the world that we do not fully control' (p. 19)

[2]. And, from his psychological perspective, Oatley (1992) states that 'emotions depend on evaluations of what has happened in relation to the person's goals and beliefs' (p. 19) [3].

If emotions have cognitive contents – as is maintained by the cognitive conception of emotions – then, the person who feels them can understand them. Starting from this premise, the educative experience developed in the study considered the following proposition: emotional illiteracy can be addressed beginning at the early levels of schooling by facilitating people's engagement in 'affective self-understanding' (Mortari, 2009a; 2015) [4] [5], where affective self-understanding is conceived as a practice of self-knowledge applied to the emotional life.

3 EPISTEMOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

The research has a qualitative framework based on the epistemological paradigm of 'naturalistic inquiry' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) [6], according to which the phenomenon under study should be explored in the context in which it appears. Specifically, our study was carried out at the school, a place where children spend a lot of their time and, consequently, where it is possible to explore children's experiences to gain faithful knowledge of them.

In designing our research, we embraced an 'emerging' and 'evolutive' conception of the heuristic process (Mortari, 2007, pp. 69 *et seq.*; 2009b, pp. 42 *et seq.*) [7] [8]; this means that the research method was not *a priori* determined, but rather progressively structured during the exploration of the context in which the research was realized.

Our research can be described as 'transformative research' (Mortari, 2007, p. 13; 2009c, p. 52 *et seq.*) [7] [9] because it aimed to improve the quality of the educative practice and the scholastic environment. In particular, our study can be framed in light of the 'research for children' approach (Mortari, 2009c) [9], according to which a study involving children should offer a positive and significant experience to the participants. Educative research for children is inspired by the ethics of care because its priority is to benefit the children involved (Mortari, 2009c, p. 54) [9]. Research of this type is configured as a space for participants' personal flourishing.

4 EDUCATIVE EXPERIENCE

During the educative experience, which lasted four months, the children were required to write and analyse their emotions in a personal diary titled the 'journal of emotional life' (Mortari, 2015) [5]. The children carried out the activity of writing and analysis daily on alternating weeks for a total of eight weeks during the four months of the educative experience.

In their journals, the children had to write a narrative about an emotion they felt during the day and analyse it on the basis of a metaphor. The metaphor was the 'vegetable garden of emotions', created by Luigina Mortari for this research. According to this metaphor, every emotion is associated with a vegetable plant. The underlying idea is that emotions, such as plants, can be 'cultivated' and that this 'emotional cultivation' promotes the flourishing of affective self-understanding. The use of the metaphor was aimed at facilitating the children's recognition of the *fact* that gave rise to the emotion, the *manifestations* of the emotion and the *thoughts* linked to it.

These elements of the emotional analysis were progressively introduced to the children over the course of the eight weeks dedicated to the diary activity. In the first week, the children were asked only to describe an emotion and draw a plant associated with it; in the second week, the children were asked also to describe the fact that gave rise to the emotion on the ground from which the drawn plant arose; in the third and fourth weeks, the children were asked also to describe the manifestations (i.e. externalizations) through which their emotions were expressed on the fruits produced by the drawn plant; finally, in the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth weeks, the children were asked also to write on the trunk of the drawn plant the thoughts that, like sap, alimented their emotions.

At the beginning of each new week dedicated to the compilation of the 'journal of emotional life', the children meet with the researcher. The activities proposed during these meetings were the reading of stories with emotionally significant thematic cores and an analysis of the emotions felt by the story protagonists, the 'game of goose of the emotions' with the children's invention of a story about an emotion, and a conversation about the differences between similar emotions. In the final meeting at the end of the experience, every child was required to define the emotions narrated in his/her diary. Finally, after having summarized together in class the different stages of the project, the children were required to answer individually what they had learned from the educative experience.

5 COLLECTED DATA AND METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The 45 diaries collected from the four participating classes and considered in the analysis included more than 1.400 exercises of affective self-understanding carried out by the children during the educative experience. Every diary was assigned a numerical code. The children's writings, including the descriptions and the analyses of emotions, were transcribed anonymously to respect the children's privacy.

We present below a very brief example of a diary exercise carried out by a child in the fifth week dedicated to the diary activity. All parts of the transcriptions are translated into English.

C.D.	NARRATION	EMOTION	PLANT	FACT	MANIFESTATIONS	THOUGHTS
16	I am happy because today I am going to make the football training.	Happiness	Tomatoes	Playing football with my friends at the training.	Smile	I think that it is beautiful to play football with my friends.

In the first column is the code that identifies the diary; in the second column is the narration written by the child; in the third column is the emotion that the researchers recognized as the object of the child's narration; in the fourth column is the name of the plant drawn by the child; and in the fifth, sixth and seventh columns are, respectively, the fact, the manifestation and the thought written by the child.

The researchers analysed the collected data on the basis of a phenomenological and inductive approach (Mortari, 2006; 2007) [10] [7]. The objective of the analysis was to explore what ways of affective self-understanding emerge from an educative experience that is structured on the basis of a cognitive conception of emotions. The analysis process was aimed at identifying, with respect to the different weeks dedicated to the diary activity, the presence of the following elements:

- The 'required element', i.e. the elements that were explicitly required for the children in a specific week;
- 'Unexpected elements', i.e. the elements that would be required for the children in the following weeks;

In the following table, for every week dedicated to the compilation of the diary, we highlight which elements were considered 'required' and 'unexpected'.

Week	Required elements	Unexpected elements
First week	Narration of the emotion Drawing of the plant associated with the emotion	Fact that gave rise to the emotion Manifestations through which the emotion was expressed Thoughts linked to the emotions
Second week	Narration of the emotion Drawing of the plant associated with the emotion Fact that gave rise to the emotion	Manifestations through which the emotion was expressed Thoughts linked to the emotions

Third and fourth weeks	Narration of the emotion Drawing of the plant associated with the emotion Fact that gave rise to the emotion Manifestations through which the emotion was expressed	Thoughts linked to the emotions
Fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth weeks	Narration of the emotion Drawing of the plant associated with the emotion Fact that gave rise to the emotion Manifestations through which the emotion was expressed Thoughts linked to the emotions	

The analysis method was structured to identify these elements in both the narration and in the analysis included in each affective self-understanding exercise carried out by the children.

As can be seen from the table above, in the fifth–eighth weeks there were no ‘unexpected elements’ because in these weeks all the elements implied by the metaphor of the ‘vegetable garden of emotions’ were explicitly required.

Some considerations can be highlighted from an additional analysis of some specific elements:

- Concerning the element of the narration, we observed whether or not the narration contained an emotion;
- Concerning the element of the fact, we observed whether it was a generic or precise fact;
- Concerning the element of the manifestations, we observed whether they were described or negated; this second phenomenon occurred when children explicitly wrote that their emotion had no manifestations.
- Concerning the element of the thoughts, we identified the typology of the cognitive acts.

In addition to the ‘required elements’ and ‘unexpected elements’, our analysis also aimed to identify the ‘emerging elements’, i.e. those elements that emerge in some diaries even if they were not required of the children. The ‘emerging elements’ that we found through our analysis were the following:

- The intensity of the experienced emotion;
- The desire or unwillingness that accompanied the emotion;
- An additional emotion that could be added to the principal emotion narrated in the diary.

The ‘emerging elements’ could be found in the narrations or in the analysis spaces dedicated to the ‘required elements’.

6 FINDINGS

The study’s results allowed identification of some elements of the way the children develop their affective self-understanding:

- The cognitive operations that in the course of the experience were required of the children for the analysis of their emotions; that is to say, the recognition of:
 - o The fact which gives rise to the emotion;

- The manifestations through which the emotion eventually expresses itself;
- The thoughts which are linked with the emotion;
- The recognition of the intensity of the experienced emotion;
- The recognition of the desire or unwillingness that can accompany the emotion;
- The recognition of an additional emotion.

Some consideration can be added about the facts, manifestations and thoughts elements:

- Almost always, the facts that gave rise to the emotion were precise, i.e. the emotion arose from a specific situation;
- There were many cases in which the children, in the space dedicated to manifestations, write 'no manifestations'; in this regard, it is important to note that this possibility was explicitly given to the children;
- The main categories of cognitive acts recognized within the thoughts were the following: evaluation, self-evaluation, prevision, supposition, question, doubt, intention, belief, hypothesis, and interpretation of others' emotions. Another category, 'no thoughts', emerged in those cases where the children expressed an absence of thoughts; however, unlike 'manifestations', for this category this possibility was not explicitly given to the children but emerged from them spontaneously.

Furthermore, the research shows that the act of narration and the process of analysis can be effective instruments for children's affective self-understanding. In particular, many cases show that the process of analysis—facilitated by the metaphor of the 'vegetable garden of emotions'—was more effective than the act of narration at recognizing manifestations and thoughts.

7 CONCLUSION

Consistent with the educative research approach, the project presented in this paper has both a heuristic and an educative value; indeed, it aims at collecting data about how children understand their own emotions (heuristic value), and it also attempts to involve children in experiences that foster their emotional awareness (educative value).

With regard to the research question, our findings lead us to consider the following cognitive operations as ways of affective self-understanding: the recognition of the fact that gives rise to the emotion, the recognition of the manifestations through which the emotion can express itself, the recognition of the thoughts connected to the emotion, the recognition of the intensity of the emotion, the recognition of a desire or unwillingness that can accompany the emotion, and the recognition of an additional emotion that can be added to the principal one.

In order to assist children in understanding their emotions, we propose two educative instruments: the 'journal of emotional life' and the metaphor of the 'vegetable garden of emotions'. The empirical research demonstrates that these instruments were effective in facilitating affective self-understanding in the children involved in our project.

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