

WHAT DO THE WORDS “GOOD” AND “CARE” MEAN FOR CHILDREN?: A RESEARCH QUESTION FROM AN EDUCATIVE ACTIVITY

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Abstract

In this paper, we present “MelArete”, an educative and research project aimed at educating children to virtue ethics and exploring children’s ethical thinking. In the last year (2016-2017), the project involved six fourth-grade classes of primary schools located in two cities in the North and in the Centre of Italy. The educative path implied twelve meetings between the researcher and the children: during each meeting, the children were involved in activities aimed at promoting ethical reflections. In this paper we focus on the activity organized during the first meeting, when we read a story used as a stimulus to activate a Socratic conversation with children about the concepts of “good” and “care”. The analysis of the collected data has been carried out following a qualitative methodological crossbreeding between phenomenological-eidetic method and the grounded theory. In this paper we present the coding system which represents the first outcome of the analysis process. The findings highlight the richness of children’s ethical thinking and allow to understand what the words “good” and “care” mean for them.

Keywords: Ethical education, virtue ethics, primary school, qualitative research.

1 INTRODUCTION

“MelaArete” is an educative and research project promoted by the Center of Educational and Didactic Research of the University of Verona (Italy). The project implies: the promotion of an educative experience and the realization of a research on it. The educative experience is aimed at fostering children’s reflection both on their ethical experience and on some ethical concepts; the research is aimed at exploring children’s ethical thinking and studying the effectiveness of the activities promoted by the project. In the last year (2016-2017), the project involved 106 nine- to ten-year-old children attending six fourth-grade classes of primary schools located in two cities in the North and in the Centre of Italy.

The theoretical background of the educative proposal is rooted in the ancient philosophy, especially in the Aristotelian thought, according to which virtues are learned by doing virtuous actions, and in the Socratic *paideia*, that encourages people to examine ethical concepts. The framework of the research is rooted in the naturalistic epistemology, according to which the objects of inquiry should be studied in the context in which they appear.

The educative path implied twelve meetings between the researcher and the involved classes: during each meeting, the children were involved in activities aimed at promoting ethical reflections. At the beginning of the educative path, the first activity was the reading of a story that focused children’s attention on the idea of acting with care in order to search for what is good. After the story has been read, the children were involved in a Socratic conversation and the researcher asked them some questions. Two of these questions were: “The word ‘good’ is a beautiful word. What comes to your mind when you hear this word?” and “The word ‘care’ is another beautiful word. What comes to your mind when you hear this word?”.

In this paper, we firstly describe the general structure of the “MelArete” project and then particularly focus on the first activity, by presenting the instrument of the Socratic conversation, the method we used to analyze the collected data and the findings that have emerged from our analysis about children’s concepts of good and care.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The word “MelArete” combines the greek terms *meléte* (which means care) and *areté* (which means virtue): indeed, the ethics of care and the ethics of virtue are the fundamental theoretical roots of the educative project.

The starting point is that the human being is not sufficient unto him/herself: he/she experiences the condition to be vulnerable and fragile, and for this reason he/she needs to be cared for. Since everyone needs to be cared for, everyone must care for others. Human is constitutively a relational being [1] and feels the need to be cared for as well as the necessity to care for others.¹ Life is made possible by the continuous exchange of acts of care. According to the ethics of care [2] [3] [4] [5] acting with care is moved by the intention to search for good; moreover, according with theoretical and empirical studies [6] [7] to care is oriented by virtuous attitudes. Starting from these premises, it is legitimate to suggest that an education to ethics in the light of care can be an education to virtues.

But, how is it possible to learn virtues? According to the Aristotelian perspective, virtues are learned by doing them. Indeed, in the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle [8] specifies, “We become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions” (Book II, 1103b, 1–2). Furthermore, it is also relevant to consider the Socratic *paideia*, according to which it is particularly important to reason on virtues because to know the essence of a thing is the condition to carry out the right action. Indeed, in the *Apology* [9] Socrates says, “It is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day” (38a).

The activities designed for “MelArete” project integrate both these perspectives as we encourage children to reflect on the meaning of ethical concepts and on their own virtuous actions.

3 EPISTEMOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

From an epistemological point of view, the main reference for our research is the “naturalistic inquiry” [10], according to which the phenomenon under study must be investigated in the context where it appears. Indeed, “MelArete” is carried out in schools, where children are used to be involved in different educative experiences.

Furthermore, our study can be described as an “experiential-transformative” research [11] [12], because it aims to improve educative practice and promote participants’ flourishing. We can also define our study as a “research *for* children” and not merely as a “research *with* children” [12] because it is guided by the purpose to offer significant and positive experiences to children.

Since this is an “educative research” [12], the activities we designed and the instruments we used had both an educative and heuristic aim: the educative aim was connected to the intention to encourage children’s ethical thinking, the heuristic one was connected to the intention to collect data about the qualification of children’s thoughts and the effectiveness of the activities we proposed to them.

4 THE ENTIRE EDUCATIVE PATH

The educative path was structured in twelve meetings between the researcher and the involved classes. The activities were designed to encourage children to reflect on the meaning of good, care and virtue and on four specific virtues, i.e. courage, generosity, respect and justice. The instruments we used are the following:

- Socratic conversations, which allow children to analyze ethical concepts within the class intersubjective context taking advantage from the richness of many perspectives;
- listening to narratives, which facilitate children to know the ways to interpret virtues;
- building narratives, which help children to construct an own view on virtues;
- vignettes, which serve as a stimulus to debate ethical dilemmas;
- games, which are useful to deepen children’s reflections on virtues;
- writing a “diary of virtues”, which allows children to learn to reflect on their own ways to practice virtues.

In the table below, we present the activities organized during each one of the twelve meetings of the educative path.

¹ Starting from the Heideggerian perspective [1], we use “to take care of” for the things of the world and “to care for” for the human beings.

Table 1. *The educative path.*

Meeting	Description of the activity
I meeting	The Story of Puc and Pec to stimulate a conversation about good and care
II meeting	First introductory activity: a game to introduce the concept of virtue and stimulate an initial reflection on the concepts of courage, generosity, respect and justice
III meeting	Second introductory activity: a story to stimulate an initial reflection on what virtues are and how they can be learned Introduction of the “diary of virtues”, which children will write at least once a week, narrating the virtuous actions they carry out or see carried out by others
IV meeting	A story about courage
V meeting	A game or vignettes about courage
VI meeting	A story about generosity
VII meeting	A game or vignettes about generosity
VIII meeting	A story about respect
IX meeting	A game or vignettes about respect
X meeting	A story about justice
XI meeting	A game or vignettes about justice
XII meeting	Conclusive activity: a story that stimulates final reflections on the following themes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the concepts of courage, generosity, respect and justice; - what virtues are; - how virtues can be learned.

In this paper, we focus on the first activity, which implies the reading of the Story of Puc and Pec and the Socratic conversation about good and care.

5 THE ACTIVITY ABOUT GOOD AND CARE

The researcher reads the Story of Puc and Pec, which frames the entire project because it focuses children’s attention on acting with care in order to search for what is good. In the story a little jaguar cares for another one who is sad by preparing and giving him a small bag with simple but important gifts, such as smiles and caresses.

After the end of the reading, the researcher asks children the following questions:

- Did you like the story?
- Why or why not?
- The word “good” is a beautiful word. What comes to your mind when you hear this word?
- The word “care” is another beautiful word. What comes to your mind when you hear this word?

The questions about good and care represented the starting point to activate a Socratic conversation in class, in order to stimulate the co-construction of thinking within a dialogical context. It is a particular type of conversation that starts from an eidetic question, i.e. a question about the essence of a phenomenon. The main reference for the realization of these conversations is represented by the Socratic maieutic method exemplified in the Platonic dialogues, where we find Socrates interrogating his interlocutors about the meaning of different things: for example in the *Charmides* [13], Socrates tells to his interlocutor, “Say what, in your opinion, temperance is” (159a); likewise, in the *Gorgias* [14] Socrates asks his interlocutor to precisely indicate the object of the rhetoric: “So come on, Gorgias. Consider yourself questioned by both these men and myself, and give us your answer. What is this thing that you claim is the greatest good for humankind, a thing you claim to be a producer of?” (452d). Analogously, in class it is possible to encourage children to examine their ideas about ethical concepts, also by helping them to reflect on their own experience. The research acts as a facilitator: he/she guides the conversation in a not directive way, helping children to examine their thoughts

deeper and deeper in order to better clarify them. During these conversations, children feel that their answers are not evaluated as right or wrong; on the contrary, the researcher is always grateful for their availability to take part at the dialogue.

The educative valence of the first activity of the educative path is linked to the fact that it introduces children to the fundamental concepts of good and care which frame the entire educative project. The heuristic valence of the activity is based on the fact that it allows us to collect data about children's idea of good and care at the beginning of the project.

6 COLLECTED DATA AND METHOD OF ANALYSIS

The conversations were audio-recorded and verbatim transcribed in an anonymous form. The analysis has been carried out following a qualitative methodological crossbreeding [11] between phenomenological-eidetic method [15] [16] and the grounded theory [17].

Combining different methods is scientifically legitimate by the concern of approaching the phenomenon under study in the more possible adequate way. When a researcher combines different methods, he/she must follow the principle of the "rigorous freedom" that implies the possibility to mix different methodological procedures (freedom) but, at the same time, prescribes the necessity to clearly explain the reasons at the basis of his/her decision (rigor). One could ask: why is it possible to use both the phenomenological-eidetic method and the grounded theory? We answer that this crossbreeding can be done because of the following reasons:

- they both give importance to search for the adherence to data in order to construct a faithful description or theory of the phenomenon;
- they both give importance to bracket or suspend preconceived assertions and theories in order to better understand the specificity of the phenomenon;
- they both give importance to avoid deductive reasoning, pointing out the necessity to construct knowledge through inductive reasoning.

The analysis process implies the following heuristic actions:

- to read any conversation repeated times;
- to identify significant units in the conversations;
- to develop a descriptive label for every significant unit;
- to draw up a conceptual category and, if necessary, also subcategories where it is possible to collect similar labels (i.e. labels referring to the same general concept of good and care).

In the table below, we present a selection of data analyzed through this method.

Table 2. *Some data about good.*

Thoughts about good	Descriptive label	Conceptual category
<i>"According to me, the word 'good' is not only love, a kiss, a caress, brotherhood, but it is also feeling good with our heart, with others".</i>	Good expresses itself through gestures of affection Good is to feel oneself well in the heart Good is to feel oneself well with the others	Good is to care about Good is to feel well Good is to feel well
<i>"For me, the word 'good' means staying with friends".</i>	Good is friendship	Good is to be friends
<i>"According to me, it means to feel good with others and share our friendship".</i>	Good is to feel oneself well with the others Good is to share friendship	Good is to feel well Good is to be friends
<i>"According to me, the word 'good' means having the heart open to others who are more in difficulty or to our friends who need a hand, and the word 'good' means many things".</i>	Good is to be available for the needs of the others	Good is to do good

<i>"For me, the word 'good' means also [that] when someone feels bad or needs help, you help him".</i>	Good is to help who needs it	Good is to do good
<i>"Also when we make them angry, the parents love us".</i>	Good is to love	Good is to care about
<i>"The word 'good' means when we all feel good and not only one feels good".</i>	Good is when all feel well	Good is to stay together
<i>"For me, the good means praying for others".</i>	Good is to pray	Good belongs to a religious context
<i>"For me, 'good' means being generous with others, loving someone or, if a person is in difficulty, you help her".</i>	Good is to be generous Good is to love Good is to help who needs it	Good is to be virtuous Good is to care about Good is to do good

Table 3. Some data about care.

Thoughts about care	Descriptive label	Conceptual category
<i>"Such as, when you are sad, someone makes you smile".</i>	Care is to make smile who is sad	Care is to comfort
<i>"When someone hurts himself, someone comes to console him".</i>	Care is to console someone	Care is to comfort
<i>"According to me, the word 'care' means also taking care of plants, do not tear off leaves, branches...".</i>	Care is to conserve nature	Care is to preserve
<i>"According to me, the word care means to protect both oneself and the others".</i>	Care is to protect oneself and the others	Care is to protect

Furthermore, through the analysis we also identify:

- the person who carries out the action and the beneficiary of good and care, and other subjects involved in the situation;
- the direction of the action: giving, receiving, reciprocity;
- the typology of the definition (for example, general or particular, abstract or including examples);
- the consequences of the action itself (for example, relational, emotional, contextual);

The analysis process implies also to note:

- suggestions, i.e. all the insights we consider useful to construct a theory of good and care starting from children's thoughts (for example, philosophical suggestions);
- formal reflections, i.e. reflections about the form of conversation, in order to monitor the co-construction of the process of thinking.

It is planned to carry out also a quantitative analysis aimed at identifying the categories and labels that are more present in our findings.

7 FINDINGS

The coding system we present below is the first outcome of the analysis process. We have other fields of research from which we collected other data which could make necessary a reformulation of the present coding. The findings we present concern the ways in which children conceptualize good and care.

Table 4. Findings about good.

Category	Labels
GOOD IS TO CARE ABOUT	Good expresses itself through gestures of affection
	Good is having a sweet heart with others
	Good is solicitude
	Good is to love
	Good expresses itself through gestures of care
GOOD IS TO DO GOOD	Good is to be available for the needs of the others
	Good is to help who needs it
	Good is to save who is in difficulty
	Good people make good and their goodness accompanies us forever, even when they die
GOOD IS TO DO SOMETHING PROPERLY	Good is a compliment for something well done
	In good company, things are made well
GOOD IS TO FEEL WELL	Good is to feel healthy
	Good is to feel oneself well in the heart
	Good is happiness
	Good is to feel oneself well with the others
	Good is feeling good both by oneself and with others
GOOD IS TO STAY TOGETHER	Good is staying with family
	Good is staying with friends
	Good is staying with people about who one cares
	Good is when all feel well
	Good are gestures and words of living together in harmony
	Good is to get along with others
	Good is to stay together without arguing
	Good is not to exclude anyone
	Good is to play together
	Good is the pleasure to stay with others
GOOD BELONGS TO A RELIGIOUS CONTEXT	Good is the action of God
	Good is the word of God
	Good is to pray
GOOD IS TO THANK	Good is to thank who created us
	Good is to thank who helps us
	Good is to thank who gave us a home
GOOD IS TO BE FRIENDS	Good is friendship
	There is good when friendship is among all
	Good is to share friendship
	Good is to be a true friend
	Good is to trust in friends
GOOD IS TO BE VIRTUOUS	Good is to welcome
	Good is to be kind
	Good is to respect each other
	Good is not to discriminate
	Good is to be generous
	Good is to share
	Good is to be altruistic

Table 5. Findings about care.

Category	Labels
CARE IS TO REMEDY	Care is to give medicines to one who is ill/to medicate who hurted him/herself
	Care is the healing work carried out by doctors
CARE IS TO RESCUE SOMEONE	Care is to accompany someone to the hospital
	Care is to help who is hill/who hurted him/herself
CARE IS TO COMFORT	Care is to give love to who is hill
	Care is to console someone
	Care is to make smile who is sad
	Care is to cheer up someone
CARE IS TO LET GROW UP	Care is to nourish
	Care is to cultivate plants
CARE IS TO EDUCATE	Care is to make possible to learn new things
	Care is to bring children to school
	Care is to explain things
CARE IS TO BEHAVE WELL	Care is not to treat people badly/to treat people well
	Care is to respect
	Care is not to discriminate
CARE IS TO PROTECT	Care is to save the species at risk
	Care is to save people affected by the earthquake
	Care is to save someone's life
	Care is to protect oneself and the others
CARE IS TO PRESERVE	Care is to preserve one's own things
	Care is not to damage gifts
	Care is to conserve nature
	To take care of the environment, also of the one where we do not live
	Care is not to pollute the see
	Care is not to dirty the city
CARE IS TO REPAIR	Care is to repair what is broken
	Care is to reconstruct a village in bad conditions
	Care is to clean the environment
	Care is to clean the city
CARE IS TO HAVE SOLICITUDE FOR THE OTHERS	To care for the grandfather who is in hospital
	Care is to make favors to the grandmother who cannot move
CARE IS RESPONSIBILITY	Care is not to leave children alone
	To take care of valuable things

Care is a relational practice, so it is particularly important to note who/what are its beneficiaries according to children. As it is possible to note in the last table, children know that an act of care can have different beneficiaries: people, animals, environment, city/village, things.

8 CONCLUSION

Our findings confirm the richness of children's ethical thinking that we had already found in a previous research concerning education to virtue ethics [18].

Data collected last year have demonstrated the capability of children to examine important ethical concepts such as good and care in a very deep and refined way. Starting from an eidetic question, children were able to highlight different meanings of the same word.

Furthermore, our findings show the effectiveness of the instruments we used – the reading of a story and the Socratic conversation – in fostering children’s reflection.

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