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Thinking silently in the woods: listening to children speaking about emotion

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ABSTRACT: The emotional side of the mind, which expresses itself through emotions, sentiments and moods, plays an important role in human existence because it conditions our own way of being in the world. On this premise, a qualitative research with children was undertaken in order to facilitate the expression of the emotions. The participants were children of four- to five-years-old attending a kindergarten school and six- to seven-year-old children attending a primary school. From the data it emerged that young children are capable of recognizing the emotions in other subjects, revealing themselves capable of empathy. The findings of the research support the notion that young children are competent thinkers and communicators about issues which require deep reflection.

RÉSUMÉ: Le côté émotionnel de l'esprit, qui s'exprime à travers les émotions, les sentiments et les humeurs, joue un rôle important dans l'existence humaine, car elle conditionne notre façon d'être dans le monde. Sur ce principe, une recherche qualitative avec des enfants a été entreprise afin de faciliter l'expression des émotions. Les participants étaient des enfants âgés de 4-5 ans d'une école maternelle et des enfants de 6-7 ans d'une école primaire. D'après les données, il est apparu que les jeunes enfants sont capables de reconnaître les émotions chez les autres sujets et de faire preuve d'empathie. Les résultats de la recherche appuient l'idée que les jeunes enfants sont des penseurs et des communicateurs compétents sur des questions qui exigent une réflexion profonde.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Die emotionale Seite des Geistes, die sich äußert durch Emotionen, Gefühle und Stimmungen, spielt eine wichtige Rolle in der menschlichen Existenz, weil sie unsere eigene Art des Seins in der Welt beeinflusst. Unter dieser Prämisse wurde eine qualitative Untersuchung mit Kindern durchgeführt, um Kinder dabei zu unterstützen, ihre Gefühle auszudrücken. Die Teilnehmer waren 4-5-jährige Kinder, die einen Kindergarten besuchen, und 6-7-jährige Kinder, die eine Grundschule besuchen. Aus den Daten ging hervor, dass junge Kinder in der Lage sind, die Gefühle anderer Menschen wahrzunehmen, woraus man ihre Fähigkeit zur Empathie erkennen kann. Die Ergebnisse der Forschung unterstützen die Vorstellung, dass junge Kinder kompetente Denker und Gesprächspartner über Fragen sind, die tiefes Nachdenken erfordern.

RESUMEN: El lado emocional de la mente, que se expresa a través de las emociones, sentimientos y estados de ánimo, juega un papel importante en la existencia humana, ya que las condiciones de nuestra propia manera de ser en el mundo. Desde esta perspectiva, con el fin de facilitar la expresión de las emociones en niños se realizó una investigación cualitativa. Los participantes fueron niños de 4-5 años de edad que asisten a una escuela de jardín de infantes

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y niños de 6-7 años de edad, asisten a una escuela primaria. Los datos sugieren que los niños pequeños reconocen las emociones en otras personas, mostrando su capacidad de empatía. Los resultados apoyan la idea de que los niños pequeños son pensadores y comunicadores competentes sobre cuestiones que requieren una profunda reflexión.

Keywords: emotional life; listening to children; qualitative inquiry

Introduction

Emotions are an essential part of the mind's life. However, the intellectualistic perspective, which dominates the Western culture (Nussbaum 2001), induces us to think that the mind's life is basically made by the thoughts we think, which are both conscious thoughts and tacit thoughts. However, by identifying the essence of the mind with its cognitive side we forget another important component of mental life, its emotional side. The emotional side of the mind, which expresses itself through emotions, sentiments and moods, plays a very important role in human existence, because it affects our own way of 'being' in the world. Emotional life, like geological upheavals, shapes the landscape of the mind's life and thus shapes our social life (Nussbaum 2001, 1). When dealing with the topic of emotional life, we must refer to Heidegger, as this German philosopher devoted particular attention to emotional life, maintaining its existential primacy. He states that the phenomenon of mood is a fundamentally existential, since '*Da-sein* is always already in a mood' (1996, 134). Even if the moods remain unnoticed, they are ontologically relevant, because the moods are what 'makes manifest how one is and is coming along' (135). Just because mood conditions life, people should develop a reflective apprehending of the inner emotional life (129).

Heuristic rationale

If emotions play a prominent role in life, education – which finds its reason for being in facilitating human flourishing – cannot avoid being concerned with the emotional side of life, in order to allow the educative subject to contribute to the promotion of his/her emotional well-being. Due to an intellectualistic approach, research has taken emotional life into scant consideration. This is also related to the fact that for a long time in the Western culture an irrational conception of emotion has prevailed, that is, the belief according to which emotions are non-reasoning movements, unthinking energies that simply push the person around. Emotions were conceived as gusts of wind, or the currents of the sea, moving the person in an irrational way; in other words, they are considered as causing behaviors but in an obtuse way, without an adequate vision of the object (Nussbaum 2001, 24–5). On the contrary, the cognitive theory of emotions (Oatley 1992) affirms that emotions are not irrational phenomena since they have an underlying cognitive component, even if – as many other aspects of the mental life – we are not always aware of them. It is only by starting from this cognitive view that one can make emotions the object of a research and involve children in reflecting about them.

Research requires time for the participants. Time is the matter of life. By assuming this ontological presupposition, the first principle of an ethical stance on research is to guarantee research has respect for the time the participants dedicate to the research by offering them experiences of research through which they can gain something significant for their life. From an educational standpoint, research is significant when children

can increase their skills through active participation. An important competence that a person should develop is to know the emotional side of the mind's life, both to attain a good relationship with one's emotional life, and to be capable of understanding the emotions of the others; thus involving children in a research experience on emotions is ethically legitimate.

Tackling the topic of emotions in research is not an easy task, because talking about emotional experiences requires a substantial cognitive effort. In the past, on the basis of the tenets of developmentalism (Woodhead and Faulkner 2008), children were seen as an incomplete version of the adult and so as pre-competent subjects, thus incapable of speaking about their experience (Farrell 2007, 6). More recently, much of the research about children grounds itself in the assumption that children are competent to speak for themselves about their experiences (Mackay 1991; Danby and Farrell 2004); children are viewed as active in their efforts to learn, to participate in constructing meanings on the experience and to develop skills to handle cultural problems (Rogoff 1990, 7). This kind of research is based on the assumption that children are capable of thinking and speaking about emotional experiences, even if the world of emotions can be an arduous subject for adults (Mortari 2006). Introducing the issue of emotional life in a research agenda with children is important because children need opportunities to give voice to their emotional life, not only in order to develop the capability of reflecting on their emotions, sentiments and moods, but also to keep a healthy interior life.

To speak of about our own emotional life attests the capacity of self-analysis, which is a relevant educative aim for a pedagogy which (in a Socratic perspective) assumes the educative primacy of the capability of knowing oneself and becoming aware of our own personal qualities (Mortari 2009a). If alexithymia, i.e. the incapacity of elaborating our emotions, is a borderline case, it seems however that a certain difficulty in symbolizing emotions is quite frequently found amongst people; consequently adults have the duty of helping children to acquire an emotional competence, which at a basic level consists in giving voice to our own emotional life. A good education, aimed at promoting the full flourishing of our own humanity, should cultivate the ability to experience emotional life in a conscious way. In order to facilitate educative actions aimed at promoting emotional competence, teachers need to undertake research to provide them with information about the children's manifested capacity to understand their emotional life and, to identify efficient strategies to enhance emotional reflectivity in children.

A sensitive way in which to investigate emotions with children is by listening to them. Not only is listening to children relevant in that it positions them as 'subjects of inquiry' (Christensen and James 2008, 1), but also because listening to children speaking about their emotions helps them conceptualize the importance of thinking and giving voice to their emotional life.

Aims of the study and research questions

Research is undertaken to investigate important issues, and since an important issue in children's life is their emotional life, this study encouraged the participants to give voice to, and reflect on, this aspect of their lived experience. The research question is the following: What children say when they are asked to express what they think about emotion? To enable children to speak about this topic could reveal their cognitive competence in conceptualizing the emotional experience which often is underestimated. To conceptualize the emotional life is an arduous task, but that linguistic work is cognitively relevant because in a hermeneutic perspective, 'words and language

are not just shells into which things are packed for spoken and written intercourse' (Heidegger 2000, 15) but through them we construct the experience.

From this perspective, it was important to view 'listening to children' as a fundamental methodology. Consequently a process of inquiry, whereby the participants had the opportunity to speak about their emotions in a conversational context, was developed. The researcher and the teacher assumed the position of facilitators in what was defined as the practice of *thinking and speaking together*.

According to a co-constructionist approach based on an interactionist perspective (Vygotsky 1978) the capability of thinking and giving voice to our own thoughts develops in a social context where the subjects share their thoughts with others, i.e. think together. Indeed, in peer conversation an intersubjective thinking develops, which allows the participants to explore new worlds of meanings and learn new cognitive strategies (Rogoff 1990, 172). But not all social contexts are educative; in order for the cognitive life of a child to flourish, the conversational context must be infused by an ethical principle: listening to the other in a receptive and non-judgmental way, respecting the thoughts of the others, helping others in shaping their thoughts. These ethical principles guided the inquiry process, not only with the intention to carry out ethical research, but also to construct a context of research with an educative value.

The participants

This research was made possible by the participation of five-year-old children from a kindergarten class and six- and seven-year-old children from five classes of a primary school located in the north-east of Italy. The project was presented to the teachers by explaining the educative and epistemological value of the research, to which they were invited to participate. Once the group of teachers who agreed to engage in the research was formed, a meeting was arranged and the research was explained in detail; the group and the researcher then planned, collaboratively, the heuristic activities to be carried out during school time.

Research in an educational setting, such as a primary school or kindergarten, is legitimate when it does not disturb the classroom's life and is not reduced to an isolated experience, but constitutes the beginning of other inquiry processes that enriches the classroom life. To this end, it is essential that the researcher shares in a collaborative way the epistemic work with the teachers.

Epistemological framework

Assuming that any pre-ordinate design of research cannot be suitable to the complex reality of the human experience, this research was developed according to the naturalistic paradigm (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Erlandson et al. 1993) which requires the researcher to adopt an emergent design; this implies to rethink the inquiry plan on the basis of a continuous critical analysis of the ongoing process. In accordance with the participative philosophy of research (Reason 1994), the revision of the plan was defined collaboratively with the participants.

The neo-conservative political agenda that was established at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in defining what constitutes acceptable research in schools, privileges a positivistic paradigm, which – opposed to the naturalistic one – assumes that only a predefined research design and a quantitative approach is the condition for a scientifically based knowledge (Hatch 2007, 8). On the contrary, the privileged way

to encounter the symbolic world of children is a qualitative and naturalistic approach. The teachers in this study showed an appreciation of this way of conceiving research, since they understood the epistemic power of the qualitative tools and the appropriateness of the naturalistic inquiry to the ordinary life of the classroom.

Speaking about emotions in the classroom can be arduous, since children tend to connect this heuristic activity to the other scholastic activities. This implies the possibility to feel somewhat uncomfortable, given that most scholastic experiences are subject to evaluation; for this reason the research was undertaken in an outdoor environment. Together with the teacher, the researcher planned to conduct the research activities in an urban wood located in the city suburbs, within easy reach of the school. Involving children in a delicate activity, such as talking about their emotions, outside the usual school environment, seemed to create a context that could facilitate the process of revealing one's thoughts.

The research experience

In order to familiarize the children with the researcher and the research topic, the researcher first encountered the children in their classroom before introducing the research topic. Since the children were used to relating with many adults who contribute, with the teacher, to the construction of the educative environment (Mayall 2008, 111) the familiarization phase did not take long. During the last encounter at the school, the research was presented to the children and the reason and the educative utility of the experience were explained. At that point, the research could begin.

With each class, three outdoor experiences were offered in the urban woods close to the school. The children, with the teacher and the researcher, arrived at the woods via a city bus. After walking for about 10 minutes they encountered a clearing, where the children were free to move and play. They were then invited to sit around in a circle on the grass. At that point the inquiry activity would take place.

In order to facilitate the children to approach the topic of emotions, some stories had been previously prepared where the characters were animals that lived intensive emotions, both positive and negative. Once all of the participants were settled in a circle, the researcher would tell a story and then ask the children to speak about the emotions lived by the protagonists. The children were invited to discuss the story in a group, in order to focus on its emotional content and elaborate its meaning. In research with children, the most important thing is that the epistemic techniques chosen to involve children in the research process are suitable to them (Christensen and James 2008, 3); the use of stories satisfies this principle, because children like narratives and tend – as it results in my research experiences with children – to develop a narrative plot when they are asked to speak about their experience.

For the primary school children, who were capable of writing down their thoughts, another activity was offered. After the conversation about the story, children could go back to play in the woods for a while, to relax their minds; then they were required to find a quiet spot in the wood, sit down on the grass and listen in silence to their own emotions, writing them down on a 'emotional sheet', i.e. a sheet – prepared by the researcher – that was used only to write down individual thoughts about emotion.

Within the developmental paradigm, it would not be legitimate to involve children in speaking about emotions, because this paradigm does not yet consider them competent to do this (Woodhead and Faulkner 2008, 15). On the contrary, children have many abilities and the task of the researcher, and in general of all the adults who enter into a

relationship with them, is to find the appropriate way to stimulate and cultivate their capabilities.

Children are generally comfortable and familiar with a conversation in a group and conversations in school are a congruent and appropriate inquiry approach to investigate the children's views. Involving children in this kind of activity is interesting both on an epistemological and on an educative level. The current study is based on the assumption that by inviting children to speak about the story it is possible to verify whether they are able to understand the emotions lived by the characters in the story, and from an educative standpoint, involving children in these discussions allows them to increase their ability to feel empathy for the experience of others. In addition, engaging children in writing about emotions allows them to improve their ability to give voice to the quality of their inner life and allows the researcher to gather data that materialize the reflective acts of children.

In order to generate rich conversations, where children feel they can freely express their thoughts, the researcher – who in the qualitative approach is the ‘primary data-gathering instrument’ (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 39) – should prepare the mind so that he/she can listen to the child in a receptive way, without being judgmental and without being affected by pre-understanding. To this aim, it is fruitful to practice a phenomenological technique of self-training that requires the researcher to do *epoché* (Husserl 1982), i.e. to bracket all predefined beliefs and theories in order to be capable of a respectful listening to the other (Mortari 2007a). Receptiveness reveals itself in an attentive and relaxed posture that makes it possible for children to feel important and worthy of regard. Being receptive helps to put the child at ease, and feeling at ease is a pre-condition for active participation (Mortari 2009b).

In order for the conversation to be heuristically effective, the researcher should be flexible enough to ‘go with the flow’ of the group’s discussion (Darbyshire, MacDougall, and Schiller 2005, 421), receiving the ideas that the children introduce in the conversation without losing the inquiry’s focus. The researcher must keep in touch at all times with the children’s thinking. To this end, he/she should modulate the flow of the conversation so as to ensure that each child feels that their thoughts are welcomed. This epistemic situatedness, which puts in use the naturalistic paradigm (Lincoln and Guba 1985) – positions a valid method that has sufficient adaptability to adjust to the different phenomena that will be encountered – requires experienced researchers, who are used to interacting with children and who are methodologically competent, so as to be flexible without losing the necessary epistemic rigor.

All of the conversations were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim, and the reflections on the ‘emotional sheets’ were copied onto a file with the permission of the children. In addition, the children were informed and they accepted that the data would be used in a research report, a copy of which has been sent to the teachers.

Analysis method

The method of analysis of the discursive material is qualitative, because qualitative methods are more sensitive to the multiple nuances of the human experience (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 40). On the basis of a phenomenological approach (Giorgi 1985; Moustakas 1994; Mortari 2007a, 2007b), the researcher designed an inductive process of analysis, which consisted of approaching the texts (the transcription of the conversations and the individual reflections on the emotional sheets) without preconceived theories, in order to construct one which is faithful to the quality of this

precise material. This phenomenological method implies repeated readings of the texts in order to:

- (1) identify the discursive acts through which the children speak about emotions;
- (2) label any acts (this phase implies a search for a descriptive label that synthesizes each kind of competence about emotions);
- (3) group the labels and find a category for each group in order to grasp all the possible discursive acts concerning emotions that were present in the raw data, and subsequently evaluate whether the given labels were faithful to the quality of the discursive acts, reading of the texts in close connection with the analysis of the evolving coding system was repeated many times.

To reduce the risk of analyzing the texts in an anticipated symbolic world, i.e. introducing one's own filters into the analysis process, the researcher involved a junior researcher, whose task was to analyze the texts without any previous collaboration with the lead researcher. They worked separately and only after the analysis was completed, compared the initial results with those elaborated by the junior researcher.

Findings

From the analysis of the data, the children seemed to show different kinds of competences about emotions evenly distributed amongst the different age groups. The different emotional competences inductively emerged were as follows: (1) to identify the emotions lived by others; (2) to give voice to our own emotions; (3) to individuate the epiphenomenality/bodily manifestation of emotions; and (4) to identify the situational antecedent.

To identify the emotions lived by others

From the analysis of the conversations focused on the stories, it emerged that young children are capable in identifying the emotions lived by the protagonists of the stories, revealing that they are capable of having empathy with the emotional experience of others.

LM: what did the bird Pingo feel when he saw his mummy fall?

All children: he felt bad.

LM: bad where?

All children: bad in his heart.

Erika (five): sadness, too.

LM: what did Pingo feel, instead, when his mum returned to the nest?

Ester (five): he felt good.

Alice (five): he was happy.

Alice: the kitten was sorry.

Ester (five): was desperate.

Giovanni (five): was unhappy.

Elisa (five): felt bad.

Ester (five): felt rejected.

Carlo (five): was. . .

Giulio (five): lonely.

Sebastiano (six): the kitten was sad.

Giada (six): felt sorrow.

Luca (six): was not happy.

To give voice our own emotions

Towards the end of the conversation children started talking about their emotional lived experience. The positive emotion most quoted by these young children was the joy of playing with their dads and the pleasure of being cuddled by their mums, while the negative emotion that affects them most was the fear of being left alone and abandoned. The five-year-old children demonstrated their capability to speak about their emotions:

Alice (5): I was at the supermarket when suddenly I lost sight of my mum, so I cried because I was scared.

LM: but then your fear went away?

Alice (5): yes, because my mum was behind me, and I just couldn't see her.

Claudio (5): when I play with my dad, I feel good.

LM: what does it mean to feel good?

Claudio (5): that I'm happy.

Marco (5): that I'm cheerful.

Ester (5): I was watching cartoons, I turned to ask for a sandwich and my mum wasn't there anymore. I looked for her everywhere...in the kitchen, in the bedroom, and in the end I found her in the garden...I got angry, because she hadn't told me.

Gabriele (6): when I'm home alone, then I'm sad.

Francesco (6): I feel sad when I have nothing to do and then I get bored.

In some cases, the researcher must be prepared to receive the concerns that are explicitly manifested by the children, and provide positive support:

Sebastiano (six): I am sad when a child makes fun of me, I feel pain when my mum scolds me, because I feel I will never grow up a man like the others.

LM: But you are a very good boy and that's why you should not think like this. When you have these thoughts, you must let them go away.

Sebastiano (six): It's easy for me to chase thoughts away, because I'm strong, I am an orange belt.

LM: you see, you can do many things.

Alessandro (seven): pain is when I feel inside something that bothers me.

LM: can you give me an example?

Alessandro (seven): when my parents tell me something, and I don't want to do that, because it's too difficult, and it bothers me that I can't do it.

LM: perhaps when you have a thought like this you should talk with mum and dad, who can surely help you do things and face challenges more serenely.

To individuate the bodily epiphenomenality/bodily manifestation of emotions

Some children try to identify the source of the emotion; some of them identify it in the heart, others in the brain:

Ester (five): he was confused and restless in his brain.

Ester (five): the kitten felt bad in his hear.

Sebastiano (six): he felt pain in his heart.

Lorenzo (six): he was worried and felt bad in his heart.

Vittoria (six): I think the little elephant feels hurt in his heart.

Sebastiano (six): emotions are in the depth of our heart. . .that's where they come from.

Chiara (six): I believe they are in our head, because you can remember them and think about them. . .the heart, instead, doesn't think much. It only thinks about beating.

To identify the situational antecedent

Among young children, only two girls give a spontaneous explanation to the rise of an emotion:

Alice (five): Pingo felt happy because he understood that his mother was well

Ester (five): the kittens felt bad because they had been left alone

Alice (five): the kittens were sad because they didn't see their mum come back

Marco (five): and they were scared.

Ester (five): because their mum wasn't there.

On the other hand, children from the primary school are able to identify spontaneously the situational antecedent of the emotion:

Laura (six): she is excited because she sees the kitten.

Aurora (six): she was happy because she was holding him.

LM: but how did the little elephant feel there, in the middle of the river's stream?

Anna (six): I think he was sad and worried.

Fabio (six): he felt lonely because he missed his mum.

Eleonora (six): he was worried. . .because he was afraid he would not be able to find his mum again.

Some children, by sharing their thinking with others, which was made possible by the conversational action, develop complex arguments, where different types of discursive acts can be traced:

Alessandro (six): I agree with Sebastiano, but I wanted to say that the little elephant was suffering [identifies the other's emotion] because he couldn't see his mum [identifies the situational antecedent]. Like all people, we also suffer when we are left without our mum [gives voice to his emotions].

One five-year-old child identified the consequence of an emotion on the behavior (fear generates confusion and the subject doesn't know what to do); moreover, he localizes the lived emotion (the state of confusion produced by fear) in a part of the body (the brain):

Ester (five): the kittens were scared [identifies the other's emotion]. . .they didn't know where to go [identifies the consequence on the agency] because his brain was a little bit confused [identifies the bodily expression of emotion].

A valid research must modify its original plan in order to adapt itself to the situation that emerges during the inquiry process. So, when the children in the course of

the discussion venture into fine conceptual distinctions, their thoughts were welcomed and a significant part of the conversations was dedicated to reasoning on these concepts:

Eleonora (six): pain hurts, while sadness makes you cry alone.

Alberto (six): sadness comes to you, but you can turn it away.

LM: how about pain?

Alberto (six): when pain comes, it doesn't want to go away. Pain hurts, while sadness only makes you cry.

Gabriele (six): sadness is when I cry because somebody tells me things that are not true, and pain comes when somebody hurts me.

Alessandro (seven): pain is when I feel inside something that bothers me.

Francesco (six): sadness makes you cry, but pain can also hurt you.

Sebastiano (six): joy is what you feel in your heart. Happiness instead is less powerful, it only puts a smile on your face.

Anna (six): when I play with other children I have fun and it makes me smile.

During the conversations, in every class, somebody came up with the word 'feeling'; so we started to think about the possible difference between emotion and feeling and the children, in some cases, proved themselves fine analysts of concepts:

Francesca (seven): feeling is something you feel with other people, while emotion is about the things that happen, like when you unwrap your birthday presents.

Riccardo (seven): emotions are something powerful...for example, when your belly is shaking out of emotion.

The thoughts of these children show the reflective intensity they are capable of. The findings, therefore, challenge the tendency to consider children not competent about issues that require deep reflection.

Thinking silently in the woods

To the teachers, the most significant finding was the appreciation shown by the children for the thinking activity on their interior life, silently in the wood, and then writing down their emotional flow. They spoke of 'joy', 'happiness', 'being calm'. Generally speaking, in class the children found it hard to concentrate and keep their mind focused on something as immaterial and elusive as the flow of their interior life. But in the woods, most children managed to remain silent and concentrate for a rather long time, and then write down some ideas.

Anna (six): I feel happy because I hear the birds singing and I can smell the earth.

Alberto (six): the air has the scent of autumn. I like living.

Francesco (six): the sound of silence surrounds me and makes me feel calm.

Flavia (six): I feel calm and serene, because I am in a fresh wood with beautiful colors.

It seems significant to conclude the presentation of the findings with this reflection:

Daniele (six): I felt so much joy because I am thinking.

A non-conclusion

The research ended with the gathering of data. Because of organizational problems it has not been possible to continue. If it were possible to continue this heuristic and educative experience it would be significant, both on an epistemological and on an educational level, to involve children in an activity aimed at improving their capability to analyze emotions and discriminate what are the 'positive sentiments' and the 'negative sentiments'.

When the negative and disruptive sentiments takes room in the mind, the disposition towards life risks a depressive stance which consume the vital energies. When the interior life is infused by positive and lively sentiments, on the other hand, the vital energies nourish an active and positive way towards the others and the world. Heidegger (1996) states that in order to cultivate positive sentiments, we don't need to strive against the negative emotions, but rather we should identify the positive sides of our emotional life and focus our attention on them. From an educative standpoint, the researcher considers this Heideggerian 'observative' approach, the first formative step to ask a person to grasp what life experiences are to be privileged in order to nourish the positive side of one's emotional life.

On this theoretical premise, it would be of significance to continue this kind of research by developing a participative approach where children invited to: (a) discriminate between positive and negative sentiments; and (b) identify what ways of being with the other people, what contexts of life, and what activities could be privileged in order to attain a good quality of emotional life. This participative strand of research could be carried out through both individual reflective activities (in regard to the six- to seven-year-old children) and inter-subjective discussion activities. More precisely, children can be first involved in an individual task that requires them to analyze the sentiments they feel in the different experiences they live, discriminating what are the negative and what are the positive ones. Subsequently, through discussion activities, they could be invited to identify what are the living contexts and the relational situations which tend to facilitate a good emotional life. Knowing what conditions facilitate a good emotional quality of life should make it possible to orient adult decisions towards the situations that generate a positive approach to life.

Note on contributor

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