

# AFFECTIVE SELF-UNDERSTANDING EMOTIONAL EDUCATION IN PRIMARY SCHOOL



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# Introduction

- The purpose of this study was to **investigate the value of emotional education** in addressing the problem of 'emotional illiteracy' (Goleman, 2006) , which can be described as people's incapability to or difficulty in recognizing, expressing and managing their emotional lives.
- 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 4 fourth classes** of three primary schools in Verona, Italy.
- The project design was intended **to facilitate the children's reflections on their emotions**.
- **Research question:** 'What **ways of affective self-understanding** emerge from an educative experience that is structured on the basis of a cognitive conception of emotions?'

# Theoretical background

Every theory about education is based on a specific **philosophy of life**.

According to us the reference philosophy is the **philosophy of care**, because care is fundamental in life and the work of life is the work of care (Noddings, 1984, 1992; Mayeroff, 1990; Held, 2006; Kittay, 1999; Tronto, 1993; Slote, 2013; Mortari, 2015a).

We start from the presupposition that the aim of education consists in improving the other to acquire the art of care and, in particular, **to care for him/herself** in order to make him/her able to care for the others and the world.

To care for ourselves implies **to care for our own emotional life**, because emotion are an important aspect of life.

# Theoretical background

The idea that the practice of care should be aimed to promote **personal flourishing**, i.e. the development of one's existential potentialities, is at the core of our theory of education, which considers **emotions an essential dimension to be taken care of**.

The emotional dimension of the human personality constitutes the **essential *quid of our being*** (Scheler, 1973). Indeed, emotions shape and simultaneously express a person's essential identity and individual uniqueness.

Nevertheless, while the emotional dimension constitutes **the core of life**, emotions are the most **fragile and vulnerable elements** (Zambrano, 1950).

# Theoretical background

- **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) .
- 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)

# Affective self-understanding

If emotions have cognitive contents – as is maintained by the **cognitive conception of emotions** – then, the person who feels them can understand them.



Emotional illiteracy can be addressed beginning at the early levels of schooling by **facilitating people's engagement in 'affective self-understanding'** (Mortari, 2009a; 2015b), where affective self-understanding is conceived as **a practice of self-knowledge applied to the emotional life.**

# Educative research

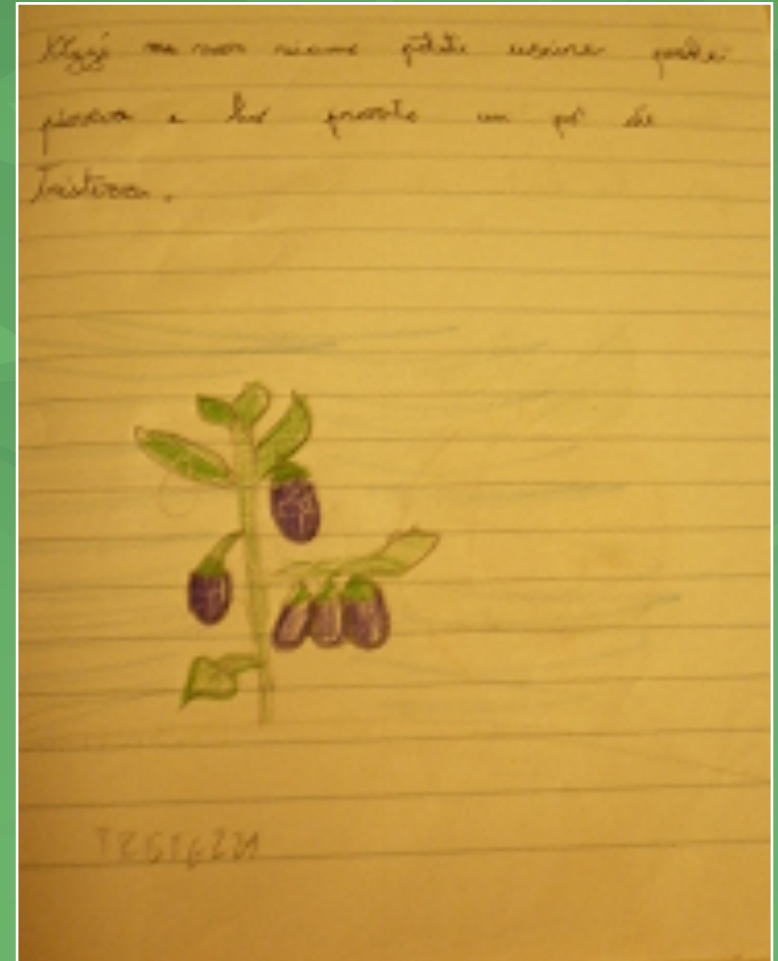
- In the field of human sciences, empirical research is either **exploratory** or **transformative** in nature (Mortari, 2007, 2009b)
  - **Explorative**: is aimed at understanding a phenomenon and increasing scientific knowledge
  - **Transformative**: is aimed at producing a positive change in the context in which the heuristic process is carried out
- An **educative research** is transformative and it implies:
  - The development of an **educative experience**
  - The design of a **research** to understand its outcomes and effectiveness
- Not only to collect valid data and increase scientific knowledge on an educative phenomenon but also to present **positive and significant possibilities of flourishing** to the study participants
  - All the **instruments** have an **educative purpose** (to promote children's personal flourishing) and a **heuristic purpose** (to collect data)
- The phenomenon under study should be investigated in the context where it appear (**Naturalistic epistemology**) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)
- Not merely described as research *with* children but, more precisely, a **research for children** (Mortari, 2009b)

# 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). 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**'.

- According to this metaphor, **every emotion is associated with a plant**.





# The diary of the emotional life

## The use of the metaphor: the «vegetable garden of emotions»

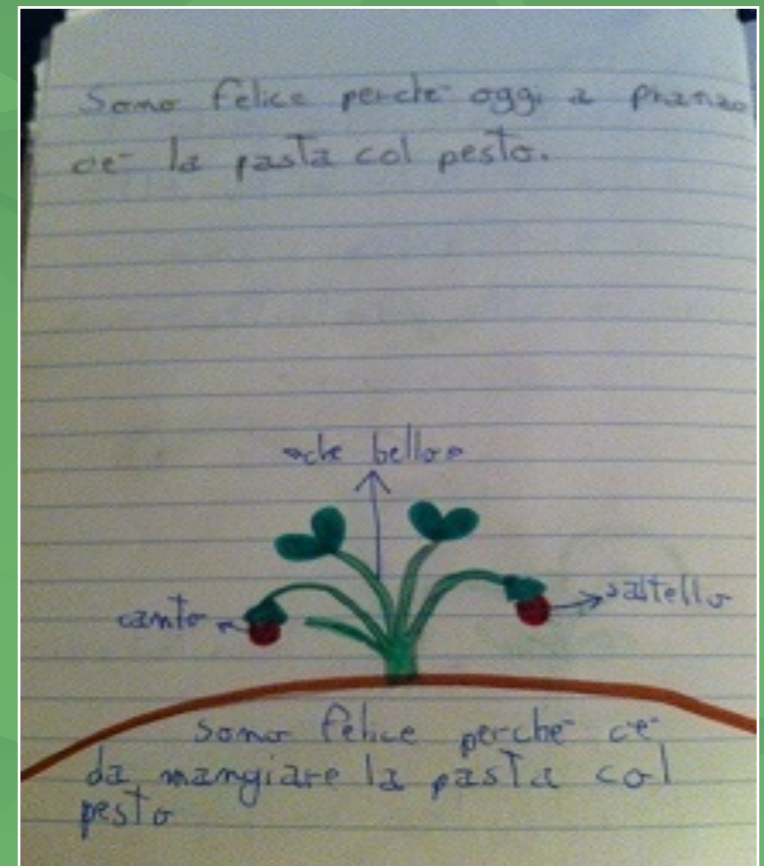
The use of the metaphor was aimed at facilitating the children's recognition of the **fact** that gave rise to the emotion, the **manifestations** of the emotion and the **thoughts** linked to it.



The **fact** is the 'ground' from which the emotion arises.

The **manifestations** are the 'fruits' produced by the emotion.

The **thoughts** are 'the sap that nourishes' the emotion.



# The diary of the emotional life

## The use of the metaphor: the «vegetable garden of emotions»

These elements of the emotional analysis were **progressively** introduced to the children over the course of the eight weeks dedicated to the diary activity

- **I week:** narration and drawing
- **II week:** narration, drawing and fact
- **III and IV week:** narration, drawing, fact and manifestations
- **V, VI, VII, VIII weeks:** narration, drawing, fact, manifestations and thoughts

## → The educative valence:

To facilitate children to **reflect** on their own emotional experience.

# The diary of the emotional life

## The heuristic valence

In the scholastic year 2014-2015:

- **45 diaries** included more than 1.400 exercises of affective self-understanding

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.

- **8-9-10** y.o. children
- **4** fourth grade **classes** of four primary schools
- in the **North of Italy**

To **understand** :

- What **ways of emotional self-understanding** emerge from the children's diaries

# The diary of the emotional life

## Method of analysis

### RESEARCH QUESTION

What ways of emotional self-understanding emerge from the realized educative experience?



- The method of analysis is **specifically invented** for this particular typology of data, following a **phenomenological approach** (Husserl, 2012; Giorgi, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Mortari, 2008):
  - The aim is to understand the *essence*, i.e. the fundamental characteristics, of the **reflective experience** in which the children were involved through the discovery of what ways of emotional self-understanding emerge from their diaries.
  - **Principle of faithfulness**: “Complete clearness is the measure of all truth, and that statements which give faithful expression to their data need to fear nothing from the finest arguments” (Husserl, 2012, p. 155);
  - **Practice of epochè**: to bracket any pre-knowledge, evaluation or expectation which could affect the heuristic process.

# The diary of the emotional life

## Method of analysis

### Heuristic procedures:

→ The analysis process was aimed at identifying, with respect to the different weeks dedicated to the diary activity, the presence of the following elements:

- **'Required elements'**, 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.

# The diary of the emotional life

## Method of analysis

Phase	Week	Required elements	Unexpected elements
I phase	I week	<p><b>Narration</b> of the emotion</p> <p><b>Drawing</b> of the plant associated with the emotion</p>	<p>Fact that gave rise to the emotion</p> <p>Manifestations through which the emotion was expressed</p> <p>Thoughts linked to the emotions</p>
II phase	II week	<p>Narration of the emotion</p> <p>Drawing of the plant associated with the emotion</p> <p><b>Fact</b> that gave rise to the emotion</p>	<p>Manifestations through which the emotion was expressed</p> <p>Thoughts linked to the emotions</p>
III phase	III and IV weeks	<p>Narration of the emotion</p> <p>Drawing of the plant associated with the emotion</p> <p>Fact that gave rise to the emotion</p> <p><b>Manifestations</b> through which the emotion was expressed</p>	<p>Thoughts linked to the emotions</p>
IV phase	V, VI, VII, and VIII weeks	<p>Narration of the emotion</p> <p>Drawing of the plant associated with the emotion</p> <p>Fact that gave rise to the emotion</p> <p>Manifestations through which the emotion was expressed</p> <p><b>Thoughts</b> linked to the emotions</p>	

# The diary of the emotional life

## Method of analysis

➤ 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 **intensity** of the experienced emotion;
- the **desire** or **unwillingness** that can accompany the emotion;
- an **additional emotion**

# The diary of the emotional life

## Method of analysis

What ways of emotional self-understanding emerge from the realized

I phase	narration	drawing	fact	manifestations	thoughts	intensity	desire	unwillingness	add. em.
II phase	narration	drawing	fact	manifestations	thoughts	Intensity	desire	unwillingness	add. em.
III phase	narration	drawing	fact	manifestations	thoughts	Intensity	desire	unwillingness	add. em.
IV phase	narration	drawing	fact	manifestations	thoughts	intensity	desire	unwillingness	add. em.

- Phases
- Required elements
- Unexpected elements
- Emerging elements



## AN EXAMPLE FROM THE THIRD WEEK

CD	NARRATIVE	EMOTION	PLANT OF	FACT	MANIFESTATION	REQUIRED ELEMENTS					UNEXPECTED ELEMENTS	EMERGING ELEMENTS				
						N		D	F	M		T	I	DE	UNW	E2
						NwithE	NwithoutE			dM	nM					
33	I felt <b>lot of</b> happiness because today we have seen a documentary about animals; it was very interesting, funny and sometimes unhappy.  I LIKE ANIMALS EXCEPT THE SPIDER.	HAPPINESS	Cherries	TODAY WE HAVE SEEN THE DOCUMENTARY ABOUT ANIMALS.	NO MANIFESTATIONS	X		X	X-PRE		X	X-EVAL	X-EVAL			

### REQUIRED ELEMENTS:

N=narration

NwithE = narration with emotion

NwithoutE = narration without emotion

D=drawing

F=fact

[PRE= a precise (or particular) fact]

M=manifestations

dM=described manifestations

nM=no manifestations

### UNEXPECTED ELEMENTS:

T=thoughts

[EVAL=evaluation]

### EMERGING ELEMENTS:

I=intensity

DE=desire

UNW=unwillingness

E2=a further emotion

# 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:

- 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**.

**'EMERGING ELEMENTS'**

# Findings

- 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;

# Findings

- 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.

# Findings

- 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.**

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The background is a solid green color with a subtle, repeating pattern of stylized leaves and stems in a slightly darker shade of green. The leaves are scattered across the frame, creating a natural, organic feel.

**Thank you for your  
attention!**