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**Ethical illiteracy: reflecting on values
starting from pre-school to counter it**

**Analfabetismo etico: riflettere sui valori a partire
dalla scuola dell'infanzia per contrastarlo**

di

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Abstract:

This contribution describes the phenomenon of *ethical illiteracy*, a still poorly explored construct, concerning the inability to reflect ethically. The purpose of this paper is to give a definition, explore its origin and characteristics. The phenomenon becomes apparent from the data interpretation, in this first phase of the ongoing doctoral research *Reflecting together. A socio-ethical education programme for preschool*. It is one of the *categories* of this research. The article also aims to elucidate the research's methodological choices, which are also ethically oriented (Bianchi, 2019). After analysing the interconnections among Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014), the relevant epistemology (socio-constructivism and complexity theories), and the research focus (the relationship between education and ethics), we will then delve into the characteristics of ethical illiteracy and its correlation with ethically conscious education.

Keywords: Ethical Illiteracy, Socio-Ethical Education, Constructivist Grounded Theory, Reflective Thinking, Reflection on Values.

Abstract:

Il contributo concentra la propria attenzione sul fenomeno dell'analfabetismo etico, costruito ancora poco indagato, di cui si intende avanzare una definizione, esplorandone le proprietà. L'analfabetismo etico è emerso nell'ambito dell'interpretazione dei dati della ricerca dottorale dal titolo provvisorio *Riflettere insieme: un curriculum di educazione etico-sociale per la scuola dell'infanzia* e costituisce una delle *categorie emergenti* di questa ricerca, attualmente in corso. Si darà conto di questo progetto approfondendone il disegno e le scelte metodologiche, anch'esse eticamente orientate. Verranno infine descritte le motivazioni che hanno condotto alla decisione della *Constructivist Grounded Theory* (Charmaz, 2014), considerata la più coerente via metodologica per una ricerca che si occupa di educazione ed etica (Bianchi, 2019).

Parole chiave: Analfabetismo etico, Educazione etico-sociale, Constructivist Grounded Theory, Pensiero riflessivo, Riflessione sui valori.

1. Introduction

The present essay proposes an analysis of a phenomenon still relatively underexplored, or only with partial approaches (Franck, & Osbeck, 2017): *ethical illiteracy*, particularly concerning education's responsibilities towards it¹. With the aim of describe its characteristics, the context in which it has emerged will be initially presented, namely the data interpretation phase of the doctoral research provisionally titled² *Reflecting Together: A Socio-Ethical Education Curriculum for Preschool*. The decisive rediscovery of the ethical perspective in education serves as the starting point for this research, particularly concerning prompts regarding the ethical task of education in the process of fostering awareness of being individuals within a community and as part of a species embedded in a natural context (Morin, 1999). Furthermore, a significant role among this research is played by the intention to place virtues at the centre of contemporary education, identifying certain universal values that everyone has the right to experience (Gardner, 2011). Concurrently, recent analyses of ethical education targeted at adolescent and preadolescent of fundamental importance, as well as the proposal of a transversal, systematic, and intentional ethical-social education curriculum that transcends the morality/ethics antinomy in favour of a synthesis between the social character of ethicality and the individual nature of morality (Baldacci, 2020). Baldacci's (2020) proposed *socio-ethical education curriculum*, which validity is intended to be explored starting from early childhood education, steers individuals away from dogmatic and mechanical adherence to ideals or opinions imposed on them by others, leading them instead towards an attitude of critical and conscious analysis in a dimension of tension towards the universal, starting from individual moralities, through *democratic comparison*. In particular, the research has investigated the importance of reflection along ethical lines with children aged between three and six years, also as an action to prevent ethical illiteracy. Useful in this regard have been the research-training experiences already conducted in the context of early childhood education, which have highlighted how encountering virtues and reasoning about them is

¹ Says a privileged witness: "In my opinion, ethical illiteracy means being incapable of reasoning on ethical issues; of really knowing and listening to the other person" (L.G., 19/12/23)

² The title will be replaced at the end of the overall work, when the emerging theory is achieved: indeed, it will be the theory that will give the research its name, in keeping with CGT tradition.

fruitful even starting from the age of three (Mortari, 2019). It is following these premises and objectives that the choice was made to proceed with research ethically oriented also at a methodological level, opting for the *Constructivist Grounded Theory* (CGT) (Charmaz, 2014). Following the presentation of the research design, an in-depth exploration of the methodology, which has characterized the entire research process, will then be proposed, before finally dedicating attention to the analysis of the *ethical illiteracy* construct.

2. Research design: ethical education starting from Early Childhood Education

The area of investigation identified in this research is *socio-ethical education* (Baldacci, 2020) aimed at early childhood. The key objectives guiding it are a) to delve into the epistemological references of this broad research subject; b) to investigate the *ethical attitude* of teacher (Iori, 2023a), the relationship between school and family in this area, and c) to examine the debate on life skills from an ethical perspective. To achieve these objectives, we intend to construct a theory, grounded in data (Glaser, & Strauss, 1967), co-constructing meanings, engaging in dialogue, and intertwining the positions of privileged witnesses (teachers, pedagogists, university professors) involved, through *intensive interviews* (Charmaz, 2014; Bianchi, 2019) and scientific literature.

The starting point was the concerning *lack of ethics* at multiple levels and from different perspectives, highlighted by some of the greatest contemporary intellectuals. On one hand, this fragility is identified as a characteristic of consumerist society, associated with increasing individualism and the weakening of social ties (Bauman, 2008), to the extent of being defined as one of the *malaises of Western society* (De Monticelli, 2010). On the other hand, education is entrusted with promoting the *ethics of humans*, namely pursuing clear ethical purposes to achieve the fulfilment of a *planetary community* (Morin, 1999) and pointing to truth, beauty, and goodness as three indispensable value horizons (Gardner, 2011), without forgetting the role played by emotions in the realm of moral discernment (Greenspan, 1995; Nussbaum, 2001). All this implies a strong finalism of educational action (Colicchi, 2021), which can represent an important risk for pedagogy to lose its autonomy and scientific intentionality, delegating to other sciences the task of establishing what should be pursued (Colicchi, 2022).

Three positions can be identified in the international debate on moral education: character education; morality education based on reasoning; and ethics of care. The multifaceted landscape of character education is characterized by the belief that the specific contents of educational practice can be identified and that it is the primary task of education to promote a sense of citizenship, value responsibility, respect for others, and pro-social behaviours, thus educating the character of everyone (Lickona, 2004; Berkowitz, 2011). This extremely finalistic position is contrasted by Lawrence Kohlberg's rationalistic approach, which identifies the competence of moral judgment as the key objective of his educational design. The foundation of this framework is Kohlberg's theory of moral development, which unfolds through six stages, starting from heteronomous morality, passing through individualistic morality, and ultimately reaching universal ethical principles (Kohlberg, 1981). The American psychologist disagrees with what he considers ethical indoctrination (implicitly referring to character education), identifying moral reasoning practice as its opposite (Kohlberg, 1981; Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). Finally, the third orientation is represented by the ideas of authors such as Carol Gilligan and Nel Noddings, who value the collective dimension of education, as it introduces the individual into a community characterized by social cohesion, interdependence, and fragility (Gilligan, 1982, 1995). This perspective focuses on the ethics of care, which emphasizes the

affective and relational dimension (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2002). Gilligan, within a theory of moral development, proposes to include a conception of morality and moral maturity more focused on care, which she considers more distinctly feminine and inadequately considered by Kohlberg. The American psychologist thus identifies two distinct moral perspectives: ethics of justice and ethics of care and argues that moral maturity consists of integrating both (Gilligan, 1982). Noddings places care at the foundation of ethical life, overturning the centrality of moral reasoning, universal principles, and moral judgment. The American philosopher identifies, more radically than Gilligan, the relational context and contingent situation as two fundamental elements of morality, thus opposing a universal moral approach (Noddings, 2002).

In addition to these positions, two recent research projects stand out: the National Interest Research Project (PRIN) coordinated by the University of Urbino and the MelArete project carried out by the team of the University of Verona. The latter has explored proposals for reasoning about virtues with children aged three to ten, investigating ethical understanding in this age group and moral maturation, proposing an education in the ethics of virtues starting from early childhood through specific action research projects (Mortari, & Mazzoni, 2014; Mortari, 2019). The research group at the University of Urbino has proposed the establishment of a *Curriculum for Socio-Ethical Education* (Baldacci, 2020) aimed at adolescents and preadolescents. The main results of the project have been the creation of a theoretical model of the moral subject, also through the identification of the capacities that define it; the analysis of empirical reality in some Italian schools; the validation of a hypothesis of an ethical-social education curriculum, and the analysis of the training paths of teachers in the field of ethical education (Baldacci, 2020).

Interweaving these reflections with the interpretation of the data from the present research, it has emerged that countering ethical illiteracy³ constitutes one of the main objectives of ethical education, mostly implicitly⁴. This firm opposition especially concerns teachers who, in their professional role, are involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of ethical-social education actions (Baldacci, 2020; Iori, 2023a). Moreover, they themselves are immersed in a social context that fosters this phenomenon, being functional to it⁵.

³ Says a privileged witness: “Ethical illiteracy manifests itself in the lack of consideration of the other, of his needs and rights, and in the absence of respect for his being, but also in disregard for the environment, and thus in distraction from situations of environmental degradation and in the obstinate continuation of environmentally harmful attitudes. It also manifests itself in the increasing logic of exhibitionism and spectacularisation of the self, as opposed to absolute indifference to events that would instead require the greatest attention and assumption of responsibility. Against the backdrop of all this, there is a pensiveness reduced to a minimum, which translates into a lack of critical thinking and sensitive thinking. In the present time we are also witnessing an impoverishment of ethically connoted language, that which keeps thinking tied to ethical issues.” (L.M., 24/6/23)

⁴ “Ethical illiteracy can develop when individuals lack certain experiences within their family or educational environments that prompt them to question certain occurrences, asking themselves: ‘Is what happened right or wrong?’ In our daily activities, we allocate time to contemplate the interactions among children. Fast-paced inputs such as those presented by television or other media, in my view, can contribute to the development of ethical illiteracy. They fail to encourage ethical reflection or allocate time to issues of ethical significance. Being bombarded with numerous inputs in a short span diminishes one’s competency, leading to impulsive behaviour and greater susceptibility to prevailing values. For instance, when I react to my son’s soccer game where the opponent fouls him and I disagree, my response is often marked by judgment, competitiveness, individualism, and aggression, rather than empathizing with the other party’s perspective” (I.B., 22/6/23)

⁵ Says a privileged witness: “For me, ethical illiteracy is a missed opportunity. We are having more and more difficulties with families. We find them changed. They have more resources, but at the level of emotional ethical education there is a gap: between knowledge and ethical maturity. Perhaps given by this individualistic society. Parents are only focused on their child. This vision of community and of knowing how to be with others, to welcome the other, to welcome diversity,

The research attempts to advance further questions and hypotheses regarding the issue of ethical illiteracy, as a node of meaning and category subjected to the reflection of privileged witnesses, according to the CGT framework (Charmaz, 2014), which will be further explored, attempting to enhance effective responses and actions for its counteraction.

3. Methodological framework: a choice consistent with the epistemology

This research intends to clearly position itself ethically even at the methodological level, through an explicitly delineated stance: it is qualitative research for which the Constructivist Grounded Theory proposed by Katy Charmaz (2014) has been chosen as the framework. Indeed, every research is ethically oriented, consciously or unconsciously, as it expresses the values that guide it, the degree of involvement and attention towards the participants, the ethical attitude, and the perspective of the researcher conducting it (Creswell, 2007).

In this regard, Gardner's urging for the researcher to clearly articulate their ethical stance resonates particularly aptly, especially demonstrating responsibility towards the community, colleagues, and users of their work (Gardner, 2006b). The American psychologist also encourages countering, if necessary, the established system in favour of deeper exploration, critical thinking, and essentially, one's own values (Gardner, 2006a). Equally relevant for this work are von Foerster's acute observations on constructivist epistemology, defined as an *epistemology of epistemology*, as it is tasked with accounting for itself. The same imperative applies to the researcher, who is not only called upon to hide behind the objectivity of distant facts but also to become aware of and articulate their own perspective on the observed world, inevitably including themselves. And, following von Foerster's insights, it is about assuming the responsibility that accompanies competence, which ethically prompts to put it in the service of understanding the real problems of the world, aware of the incapacity to perceive the world around us objectively (von Foerster, 1987).

The CGT has thus proven to be the best methodological solution, consistent with an epistemology based on the idea of co-constructing meanings and knowledge in a complex, ever-changing context (Charmaz, 2014). Therefore, we have opted for a comparative analysis leading to the definition of a theory grounded in data (Tarozzi, 2008), wherein the co-constructed understanding is not discovered but collectively created by both the researcher and the study participants. The CGT contextualizes the founding principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser, & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1999) within the epistemology of complexity (Bateson, 1977; Morin, 1993) and social constructivism (Kelly, 1955; Maturana, & Varela, 1992; von Foerster, 1987). Knowledge is thus understood as relative and determined by the multiple interpretative lenses of each subject, as active individuals and protagonists of an evolving process, and as a collective process of meaning construction, in a recursive interpretation of reality (Bianchi, 2019). It assumes a central role that data are inherently subjective and cannot be collected neutrally (Charmaz, 2014), departing from the positivistic assumptions of Grounded Theory (Tarozzi, 2008). The ethical attitude of the researcher is another decisive element, as it emerges and translates into all the different stages of the research process: in the relationship

to welcome its many facets. In this historical period, we are always hyper-connected, but there is also a lot of social loneliness. Ethical illiteracy is also when parents do not give their children the tools to be able to discern between what is right and what is wrong, according to principles of acceptance, of valuing diversity. Thus, we will have smaller and smaller societies, looking only at themselves, closed. I would like, as a teacher and as a parent, to instil this trust, this openness" (C.R., 28/6/23)

with the commissioning body, colleagues, and participants, in constructing the interview script, in transparency regarding all recursive steps of reading and rereading the data and what emerges from them, in the coherence between the data themselves and the interpretations of the researcher (Bianchi, 2019). The researcher's responsibility, as someone who directly engages with the ideas and lives of other people, exemplifies this attitude. The salient features of this responsibility include genuinely co-constructing meanings; demonstrating profound respect for them and for the shared responsibility of interviewer and interviewee regarding the meanings emerging in the interview; and the correspondence of these meanings with each participant's expressed position.

In the case at hand, it is an extremely situated CGT in terms of sampling, with the emergence, from the dialogue between interpreted data, namely intensive interviews (Charmaz, 2014; Bianchi, 2019), and theoretical prompts, of categories whose saturation has led to the co-construction of meanings and, finally, in the coming months, to the elaboration of a theory that valorises their relationships.

In a context where the researcher's critical spirit characterizes the entire research project, as well as the ongoing meta-dialogue regarding the different elements at play (Bianchi, 2019), we proceed recursively through the following articulation: a first phase of data acquisition and construction is followed by their coding and analysis. The data are dialogued with each other at this stage, to explore the widest range of speculative possibilities originating from them, and then arrive at the identification of some pivotal nodes or categories, whose properties are described in the phase of selective coding, until reaching theoretical saturation. For categories that require it, as they are still not saturated, a new data acquisition process is undertaken until overall saturation is achieved (Tarozzi, 2008).

Ethical illiteracy emerges as a *saturated category* through the various stages of coding by identifying its properties, relationships with other categories, and conducting comparative analysis. It has been presented and discussed with the research participants as the horizon of educational work in ethical terms and as a social phenomenon involving, among others, parents and teachers, who are the most prominent educational figures in the lives of children and the primary reference figures in terms of ethical education.

4. Ethical illiteracy: an educational emergency

Ethical illiteracy emerges as a significant concern early in the research process, in dialogue with sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1969) that have generated it – *ethically oriented education*, *ethical competence*, and *shared reflection on values*. Subsequently, it was subjected to reflections by participants during intensive interviews⁶ (Charmaz, 2014; Bianchi, 2019).

From the outset, we have oriented ourselves towards a conception of the ethical sphere as an *individual competence* connected to the structuring of educational experiences⁷ that could either promote and enhance it or, conversely, diminish it, leading to its atrophy over time. In this context, we decided to delve into the issue of the lack or absence of reflection capacities, in ethical terms, in

⁶ Below are the interview questions relating to ethical illiteracy (3 of the 26 overall questions): How would you define ethical illiteracy? Do you think there are social phenomena that might encourage it today? What do you think the role of the school should be in relation to it?

⁷ In my opinion, an adult experiencing this ethical illiteracy hides a serious inner fragility. That is, he has not been able to live experiences that have formed him, in my opinion, as a person, and therefore it is a fragility of the person. And unfortunately, this can make these people more manipulable than others. In my opinion being ethically illiterate means being indifferent to what surrounds you. If you have not experienced the care, the intimate relationship of someone who cares for you, sees you, and helps you interpret the reality around you: how can you develop this competence? The school must create a context in which self-realized adults propose experiences that go in this direction." (S.S., 20/6/23)

children aged three to six, also based on the various approaches formulated regarding ethical education, as described above.

Hence, our primary objective is to delineate ethical illiteracy within the framework of traditional illiteracy, which is conceptualized as the absence, deficiency, or inadequate promotion and valuation of competencies essential for a life of well-being. Unlike traditional literacy, encompassing specific skills like reading and arithmetic, we aim to examine ethical illiteracy through its three primary dimensions – structural, functional, and return (De Mauro, 1963; Pizzini, 2013) – considering a range of articulated competencies, particularly ethical competencies associated with the expression of individual identity.

A preliminary proposal is put forward to describe ethical illiteracy, built in the first phase of analysis of the research results, bringing together the scientific literature and the points of view of the researcher and the research participants:

it is the instrumental⁸, functional⁹, or return¹⁰ incapacity to critically reflect, with originality and according to one's deep feelings, on ethically relevant situations or behaviours, either enacted, observed, or reported by others, through ethical or value guidelines, leading to an analysis process that determines whether they are deemed by the subject to be right or wrong, good or bad, honest or dishonest, courageous or cowardly, respectful or disrespectful, fair or discriminatory, and whether it can be shared with others or not. It is also the inability to reflect on ethical values, clearly defining and distinguishing them from each other, and to deduce or interpret the motivations behind a certain action (whether one's own or others'), or its consequences, subjecting them to a judgment closely linked to one's identity.

Being *ethically illiterate* does not mean, following this reasoning, not possessing reference values, as every human action is guided by values and beliefs (Colicchi, 2021). Instead, it implies uncritically and unknowingly adhering to certain values, thus being overwhelmed by their weight and significance, rather than being able to take responsibility for them¹¹. Every human action is

⁸ Instrumental illiteracy concerns all those who have never learned basic literacy skills: namely, those who cannot read and write. In Italy, in 1861, according to Istat data, 80% of the female population was completely illiterate (ISTAT, 2023). This percentage decreases concerning the male population, reaching 60% (ibid.). At the beginning of the 1950s, after several reforms establishing compulsory schooling for at least two years (in 1859), then extended to three years with the Coppino Law of 1877, and then to five years in 1904 with the Orlando Law, until the Gentile reform of 1923 which introduced compulsory education up to the age of 14, the situation was still alarming: over 13% of Italians were illiterate (ibid.). In 1961, we still had over 8% of illiterate Italians, with a clear disparity between males and females (10% of the female population and 6.6% of the male population) (ibid.). The real drop in the percentage occurred in the 1970s, after the reform of the single middle school in 1963, when in 1971 it dropped to 5% of the population, then to 3% in 1981 and 2% in 1991 (ibid.).

⁹ Functional illiteracy is the inability of an individual to effectively use reading, writing, and arithmetic skills in everyday life situations. Additionally, according to the OECD, functional illiteracy refers to those who cannot: “understand, evaluate, use, and engage with written texts to actively participate in society, to achieve their goals, and to develop their knowledge and potential” (OECD, 2018).

¹⁰ Return illiteracy concerns individuals who, after acquiring good reading and writing skills, as well as basic mathematical abilities during their schooling, regress to low levels of literacy in these three areas in adulthood. This regression is often due to a lack of practice in reading texts and understanding numbers, percentages, or tables, leading to the atrophy of skills learned in youth (Pizzini, 2013).

¹¹ Says a privileged witness: “Ethical illiteracy develops when one fails to listen to their inner self and employ reflective thinking. If I don't listen to my own needs, I cannot develop ethical competence. If I don't hear and perceive myself, I

determined by the beliefs that underlie it and has consequences on us, on those around us, and on reality as a whole: being able to reflect on these dimensions, formulating one's own thoughts, is, according to this perspective, a basic *ethical competence* (Calidoni, 2022; Damiano, 2007; Iori, 2023b) and creates *ethical awareness* (Iori, 2024).

Daily life in Western societies is not characterized by explicitly dedicated spaces and times for reflection, much less ethically imbued reflection, which is simultaneously the cause and effect of this phenomenon. Reflection is not scheduled in the workplace or at school, except for rare exceptions, it is not on the public television schedule or within social media, and it rarely appears in newspapers. In the typical day of a citizen of a Western country, rhythms are dictated by work, leisure time, and the use of social media and mass media, whose timelines are increasingly reduced and pressing, not allowing for deepening, and sometimes preventing, the user from autonomously deciding the content to view. We live in a reality where we are inundated with visual and auditory inputs, immersing ourselves in them, leaving very little room for reflective thought, which requires long periods, real sharing with others, careful evaluation, and active listening to others and oneself. This is a challenging, non-immediate, or natural practice but one that requires training and dedication, producing, at the same time, aware individuals and a globally more prosperous situation. The example of the decision made by the British people regarding their exit from the European Union, influenced by social media and mass media that also disseminated false news with the precise purpose of directing this choice (Hänska, & Bauchowitz, 2017; Gorodnichenko, Tho, & Oleksandr, 2018; Höller, 2021), emerges as emblematic. A substantial regret from the British population has surfaced just a few years after this decision¹².

Following the traits of traditional illiteracy applied to the present case, being in the condition of *structural ethical illiteracy* does not mean that the child or young person has not been exposed to and, consequently, has not acquired certain values during their upbringing, as this is deemed impossible, as every action observed by adults or peers is, by its nature, an action based on the individual's deep convictions that guide behaviours and attitudes (Colicchi, 2021). In the case of structural ethical illiteracy, it is imagined that there has been a lack of exposure and habituation to reflection in terms of values, focused on the motivations that have guided certain choices or their consequences, gradually atrophying this competence. In this situation, it is hypothesized that one outcome is the acquisition of the most prevalent values in society or those most useful and functional to the socioeconomic system in which one lives. It is assumed that in the absence of explicit reflective attention from the adults of reference and deep shared reasoning on experienced or observed situations, according to ethical guidelines, children and young people internalize as positive values those they breathe daily, guiding observable behaviours on the street, at school, at home, on social media, or on television, which could be summarized as follows: profit above all else, competition, violence, viewing people as means to economic growth rather than ends in themselves (Baldacci, 2019). The alternative to this situation, i.e., a path of ethical literacy, would instead aim to promote the competence to formulate one's original thought that is capable of questioning dominant values or

won't be able to relate to others. Similarly, if I don't engage in direct experiences. For instance, if children in a classroom don't encounter the world beyond that classroom, they won't have the opportunity to ask questions about it. Consequently, reflective thinking isn't encouraged. Furthermore, those who are ethically illiterate are more easily controlled because they lack critical thinking skills. For instance, the fast-paced communication culture often leads to detachment from oneself" (I.D.F.,18/10/23)

¹² Cfr. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/dec/25/one-year-on-most-voters-say-brexit-has-gone-badly>

adhering to them, depending on one's feelings and identity. The responsibility for this complex process lies with the family and the school, if we consider the school context as a place where the main objective is to educate, alongside and in connection with the more institutionally recognized task of instructing (Baldacci, 2014; Massa, 1987).

Another significant aspect of this phenomenon concerns its origin, which is believed to lie in the *bankruptcy of practical reason* (De Monticelli, 2010), i.e., in the denial, by twentieth-century European philosophical thought, as well as by everyday practices, of objectivity in matters of practical judgment. Subjectivism, relativism, decisionism, and nihilism have perpetuated this global distancing of reason from practical action (De Monticelli, 2010). Opposing this prevailing ethical scepticism essentially means affirming the rational foundation of practical thought that includes, and does not exclude or deny, passions and emotions that intertwine with this rational process. Reflecting according to value guidelines on what happens to us or what we observe represents, first and foremost, a process of encountering what surrounds us, who surrounds us, and thus of self-knowledge. Education plays a crucial role in this process, which can be oriented towards active listening, promoting curiosity attention towards others, and reflective and critical thinking, and equally fundamental is the training of adults and teachers in terms of *reflective thinking* (Dewey, 1933; Michelini, 2016) also regarding ethical issues. In particular, it is believed that this horizon can be achieved only if the group of teachers begins to live and practice this perspective in their own professional relationships, so as to then cascade it into daily practice with students, building *communities of thought* (Michelini, 2016).

5. First concluding remarks

«Every kind of use of words for everyone» seems to me a good motto, with a democratically resonant sound. Not because everyone is an artist, but because no one is a slave. (Rodari, 2010, p. 10, translated by the author)

Taking up Rodari's invitation, it is considered particularly effective to highlight, in conclusion, how the promotion of ethical literacy, namely reflection and sharing with others on personally experienced or observed situations from an ethical perspective, can lead to democratic living and to individual emancipation (Biesta, 2012; Freire, 1970). Therefore, the ability to explain one's own and others' actions, the motivations behind them, and their consequences to oneself and others can be understood as one of the many "uses of words" to which everyone is entitled. Discerning different values, recognizing those considered positive by the individual or the community, and developing competence in critical thinking in terms of values are competencies to be promoted from early childhood education, even in contrast to the phenomenon of ethical illiteracy. This is because it is believed that such a set of skills is fundamental for a life of well-being, to enable individuals to consciously position themselves in a complex and multidimensional reality, and to support individuals in avoiding situations of oppression, both enacted and experienced.

In these terms, it is considered the task of pedagogy, of a pedagogy defined as militant (Baldacci, 2014), which strongly advocates for the well-being of individuals and for the improvement of the quality of life of humanity through changing the status quo, to propose a serious investment in terms of policies and educational practices, both within and outside the school, to counteract ethical

illiteracy and promote ethical responsibility in the choices of each individual. It is the task of pedagogy to concern itself with the emancipation of the individual through the promotion of complete ethical autonomy, the ability to reflect and share with others the motivations and consequences of actions taken or observed, careful group discussion, and clear and precise ability to define and recognize the values involved in a particular situation.

Finally, to better understand such an articulated and complex phenomenon as has been attempted to be portrayed in this contribution, further research and analysis are considered necessary regarding ethical illiteracy, both quantitatively, including its measurement or the quantification of its social cost, and qualitatively, for example, regarding the genesis of the phenomenon, operational methods of combating it, or the contribution that initial and in-service teacher training can make, or finally, the involvement of families by schools in relation to these issues.

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