

Improving Mental Health and Wellbeing Through Bibliotherapy

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Chapter 9

Narrative Medicine Practices: Emotional Literacy and Inclusion Through Reading

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ABSTRACT

In narrative medicine practices, emotional education and reading represent two intrinsically connected elements for the countless reasons that describe the potential of reading in promoting well-being and quality of life, self-realization and planning of one's future. The chapter starts from some theoretical references that trace the reasons for the importance of reading from early childhood and takes a deliberately methodological turn when the discussion on emotions is addressed precisely to bring to light a possible educability and management of them to encourage well-being and interpersonal relationships. The contribution intends to reflect on the development of emotional education through the practice of reading to give a meaningful orientation to our human form, to our formation, to our taking care of ourselves to build together answers for the future starting from the reflection on the actions to be taken to re-plan existences from an inclusive and transformative perspective.

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INTRODUCTION

Contemporary challenges have profoundly transformed the way childhood is understood, both culturally and pedagogically and in terms of welfare. In this circumstance, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), defined by UNESCO as «provision for children from birth through to primary education that falls within a national regulatory framework, i.e., it has to comply with a set of rules, minimum standards and/or undergo accreditation procedures» (European Commission / EACEA / Euridyce / Eurostat 2014, p. 155), represents a more urgent issue than ever, insofar as, at the international level, the education policies promoted by the world's leading organisations have devoted profound efforts to the implementation of the fundamental right of every child to the best possible opportunities to develop their potential (European Commission/ EACEA/Eurydice, 2019). Over the past two decades, bodies such as the OECD and UNESCO have established specific departments and research groups for this purpose, confirming the importance of guaranteeing every child, including children with disabilities (Art. 23), «the best possible opportunities to develop their full potential» (Art. 6), as already widely recognised by the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Council of Europe, 1950) and the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989).

METHODS

Being able to enjoy positive, meaningful and quality experiences in the 0-6 age group can be an undoubtedly effective driver with respect to self-development, future educational and scholastic success as well as early support for learning processes, social inclusion and employability (Briceag, 2019; Bianquin, Giraldo, 2021). These benefits are even more relevant for children with disabilities, particularly when the key to understanding, in terms of potential development, becomes that of Quality of Life (Giaconi, 2015). Moreover, the positive effects derived from attending a nursery or pre-school also affect the strengthening of mnemonic skills, oral and written comprehension, numerical and calculation skills, inter- and intra-personal problem solving, sociability and physical and motor development, with an evident persistence of these aspects also during adolescence, reducing – therefore – the risk of early school leaving and the likelihood of repeating the school year (Save the Children, 2019). The progressive knowledge on inclusive early childhood education, with reference to disability, the explanatory hypotheses on learning, on cognitive processes, are increased by the fruitful fertilisation of interdisciplinary contaminations.

RESULTS

As indicated in international documents (Unesco-UIL, 2017), the explanatory hypotheses and guidelines aimed at the promotion of reading and writing have been expanded under the impetus of the new demands imposed by contemporary social contexts and the growth of advances in science. The International Board on Books for Young People in Norway has published a worldwide selection of quality picture books in order to promote the right of all children to read. Publishing with reference to disability, aimed at promoting inclusive education, has also increased considerably in Italy in recent years. These are books in which children and adults with disabilities are among the protagonists, in a key that enhances them and promotes their knowledge and rights. Different types of books are proposed by silent books, e-books, apps, touchscreens, game books, sound books, pop-up books, which are chosen from the general production of the International Children Digital Library for certain characteristics, and which may be useful and valuable because of the particular clarity of the illustrations and the graphic design, simple text and readable typography, or because they propose interesting content.

The promotion of reading, from this point of view, does not specifically concern the intentional action of the educator or teacher in preparing educational paths aimed at the individual; rather, it refers to the use of the book as a mediator of relationships and learning environments, capable of responding to the educational needs of all children in the age range from zero to six years. The book, following this direction, becomes a tool to promote amazement, curiosity, desire, and courage, because reading is also accessed out of wonder and not only out of “duty to read” (Pennac, 1993). In 0-6 educational and school services, it is also important to observe how books are displayed, paying attention to types, shapes and colours, through the careful guidance of the adult, which can become an opportunity to create the child's or section's personal book. This, in fact, can be constructed directly by the children, also involving the parents in collecting drawings, photos, stories, also social and with visual aids, made by the children themselves (also through the introduction of alternative augmentative communication systems), initiating creative activities to be shared during the growth path (Caliceti & Rivola, 2017). Such activities develop imagination and creativity, facilitate the acquisition of sensorimotor, cognitive, and socio-affective skills; they also promote the construction of a common vocabulary, teach how to organise and classify, preserve memories, organise sequences, and ritualise times and spaces, recognising their functions; lastly, they accustom children to a creative use of language, creating complicity and enhancing the potential of each one. In very early childhood, initial communication includes all the work necessary to involve the child, starting from his or her interests, the minimum spaces of engagement (a particularly important aspect in young children or children with

difficulties), and to modify the environment so that it can better support communicative and relational development. Basic facilitation, which is useful at a very early stage in all situations where there is the slightest doubt of possible difficulties in the future development of communication, includes supporting partner-perceived communication, offering opportunities for choice and introducing 'tailor-made' books (Costantino, Marini, Bergamaschi & Lanzini, 2006;). For this reason, it is crucial to pay attention to the reading process from an early age in order to prepare the child for later formal learning.

DISCUSSION

According to Lonigan, and Shanahan, (2008) even before entering primary school and the last year of childhood, in everyday life situations, listening to reading, observing figures, shapes, musical and body games, facilitates the acquisition of the multiple ways in which human beings communicate. When a child is involved, for example, in reading a picture book, playing with a sound object, with a tactile book that he can also experience with his hands and mouth, he begins his first activities: cognitive, social, emotional, acquiring fundamental basic skills. Furthermore, a child's individual skills interact, especially in early childhood, with the family contexts by which it is surrounded, and the environment is vital for the development of reading. For a young child, before reading comes speech and before that comes voice, experienced within a relationship. There is a sound dialogue that begins before the child possesses words in full; Bateson calls them "proto-conversations", while for Stern they are sounds that represent the authentic expression of emotions, of intentions that enclose meanings and are at the basis of the construction of meaning that the child gives to the reality that surrounds it. The child takes its first steps into the world of reading from an early age, through sensory experiences: looking, touching, smelling is already experiencing the first forms of relationship with the book and reading. The actual reading process in the child develops later and comprises a series of very diverse and complex activities. Dehaene (2009) states: 'Being able to read means, first of all, being able to decode. The decoding of graphemes into phonemes is the transition from a visual to an auditory unit. In order to progress in reading, the child must know how to decode new sequences of characters by himself in order to recognise words whose pronunciation and meaning he already knows, and progressively automate the whole of this processing chain'. In addition, the environment within which reading takes place is fundamental (Aidan Chambers, 2015), since certain factors, fundamental to the development of learning and positive emotions, linked to the social context must be considered. Reading, therefore, contemplates places, habits, emotions, relationships with the adult, the reader and

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the book object. The creation of a favourable reading environment is crucial, in order to competently help children and young people to become passionate and thoughtful readers. Furthermore, it is necessary to make choices to facilitate the discovery of preferences and to propose a book only after having read it. The concept of the 'social context of reading' as proposed by Chambers is in line with the evidence that has emerged in recent years from numerous studies on the functioning of the brain in reading processes. The American neuroscientist and dyslexia expert, Maryanne Wolf (2012), in a study devoted to reading, states that there are no specific genes solely responsible for enabling human beings to read and write. In order to acquire this ability – which is not only natural – children need educational environments that support the connection (of structures related to vision and speech) of all those circuits, which need to be acquired, to enable the brain to read. The scientist draws attention to three fundamental factors - educational - that influence language learning and consequently, brain development during the reading process. The first relates to the availability of books and how a lack of them can adversely affect the knowledge of words and things, which should be formed in the very first years of life. The second, to the provision of environments in which plenty of time is devoted to the simple activity of dialogue, even at the table during meals, and to reading. The third, to support parenting, especially for those experiencing linguistic and cultural deprivation. The three factors highlighted by Wolf have also been incorporated in international documents on policy, literacy and inclusion processes (UNESCO, 2017). The right to read can be guaranteed, according to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), through “reasonable accommodation”, i.e.: “necessary and appropriate modifications and adaptations that do not impose a disproportionate or excessive burden, (...) to ensure that persons with disabilities enjoy and exercise, on an equal basis with others, all human rights and fundamental freedoms” (Art. 2, 'Definitions') among which is the right to read and the freedom to choose what to read from the widest possible range of proposals. These accommodations mediate a new arrangement in which everyone's needs meet, dialogue and contaminate each other through multiple forms of representation. They are, in practical terms, accommodations that make it possible to remove or circumvent the barriers currently present to the comprehension of a text by fragile subjects, guaranteeing access to the body of information it contains and, at the same time, favouring communication and comparison with others. The use of an inclusive language, therefore, is not an addition placed for the use and consumption of a few individuals with specific needs, but a choice that enriches the narrative for all. Reading or listening to a picture book frees one from the real condition of the 'here and now' and allows the reader to open up to the world of the possible. Exploring alternatives and safe places through metaphors, images and new, original, unexpected, unsettling or reassuring points of view. Indeed, illustrated books prove to

be “silent educators” (Lepman 2018) capable of mediating not only between themselves and their own imagery, but also with others and the imagery of others, promoting identity construction in a privileged space such as that of shared reading. If reading, by its very nature, offers opportunities to meet with otherness, the best illustrated books can be the indispensable tools of educational work in different educational contexts. Particularly in places of care and health, they make it possible to erect 'bridges' for the transit and sharing of stories, emotions and hopes. Speaking of books aimed at children, we must not forget the mediation work of the adult - parent, educator, teacher, bookseller/librarian - in the proposal of quality books appropriate to the contexts within which we intend to promote reading and inclusion: the adult, in fact, has the primary responsibility to work for the right to read of each and every one, in the direction of building a vision of reality grasped in its richness and complexity. The adult, who is passionate about reading, will not fail in his task to make the child also discover this world of adventures, discoveries and fun. Bringing a child to a passion for reading benefits not only their enjoyment, but also the development of important areas, including linguistic, cognitive, emotional, and relational. There are many objectives that reading training and education set and for these reasons it must be widely valued. Reading helps the child, in a significant way, in the acquisition of new words; the book stimulates comprehension of the first words and in a completely natural way enables the child to learn the first words. Of course, all this is achievable if the text has a certain narrative style and if the reader is skilled at reading it in an expressive and emotionally engaging way. Reading stories together or telling them are modes of interaction with the child that are very rich in potential. They become opportunities for communicative exchanges and the circulation of information that are fundamental for the development of oral language and the emergence of the future reader, as well as for the child's cognitive and emotional growth. Through the reading of illustrated books, from early childhood onwards, the aim is to promote inclusion through the promotion of the value of diversity as wealth. For Emili, 'inclusion is above all a set of concrete practices (from the smallest to the largest), pedagogically based, that must be implemented every day and in every place. There are no breaks or exceptions. [...] Inclusion is certainly based on words, principles and reinforced by scientific evidence, but it is defined by our actions” (Emili, Macchia, 2020). A path to inclusion education in early childhood starts right here, from reading books, in which normality and speciality coexist and are enriched with/for each other. Precisely for this reason, children's book author Luigi Dal Cin has created splendid, illustrated books that succeed in explaining certain illnesses through storytelling. Among the titles, written by Dal Cin and illustrated by Chiara Carrer, are: 'The Flowering Desert: Angelmann's Syndrome Told to Children' (2015), 'Matthew's Puzzle: Prader Will's Syndrome Told to Children' (2015), 'The Fragile Gaze: Fragile X Chromosome Syndrome Told

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to Children' (2017) and 'Grab the Top!: Epilepsy Told to Children' (2018). The language that strikes the children, in this case, is not the clinical-adult language, but that of narration, because it allows them to activate the processes of projection and identification, triggering an emotional relationship with the character in the story and consequently also with the friend who has the same characteristics or the same disability. Children need honest words, truths explained in simple language, and storytelling is able to satisfy these needs. A valuable book for explaining diversity is 'What is a syndrome' (2019) by Giovanni Colaneri. This illustrated book explains with very few words and detailed illustrations how to approach the complex subject of syndromic pictures to young children. It provides some answers on a very delicate and complex subject, to which adults very often fail to find an adequate response. Through very short sentences, it explains to children the immense richness and all the facets that the many syndromes present. The syndrome, within the illustrated book, is represented through the metaphor of a climb, another world, a giant, a prejudice and as something unique. But above all something that concerns us. Because if disability became something that concerns everyone, we would certainly live in a world with less prejudice, where diversity can be recognised and valued. And this would benefit people with disabilities, because they would perceive that they live in a society that is more inclusive and more respectful of everyone's needs. If we continue to think that the disability or syndrome a person suffers from is something that does not concern us, "it would be like judging a book only by its cover and not by its content, by the story inside". And for those who experience the burden of a syndrome at first hand, it is seen as 'an ongoing struggle against discrimination so that inclusion can be won'. An ongoing struggle by many people with disabilities who try to make their voices heard. Making people understand that diversity is there and that it is part of the richness of the world is fundamental for a more inclusive world and to improve the lives of all those people who, forced to live with a condition they do not choose, still feel the prejudice of others. Another book that, in a veiled and delicate way, addresses the issue of diversity by explaining it to children, is the illustrated book 'As in a Garden' by Agata Vignes with illustrations by Antonio Boffa (2020). A bit like mankind, a garden is also colourful and full of different flowers. The protagonist of this extraordinary story is Michellino, a child who has high expectations of the seed he has just planted in his garden. When he discovers that the flower is not what he expected, he is deeply disappointed. But the other flowers in the garden make him reflect and he manages to realise that the flower he wanted to remove - because he thought it would make his garden ugly - actually makes it unique and special in the eyes of everyone. Before the protagonist convinces himself of the richness of his garden made up of flowers that are all different from each other, he is struck by these words, which the 'different' little flower pronounces: "Think how sad the world would be if we saw a rainbow made

only of yellow or if there were an ice-cream truck only with lemon flavour or, even worse, if there were a world made up of people who are all the same: we would no longer be able to recognise our best friend, we would not be able to understand which are the good and which the bad, but above all we would no longer know who we are! An extraordinary message for children to grasp diversity as an indispensable richness. Reading these illustrated books allows children to discover that they are all different and this stimulates empathy towards all those people who appear different and special in our eyes. In recent decades, there has certainly been an increase in the number of illustrated books produced by the various publishing houses dealing with this topic. This has helped parents, educators and teachers to deal with a very often difficult subject: that of diversity linked to a disability. Reading and the language used in illustrated books is, in fact, the best way to answer the many questions, which would otherwise remain unanswered, without a clear answer to fully understand them. Dealing with such a complex and debated topic as inclusion, within illustrated children's books, makes it possible to raise more inclusive generations. Any quality reading is a valuable form that children can use to get to know the world and life around them; a book, however, also helps them to get to know themselves, because it guides them towards a path of newness and the construction of their own identity, different from all the others. In addition to deepening the sphere of the self, reading supports the child in becoming acquainted with the positive and negative events that he will encounter on his path, such as friendship, love of neighbour, but also facts that are often incomprehensible to the youngest, such as illness, death or war. Learning to read in early childhood - initiated through the unavoidable lens of inclusive education - ultimately suggests an integrated approach directed not only at children with disabilities, but at all subjects, seeking to respond to the human urge to 'inhabit' the world, i.e. allowing the full expression and sharing of thought and, before that, of emotional experiences. Understanding intentions and emotions allows one to empathise with the character in a narrative, helping the child towards the correct development and decoding of the real world, facilitating relationships, and laying the foundations for a conscious construction of well-being.

CONCLUSION

Over the last twenty years, the educational approach that has seemed more appropriate than others for developing and reinforcing skills on an emotional level is the one developed from the Medical Humanities model: this approach - which involves reading passages or parts of works from the liberal arts as powerful evokers of emotional experiences on which to stimulate reflection - has demonstrated the ability to enhance individuals' familiarity with their own emotions and at the same

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time their ability to recognise the emotions of others (Manus, 1995; Goleman, 2005; Gordon, 2005).

There are numerous studies that demonstrate and support the importance of the pleasure of reading (Beseghi, Grilli, 2011; Blezza Picherle, 1996, 2004, 2013; Bruner, 2006; Cambi, Cives, 1996; Campanile, Lovo, Musella, 2001; Catarsi, 2001; Frasnedi, Martari, Panzieri, 2005; Levorato, 2000; Merletti, 1996, 2006; Terrusi, 2012).

Reading improves language, enriching vocabulary and the ability to express one's emotions in children from an early age; it broadens attention and concentration time; it educates to silence and listening; it enables the creation of autonomous mental images; it increases the desire to learn to read independently; it makes it possible to highlight that language has a sound and a rhythm and narrative its own structure; allows the child to create a common territory of ideas, images and emotions; allows the child, from the age of just over a year, to know what a book looks like, how to hold it, how to turn the pages and which way to look at the pictures; allows the child, even if he or she does not yet say so, that stories amuse, comfort, keep one company, enchant, move and move to action.

Reading is a very important activity and promoting motivation to read leads a person to become a 'reader for life'. Reading, therefore, should be continuously nurtured, supported and stimulated. Expressive reading activities are not an attempt to teach reading, but children's books allow for enriching experiences, influencing feelings, behaviour and attitudes. Moreover, books allow the imagination to be stimulated. The encounter with the book, in fact, allows the 'little reader' to reach spaces of imagination denied by reality. The story has the great ability to take us where thought stops for fear of the unknown, thus enabling us to face fears, doubts and misunderstandings.

Reading is the result of a learning process that is initially pure decoding of signs to enable them to be given meaning. This definition, however, only partly answers what 'reading' stands for. In fact, it must be borne in mind that the activity of reading requires the subject to place himself actively in relation to the book, so as to construct the meanings it contains and compare them with his own experiences and knowledge. Therefore, a continuous interaction between reader and text is required, since the construction of hypotheses about the meaning of a text is made possible by the interconnection between visual information (the text in its graphic form and context) and non-visual information (the reader with his or her content knowledge, oral, bodily and emotional language skills, and readiness to receive information from the outside world) .

A text wants someone to help it work, a product whose interpretive fate must be part of its own generative mechanism. Thus Eco, in his essay 'Lector in fabula' (1986), emphasises that the formation of a literary text occurs in the encounter

between author and reader. This union, between author and reader, brings with it the singularity of the encounter.

Reading, therefore, is a complex activity since it involves different areas of the person: the socio-affective area, the cognitive area and the communicative area. It calls for the development of critical and analytical skills, aesthetic taste and emotional expression. Reading also means acquiring knowledge, constructing meanings, satisfying curiosity, orienting oneself in the great themes of life and in the universe of values in order to learn respect for differences and a sense of responsibility.

In early childhood, reading has a complex meaning, since it does not denote the ability to decode and understand the text, but the activity of discovering reality through the book 'tool'. Reading is a complex activity, in which cognition (knowledge) and emotion (pleasure) are closely linked, and for this complexity it needs support and motivation (Boscolo, 2006; Dehaene, 2007, 2009; Longo, 2011; Merletti, 1996, 2006). Being a spontaneous activity, reading should not be imposed, but motivated by viewing reading as a source of pleasure. Therefore, one must have a reason to do it. In order to do this, first and foremost it is the educator in the nursery who must be convinced that reading is a pleasurable and exciting activity, presenting himself as a lover of reading and an emotionally involved subject in the stories he reads (Buccolo, 2019). Only in this way will the children with whom they establish a relationship receive the communicative emotional signals and process them. In this regard, it is useful to review some illustrated books that can help the child explore his or her inner world and try to tell it, through images and words. First among these - on the subject of early emotional literacy - we find the illustrated book "Che rabbia!" (d'Allancé, 2007) which, thanks to its skilfully chosen images, can be very useful for adults who want to relate to children to talk to them (and with them) about emotions and educate them to know how to recognise even the most complex and less pleasant ones, such as anger in this case. Every child can easily identify with the character of Roberto, a child who, after having had a bad day, is really furious, and at the height of his anger, this turns into a red monster, which throws everything up in the air! This reading is especially useful for children who find it hard to control themselves in moments of anger. This story helps them visualise what they do not yet understand, and the adults guiding them towards self-discovery, to learn to know and recognise their emotions and give them a name. Another reading for young children is about the moment when they have to give up the dummy, the illustrated book "Nina's Dummy" (Naumann-Villemin, 2003). A fun and surreal story with beautiful illustrations, it helps parents to deal with the problem in a less dramatic way, having faith in the sometimes unexpected abilities of children who know how to make important choices without impositions, but on the basis of their experience, with a bit of grit and courage just like in Nina's story. Children who are beginning their experience at the crèche and have difficulty de-

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taching themselves from the parental figure are offered, on the other hand, the reading of the illustrated book entitled “A più tardi” (Ashbè, 2019) in which two small children are depicted during a day at the crèche. A reading that recounts through reassuring images and words the morning kisses, toys, companions, painting, feeding, peeing, naps, fights and cuddles, the tiredness of the evening and... the happiness of being reunited with their parents! Tender illustrations that speak sweetly of the detachment at the moment of entry to the daycare centre, of becoming part of a group of little friends, and of how young children cope with all the new things they experience in this situation. Negative emotions are also linked to the separation of parents, and to get through this difficult time, a very useful read is the illustrated book entitled 'My name is Nina and I live in two houses' (De Smet, Talsma, 2019), the aim of which is to give a representation of the often conflicting feelings that a separation brings with it. It does so with direct words that do not conceal the difficulty, nostalgia and resentment (but do not leave them alone) and with delicate illustrations that pay particular attention to the body and facial expressions of the characters that help the child recognise the emotions they feel along with those of their parents. A sensitive topic such as separation is treated in a natural and non-traumatic way for the child who is, in fact, reassured: “Mummy and Daddy live in two different houses, but in each of the two houses there is a lot of love for you”! The subject of death is one of those readings that solicit negative emotions, especially if it has to be tackled with a child, it is never easy; all the emotions that we carry within us, perhaps the result of past and very intense experiences, very often represent a subject that one tends not to want to propose to one's children, also having the spontaneous desire to protect them from the concept of death and mourning. One must first of all understand that, sooner or later, this confrontation will inexorably arrive and it is therefore very useful to be ready to answer questions that will be more than ever legitimate and normal. “Grandpa's Island” (Davies, 2016) is an illustrated book suitable for children aged 3 and up that tells the theme of separation due to death; the intention of the narration is to deal with such delicate topics with grace and feeling, adding that touch of melancholy that is inexorably linked to the concept of lack. The protagonists of the story are the child Syd and his grandfather who embark on a journey to an imaginary island, punctuated by moments of great amusement and amazement at all the wonders they find, so much so that the grandfather decides to stop there permanently, greeting his grandson with a strong embrace and heartening him that even if they are separated forever, their love will never cease. Also connected to this theme is the emptiness or absence that a person leaves behind after death and the big existential questions that four- and five-year-olds begin to ask their parents but also their teachers. A very useful read, then, is the illustrated book entitled 'the hole' (Llenas, 2016), which tells the story of Giulia who explains how each of us always needs to

fill the void created by the absence of an object or a loved one. Little Giulia teaches us that the strength to deal with these bereavements lies within each of us and that we must always accept the 'holes' and fill them with memories and positive thoughts. Among the many transformations that took place during the Pandemic period, the most significant and incisive for the growth of children is undoubtedly the profound revolution in communication processes and the radical transformation of relations between people mediated by technology. The closure of educational services in the lockdown period, in fact, immediately called educators and teachers to question how to set up distance activities with the 0-6 age group. Since there are no specific guidelines concerning the use of media in early childhood, many approaches have been used. The most interesting aspect of this was certainly the common intention to establish a dialogue with families, forcing educators and teachers to reflect on what were the most appropriate ways to offer support to parents, to maintain educational continuity and, above all, not to lose contact with children. This led to the birth of the “Educational Distance Ties” (LEAD) as the educational aspect at this age is based on the affective bond with the educators and teachers of reference who must maintain or reconstruct that contact made up of emotions, glances, voices, closeness, sharing, complicity, with the children and their families. In this experience, expressive reading represented precisely that common strategy implemented to be able to communicate and reassure children in the face of the experience of isolation at home. Readings together with the parents and little brothers and sisters, but also readings with a live connection to the educators and teachers to keep the emotional and relational closeness with the children alive even at a distance. It was precisely during the Covid period that the story entitled 'Covid the Barbarian' was born, an unpublished, highly topical tale written by professional educator Sara Pizzoni to explain to the children the reason for isolating themselves at home in order to fight an enemy: Covid-19. The story is recommended for children from 3 to 7 years old and was illustrated by designer Elia Pizzoni; it is available among the read alouds made available by the 'Leggere: forte!' project of the Region of Tuscany in collaboration with the University of Perugia¹. The Covid is a small monster that dreams of invading the world and dirtying the rest of the population with balls of dirt. The inhabitants realise, after being soiled, that if they did not wash their hands they would in turn infect other people. They then collectively decide to lock themselves indoors so as to leave Covid alone, forcing him to return to his dirty little house. Through this reading, the aim of the “Read Strong” project was to educate resilience in order to provide the children with resources with which they were able to direct their emotions constructively, without reacting impulsively and painfully to challenges and difficulties. Resilience in this experience did not lead to closing one's eyes in front of the obstacle to pretend it did not exist; on the contrary, it demonstrated an awareness of being able to manage it, to conceive of it as

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a natural change and not as an impediment to one's own growth and evolution. From this perspective, the shift from emergency teaching to resilience teaching is interpreted as 'the ability of a system to preserve its integrity and fundamental purpose in the face of a drastic change in circumstances'. Faced with this change, the challenge has been to stimulate educators and teachers to rediscover - even in this complex phase - the 'meaning' of educational work, placing training as a lever of human and social change at the centre.

A strong desire emerges from these experiences to promote motivation for expressive reading, so that it can constitute a very important educational and didactic action for the formation, in the subject, of a 'cognitive disposition' (Frasnedi, Poli, 1989) to be a 'reader for life', and this competence must be continually nurtured, supported and solicited. This is not easy and for this reason it is necessary for the educational agencies to offer support and motivation, organising themselves in an educational and cultural network that unites shared goals, objectives and tasks in a project. This does not mean considering the role of the family marginal; on the contrary, it becomes the great point of reference for a shared reading education project (Batini, 2023).

An early reading experience is not about trying to teach the child to read. On the contrary, the aim is to be able to create interest, motivation and preference for reading around the child, which will later be prerequisites for the evolution of language and cognitive skills related to it.

Reading to children is an activity that takes place regularly in families but also in kindergartens from an early age. Reading is often linked to routines (Bosi, 2002), such as sleep: 'bedtime stories' are a habit of many parents, even if they are not always aware of the importance of this activity in early childhood.

Various scientific studies highlight the importance of adults reading aloud to children from early infancy and in the pre-natal period (B. Sahakian, J. Feng et al. 2023).

In fact, the newborn baby is already able to recognise stories that the mother has read to him, particularly in the last period of pregnancy. Moreover, when a story is read or told to a newborn baby that he or she already knows from intrauterine life, it has a calming effect on him or her: this can also be a valuable aid for new parents in consoling and relaxing the baby when he or she is experiencing emotional tension accompanied by crying.

The relaxing effect is just one of the many benefits that expressive reading produces in very young children. On a relational level, reading fosters the consolidation of the relationship between reference adult and child.

Research in the field of childhood shows how a good attachment bond is correlated with the frequency with which the child is told and read to. Secure attachment (Bowlby, 1979) nurtures the child's sense of protection, well-being and feeling

loved, from which healthy self-esteem, self-confidence and confidence in the world derive. On an emotional level, the child is calmed and reassured by the power of the voice and the physical closeness of the reference adult who may be the parent, the educator or the teacher, who favours expressive reading as an intimate instrument of emotional connection and relationship with the child. The child can be supported in the process of developing empathy: through stories and identifying with the protagonists, he or she can learn to “put him or herself in the shoes” of the different characters and also achieve valid emotional management tools by presenting each emotion through reading a story. This can be achieved above all thanks to the fact that books lend themselves to conversation with children on the most diverse topics, including, precisely, emotions. Adults can therefore involve the children in what is happening in the stories, making comments and examining what is happening in them, inviting them to interpret the images.

This dialogue helps children to analyse the book, talking about life, commenting on the various types of experiences and linking them to their own, clarifying their own ideas. Since most of the stories revolve around people or anthropomorphic animals, who experience emotions and feelings in what happens to them and what they do, these conversations prove to be perfect opportunities to stimulate children to talk about feelings and emotions in order to develop their empathic skills and emotional intelligence. Thus, while having fun and without effort, children can acquire emotional skills that are fundamental for their own harmonious growth. In terms of moral development, reading quality books can foster the acquisition of values, models and principles in children, avoiding a lot of abstract discourse that is often alien to their reality. The choice of books, therefore, from early childhood cannot be accidental, it is very important as they provide children with 'indications' and models of behaviour: stories propose, in one way or another, a world, possible and appropriate behaviour, emotions that can be felt in relation to certain encounters or events, they provide rules of conduct and morals (Batini, 2011).

In this sense, it can be useful to read stories that talk about play, sharing, friendship, acceptance of diversity, so as to facilitate the achievement of those principles that are important for personal and social well-being.

Reading with children in early childhood is, first and foremost, an enjoyable activity that contributes to the immediate psychophysical well-being of both the child and the adult reading with him/her. Listening to a story read aloud, leafing through a book, playing with a nursery rhyme, are all activities that aim to make children feel good, thanks to the contact, closeness, intimacy and complicity that attentive and helpful adults create around them. Early reading today represents a powerful means to renew and strengthen the relationship between adult and child. The quality of the relationship is fundamental to the child's development, because from birth the

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child is already a social and symbolic being rich in skills, with cognitive capacities for self-learning (Vygotsky,1973).

The relational approach is the methodological principle that is proposed in the expressive reading workshops to foster the development of emotional literacy in working with children in the 0-6 childhood education services. Being able to build a daily relationship between children and books is an operation that requires attention, curiosity, a desire to measure oneself against one's own abilities as an expressive reader and awareness of one's own choices. Precisely because of its characteristics, the crèche is a privileged place to propose the first books and readings, because it prepares dynamic and open contexts, supporting the child's learning phases linked to positive emotions. Alongside these emotional, affective and cognitive reasons, there are certainly others of an exquisitely evolutionary nature, which characterise the relationship between the child and the book. With very young children it is the narrative voice that supports and accompanies the important process of symbolisation that they initiate at a very early age. Working with and through symbols means, for the child, acquiring the ability to represent things, objects, people, situations, even in their absence, learning to replace them with signs and images that evoke them.

The stories told, read or invented and the images contained in books constitute the richest symbolic material in terms of possibilities and indirect experiences that can be offered to children. In the symbolic space created by expressive reading and the vision of images, children can move around with confidence, experiencing feelings and thoughts, recognising emotions (e.g. emotions such as anger, disgust, fear, sadness, joy) that do not guilt or hurt others; simulating conflicts and tensions that are resolved without drama, coming into contact with complex situations that activate new thoughts and new responses linked to their daily lives.

The process of symbolisation is fundamental for children, because transforming reality into symbols gives them control over their emotions, increasing their ability to assimilate knowledge and make generalisations. In other words, symbolising allows them to construct their own personal set of words, images and cognitive functions in interaction with other children and adults. Early books do an excellent job of initiating symbolisation, because they construct mental images that are the effective narrative representation of the object.

Reading, therefore, offers children models of life and styles of behaviour, social relationships with which to compare themselves, analogies with everyday problems, possible solutions or mediations with respect to strong emotions or conflictual situations and events. Territorial educational policies welcome social and cultural instances on reading, as a systematic and organised practice, from early childhood onwards, with institutional responses that are part of the evolution of services for children. Increasingly, activities such as Reading Centres - also called 'reading space', 'children's library', 'zerosei library' - are being set up to encourage the en-

counter between books and children between 0 and 6 years of age, accompanied by parents, educators and teachers. These projects, based on the experience of reading by the adult to the child, make it possible to initiate the process of cognitive and emotional literacy from an early age. The earliest possible introduction of children to reading is understood as a probability of success compared to late exposure, since the ability to read is the result of a long and articulated process of symbolisation that goes from drawing, to interpreting the drawing, to reading and understanding the text. It should be emphasised that in Reading Centre projects the main aim is not the teaching of reading technique, but the consolidation of motivation for reading and the building of the ability to grasp links between elements, both real and symbolic. In this regard, it is worth mentioning 'Nati per leggere', which is one of the Italian projects on reading conceived in 1999 (www.natiperleggere.it). It is promoted by the alliance between librarians and paediatricians. It has involved the following associations: the Associazione Culturale Pediatri (ACP), which brings together three thousand paediatricians with an exclusively cultural purpose; the Associazione Italiana Biblioteche (Italian Library Association), which brings together more than four thousand librarians, libraries, documentation centres, information services operating in the various environments of the profession; the Centro per la Salute del Bambino - ONLUS (CSB), which has training, research and solidarity activities for children as its statutory purposes. The alliance between librarians and paediatricians stems from society's need to concretely support the development of the habit of reading to children from pre-school age. The project is active throughout the country with around 400 local projects involving 1195 Italian municipalities. 'Born to read' aims to promote the child's encounter with books from the age of 6 months to 6 years using, among other strategies, expressive and emotional reading. The project starts from the idea that every child has the right to be protected: from illness, from violence, from the lack of adequate opportunities for affective and cognitive development. It has been documented by many studies how a continuous reading activity from the adult to the child, in pre-school age, has a benefit, or rather, has a positive influence both from a relational and cognitive point of view: from a relational point of view because it is an opportunity for a relationship between child and parent; from a cognitive point of view because it allows for earlier and better development of language comprehension and reading skills. In addition to these two positive influences, it helps to create the habit of reading, which lasts over time. Over the last few years, the project has had a remarkable spread, seeing the involvement of an increasing number of operators and services for children, including paediatricians, librarians, socio-cultural operators, educators, teachers, pedagogues, organisations and associations, educational centres and family centres. The experience of the 'Born to read' project has shown that reading contains many meanings linked to positive and affective communication patterns that have

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a significant influence on the emotional development of children. It is considered the most important activity for the acquisition of the skills necessary for success in reading and the development of positive emotions. Through reading, the child gradually takes possession of the mother tongue, its words, form and structure. This will enable him/her to build his/her own mental structures in order to be able to understand space-time relationships and distances. The project is rooted in studies on early literacy, the development of the conditions and skills for learning to read and the early ability to solve problems of increasing difficulty involving the comprehension of written texts. On the other hand, "Born to read" represents one of the most widespread projects in the world on the promotion of reading, involving health and cultural services in a cross-sectoral way, reading and health are intrinsically connected and in a non-explicit way, resilience is also developed, in the sense hypothesised and described by Walsh (2008). In fact, much research shows how 'Born to Read' is a project capable of promoting health and resilience with respect to the construction of informal networks, secure and multiple attachment, motor humour, the construction of meaningful relationships, emotional education, and the construction of a sense of coherence. The state of 'well-being', therefore, cannot disregard the dimension of the relationship with oneself and with others and its achievement is deeply linked to an emotional and empathic dimension that balances states of instability and uncertainty. We can affirm, from this perspective, that reading, despite causing fatigue, can become a source of well-being. Reading competence is a competence that heals. Reading can also be regarded as a resource for generating health, as intuited by Antonovsky (1996) in his salutogenic model.

Expressive and emotional reading - as a result of this reflection - has turned out to be a useful tool that can be applied at various times; even in the nursery and pre-school, this awareness on the part of educators and teachers has prompted them to experiment with building a more meaningful relationship with children and families. The activity of reading to children can be proposed at different times such as during the reception, during educational activities or at bedtime. Reception has a fundamental function, since it is the moment that predisposes children to listening. The first contact with the children, the moment of picking them up from the section or dividing them into the groups that are going to read in the story corner, often called the reading corner, should be considered important. The most effective way of welcoming very young children consists of ritual actions, which make the reading activity into something extraordinary, an event that attracts their imagination, prepares them to take in and get involved. Rituals can be many other things, children can be invited to deposit something, such as their own shoes, outside the story place to sit on the soft mat that marks the transition from the ordinary environment of the nursery to the 'extraordinary' space dedicated to reading in order to attract their attention. When choosing the space to be used for reading in the crèche and

kindergarten, and when setting up the story place, it is necessary to act with care and attention. Making shared choices and not letting decisions happen by chance is perhaps the most effective rule of conduct. For this it is useful to take a few criteria into account. Choose a venue that is easily accessible to all children and parents. It must be a strategic point for movement within the nursery, but also a visible point for families to be intrigued and stimulate attention towards reading. A good choice is a space that can be acoustically isolated, so that reading is not disturbed by calls between people and various noises. A room with large windows, where natural light can enter, is preferable to one that is artificially lit. The environment must convey quietness and tranquillity, emphasising the book and facilitating relationships. The shelves, bookcases and trolleys should be low, so that the books, preferably with their covers, are freely accessible to the children. Additional furniture is not necessary, because the children must be able to move freely in the space, crawl, lie down and read comfortably. The readings that take place in the story place take place systematically, i.e. they have defined times, according to the timetable and organisation laid down in the Educational Project of the individual 0-6 educational service. The most favourable part of the day must be chosen for the reading: away from tiredness, appetite, entering and leaving the nursery or pre-school, i.e. when the children are most relaxed and available, as for any other activity that requires a certain amount of effort. It is necessary for the educator or teacher to take into account the timing of the reception, the reading, the dialogue that must follow the listening and the time necessary for the children to 'read' independently, according to individual preferences and times, free among the books. The contribution presented here, with its articulations, demonstrates that children must be given the possibility of attention. And this attention is revealed precisely in participation in reading, in the discovery of the book that becomes a useful tool for learning about the world. Reading is therefore a fruitful tool for promoting individual and social well-being, it improves linguistic, logical and text comprehension skills. It increases knowledge of the world but also knowledge of oneself and others, keeps the cognitive functions of memory, attention and concentration, reasoning and critical capacity active. Stories provide access to the sphere of feelings and emotions of the protagonists and in this way increase emotional literacy. The emotional vocabulary becomes broader and this improves the definition, expression and understanding of one's own and others' emotions. Identifying with the characters in the stories allows one to develop the ability to feel the other's emotionality (what they are feeling and how), i.e. empathy. Mayer and Salovey (2004) call the letter "the first home of emotional intelligence": assuming that books are the place where we practise our feelings, reflecting on the great potential of the letter in the formation of the individual and considering the fact that, through the actions, thoughts and emotions of fictional characters, children in particular can learn about themselves and the world, then it is possible to

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understand reading as a useful tool for acquiring good emotional competence. All these potentialities of reading are invaluable for children who, as they grow up, are constantly in search of reference points, they structure their own being, they build images with which to think, they learn to recognise and manage their emotions, and this is why it is possible to think of reading as a tool for educating emotions, hypothesising a real emotional literacy course in school through a selection of books. It is up to the educator and the teacher, in fact, to choose the materials through which to introduce children to reading, and certainly, by approaching children with a passion for reading, selecting suitable - and above all, interesting - books with which young readers can easily identify, and granting slightly more experienced readers all the 'rights' that we grant ourselves, the possibility of making them good readers for life is concrete. Only if one succeeds in transmitting a love of reading to children, will they become passionate readers and be able to benefit from the infinite advantages of this educational experience, first and foremost the possibility of practising the most important emotional and social skills, becoming emotionally aware subjects, able to put their inner world in order and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships throughout their lives.

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ For further information, see the dedicated special on the Regione Toscana website: <https://www.regione.toscana.it/scuola/speciali/leggereforte>

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In fede,



Gianluca Amatori



Maria Buccolo