

## **CHILDREN OUTSIDE THE BIRTH FAMILY: THE CHALLENGE OF PRESERVING AND NARRATING THE LIFE STORY BETWEEN DISTANCES AND PRESENCES. PROPOSALS FOR EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT**

### **BAMBINI FUORI DALLA FAMIGLIA DI NASCITA: LA SFIDA DI PRESERVARE E RACCONTARE LA STORIA DI VITA TRA DISTANZE E PRESENZE. PROPOSTE DI SUPPORTO EDUCATIVO**

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#### **Abstract**

In Italy, a significant number of children live outside their birth families. It is noted that this condition represents an experience of discontinuity in the children's life paths and requires support by professionals or foster and adoptive parents. This reality questions educational reflection since it is intertwined with the process of building personal identity. It is a challenge that involves the person throughout his or her entire life and implies elements that pertain to the sphere of memory and existential planning. This contribution intends to dwell on the educational dimensions that can guide the process of supporting children, with a view to encouraging the elaboration and the construction of a narrative identity.

In Italia, un numero significativo di bambini vive al di fuori della propria famiglia d'origine. Si segnala che questa condizione rappresenta un'esperienza di discontinuità nei percorsi di vita dei minori e richiede il supporto di professionisti o genitori affidatari e adottivi. Questa realtà interpella la riflessione educativa poiché si intreccia con il processo di costruzione dell'identità personale. È una sfida che coinvolge la persona lungo tutta la sua vita e implica elementi che appartengono alla sfera della memoria e della progettualità esistenziale. Il presente contributo intende soffermarsi sulle dimensioni educative che possono orientare il processo di sostegno ai bambini, nell'ottica di favorire l'elaborazione e la costruzione di un'identità narrativa.

#### **Keywords**

Foster care; adoption; residential childcare services; educational support; narrative identity.  
Affidamento; adozione; servizi residenziali per l'infanzia; supporto educativo; identità narrativa.

## 1. The context

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) proclaims that "childhood is entitled to special care and assistance" (Preamble), for the full and harmonious development of personality. The child has the right to grow up in a family environment, which provides "an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding" (Preamble) and material, affective, educational, and moral support<sup>1</sup>. The *Convention* affirms the right to live, grow and be cared for in a family environment, respecting "the responsibilities, rights and duties" of both parents (art. 5) for the "upbringing and development of the child" (art. 18.1).

In this way, the law highlights the family's irreplaceable role, as "fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children" (Preamble). For this reason, to the family "should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community" (Preamble).

States shall ensure "the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children" (art. 18.2) and shall "provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing" (art. 27.3). States should also take "appropriate measures" to assist parents and other people having responsibility for the child in case of need (art. 27.4).

However, the family does not always succeed or can fulfil its educational functions. Where the conditions of serious and persistent family negligence and a situation detrimental to the psycho-physical integrity of the offspring are identified, the *Convention* provides that the competent authorities must guarantee special protection and assistance to the child (art. 20.1). For these situations, States ensure alternative care, such as "foster placement, kafalah of Islamic law, adoption or, if necessary, placement in suitable institutions for the care of children" (art. 20.3). The criteria for the choice of alternative protection measure shall be defined by reference to the need to ensure "continuity in a child's upbringing and to the child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background" (art. 20.3).

In Italy, the reference text is Law 4 May 1983, n. 184 "*Regulation of adoption and foster care of children*", as amended. The document reaffirms the principles of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and states that the child temporarily deprived of a suitable family environment comes "entrusted to a family, preferably with children, or to a single person, able to ensure the maintenance, education, and emotional relationships" (art. 2). Where this is not possible, the child may be placed in a family-type residential care service.

In Italy, a significant number of children live outside their birth families. On 31 December 2019, there were 13,555 children in foster care and 14,053 children in residential care service (MLPS, 2019). These data show, from 2017 to 2019, an increase in the number of children in residential care service, while there is a slight decrease in the number of children in foster care.

A special reflection deserves the presence in residential care services of about 62.4% of unaccompanied or separated children, who come to Italy after a migration process without parents (MLPS, 2020). The numbers are expected to increase, as the Report dated October 2022, indicates the presence of 18,876 unaccompanied children on the national territory (MLPS, 2022).

With regard to adoption, we can see, in the years between 2001 and 2021, a total of 47,638 intercountry adoptions and 21,015 domestic adoptions.

It is noted that the phenomenon under consideration is characterized by extreme complexity. From an educational perspective, it is important to reflect on what it means to grow out of one's birth family. The stories of

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the term child is used for "every human being below the age of eighteen years" (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989).

these children are marked by significant moments of rupture: the separation from parents or other caregivers; the leaving of their own context of life and, sometimes, the landing in a country with language, traditions, culture very far from those of their origin. These events, not infrequently, are intertwined with behavioural disorders or severe traumatic experiences (abuse, ill-treatment, abandonment, long period of institutionalisation) and mental or physical disability (Hague Conference on Private International Law, 2005; 2008).

Despite the diversification of experiences, we can see how these children are challenged by the task of the development of their own identity by seeking continuity in the discontinuity of life. As Dewey says:

Most mortals are conscious that a split often occurs between their present living and their past and future. Then the past hangs upon them as a burden; it invades the present with a sense of regret, of opportunities not used, and of consequences we wish undone. It rests upon the present as an oppression, instead of being a storehouse of resources by which to move confidently forward. But the live creature adopts its past; it can make friends with even its stupidities, using the ad warning that increase present wariness (Dewey, 1934, p. 18).

For those who live outside the birth family, this 'split' needs to be recomposed during life, bringing back to a horizon of meaning the experience. It is a matter of knowing one's own history, elaborating one's own experience, and coming at a possible integration of personal and family identity. In this, we can see a reference with the concept of narrative identity proposed by Ricoeur (1993), the result of a continuous dialectical process of 'cohesion and dispersion', that arises from the interweaving of the self with otherness, within a space and a time in which it unravels. Life story and identity are inextricably intertwined. Cyrulnik (2009) reminds us that "human without history have a scattered soul, without memory and without plan. [...] When you have no memory you become nobody and when you are afraid of your past you let yourself be trapped by your shadow" (p. 19, auth. Trans).

The personal identity is a psychosocial construct (Erikson, 1968), which "stands at the interface of individual personality, social relationships, subjective awareness, and external context" (Grotevant, 1997, p. 5). It is a life-long process, and it refers to one's sense of continuity over time, as identity involves exploring, reviewing, or reconsidering life choices and experiences across one's past, present, and future as well as integrative phases. Identity is built since elements that come from the birth family, the culture of origin, the caregivers, and the host context.

Supporting the person in the task of the construction of a sense of identity is a challenge that urgently calls for educational reflection. We therefore ask ourselves, what elements can facilitate the construction of a sense of the unitary self within unfavourable past events and multiple belonging? How to support the child living outside the birth family in this process? How can we help the child to make a synthesis between life experiences that are very distant, marked by breaks, losses, the absence of memories?

On the one hand, it is important to reflect on how to accompany the child to compose the puzzle of memories and fragments of recollections; and, on the other hand, to search for methodologies and good practices that can urge to take care of the pieces of this complex and articulated history, which is often shared by several people in times far apart.

## **2. Support children to reframe their own life story**

In an educational perspective, it is believed that narration can be a "transformative tool of the person and the group they belong to" (Pati, 2017, p. 7, auth. Trans), which allows to make order in family life, to search for the underlying meaning, to build belonging and attachment, to support the differentiation of self. Bruner identifies in the person a sort of "readiness for meaning" (Bruner, 1990, p. 72) and a human "push to organize experience narra-

tively" (p. 79). The narratives lend a "sense of coherence and meaning to the experience of individuals constructing them" (Grotevant, 1997, p. 11). Self-telling helps to develop thinking (Demetrio, 1995), to reflect and to envisage alternatives; allows to trace points of rupture and elements of continuity; strengthens self-knowledge and understanding of experience. With Bruner (1990) we can affirm that "the lives and Selves we construct are the outcomes of this process of meaning-construction" (p. 138).

The self-narrative becomes a possibility to re-signify the events and, at the same time, reveal new possibilities of planning one's own existence. We refer here to Ricoeur (1988/1985) and to the concept of repetition understood not only as a recovery of the past, of what each has been, but also as a bridge to the future: "Repetition opens in the past untapped, aborted or repressed potential. It reopens the past in the direction of the coming. By sealing the link between passing on and deciding (*trans-mission et ré-solution*) the concept of repetition manages at the same time to preserve the primacy of the future and the shift on the being-state" (p. 118, auth. Trans). The past, in this way, ceases to be a "burden suspended" over one's own heads and opens to new perspectives.

The narrative is inscribed in a relational horizon, where the I-You relationship (at the centre of Buber's reflection) makes it possible to construct one's own identity.

In the light of the formative value of the narrative, we understand the importance of providing support paths, aimed at children who are outside of the birth family, that can stimulate and encourage this process of constructing a sense of identity while staying aware that, still as Ricoeur (1988/1985) claims, the narrative identity is not "stable and without cracks" and "it is done and continually undone" (pp. 378-379, auth. Trans). The author reminds us of the dynamic nature of identity formation, a process which integrates many aspects, including unfavourable experiences such as multiple foster placements.

How then to support children who live outside their birth family in the process of construction of their own narrative identity? What attentions to have in the communication and narrative process? There are some educational criteria that could guide in this construction of one's own identity and that could prevail in finding a principle of continuity through change.

- *The criterion of gradualness and respect for the time of the child.* Gradualness means enriching the family history over time, leaving the child a space of expression, and ensuring access to a greater understanding of his/her past.

- *The criterion of narrative truth.* It is indispensable to preserve the criterion of truth about what is known of past experiences. "I recommend staying with the truth, always answered at the child's level" (O'Malley, 2000, p. 26). Narrative truth means not to distort or not to sweeten the story, and even more searching for the most suitable words, in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. The point is to plant seeds at each new developmental stage of the child.

- *Pay attention to the child's roots and to experiences of care and love lived.* The children need to know that the birth parents and the caregivers loved them. It is important to value their roots. This implies coming into a symbolic contact with the birth families' histories, not infrequently marked by vulnerability, fragility, socio-cultural poverty, but also with different and distant contexts of life for culture or geographical origin. To confirm these roots means to trace those aspects of a good present in the past of the child.

- *Preserving memories.* It is important to preserve the fragments of the child's life story. There are some memories which belong to child and others which need to be taken care of by adults (professionals or foster/adoptive parents) who are accommodating the child for a transitional period. In these cases, it is essential to leave a trace of this time and of what has been gathered about previous experiences: they can be objects, photos, writings, graphics, artworks, diaries or Lifebooks that create "a life records for a child" (O'Malley,

2000, p. 7) and that preserve memories of the past (Backhaus, 1984; Foranda, 2017; Blackmore *et al.*, 2020). Such materials become a kind of memory luggage, which must be preserved and shared in the passage from different placements.

If the adults do not understand the value of a 'heritage' of historical sources with respect to child's life history, they will hardly strive for such materials and for making them accessible to the child. It then becomes essential to increase awareness about the opportunity to keep track of elements that allow child to reconstruct the past, to be aware of the present and to project the future.

### **3. Tools and good practices to preserve and build life stories**

As we have just said, there are good practices that ask to be known, implemented, and validated in the children's placement (residential care services, adoptive or foster families). In view of the construction of personal history are useful images, objects and words which could revive childhood, where the memories of the child are vague, confused or completely absent (Francis, 2013). The richness of these tools is contained in the possibility of weaving the plot of child's story with concrete support (Micheal *et al.*, 2002). They represent an opportunity to preserve in time traces of their past, of the acceptance received, of elements that over time can be forgotten, altered, or retained only partially.

In Italy, there are no reference protocols, practices or methodologies spread homogeneously throughout the country. This is to the detriment of the proper custody of information and of an adequate support of the child in the reconstruction and elaboration of his/her own history.

So which elements should we pay attention to?

- *Collect and store historical sources.* Collect elements of the past useful for the reconstruction of the story of the child: photos or objects that the child brings with him/her; stories or anecdotes that come from previous caregivers; daily routines.

- *Collect the memories of the child.* It is important to preserve reminiscences that remain etched in the memory of the child and that reach a level of sharing. There may be limitations derived from not knowing how to speak or not mastering the language of the host country. Moreover, there may be criticalities connected with the fact that the need to have a memory can induce children to romanticize their own experience, making it difficult to distinguish truth from fiction. But it is important to keep a record of this. Adults can transcribe the stories of the children, but also encourage to draw what they remember from the birth parents or caregivers or friends, to the house or placement in which they lived, to the country of origin. Visual memories constitute a firm image on past reminiscences.

- *Representation and symbolic game.* Some children wish to reproduce in fiction and dramatize salient moments of their personal history: birth, breastfeeding, separation from the birth family, life within placements, painful moments, or joyful events. These ways of presenting one's own history and experience refer to the correlation between the dramatic and the cognitive instance of man (Melchiorre, 1993). Through dramatization, "consciousness explores and embodies [...] the possibilities of existence, the many perspectives of life in which being manifests itself without exhausting itself" (Cascetta, Peja, 2003, p. 10, auth. Trans). It allows access to new acquisitions and awareness, also through the exploration of one's own emotional world and of more latent aspects, which pertain to the sphere of human survival. Dramatization, in close connection with the rite, also contributes to the construction and consolidation of personal and collective identity.

- *Keep track of the present*, through taking photographs, noting the salient steps of growth (the acquisition of the first autonomy: weaning, motor skills and speech; any health issues), collecting memories, thoughts, life stories.
- *Encourage group meetings between people with similar experiences*. In the perspective outlined by the dialogical relationship of Buber (1958), the encounter with the other allows a reflection and a deep understanding of one's own experience. For a child who lives outside his birth family, the possibility of meeting peers or adults who have lived such an experience becomes decisive. This facilitates the understanding of one-self history and it provide an important emotional and social support.
- *Encourage knowledge of the birth culture*. If children have a migratory background, it is important to offer them opportunities to appropriate their roots and preserve elements of the culture of the country of origin (Brocious, 2017).

### Conclusions

For Demetrio (1995), the action of remembering carries out a "prolonged pedagogical function, of which we only become aware by reflecting on it" (p. 112, auth. Trans). The result is a cognitive gain following from the ability to settle experiences and an accurate weighting of the same. The perspective vision that is obtained is an exhortation to "cultivate a pedagogy of memory", which contributes to the process of formation of Self and Self-realization.

The process of construction of the personal identity is therefore a complex task, which involves the oral and written narration, but also the sphere of corporeity with its unprecedented possibilities of dramatization and representation. We can consider as fundamental the closeness of adults who know how to stand in painful situations and to support the child in the task of re-signifying existence. Those who become able to tell their own story of pain can, in fact, implement personal resilience and grasp hidden meanings in the traumatic experience lived.

The confident gaze towards life and the future becomes possible in a path in which the person can weave this link between past and present and turn to possible futures and to an existential redesign.

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