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# Creating to Connect, Engaging to Learn: Artistic and Digital Languages in a Three-Year Affective Education Programme

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**Abstract:** School engagement cannot be reduced to observable participation or persistence in tasks, but must be interpreted as a multidimensional, situated and relational process, influenced by the quality of interactions and the opportunities offered to pupils to contribute to the educational experience. This paper develops a theoretical and critical reflection based on a three-year programme of affective, relational and social education implemented in lower secondary schools. This paper stems from the need to understand the pedagogical conditions under which the integration of bodily, artistic and digital languages can support students' engagement and agency in affective and relational education programmes. The aim is to explore the value of multimodality, the role of artefacts in the construction of reflective distance, and the opportunities and challenges introduced by digital technologies and generative artificial intelligence.

**Keywords:** student engagement; affective education; multimodal learning; digital mediation; embodied cognition

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## 1. Introduction

*Engagement* constitutes a central dimension of the educational experience; yet its identification with immediately observable behaviours risks providing only a partial representation of it ( Fredricks et al., 2004). Indeed, mere participation or compliance with the requirements of an assignment, as well as the expression of interest, do not necessarily equate to meaningful engagement, given that: '[…] positive responses to questions about effort and homework may reflect procedural engagement even when students' intellectual commitment to the material […] is attenuated.' (Gamoran & Nystrand, 1992, p. 50) . The most recent research suggests that *engagement* should be viewed as a dynamic process, in which participation, cognitive processing, the affective dimension, relationships and the opportunity to influence the activity are mutually reinforcing ( Salmela-Aro et al., 2021; Wong & Liem, 2022). In particular, in the case of pre-adolescent pupils, *'student voice'* and *'agency'* appear to take on greater significance provided that participation is not merely consultative but enables pupils to contribute actively to decisions, thereby influencing their ability to reflect on their own role in the educational experience (Schaefer et al., 2024).

This takes on particular significance with regard to emotional education: indeed, the recognition of one's own and others' experiences, an understanding of interpersonal boundaries, as well as conflict management and the assumption of responsibility for

one's own actions cannot be conveyed through a series of sterile content but stem from a constant endeavour to design experiences that enable students to observe, represent, discuss and refine relational skills; that is, 'developing and practising the skills (not just presupposing or stating what those skills are)' (Setty, 2022, p. 532) .

The most recent reviews *of Social and Emotional Learning* programmes aimed at pre-adolescents and adolescents tend to confirm the relevance of structured school-based interventions, whilst also highlighting the diversity of models and the need to explore in greater depth the pedagogical conditions that make such programmes meaningful for this age group (Cosgrove et al., 2024; Lynn et al., 2024).

The issue, therefore, is not merely a question of what content to offer, but rather through which forms of expression and tools it is possible to foster genuine participation. In this regard, *embodied* perspectives applied to learning highlight the close interdependence between cognitive activity, bodily action and the environment, emphasising the importance of situations in which the individual actively produces and reworks their experience (Castro-Alonso et al., 2024). Furthermore, research on multimodality with young adolescents shows how the use of different forms of expression and languages can support personal expression, broaden opportunities for *empowerment*, underpin identity-formation processes and open up diverse avenues for participation (Linder & Falk-Ross, 2024). Building on these premises, this paper examines a three-year programme of affective, relational and social education developed in lower secondary schools, with the aim of critically discussing the role played by artistic, narrative, bodily and digital languages in its design. To this end, a theoretical-critical approach is adopted which brings into dialogue the academic literature on engagement, embodied cognition and student participation with the experience of a three-year educational programme implemented across five lower secondary school classes. The analysis does not aim to measure the effectiveness of the intervention, but rather to identify the conditions under which different forms of mediation can foster the shared construction of meaning, whilst safeguarding interpretative autonomy and responsibility for choices.

The educational programme thus constitutes the concrete context through which to examine four interrelated issues: a) multimodality as a means of accessing the complexity of affective and relational experience; b) the production of artefacts as a process of externalising experience and constructing a reflective distance; c) the digital environment as a space within which adolescent relationships are constructed, represented and interpreted; d) the progressive development *of* students' *agency*, including in their interactions with generative artificial intelligence tools.

## 2. The three-year affective education project: structure and methods

The project was launched in the 2023/2024 academic year in five Year 7 classes at lower secondary school and ran throughout the entire three-year period. The decision to adopt an extended duration stemmed from a desire to avoid an episodic model of affective education, instead accompanying pupils through a developmental phase in which identity, bodily awareness, peer group belonging and relational dynamics are subject to rapid transformations. The main aims of the intervention can be summarised in the following objectives: a) the development of emotional awareness and self-regulation skills; b) the enhancement of listening skills, cooperation and conflict management; c) the recognition of and respect for differences and interpersonal

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boundaries; d) the exploration of more complex issues, such as consent, stereotypes, dysfunctional relationships, bullying and cyberbullying.

The methodological framework is based on an *Embodied Cognition* approach. The workshop was conceived as a space for experience, expression and reflection, in which bodily experience, action, relationships and symbolic re-elaboration all contribute to the construction of meaning. From this perspective, the body takes on an epistemic function: through sensory engagement, shared action and interaction with others and the environment, experience can be explored, represented and progressively reorganised ( , Cuccaro et al., 2024, 2026). Theatre, music, individual and collaborative writing, story-building, scriptwriting, dramatisation and creative production were conceived as languages and mediators of experience, through which affective and relational dimensions—which are difficult to address through definitional transmission alone—could be made representable, shareable and open to discussion.

In the first year, the programme was run primarily by external experts. The priority was to create relational conditions conducive to participation, to work on recognising emotions, and to introduce forms of expression that would allow participants to engage with emotional themes without turning the classroom into a space for the compulsory disclosure of personal experiences. Safeguarding the freedom to choose how much and in what way to disclose oneself takes on particular importance when dealing with sensitive content: 'their right to privacy and anonymity is essential […] as well as the consistent option to abstain from participating' (Trivelli Diaz, 2024, p. 25).

In the second year, the focus gradually shifted towards the teachers, who had previously undergone a training programme and received pedagogical supervision. The importance of teacher training in this process is reflected in the study by , Peña and Teeters , et al. (2021), in which 'the DIA professional development programme promotes an increase in teacher practices addressing social and emotional learning' (p. 25). Training and supervision thus provided the framework through which teachers were gradually entrusted with activities centred on communication, group dynamics, conflict management and the recognition of interpersonal boundaries, whilst at the same time maintaining a space for pedagogical support for their work.

In the third year, the shift towards greater participation directly involved the pupils, who took on a more active role in choosing topics, constructing narratives and producing artefacts intended for sharing with other groups. This transition marks a shift from participation primarily in proposed activities towards more explicit forms of *pupil voice* and *agency*. This distinction is particularly clear in the review by Schaefer et al. (2024), according to whom, 'in the most mature forms of *student voice*, not only are students providing input, but they are also active and collaborative partners and, in many cases, decision-makers' (p. 8). From this perspective, the creation of stories and artefacts can be seen as an opportunity through which students select what they consider significant, give it a communicable form and introduce it into the shared space of the educational community.

Over the course of the three-year period, digital tools were also gradually introduced: applications for music and narrative production, writing environments and generative artificial intelligence tools. Their use was constantly monitored by the teachers and was contingent upon the creation of the artefact and the process of selection, modification, comparison and revision. At the same time, digital technology has become the very subject of affective education itself, as many of the issues addressed

– recognition, reputation, jealousy, consent, control, exclusion and vulnerability – now take on specific forms in media environments ( Cuccaro, 2025 ).

| Year | Main approach | Educational focus | Languages/devices |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1st | External experts | Emotional awareness, bodily awareness, relational atmosphere | Embodied workshops, theatre, music, writing |
| 2nd | Trainers with training and supervision | Communication, conflict, boundaries, group dynamics | Teaching planning, cooperative activities, storytelling |
| 3rd | Teachers and pupils | Consent, respect, stereotypes, healthy relationships, digital citizenship | Artifacts, artistic and digital creations, generative AI |

Table 1. Pedagogical progression of the three-year programme.

This progression addresses both the complexity of the topics and the redistribution of educational responsibility.

### 3. Artistic languages, multimodality and engagement

We have touched upon how multimodal pedagogies can broaden the possibilities for expression, empowerment and identity formation (Linder & Falk-Ross, 2024). The presence of different languages within the same learning pathway is valuable for the work of transforming meaning required when moving from one form of expression to another. Describing a situation, representing it theatrically, translating it into a musical sequence or constructing a digital version of it means, each time, reformulating it: selecting a point of view, attributing intentions to the characters, organising a temporal framework, considering the audience and negotiating representational choices with others. It is precisely in these stages that multimodality can become an opportunity for processing. As Nielsen et al. (2022 ) observe, the semiotic work lies in transforming them so that the intended meanings are constructed through the arranged sequence (p. 887).

In affective education, the plurality of languages makes it possible to address sensitive content without turning participation into self-revelation. Stories, scenes and symbolic productions introduce what we propose to define *as 'reflective distance*': the condition in which the subject remains sufficiently involved to attribute meaning to the situation and, at the same time, sufficiently distant to be able to observe, discuss and transform it without being required to make their own experience public. The artefact thus takes on a mediating function, because it externalises the interpretative process and makes it available for discussion. Reflection does not occur only after the experience, but takes shape during the construction, revision and negotiation of the product, transforming an individual process of elaboration into a shared object of meaning.

The pedagogical value of artistic languages does not, therefore, lie in simply making the activity more enjoyable or engaging. Theatre, music, storytelling and creative production create spaces in which relational experience can be represented, observed and transformed. In their systematic review of participatory arts programmes aimed at *children* and *young people* (CYP), Williams et al. (2023) observe that 'CYP are supported to express themselves and create their own meanings through engagement

with arts activities' (p. 1760). The point, therefore, is not to identify one language that is intrinsically more effective than the others, but to design conditions and transitions between languages capable of supporting expression, processing and the shared construction of meaning.

**4. From digital as a tool to digital as a relational environment**

The advent of digital technology complicates the situation, because technologies do not simply constitute an additional channel of expression. For adolescents, digital platforms are also contexts in which a sense of belonging, reputation, self-presentation, intimacy and conflict are constructed. It therefore becomes of little use to take screen time as the main interpretative criterion. The systematic review by Avci et al. (2025), based on 32 studies, shows that, for identity development, what adolescents do on social media appears to be more significant than the amount of time spent online: active participation, authenticity of self-presentation and social comparison show different associations with identity exploration, clarity of self-concept and identity distress. On an emotional level, too, the relationships appear complex. Piccerillo and Digennaro (2025) identify associations between patterns of social media use, emotional intelligence, emotional regulation, self-esteem and empathy, but highlight the heterogeneity of the studies and the prevalence of cross-sectional designs, which do not allow for the establishment of unambiguous causal relationships. For affective education, the focus therefore shifts from 'how much' to 'how': from the technologies themselves to the relational, expressive and interpretative practices they enable.

This mediation also introduces specific forms of ambiguity. A message displayed without a reply, a reaction, an image, or content shared or excluded from a conversation can take on considerable emotional significance without, however, offering certain insight into the other person's intention. The review by Badrakh et al. (2024) shows how the very same digital cues used to clarify tone and intention can be interpreted differently depending on the context, the relationship and the characteristics of the individuals involved. This gives rise to an extremely complex educational task: learning to distinguish between what the device makes visible and the interpretation that is constructed from it. In this sense, relational competence also encompasses the ability to suspend judgement, tolerate a degree of uncertainty and subject one's own attributions to scrutiny.

The issue becomes more apparent when technological mediation encroaches upon the boundaries of the relationship. Reviews on cyber-dating abuse document a significant continuity between in-person and digital forms of abuse and show how control, surveillance and pressure can shift from one environment to another without a clear distinction (Afrouz & Vassos, 2024; Rodríguez-deArriba et al., 2024). Insistent requests for location updates, monitoring of online availability, access to login credentials or the non-consensual sharing of images do not merely concern digital safety: they call into question trust, consent, reciprocity and the possibility of self-determination.

The body, too, is fully part of this continuum. In the digital realm, it does not disappear, but is represented, selected, modified, exposed and subjected to the gaze and judgement of others. Fortunato et al.'s (2026) meta-analysis, , covering 45 studies and over 33,000 adolescents, finds a significant association between greater engagement with social media and issues relating to body image, self-objectification, the internalisation of

aesthetic ideals and eating behaviours, with stronger associations found in studies focusing on highly visual platforms. Digital education and emotional education thus converge within the same problematic space: one in which visibility, recognition, the body, intimacy and consent are negotiated through technological devices.

Throughout the three-year course, this perspective has guided the use of media in a way that does not treat them merely as tools for production. Students have used them to construct narratives and projects, but the digital practices themselves have become the subject of discussion facilitated by the teachers.

**5. Agency, artefacts and generative artificial intelligence**

The introduction of generative artificial intelligence has added a further layer to the work of production and reworking. Throughout the course, tools such as ChatGPT, music-generation applications and other digital environments were used in certain stages of content conception, writing and transformation. Their use was not aimed at treating the output as a final result, but at making it part of the process: students were required to evaluate it, select it, modify it, combine it with other proposals or reject it. The educational value therefore lay less in the automatic generation of the product than in the decisions required to give it meaning, coherence and intentionality.

This appears consistent with the most recent literature on the integration of GenAI into learning, which emphasises the importance of pedagogical scaffolding and the critical evaluation of outputs. The systematic review by Liu and Zhong (2025) shows how the educational use of GenAI requires a design that brings together technological knowledge, content and pedagogical mediation, ensuring that the availability of the tool does not replace the learning process.

In affective education, however, the use of artificial intelligence opens up further possibilities. A generative system can also be used to attribute meaning to a relationship: interpreting a message, suggesting a response, evaluating behaviour or seeking guidance when faced with a conflict. AI thus enters a space traditionally reserved for interaction with other people, potentially taking on a role of dialogue and mediation of the affective experience.

This phenomenon is already observable. Herbener and Damholdt (2025), in a study conducted with Danish secondary school pupils, found that 2.44 per cent of the sample used chatbots for reciprocal conversations or to seek emotional support; students who engage in such interactions also report higher levels of loneliness than their peers, although the study design does not allow for the establishment of a causal relationship. The issue becomes even more sensitive when AI is asked to interpret problematic relational situations. Ricon (2025), comparing the responses of ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude and LLaMA to adolescent scenarios involving coercive sexting, psychological abuse, sexual violence, the misuse of images and digital control, identified differences in the models' ability to offer emotional validation, recognise boundaries, provide practical guidance and frame the situation ethically.

The pedagogical issue, therefore, does not concern solely the reliability of the information produced. It concerns the possibility that a generative tool might participate in the construction of the interpretation itself: that it might help to define whether a behaviour is acceptable, whether a boundary has been crossed, what intention to attribute to the other person, and what response to consider appropriate. In the emotional sphere, educating people in the use of AI therefore also means learning to

maintain a critical distance from its interpretations, to compare them with other points of view, and to recognise that the linguistic plausibility of a response does not guarantee either its relational appropriateness or its ethical correctness.

The educational issue can, therefore, be traced back to the distinction between mediation and delegation. In affective education, this distinction is particularly relevant, because interpreting relationships and taking responsibility for one's own choices forms part of the learning process itself. Building on this distinction, we propose a principle of responsible non-delegation: generative tools can broaden the scope for reflection, but they cannot replace the individual's responsibility for attributing meaning and making relational judgements. Even an inadequate, stereotypical output, or one that diverges from the group's intentions, can become educational material if students are asked to discuss it, modify it or reject it, whilst justifying their decisions. Authorship, in this sense, coincides less with the absence of external supports than with the ability to take responsibility for the choices through which a product takes shape.

## 6. Conclusions

The experience under consideration suggests shifting the focus from a conception of engagement based predominantly on the intensity of participation to the position that the student can assume in the construction of meaning. It is not the presence of theatre, music, digital technologies or artificial intelligence that in itself produces engagement. What appears pedagogically relevant is the possibility of choosing, transforming and negotiating the forms through which an experience is represented and made available for discussion. Engagement thus takes on an active dimension: participation means being able to influence the process and recognise oneself in the decisions through which it takes shape.

In affective education, this possibility encounters a specific tension between engagement and the protection of personal experience. Reflective distance allows us to describe a space in which the student can work on emotions, conflicts, boundaries and relationships without the significance of the experience depending on their self-revelation. Fiction, characters and artefacts take on value precisely because they make meaning observable and open to discussion whilst, at the same time, maintaining a boundary between what is processed and what the individual chooses to make public.

The same issue arises with digital mediation and takes on a further dimension with generative artificial intelligence. When a tool intervenes not only in the production of content but also in the formulation of possible interpretations, the educational challenge concerns the possibility of ensuring that responsibility for judgement remains recognisable. The principle of 'responsible non-delegation' proposed in this paper identifies precisely this boundary: mediation can broaden the available alternatives, support re-evaluation and introduce new points of view— —but it cannot replace the individual's responsibility for attributing meaning to relationships and for the decisions that follow from them.

*'Creating to Relate, Engaging to Learn'* expresses, in this sense, a reciprocity. One creates in order to enter into a relationship, and engagement gains depth when the student can contribute to the construction of meaning and take responsibility for the choices through which it takes shape. A pedagogy of engagement in affective education is therefore not simply called upon to make activities more appealing, but to construct contexts in which bodily, artistic, digital and algorithmic mediations broaden the

possibilities for expression without replacing the individual's interpretative responsibility.

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