

# Empathy as an educational tool

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**Riassunto:** *L'Organizzazione Mondiale della Sanità riconosce nelle life skills (abilità utili alla vita) abilità indispensabili all'individuo per perseguire i propri obiettivi di vita e per funzionare all'interno dei contesti sociali. Tra quelle considerate fondamentali, quali il problem solving, il decision making, la gestione delle emozioni e altre ancora, una sembra, nella proposta teorica presentata, assumere un ruolo rilevante per lo sviluppo complessivo dell'individuo, a partire dalla prima infanzia, con attenzione specifica all'incremento delle competenze emotive: l'empatia. L'analisi del concetto, che qui viene proposta, ne evidenzia l'importanza all'interno della relazione educativa. Esso viene, quindi, sviluppato con riferimento specifico al "Principio Dialogico" di M. Buber, alla "Teoria della Personalità" di C. Rogers, ai contributi apportati dagli studi sull'empatia di S. Baron-Cohen: questi contributi, infatti, sottolineano il ruolo dell'empatia come strumento educativo e la sua importanza per l'educazione nella prima infanzia. L'empatia viene definita quale elemento di qualità della relazione stessa e costituisce un elemento indispensabile perché una relazione interpersonale possa definirsi anche educativa. In accordo con quanto sostenuto dalla "teoria dei neuroni specchio", la nostra ipotesi è che l'empatia degli adulti induca corrispondenti reazioni in età prescolare, sebbene non tutti i caretakers sembrano esserne consapevoli.*

**Abstract:** *World Health Organization indicates life skills as essential abilities that allow individuals to pursue their life goals and to work within the social contexts. According to our theoretical proposal, among these skills, such as problem solving, and decision making, coping with stress, etc., empathy assume a lead role in the overall development of the individual, starting from early childhood, with specific attention to the increase in emotional skills. Our analysis highlights the importance of this concept within the educational relationship: We develop the notion of empathy inspired by Buber's Dialogic Communication Theory, Rogers' Theory of Personality and Baron-Cohen's research on Empathy: these contributions emphasize the role of this concept as an educational tool and its importance for early childhood education. Empathy is defined as an element of the quality of the relationship itself and is necessary in interpersonal relationship defined, also, as an educational one. According with Rizzolatti Theory of Mirror Neurons, We hypothesize that adults' empathy induce corresponding reactions in preschoolers, even if not all caretakers are aware of its importance in conditioning other individuals, and its role within relationships.*

Carrying within oneself all the people who love us is empathy's amazing gift!"

(Bellingreri, 2005, 110)

"Tommaso (29 months) comes into the room crying. The teacher takes him in her arms, trying to console him. The children are all sitting on the floor in a circle. Tommaso, sitting on the teacher's lap, slowly stops crying: he is clearly distraught. The workshop begins and the children are invited to say hello, one by one, to their friend "Barbapapa", their ever-present guest during this activity.

Teacher: "So, children, who wants to be the first to say "Hello" to our friend?"

Simone (31 months): "Me!"

Simone greets the soft Barbapapa figure, plays for a bit, and then it's time to hand him over to a classmate. During the workshops the children have become accustomed to handing the soft toy to a child next to themselves, whether on their right or their left, and so on, until they gone all around the circle. But this time something different happens:

Teacher: "Simone, who do you want to give Barbapapa to?"

Simone thinks and does something neither he nor his classmates have ever done during the other lessons.

Simone: "To Tommy!"

And with that, he gets up and goes over to his friend sat on the teacher's lap, on the other side of the circle, and then goes and sits back down.

Tommaso doesn't say anything, but he's smiling again. Simone looks at him and starts smiling too..."

(Preschool "G." – Turin – April 2013)

It is nice to think that the scene described above is a manifestation of one of the most important capacities possessed by humans: that is, the capacity to put oneself "in another person's shoes", not just in cognitive terms ("understanding someone else's point of view") but also and above all in emotional: this is what we call *empathy*.

## The origin of empathy

Some might not share the interpretation of the episode described above, as the definition of the construct, as we shall see, would seem to render it

inapplicable to early childhood. Nonetheless, experience teaches educators employed in services provided for this age group that even children this young can be capable of empathy – albeit not in its mature form – and not just of emotional contagion<sup>1</sup>. Episodes like Tommaso and Simone’s are not infrequent in the day-to-day life of nursery schools and preschools: every educator could cite similar experiences.

In his most famous work, Daniel Goleman mentions an episode which is not so far removed from the one described above: “And fifteen month-old Michael went to get his own teddy bear for his crying friend Paul; when Paul kept crying, Michael retrieved Paul’s security blanket for him.” (it. trans., 1995, 126)

Albeit with some reservations, which we will clarify later and which regard the defence between a *rudimentary* form of empathy and a *mature* one, as Goleman points out *the roots of empathy can be traced to infancy* (*Id.*).

Much has been written about this construct in the literature, probably because the experience of empathy touches everyone in daily life, especially as far as significant social relationships are concerned: in general, individuals have an idea of what it means to share other people’s emotions and identify themselves in what others feel (Bonino, 1998, 8). We say *in general* because, as a number of important studies have shown (Baron-Cohen, 2012) and as history and the news often suggest, not quite everybody would seem to be in possession of it.

There remains little doubt, however, as to the important role that it plays for individuals and for the development of social relations. Darwin (1872) explained how most of our emotional reactions are in reality responses which over time have demonstrated their value in adaptive terms, specifically with a view to the evolution of the species. Specifically with regard to empathy: “... most of our interactions with our environment and our emotional behaviour itself depend on our capacity to perceive and understand the emotions of others.” (Rizzolatti, 2006, 168)

Empathy, therefore, is and has been essential for the individual because it has permitted its evolution and survival. To give a further example, which is probably familiar to early childhood educators, John Bowlby, in his attachment theory, pointed out that the bond with a specific attachment figure, the mother, is the prototype for future social relations (Bowlby, 1969) and that empathy is essential to the bond of attachment itself. The way in which people are loved and accepted right from birth activates – or fails to activate – their predisposition to social relations: the mother’s capacity for

empathy, therefore, is indispensable in this process of activation (Bellingreri, 2005), as it allows her to understand and anticipate her child's wants and needs. One might even be induced to believe that empathy is an innate capacity of the individual, while in fact it is not: people *become* empathetic (Bellingreri, 2013), bringing to expression a capacity which they possess right from birth.

It is no surprise, then, that the World Health Organisation (WHO) decided, in 1997, to consider it one of the *life skills* necessary for the individual to attain and maintain a state of good health and well-being, as it both influences behaviour and lifestyles and enables the individuals to have control over their environment and to manage it. Specifically, empathy is also fundamental because it influences, or underpins, several other skills listed by the WHO (such as problem solving, decision making, the ability to manage stress, etc.). For example, it is enough to think about the role of empathy in fostering the ability to manage social relations in order to understand its importance.

Carl Rogers has pointed out several times that in reality empathy has been essential to the conservation of the human race, which otherwise would have been led to destroy itself (1977; 1980), as it is at the basis of intersubjectivity and its absence would have made most social relations impossible.

In this regard, Simon Baron-Cohen (2012), who has conducted studies on the subject for thirty years observing it from several viewpoints, has pointed out that behind what humanity terms "evil" there is nothing other than absence of empathy, almost as if wishing to emphasise its role in our survival in countering the destructive impulses present in human conduct.

In the light of what has been said so far, if it is true that a certain predisposition to empathy is innate in individuals – albeit with different levels of intensity – it follows that it is essential to foster its development, starting from early childhood and continuing throughout life<sup>2</sup>.

Daily life and history offer us – it bears repeating – countless examples of situations in which empathy appears to be absent. Baron-Cohen, in this regard, invites us to recall the barbaric acts carried out by scientists in Germany's concentration camps during the Second World War, pointing out that behind the absence of this capacity lay, essentially, a *seeing the other as an object* (it. trans. 2012, 2): another example of this is the more recent cases of violence against children in a Pistoia nursery (Italy) in 2009<sup>3</sup>, one of the many cases that have come to light in recent years involving more vulnerable individuals, whether children or the elderly.

Considering the other as an object means – as Martin Buber (1993) has suggested – pitting *Ich-Du* (I-Thou) against *Ich-es* (I-It), devaluing it: relating to others as if they were “objects” means “using them for some purpose” (1993, 6). This, we should acknowledge, may happen to any individual, as in everyone empathy (which requires, as we shall see, recognising in the other a *subject*) move along a continuum between a maximum level and a minimum level. Everyone is located on what is defined an *empathy spectrum* (Baron-Cohen, it. trans. 2012, 13-16), ranging from conditions in which the capacity to identify with what others think or feel and to respond to those thoughts and feelings with a corresponding emotion is greater (*Ivi*, 14) to situations in which this capacity loses strength, so to speak. All of this is normal, and in some respects, even healthy for an individual. However, it is important that individuals be located, for most of their existence, at a point at which empathy is significant and “high”: as Rizzolatti (2013)<sup>4</sup> suggests, “it is like glycaemia, it must not fall below a certain threshold”.

If it is deemed of fundamental importance to foster the development of this capacity right from very early childhood, we cannot disregard those individuals who more than any others might play a role in this process. Beside parental figures, in fact, the professionals who come into contact with children from very early childhood and who spend a significant amount of time with them – that is, educators – also play an extremely important role. Like parents, they are asked to acknowledge their own educational role and own responsibility in fostering, in some way, the emotional – and not merely the cognitive – development of the subjects entrusted to their care, whether children or adolescents. While on the one hand the relationship with the attachment figure (the mother or father) is fundamental in profoundly and often significantly conditioning the individual, it is also true that any lack of empathy may be subsequently compensated for: a failure experienced in one context may be made up or compensated for in another.

Today’s educators, regardless of the age group to which they have to relate, are called upon to be aware of their own emotional states and of their own emotional experiences: indeed, without this awareness, it is not possible for them to become good “emotional trainers/coaches” for their pupils, just as it is also not possible to show them empathy. Educators, therefore, are required to be in tune first of all with themselves and then with others. Goleman specifically suggests that this ability be based on *self-awareness*: “the more open we are to our emotions, the more skilled we will be in reading feelings” (it. trans., 1995, 124).

The aim of these considerations is, therefore, to argue for the importance of putting this *ability* into practice in the educational relationship, where the child or adolescent is allowed to observe, understand and gain experience of the meaning of empathetic action through the example provided by an adult.

## Defining empathy

Defining empathy is – as several authors have observed (Bonino, 1998, 9, Bellingreri, 2005, 22) – an arduous task. It is the result of cognitive and affective factors in the individual that are interconnected with each other, such as awareness of the bounds of one's self, emotional acceptance of the other, motivations, the social environment one is part of, and so on.

The term derives from the German *Einfühlung*, meaning *contemplation of the beautiful*, with reference to the artistic inspiration of the late nineteenth century (Bellingreri, 2005, 35). The term *empathy* owes its origin to Edward Titchener, an American psychologist who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, translated the German term literally: “*feeling into*”, with reference specifically to aesthetic enjoyment (Bonino, 1998, 9). Actually the new term was coined in reference to the Greek *empathia*, incidentally very similar to the term *sympathy*. Titchener applied the new concept not only to the relation with objects (specifically with reference to aesthetic enjoyment of art) but also to the relations that characterise the social context. “Feeling into”, suggests Bonino (*Ivi*, 10), therefore refers to a situation and to a person, “with the consequent tendency to imitate the shared emotion” (*ibid*). Empathy, therefore, derives from a sort of physical imitations of another's emotional expression which then evokes the same feelings in the imitator as well (Goleman, *it. trans.* 1995, 127).

Slowly, then, the definition of the concept is evolving away from aesthetic experience, although this was not Titchener's initial intention: his contribution was to identify a term that was distinct from *sympathy*, in its sense of “benevolent compassion which one may feel for other people's suffering but which does not involve any sharing in it” (*ibidem*; Bonino, 1998, 12). If *empathy* means “feeling into”, *sympathy* can be understood as “feeling for” another person: indeed, it does not entail sharing in the other's emotional experience, experiencing the same feeling vicariously<sup>5</sup> but, as it is an emotional orientation, it means feeling “concern” for others. This phenom-

enon is certainly connected to empathy, yet it is extremely different from it.

Returning to our definition, the term rapidly found application in the field of psychology, to the extent that Theodor Lipps (1905) highlighted how in his view aesthetic pleasure was to be understood as the enjoyment of an external object, although placing the accent on the subject experiencing the enjoyment more than on the object itself (Bonino, 1998, 9). According to this perspective, the term implies that “anyone who observes a given gesture in another person projects him/herself onto the other person and thus feels what the other is feeling” (*ibidem*), manifesting a tendency to imitate the gesture perceived.

Over time the concept of empathy was applied to different contexts, ranging from the clinical to the philosophical field through to the neurosciences (consider, for example, Rizzolatti’s contribution and his theory of “mirror neurons”). For each field, a definition representing a specific theoretical orientation was provided; as this is not the place for an exhaustive analysis of the literature, we believe that it is important to highlight the fact that since the beginning of the twentieth century, two orientations have essentially guided research: the first primarily considered the affective nature of empathy (e.g. twentieth-century clinical, social psychology and personality studies), while in the second it was considered a predominantly cognitive experience (the 1970s), above all with the aim of identifying elements which made it measurable from the scientific point of view.

In addition to the many definitions offered in the literature, we feel that the one suggested by Bellingreri is extremely interesting: empathy means that specific “cognitive quality” which characterises interpersonal relations – or at least some of them – that is the “emotional understanding of other people who are known and loved” in their originality (Bonino, 1998, 15-32, in Bellingreri), and that intentional “multidimensional process”, which entails a conscious cognitive representation of the other and emotional involvement (*Ivi*, 68). Indeed, this definition correctly encapsulates both the affective and cognitive orientations.

Carl Rogers, too, offers an effective formulation: “*The state of empathy, of being empathic, is to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and with the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto as if one was the person, but without ever losing this ‘as if’ condition*” (it. trans., 1980, 121)

In some way, therefore, being empathic means emotionally and cognitively experiencing the experience of another, without however losing one-

self: “the other remains other, different from me (...), yet I meet him on his ground which remains his, he does not come to belong to me only because met him there” (Stein, 1917, in Cerri Musso, 1995, 97). Nor, we would add, do we belong to the other.

In the empathic act the experience of the other draws us inside it, radically changing our perspective, and it is perhaps this which, as Cerri Musso points out, is its peculiarity (1995, 96): the other’s experience “is no longer an object in the true sense of the word, as it has drawn me into it” (Stein, it. trans. 1917, 78). My object is constituted by the emotional experience of the other, “so that I am within the subject of that original experience and have the same angle of vision as him, albeit without confusing myself with him” (Cerri Musso, 1995, 96), and allowing the other to remain different from me (*Ivi*, 97).

On the other hand, that immediate understanding of other people’s emotions which, as Rizzolatti observes, is activated by the *mirror neuron* mechanism (Rizzolatti, 2006, 181), is a necessary but not sufficient condition for empathic behaviour<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, in addition to the acknowledgment of one’s own emotions first of all (Goleman, it. trans. 1995, 124) and the capacity to distinguish one’s self from the other, Bellingreri also stresses the fundamental role played by *intention*, which is at the basis of empathic behaviour (Bellingreri, 2013, 99), referring above all to that which as well as being mature (and therefore extremely different from mere emotional contagion) is also genuine (the purpose of which therefore is not to manipulate others). In this respect, returning to what has already been implied, “mature” empathy is that form of empathy which has the capacity to recognise the other as a “universe distinct from oneself” (*Ivi*, 86), one which is wholly original: understanding experiences in emotional and cognitive terms in fact does not mean perceiving the existential horizon of the other as equal to our own<sup>7</sup>. Understanding *by analogy* must also provide for the ability to recognise that what we see and perceive of reality is not what others perceive. Knowing the feelings of others enables us to grasp what is similar to us in them (Buber, 1993, 175; Bellingreri, 2005, 48).

For this to be possible, it is necessary for the *empathising subjects*<sup>8</sup> to have performed the work of self-training on themselves in order to grow in self-awareness and self-management (Bellingreri, 2005, 88) so that they are able to define the boundaries that separate the self from the other: without this process the individual is unable to practise mature empathy, which is also required in educational contexts. Self-knowledge, being ca-

pable of inner discernment, makes it possible to eliminate those disruptive elements which each subject brings into a relationship: individuals drag behind their unresolved experiences, habits, mechanisms, prejudices and judgments which in some way subconsciously condition their own way of relating to others. If it is true that, through the “mirror neuron” system, we *know what others do* (Rizzolatti, 2006), there is reason to believe that our action “activates” a similar, reciprocal mechanism in others.

Being aware of what lies at the root of our action and of our being-in-the-world also constitutes an ethical question for use and for those who have relations with us, precisely because through our behaviour we profoundly influence others; this takes on greater value in reference to contexts in which educational relationships are established, such as educational institutes. Educators who do not set the primary objective of knowing themselves adopt inappropriate behaviour from the ethical point of view, also in respect of the children whom they must accompany in their process of growth, being required to work for their good, their maximum autonomy and inner freedom.

On the subject of education and being educators in one’s relation with children, Antonio Ricci writes: *“We concern ourselves with doing, but we rarely do so with a concern for developing being. Thus everything loses meaning, until in the end anything goes. How sad. So I wonder what other people’s lives can matter to people who have long relinquished the seriousness of their own?”* (Ricci, 2013).

The ethical question within which we frame empathy also regards another important aspect: the motivation which underpins empathic behaviour. Martin Buber (1993, 311-339) uses the term “*disencounter*” to indicate those relations in which the good of the other is not the ultimate end: the concept introduced by the author thus assumes a profoundly negative meaning, as knowing and being in physical, cognitive and emotional proximity to the other are transformed into a tool for manipulating and hurting – knowingly or unknowingly – other people. As Bellingreri (2005) points out: “by projecting into others what we know about them, somehow we domesticate them”, to the detriment of the real identity of who, with us, is involved within the relation. This is true insofar as the subjects who define themselves as *empathising* are not actually aware of the projection mechanisms by virtue of which they attribute experiences and existential meanings to the subjects *empathised with* which do not belong to them: in this way they adopts a *non-authentic* empathic attitude (Bellingreri, 2005,

45-46), which does not bring any unique knowledge of others or, as may happen, even induces to manipulate them.

Setting aside any definitions, the general consensus views empathy as a construct to be necessarily understood in positive terms, without considering whether it is mature or not, genuine or not. On the contrary: with it we can harm ourselves or others “precisely by reason of the gradual attainment of intimacy of mind” (*Ivi*, 21), succumbing to a certain morbid curiosity in knowing and feeling the other. In addition to the positive side, which Bellingerri defines as “sunny”, characterised by listening to the other receptively, there may be another “dark” side linked, in some cases, to the “danger of manipulation or to unwelcome intrusions and intimacy” (*Id.*).

Within a relationship, whether educational or otherwise, the fundamental question that individuals are urged to ask themselves therefore regards the intentions and motivations that impel them to control and manage their own emotional and cognitive states, to understand those of others.

### **Empathy in the educational relationship**

A consideration of this subject is important and essential in order to respond to all of those professionals working in educational institutes who in general formulate training requests geared towards the acquisition of “practical tools for working” with children. Kurt Lewin would reply “nothing is more practical than a good theory”, while Maria Montessori might point out to us, not without reason, that the best “work” we could offer children, respecting them as a developing being, would be to provide them with a space tailored to themselves, rich in stimuli. We are not claiming, in practice, that formulating such requests is not legitimate. Yet we find it perplexing that of the various “tools”, those which in some way call into play the educational relationship itself are the least frequently requested.

Something, slowly, is changing: in recent years organisations responsible for managing these services offer training programmes which examine issues concerning, for example, the profound significance of educational programmes engaged in or concerning the development of emotional competencies.

Indeed, educators are offered a large number of courses to help them become good emotional “coaches”, capable of guiding pupils (children or otherwise) in acknowledging, understanding and managing their emotions.

Nonetheless, it seems to us that training programmes offered today do not sufficiently take account of the fact that of the many “practical” tools, empathy may be among the most important for working within educational institutes. If on the basis of the definition of the construct offered in the preceding pages it is agreed that there is a need to foster and develop this capacity right from early childhood, it follows that it needs to be cultivated first and foremost in those who have to do with childhood on a daily basis and who too often “prove to be generally unaware of the sometimes keen influence that they exert on the child” (Rogers, *it. trans.* 1965, 28).

Naturally it is not a question of subjecting educators to tests and assessments in order to ascertain their capacity for empathy, but rather of the need to ensure that there is a concretely present, keen interest in the aforementioned and necessarily continuous inner process which can ultimately lead them to be true education professionals<sup>9</sup>.

Attaining self-knowledge and living by taking charge of oneself are tasks which these professions are called upon to accomplish: “only he who experiences himself as a person, as a meaningful whole, can understand other people” (Stein, 1971, in Cerri Musso, 124-125).

This, in our view, should entail being characterised by a mature personality capable of being self-regulating even in the most complex situations: it is more the result of a self-educational effort than of a hetero-formative one, as it requires self-knowledge and intentionality on the part of the subject.

In this regard, Rogers asserts that empathy is: “*something that can be developed by training. [Educators] can be helped to become empathic. [...] this subtle, elusive quality [...] is not something one is “born with”; rather, it can be learned, and learned most rapidly in an empathic climate.*” (*it. trans.*, 1980, 129).

Mature empathy is, therefore, that which requires – in the educator too – a continuous process of inner growth, a concern with one’s own being and the deep motivations that guide one in relations with others and in the choice of a profession based on relations. In education this must be considered indispensable.

The literature, in this regard, does not seem to have spared itself. Rogers himself, in setting out the conditions for effective educational relationships, in addition to authenticity and unconditional positive acceptance of the other, includes *empathic understanding*, understood as being the most powerful condition for the effectiveness of the educational relationship (*Id.* 120).

Herbert Franta, reflecting on the need for the educator to assume an *empathic attitude*, stresses that without this ability it is not possible to un-

derstand the communications of learners “or to transform the educational process into a fully-fledged relationship between partners (Franta, 1977, 77). It is even less possible – returning to Rogers – that the process of “personal development” be triggered in the learner (Rogers, it. trans. 1965, 21). Children responded to in the affective sphere feel encouraged to develop their own personality.

Can we define it, then, as an “educational tool”? Empathy, as a phenomenon that characterises every mode of relating, allows us to understand the other and others (Bellingreri, 2005, 23), insofar as it requires self-understanding on the part of the empathising subject. This takes on greater value if we consider that it fosters and promotes the growth of individuals as it enables the subjects to focus their attention on their own deep experience, encouraging introspection, self-understanding and an understanding of the meaning of their own existence (Bruzzzone, 2007, 112), predisposing them to self-directed change and to growth.

Just as it is not possible in life to see directly and know completely the experience which others, in their inner life, “have of themselves, of their world and of me in their world” (Bellingreri, 2005, 24), nor is it possible, for each of us, know oneself fully, but only occasionally. Returning to what has been touched on above, being empathic must entail the awareness that what we see is not what others, inside them, see of themselves. Putting oneself in other people’s clothes and taking on their perspective certainly means taking on the same axis as them (Franta, 1987, 78), in a physical/spatial and perceptual sense. Yet it also means taking on their cognitive and emotional perspective: this allows us to understand others and their emotional experiences as distinct from our own. This notwithstanding, although the knowledge which is born out of such an approach is not objective, it remains “real” as it is characterised by emotions and hence makes it possible to understand something of the other’s heart (*Ivi*, 51) and of one’s own heart in relation to the other.

Empathy, when mature and intentional, thus becomes an educational tool, as it is motivated by the attainment of an ultimate goal: the autonomy of learners and their being capable of understanding themselves (Franta, 1987, 265). This must entail, on the part of the educator, an “unconditional positive consideration” of the other (Rogers, it. trans. 1965, 64-65), far removed from any form of judgment. Indeed, the perspective of the educator is that of “revealer” and enables the other to “see” in turn (Bellingreri, 2005, 285): if in this perspective, then, a judgment or a devaluation is present,

we cannot expect children to see anything different, or that they recognise a value in themselves. The duty of the education is to guide the learner in planning their existence and in being responsible for it. This is the self-formative component of education, above all as the relation with others is a place of encounter with the self.

Being able to understand the experiences of others, both cognitively and emotionally, enables us to grasp their deepest dimension, and to bring out hidden competences. An empathic attitude, as it entails both an understanding of oneself and an understanding of the other, offers “genuine potential for co-education” (Cerri Musso, 1995, 151): this is the virtual space in which the educational relationship develops. Within it, educators, by demonstrating their own authenticity, by placing value on themselves and on the other as active subjects, enables learners to perceive themselves as authors of their own process of growth, autonomous and “responsible for themselves” (Franta, 1988, 62).

In the final analysis, this is the assumption of *responsibility* to which these professionals are called upon to respond from an ethical point of view as well (Feeney, 1999). Indeed, Edith Stein maintained that “great abilities are required of anyone preparing to undertake an educational duty inasmuch as the duty is great” (Cerri Musso, 1995, 151).

Educators must be aware in some way of the importance of their own positive outlook in the attribution of value and meaning that learners will subsequently have of themselves. Recalling the *mirror neuron system* discussed by Rizzolatti, it becomes clear that within a meaningful relationship an individual can become a mirror of the other: adopting non-judgmental, empathic behaviour in relation to oneself and the other will induce the latter to adopt similar behaviour (Rizzolatti, 2006; Corradini, 2013).

## Conclusions

Education sets itself the goal of developing a “life project” with a view to personal self-realisation, the attainment of autonomy and wellbeing for everyone, as well as that condition of well-being defined by the Hastings Center as the development of “people’s capacity to pursue their own vital objectives and to function within shared social contexts” (Hastings Center, 1997).

This is a fundamental task to which educators too must respond, despite the fact that they find themselves working, in their day-to-day experience,

in contexts which rarely recognise their value and role from the educational point of view.

As the literature and professional experience in personal care services show us, the harm done by a lack of love and empathy during childhood may leave a deep mark on the individual and even compromise aspects relating to his/her cognitive as well as emotional development. Recalling Baron-Cohen's assertion, at the basis of our deepest wounds, whose origins often lie in our childhood, is a deprivation in terms of empathy. And it is precisely such deprivations which in a more or less evident manner may limit or compromise the development of our abilities in adulthood, as well as our capacity to relate to others and cope with environmental challenges.

In this regard we shall conclude by posing a number of questions which we feel are extremely important: are educators working in educational institutes truly aware of the fundamental role they are asked to play? Do they understand, at the deepest level and not just "in words" – the importance of the impact which their behaviour, their way of being in the relationship, can have on the learners with whom they relate on a daily basis? And finally, are they aware of the "ethical" duty they have in engaging in a process of self-awareness and elaboration of their own experiences?

It is our hope that soon all educators will be able to answer yes to these questions through their own behaviour: they have a unique, irreplaceable tool at their disposal.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "With the term emotional contagion we refer to all of those immediate, involuntary forms of emotional sharing, characterised by the absence of cognitive mediation, that is automatic reactions to the expressive stimuli manifested by another person: emotion is therefore shared not in a vicarious but in a direct way" (Bonino, 1998, 19).

<sup>2</sup> Whether it is possible to speak of *empathy* in its true sense in early childhood was also discussed by Edith Stein in her doctoral thesis published in 1917, entitled "*Zum Problem der Einfühlung*" (*On the Problem of Empathy*) (Italian translation Ed. Studiun Roma, 1985). Renza Cerri Musso has written on the subject: "*Children do not have sophisticated interpretative schemes that allow them to establish relations on complex coordinates: this is probably why they grasp immediately and thus immediately get to the crux of the matter. Theirs is a form of knowledge that is only apparently empathetic their affectivity (...) is more directed towards feeling than towards establishing cognitive or evaluative relations. The predominant emotional-affective sphere is*

*still subtly delineated and is thus more easily 'attackable' by outside experience*" (Cerri Musso, 1995, 102-203).

<sup>3</sup> [http://firenze.repubblica.it/cronaca/2010/06/28/news/asilo\\_pistoia\\_nuovo\\_video\\_shock-5229750/](http://firenze.repubblica.it/cronaca/2010/06/28/news/asilo_pistoia_nuovo_video_shock-5229750/)

<sup>4</sup> Domenica del Sole24ore, JANUARY 2013

<sup>5</sup> At this regard *sympathy* is very similar to the *emotional contagion* defined previously.

<sup>6</sup> In a recent interview Rizzolatti explained that "mirror neurons are found in the motor areas, and describe the action of the other in the brain of the observer in motor terms (...) many neurons in the motor system respond to visual stimuli. If I see people grab a bottle I immediately grasp their gesture as the way they grab it is already neurologically programmed in me. An immediate understanding of the other occurs, without the need to bring higher cognitive processes into play. We subsequently observed that the same thing happens with emotions (...). This makes it possible to break free of a mentalistic, cold concept, relating everything to the body. I understand you because you're similar to me. (...). Love your neighbour as yourself" (Bentivoglio, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Rizzolatti contrasts mature empathy with a more "rudimentary" form of empathy typical of the first year of life which characterises the affective consonance which the child establishes with its mother: this form of empathy presupposes "*the ability to recognise the emotions of others, to read in the face, gestures or bodily posture of others the signs of pain, fear, disgust and joy*" (Rizzolatti, 2006, 169).

<sup>8</sup> That is, the subject who feels "empathy" for another individual who thus becomes "empathised with".

<sup>9</sup> Bellingereri uses the term *eùnonia* specifically to refer to a process of growth which he defines as *noodynamic*, that is an inner effort which lead the individual to become the agent and author of his/her own existence (Bellingereri, 2013, 89).

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