

The disappearance of childhood and the lack of desire. Rethinking intergenerational education between pedagogy and psychoanalysis

STEFANIA ULIVIERI STIOZZI

Abstract: *How can education and the transmission of meaning and values from one generation to another be rethought in the face of the lack of desire to educate? From a pedagogical/ critical point of view, some symptoms of this loss in terms of education means facing widespread hardening of desire which effects bonds. They become rarer and utilitarian in nature. With a dwindling educational plan, adults demonstrate difficulty in guiding the younger generations towards other possible worlds, and more generally to deal with an atmosphere of resignation and cultural conservatism that blocks the impulse to transcend the existing and engage first person in identifying new educational goals, stemming from the elaboration of the relationship with the legacy that comes from the past. Childhood seems like a representational universe where it is possible to see the effects of the educational decline discussed in the article, calling on pedagogical and psychological knowledge, two visions able to fruitfully dialogue in the attempt to revise dominant educational models in the search for educational and care possibilities that are able to go beyond the educational drifting of our contemporary society.*

Riassunto: *Com'è possibile ripensare l'educazione e la trasmissione di significati e valori da una generazione all'altra a fronte della caduta del desiderio di educare? Leggere da una prospettiva pedagogico/critica alcuni sintomi di questa perdita dell'orizzonte formativo significa confrontarsi con un inaridimento diffuso del desiderio che tocca la sfera dei legami, sempre più rarefatti e soggetti a forme di scambio utilitaristico, con il venir meno di un orizzonte progettuale da parte di una generazione adulta che mostra difficoltà a se-durre le nuove generazioni verso prospettive di mondi possibili altri. Più in generale significa fare i conti con un clima di rassegnazione e di conservatorismo culturale che impedisce una spinta a trascendere l'esistente e a impegnarsi in prima persona a individuare nuove mete educative, nate da un'elaborazione del proprio rapporto con le eredità che ci provengono dal passato. L'infanzia appare come un universo rappresentazionale in cui è possibile leggere alcune tracce di questo declino dell'educativo che il testo prova a delineare, convocando il sapere pedagogico e quello psicoanalitico come due sguardi in grado di dialogare proficuamente per operare una revisione critica dei modelli educativi dominanti e di ricercare e tracciare percorsi di formazione e di cura in grado di oltrepassare le derive educative della nostra società contemporanea.*

Keywords: *education, care, desire, childhood, parenthood.*

Lightness or levity?

To begin, let us consider a phrase by P. Valéry: “il faut être léger comme l’oiseau et non comme la plume” (Valéry cit.in Calvino, 1993, 20). This poetic expression of sublime beauty which Calvino used to introduce the first of his *Lezioni Americane*, is a dense analogy for reading a few distinctive characteristics of our “hypermodern” era (Recalcati, 2011) where the “lightness of frivolity” seems to have surpassed the “lightness of thoughtfulness”(Calvino, 1993, 20).

The lightness of a feather is an evocative metaphor to express the evident rarefaction of social bonds in our time, the lack of taking responsibility for a world project on the part of a generation of adults whose behavior alternates between casual or ruthless cynicism and narcissism characterized by ostentation and the donning of a social mask which does not correspond to inner experience, fluid, superficial personalities with almost no depth, with such uncertain and poor identities in terms of self-awareness that they seem impermeable to change, refractory when they make contact or in relationships, devoid of projects and investments. Men and women “without the unconscious” (Recalcati, 2011) who reflect the opacity of a saturated world overrun by merchandise, where objects are consumed and reign supreme over the imagination, where we see the multiplication of induced needs which govern and make ancestral fears mute. This market economy manipulates more and more the drives of individuals, expert answers that enhance, rather than overpower, the leak of needs (Phillips, 2003). It is the oral economy of compulsive hunger, the spasmodic need and the alienating euphoric dizziness: “the world is a huge object for our appetites, a giant apple, a huge bottle, an enormous breast; we are new-born infants who wait eternally, full of hope and never satisfied” (Fromm, 2011,31).

For some time, psychoanalysis has denounced the emergence of childishness, as the distinctive characteristic of a generation of adults unable to take the reins of their lives. They have abdicated their task of educating and investing in the project for a “different” world, complaining of feeling disoriented and resigned. Pedagogy and its authoritative role in outlining hypotheses to get through this current moment of political, cultural and ethical crisis has undergone radical soul-searching. The *lightness of a bird* is what we’re looking for, to weave this text together, wondering what are the reasons for this fall from desire and to intercept other, educationally feasible alternatives. Calvino had a plan for “treatment” which could be of

great interest to those in the field of education, represented by the desire to construct a poietic and poetic vision aimed at going beyond the evils of the world. The levity of flight seems to be an effective counter-measure against this wide-spread rarefaction of desire, since this metaphor concentrates its motivational, relational and planning power. The disappearance of desire can be interpreted as a multi-faceted crisis which expresses the difficulty of living in the horizon of desire and emptiness, of hearing the call to exercise one's creative and transformational power, experiencing emptiness and absence as creative conditions necessary for planning a different future and recognizing the need for bonds with other people.

Children of families, children of desire

We consider childhood and desire to be important indicators for analyzing the crisis of educational models in Western society. In contrast to an apparent transparency that makes our world hyper-visible, the critical eye of a pedagogy is aimed at singling out new educational aims, showing us unknown spaces. Childhood, deformed and made perverse by the media, unnatural and subjected to late-capitalist economics, bends the needs of the adult generation who are increasingly more unaware of their educational responsibility. This is one of the great pedagogical questions of our time. It is obvious that the *death of the child* is the other face of the *death of the father*, seen in the disappearance and decline of this cultural regulator. It is a matrix of a symbolic bond full of tradition.

If, from the point of view of modern education, it was the father who made the son and who formed his child's profile based on his own world of values and rules, today since this vertical line of education has fallen away. Reconsidering childhood means creating a new identity for the father and rediscovering symbolic meaning in our culture through the reviving of the creative relationship between "desire and law" (Recalcati, 2011).

We start from the hypothesis that nowadays the educational models and care given by parents to their children are not aimed at constructing the basis for their children's identities to be emancipated from the parents'. Rather, parents offer tools for conforming and adapting thanks to acritical standardization regarding the cultures and the values upheld by our society. This in turn causes difficulty in adults not so much to desire having children as to desire having a relationship with their children that

is exposed to the risk and the perturbing adventure of recognition, never fully introduced, but always to recreate and re-establish. Desire is one of the most complicated issues for humans, to the extent that the drive to escape from it is stronger than the one to face it. Avoiding thinking about desire is like fleeing from generosity (Phillips- Taylor, 2009, 52) and from the task of identification with the other which seems, in our time, more and more disturbing. But what is this combination of the fear of desire and the fear of generosity? Contemporary psychoanalysis offers a viewpoint full of pedagogical implications. It holds that the relationship between adult and child is not between *two*, but between *three*, where the third subject is the ghost-child of the adult which returns with its impelling need in the relationship and to which the adult has a hard time saying goodbye (Villa, 2008). Thus the family relationship is always a scenario in which there is a confrontation, a struggle, a power game that at times is difficult and dangerous, between the real child and the ghost child who is evoked in the educational encounter. The death of the *family child* (the ghost of the child subjected to the unconscious desire of the parents, weighed down by a blood bond) has to happen in the adult so that the *child of desire* can take form, able to mourn for one's own imaginary childhood, an orphan of the pre-knowing, able to distill the heredity of one's own origins in a new, personal way. Perhaps only this symbolic betrayal is could open up the horizon of education so that it is no longer conservative, but able to contemplate the space of alterity and for desire and for the amount of difference that substantiates it.

The loss of the illusion of mutual belonging is what permits authentic acknowledgement between parents and children, as can be seen in stories: Pinocchio at the start is a puppet whose death is accompanied by many mishaps which touch the father and son in the same way until the final rediscovery and birth of the flesh-and-blood child. Father and son lose each other and do not acknowledge each other over and over again, they are disappointed, they flee, and wander and stay far from one another in ways which seem overwhelming. Stories turn this passing of ghosts into metaphors, like myths do. There is the serious, heavy child who is burdened by the blood legacy and there is the light, air-borne child, able to reinterpret tradition with joy and creativity; this is the *light* child in the Calvinian sense, who transformed the quality of his own history and created a precious fabric to imprint the traces of his desire, beyond the desire of others, which also brings him to recognize his desire *for* the other.

This is the thin line dividing the economy of need from that of desire, an area where we can see many invisible pathologies which constellate the relationships between parents and children in our society. The fear of not being loved by one's children or the magic expectation that our children will realize the ideals of a good world are only two among many symptoms that allude to this *mirrored* relationship between generations and the difficulty in removing the emphasis from compelling "need".

The child in the register of "the double"

To develop this hypothesis we needed to investigate today's adult ideas about childhood. From a critical and clinical pedagogical point of view (Massa 1992; Rezzara, 2004), we will consider a few recursive educational models aimed at analyzing generalized malaise in order to better understand the effects and possible relapses on the formation of tomorrow's adults. The difficulty of talking about childhood stems from its etymological root: "*infans* is he who does not know how or cannot speak". This *ex-negativo* definition of the child is interesting, defined starting from a structural lack, an emptiness. It is clear how childhood is a social construct which has been modified over the centuries and responds to the need of the adult to fill up a word with an experience incapable of expressing itself in an autonomous way. In this sense, childhood has always been a "hidden" experience (Becchi, 1979-1981; Covato - Olivieri 2006), but in our society it seems to have been submerged, despite the past 70 years of specialized culture which has produced a vast body of literature. Postman wrote: «I want to begin by calling attention to the fact that children have virtually disappeared from mass-media, especially television (...). Obviously, I don't mean that they can't be seen physically, but they are portrayed as miniature adults like in the 14th or 14th centuries» (Postman, 1984, 51). Childhood was not recognized in the Middle Ages, the image of the innocent and pure child or the child marked by the original sin, a creature to be redeemed through education, were the two faces of the cultural imagery which did not give dignity to the "real" child, only relating to its simulacrum (Aries, 2002). Something similar happens in our era when "adulterated" childhood (Villa, 2008) corresponds to an idealization of children, idolized as alter egos which are receptacles for the narcissistic projections of adults (Korff Sausse, 2007). Acclaimed, but at what price? In fact violence is always the

dark side of idealization; today childhood seems to be the result of the lack of desire to educate and adults' difficulty in recognizing children as other than the self. Instead of creative conflict and relational recognition, movements active in children from their earliest years, the desire for autonomy and independence, we see forms of contiguity that are more disturbing and violent between the world of adults and that of children, a worrisome oscillation between borders, where "parentalized" children (Ibidem) correspond to adults who manifest their parental incompetence, revealing evident personal fragilities and a worrisome amnesia regarding their own childhood experiences.

Education as an intentional device is in crisis (Massa, 1987; Cambi, 2006). Its mandate and statute of experience able to make the future part of the present through incisive action on the child in crisis today. The dimension of rupture, discard, of fecund influence which every educational project creates, radically transforming the legacy of the past, is in crisis. The maxim from *Émile*: «*Émile* knows but few things, but what he knows is truly his» (Rousseau, 1966) today can be easily paraphrased as *Émile* knows too much but the things he knows are not really his, they are induced, his knowledge not matured in an original, self-directed relationship with the environment, but constructed based on the relationship with a social, cultural and affective context which operates strong pressure to develop adapted forms of identity. In *Emile*, if Rousseau constructs a vision of childhood to reason "*ex negativo*" on the conditions for remedying the evils of modern progress, today liquidating childhood autonomy is at the root of the pedagogical crisis. Making the face of the child disappear is accepting the death of desire as a structure able to create radical generational change. Desire, in fact, is an infant in relation to how pre-subjective it is, in desire the form of action of the subject it is always in the future, in desire the subject is constantly brought to the limit of his identity, torn from his name, pushed towards his dissolution. Rousseau's thought is no longer current, since *Emile* is a meditation on the conditions through which desire in childhood is at the root of a u-topic philosophy aimed at prefiguring other forms of possible worlds. His pedagogical project is more in the method than in the content, and today it is still necessary to question the method. He shows a world *as if* (Antonacci, Cappa, 2001) to reason about the *extreme* conditions which oversee an educational action. Today adults have a hard time personifying this *fictional* dimension when they exercise their educational role, their ability to play the game, mindful of the acted scripts

in their own lives. Without the necessary symbolic mediations, the filter of this vision is upset and we see the sweetened image of the child-trinket, or the demonized child-demon (Hillman, 1997,114).

Today the existential dimension of “authentic” care (Heidegger,1976; Fadda,1997; Palmieri, 2000) is in crisis, because originally it lived in the shadow of care as striving for an authentic existence, elaborating the experience of mortality blanketing life in a desirous planning. Today care, which has lost its desirous planning tension, seems like a remedy or a consolatory strategy for the widespread malaise in a society which has lost its fundamental reference points. If the death of the law of the father has made Western society an orphan of the strong orientational criteria and the logic of “entitlement” has become the criterion that governs the collective imagination (Recalcati, 2009; Fiumanò, 2010), care models have also bent to the need to protect this drifting of “childishness” in adults which saves them from the job of elaborating the legacy of their own history and finding possible ways to overcome it.

Childishness and the disappearance of childhood

Psychoanalytical literature has denounced the drifting of “childishness” (Guignard, 1996) as a worrisome characteristic of the modern-day world of adults and which pedagogical effects in crucial ways. Having lost the role of guaranteeing passing down the legacy of the past and ferrying the younger generations towards other possible worlds, the adults of today seem to use the younger generation for satisfying their own search for hedonistic pleasure. This is radical when considering the difference between childhood and childishness. If childhood is the fundamental, prehistoric phase of life, when the basis is placed for an education able to promote generational interchanging through the exercise of desire and relational exchange between adults, adult memory also contains the origins of its formation. Childishness is that which in adults has not taken shape, it is a need which pushes in the absence of a symbolization¹. Examples of childishness are experiences *without limits*, striving for eternal youth, the mother who goes to the plastic surgeon and gives him photos of her adolescent daughter so that she can be “touched up” just so.

If a child at play is a child involved in a serious creative experience where invention and industriousness unite to create the foundation for

that transitional area which will later be the source, as an adult, of an unending supply of thoughts and affections marked by autonomy and originality, how can we interpret this affirmation (Winnicott, 1974) in light of the abundance of the toys which fill up children's rooms today? It is evident that this reparatory dimension is intended to fill up the emptiness of adult desire through uncontrolled buying. Numerous articles have been published about how European parents have lost the ability to play and engage in authentic contact with the origins of their childhoods. Childishness as an unconscious way to express the social dimension, to mask the poverty of the adults' childhood experiences which makes them psychologically fragile.

Playing is not fiddling around with more and more sophisticated objects or using identity crutches to reach artificial and externalized youthfulness; playing is a "serious" experience which gives life to something unique, it is an original creation. What lack of virtuous experience does a child have if the privileged channel for exchange and affective exchange with his parents is to be surrounded by toys which are meant to mute his authentic desire? Submerged by an abundance of goods, which saturate every experience of frustration, being limited in his desire for contact, relationships, discovery, he is impeded in that vital suffering which develops through learning to accept the experience of missing and waiting. This is not only a serious risk for newly-forming personalities, and the problem of modulating needs and satisfaction which inhibits the structuring of a *healthy* desire, but it is a more complex risk which touches the generational bond, parent-child communication, more and more allied to ward off any extreme experience, separation, loss of the identifying illusion. Care, under these conditions, is the practice of looking after and satisfying needs, but above all it is an unconscious attempt to preserve the adult's dream of his own childhood, through the overprotection of their children. This has nothing to do with making contact with one's own historical roots, rather it is a way to deny them. This mask avoids and hides what really happened, only in its truth is it possible to leave a legacy behind.

It is as if parents today allow themselves the luxury of returning to being children through their children, but they load them with the weight of exercising this *extreme function* by themselves which in the past was guaranteed by rules which sanctified the generational differences and passages. This is visible in the clear and often dramatic way that symbolic bonds are lost which once made the family an allied of the school and its educational

mandate. Today parents are busy defending their children, and through their children, themselves, from a school which is experienced as censorial and normative, and they denounce the loss of any relationship with the symbolic horizon of education.

“Savoured” children

Talking about care today in intergenerational relationships, means coming to terms with a fading generational boundary that makes parents and children united by similar imaginary constellations. Children are the receptacles of the projections of happiness, desire, future parents do not know how to invest elsewhere. Once again, Guignard indicates the forms that this educational drifting takes on where the primitive mind is in power. Primitive mentality alludes to that level of archaic thinking in the collective unconscious of a group and society in historical moments dealing with a state of severe threat. Today the threat is pervasive because the future seems more than ever clouded and burdened with considerable anxiety. The idealization of a mythical past and the tendency to focus on survival rather than to create a life plan seems the most obvious symptoms of an epochal collective malaise. The emblem of this serious decline is: “the father who arrives at a supermarket checkout accompanied by an excited child of four, arms and cart full of toys topped with a pizza for two people, and asks his son complacently: «Is this ok? Did you choose everything you wanted?»” (Guignard, 2010, 906).

The scene seems like a scary Altman movie, taking us into an atmosphere of anonymity and shows us, from another angle, the fall of the generational divide, the symbolic boundary which delimited, up to few years ago, the growth processes of children. The abundance of goods engulfs the two partners in a virtual satisfaction which only apparently saturates their relationship, so cluttered that there are no points for either escape or desire. The parent treats the child as his alter ego, attributing an experience full of pleasure. The crucial question «did you choose everything you wanted?» is the apex of this generational malaise. Who is this parent speaking to? Certainly not to his flesh-and-blood son who cannot exhaust his desirous tension in buying *so much*. The child may ask his father, as all children have the right to do, to teach him, through his own life stories, what criteria to use to make choices. The father is speaking to himself as a child, creating

an experience of full satisfaction and abdicating the symbolic function that would require inner work of distinguishing between his own desires and failings.

The scene shows father and son immersed in the same sensory experience of dizziness, of virtual satisfaction that makes it impossible to focus on the limit, on the space between what would make their relationship rich, joyous, transformative. This lack of symbolic boundaries can be seen on many levels: many parents in family planning clinics admitted to sleeping with their children well past their young age, talking about the pleasure of closeness but actually confessing their atrophy of desire, including sexual desire, which often found an easy excuse due to the presence of the child. In this claustrophobic closeness it is easy to wonder: who is taking care of whom? What authentic care can exist in the absence of a symbolic limit that structures the relationship between generations?

Birth planning is also part of this loss of the future which signs our era. We are not referring to artificial insemination techniques, but to the desire to control births, to insert them into a life plan where they fill up a defined space which is circumscribed, like work or other planned activities. Often children become identity crutches meant to fill up a structural void, taking the place of a desire unable to be excited. A child made not as an ambivalent expression of the desire for freedom, but to avoid it, the maximum expression of fear of the future that characterizes this era of "sad passions" (Bensayag-Schmit, 2004). *The evident reference is to the clonic society (Baudrillard, 1976), centered on the double.* If the philosopher Arendt in the 60s interpreted the radical crisis of education in the USA as a political attempt to eliminate the difference between the generations (Arendt, 1991), Renaut denounced the risks of a regime of equality that while appearing to be one of the main goals of modern society, (children and adults enjoying the same rights), he revealed also thick shadows that are projected onto our time. He wondered: «how can we conceive of the educational relationship in a society and culture crossed by an unreal dynamic of equality which makes the other seem like another me, as an equal?». (Renaut, 2003, 77).

What does childhood in a double register mean, from a pedagogical point of view? It means educating a child charged with the weight of being the direction-pointer for adult desire, on an imaginary level. The film "Caro Diario" by Nanni Moretti (1993), talks about the standardization of roles, this educational displacement on the part of the parents and the loss of the symbolic horizon. The most emblematic scene is when the children control

the telephone and enslave the adults by directing the conversation entirely. The child, who apparently is in charge, in reality exercises a false power of the one who is excluded from the relational game, he simply simulates it and has a dominant relationship with mere objects (the telephone). The adult is complacent in taking on the role of the child, as if to protect his own insecurity as a parent and accepts the grotesque, immature aping, unable to stop the game and limit the solipsistic and repetitive monologue.

In this sense the drifting of the omnipotence of thought seems to pass from parent to child and from child to parent in a repetitive and circular way, with high risk for the child who needs to be torn from absolute omnipotence in order to develop a creative and productive relationship with the world. What can we say about this idealization of childhood? Phillips and Taylor suggest that children are the elected ones, chosen by adults, to talk about a world that does not exist, mythologized children who respond to a drop in tension and are considered to represent a mixture of moral virtues while regarding public action, adults act out a script of vices, accomplices of a relational barbarianism that sometimes seems like contempt, sometimes indifference, and more generally a serious lack of respect towards others. The authors add: "Today it is as if parents were more dependent on their children than children are on their parents, as though what remains of the past two centuries of researching children is nothing but a world where parents are afraid of children, their vulnerability, dependency, frustration, anger, a world where parents watch their children as they pursue so-called self-esteem, to give their lives a purpose and a point of reference" (Phillips-Taylor, 2009, 56). It seems that childhood today, so revered and at the same time so misunderstood, shows all signs of adulthood that exhibits great weakness and a worrisome lack of personal, ethical and social and identity.

Only thanks to reasonable loving, benevolent care, relieved of that passionate element (the myth of the child) that seems to be one of the main traits in the relationship between the generations of today, can a good, respectful patient and farsighted link be generated over time, where it is possible to grow together thanks to the recognition of differences and tolerance of each other's disillusionment. When Winnicott talked about the *good enough mother* (Winnicott, 2002), he alluded to this threshold, which is rather wide, of maternal behaviors that go beyond the exercise of traumatic and excessively traumatic behaviors. Today the risk seems to be reformulated in terms of the parents (also fathers) who are *excessively* good, inspired by the myth of perfection, a really traumatic risk for the new generations. It

is no longer the Millerian *talented* child (Miller, 1996-Riva,1993) but the *child king* (Korff Sausse, 2007), the result of adult imagination, who wants a more and more competent, skilled adapted child, one who becomes an adult early on but is protected at all costs, who enables parents to nurture the dream of a perfect childhood and the negation of their own weaknesses and missed expectations.

This drop in the tension towards self-training in adults, generalized by their dried up behavioral, communicative and planning repertoire, their frequent comments of how the family is the place main place where suffering linked to the lack of a culture of listening to the self and the other emerges. Pedagogy as well as therapy should be held responsible for offering responses and making interventions. It is necessary, now more than ever, to plan for training in «the knowledge of feelings» (Iori, 2005) for parents, through testimonies (Corsi, 2003) which enables parent's personal histories to find creative connections with their own pasts and their children's histories, to deny the words of a colleague, working with parents in a school, who wondered: «why with parents is it impossible to talk about their childhoods apart from feeling like it is almost too brusque, painful, unbearable?».

Author's Presentation: Stefania Ulivieri Stiozzi is a researcher at the Università di Milano-Bicocca where she teaches *Teorie e modelli della consulenza pedagogica*. Her research focuses on issues relating to the relationship between pedagogy and psychoanalysis, the relationship and teacher training, and self-training and educational processes in adulthood, as well as the esthetic dimensions of the pedagogical setting.

Note

¹ «A strange mix the historical and unhistorical, a crucible of primal fantasies and experience the sense-drive stored in the form of memory traces, the child can be regarded as the place of psychological emergencies and early, unrepresentable drives».

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