

"LET'S GET EMOTIONAL"

An educational journey between emotions
and life stories

Project by the social Educators
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The story of a person "can be constructed also telling events, recalling life and relationships images, recognizing and naming connected emotions, placing them in time, in space, looking for their meaning and sense, modifying the future critically starting from the past with the goal of understanding ourselves and of giving a meaning to the present (M. C. Bateson).

Infact the story of our life can look like an impalpable plot looking for her narration, that if of her story teller: Narration is a revisitation of events, a process that gives once again sense and meaning to experiences, allows to look them again linking them to the complex network of our lifes, giving back to the person a more armonic and complete image.

Trough this process everyone acquires a major self-culture, a major self-knowing about his or her identity between past, present and future.

Infact the life of a person exists to be told, if we lose our self memory, we don't exist anymore.

Through memory it's possible to recall the past, and trough this it's possible to look for ways of access to the interior world, and it's possible to find ways to understand and modify it.

The story of a person with psichic handicap is often a denied story for different reasons: firs of all it never follows the normal journey of evolution, remaining trapped in relationships that hardly change, both in the family and in the social contest.

More, handicap gives limitations to the knowledge of the moltepliciety of social and familiar roles, being them a fundamental part of the life of the person and gives mainly or only the role of a son to the person with handicap. Other roles are kept apart (uncle, brother, brother in law, nephew) while others are quite denied (engaged, friend, companion).

From a symbolic and cultural point of view, a person with psichic handicap doesn't have a life under development, having interruption of the natur cycle of events, showing him or herself as a child, eternally irresolute.

Diagnosis often contributes to create a halo of immutabilityaroun the person, dening a becoming life story.

Present becomes the only dimension of life, a monodimensional life in wich past and future look like the present.

Abnegation of story also goes trough difficulty or impossibility for the person with handicap to tell it, write it, to pick it up, to keep it together and present, to recall it and to keep it in memory.

We must often add to these objective difficulties the absenca of an interlocutor, of a person who can pick up and tell to the disabled his or her life story, winding a skein of connected events and emotions into a ball, recalling images, places, feelings.

The story of a person with handicap is often identified as a unfortunate, sad story, trapped in a network of events that hardly is unhooked from disablement.

If and when the pieces of a story like this get told, the missing elements become more and more underlined, and this is also for the discarding of a comparison with normality, with the risk of evoking a story that becomes a long row of "not": the person is not abled to write, to talk, to wash him or herself and so on...

Taking the role of the narrator, in these situations, means to be able to take off the schemes of a life prototype, taking what a person has really lived, rather than what he or she could have lived; it means learning to understand languages different from the conventional; it means learning to interpret not common emotional symbols and signs, it means, most off all, to go trough the more profound part of the concept of Person.

To tell a story has the meaning of activating an introspective and a balance of the event process.

So we don't go looking for facts, places or things, but we also goad a poetic dimension: what really means isn't the description of the memory, but rather the emotional and poetic linkage of the person with what is recalled to memory.

In this key, the educational work and the meaning of "educating", go around a particular dimension of semiotics, that we could schematically resume in three important elements:

1. To give sense: ability to see, take, give interpretation, produce signs and clues of a sense that isn't immediately clear, but to which a word has to be given. "To work not much to reduce the state of disability, but to interact with a way of mind-working not immediately accessible".
2. To make grow up the availability of listening, to pick up the clues, to make ourselves questions as a mental space of professional growing.
3. To see the disabled as a test, written in part and in part to interpret, giving value to the different points of view and not giving ourselves limits to interpretation.

GROUP PRESENTATION

"Let's get emotional" project is carried out together with handicapped persons frequenting the socio-educational centre "La zebra a pois", a day-time centre for physically handicapped adults run by the Sanitary Administration of Brescia. It is a centre opened from Monday to Friday, from 9 A.M. to 4 P.M.; the centre users take part to educational and recreational activities programmed by the educationalists.

The group is composed by nine people (7 users, 3 males and 4 females; 2 social educators, 1 male and 1 female), of these people, 8 work together since 6 years while the female educator works since 2 years. At present the group is supported by 2 conscientious objectors.

The nucleus of the relationships of this group is then very solid and rich.

The educational choice of the couple of educators consisted in investing energies both on the person and on the group, giving consideration the group dimension with the same respect and attentions and cares of the single person.

The group, in fact, is one of the ontological conditions of the human being: we are born and grow up in a group, the belonging to a group in a human necessity; in the group every single person gives form to his or her identity through the meeting and comparison with the identities of the other people. The group lives through various relationships networks that the members of the group have one towards the other and that we can schematically sum up in different types:

- Affective relationships.
- Mutual taking care and care relationships.
- Conflictual relationships.
- Alliances.

Near these types of relationships networks, a system of relationships between all the members of the group exists, and it's tied and built around daily experiences cohabitation in a group.

In the group there's a deep respect towards what the other person is, expresses, communicates, with his or her own particular modalities.

Acceptance and comprehension of the other person, at this level, make possible cohabitation of diversity in the group, even when they are expressed in acute discomfort occasions.

Stability of the members of the group through time and the educational laying down of the work are the conditions that permitted through years elaboration and management of individual and group projects, very complex and deep, between which "Let's get emotional" finds its place.

THE INSTRUMENT

WHY THE FABLE

We chose to transform the most meaningful events of the life stories of the guys in short tales that we call “fables”.

The motivations that took us to choose this instrument are very simple.

First of all the awareness that in order to give back to the guys of the group moments of their life stories it's necessary an instrument that can simplify the event, making it accessible and simple.

The fable allows to maintain an emotional distance between the contents and the person, a distance that can be run or maintained on the basis of the necessities of everyone.

The use of the fable can favour the natural slowing down of the defences of the person: it is proposed as a transmission space, an occasion for meetings and exchanges, a moment for interpretation and recalling of an occurred event.

Everyone can be involved for free at his/her own will, at a level that can be more or less deep and personal, or he/she can choose to maintain the distances.

The use of the fable allows also the use to spread a light on the person's identity; in fact the fable, when recalling an event, gives to every character a precise role, a precise position in the tale in relation to him/herself or to the other characters.

The various characters of the fable have precise roles and responsibilities (for example, parents and sons) and this clearness allows everyone to find again him/herself, the position in the events.

This process supports and stimulates..., through a way that runs through three main events:

- Understanding of the event,
- Awareness,
- Identity.

BUILDING UP A FABLE

The building of a fable for the guys presents various moments of work:

- A. The harvesting of informations, data, objects and emotions in relation to meaningful events of the past lifetime of the person, through meetings with the families.
- B. Elaboration of the harvested material through the recording of the meeting with the parents, the pictures that they have showed, the memories and sensations. From this whole of data, goals, emotions, informations, the most meaningful event is chosen and on it the story is written and illustrated.
- C. Some stories are built around events that are present and tied to circumstances that are particularly loaded with emotional meaning for the person that is living them.

Protagonist of the story is a little family of dogs: the parents and two or more little brothers/sisters. Every story represents an adventure lived by the protagonists, to whom everytime other characters are added (friends, relatives, school companions, teachers...) necessary to represent the event.

The choice is not casual: the family is a place that is common for all the guys of the group, the relations in it are known and loaded with deep emotional meanings, even if not recorded by all of them.

More, the family is surely the life place privileged and more known by the guys.

The characters towards which a mechanism of identification exists are the little brothers/sisters, or however the little dogs because they have in common with the guys the dimensions of “sons” and “brothers” the two social and emotional roles that are most important for the guys of the group.

The places in which the stories happen are known and meaningful for the people of the group, even if different towards what is told: home, the quarter, the school, the public gardens...

So, the event told is elaborated and simplified thinking about some important aspects of the group:

- the characters and places of the story have to be recognizable by the people of the group, they have to recall mental and emotional images that allow a strong psychological adhesion to what is narrated.
- The plot of the story has to be as much as possible simple, with few and clear points to build the meaning of what is narrated. Too many goals, in fact, don't allow to clearly focus on the single emotions that emerge from the story and don't allow to the guys to keep in mind the meaning of what is narrated to them from the beginning to the end.

HOW TO TELL A STORY

Of great importance is the way through which the story is told. The voice tone, the ability of making emerge or disappear words, the mimic of the face, the gesture, the ability to transmit emotions: all of this are elements that build emotional adhesion to what is told in the story.

More, when telling a story, spaces of creation for the guys are to be given, giving them the chance to insert in the story, proposing solutions, creating different situations, on the basis of their interests and of the caused emotions.

The plot of the story is only a trace on which we can work in a creative way.

We can resume some elements on which the narrator has to make focus:

- To echo the fable: to evoke images and to give inputs, thinking of the emotional distance that everyone has towards what is told.
- To underline the value of the experience, giving value to the ways through which tries and mistakes that the protagonists do; in this way it's possible to offer to the guys different strategies to face painful and problematic situations, giving solutions and ways different from the traditional ones.
- To make evidence on obstacles, proposing them as a fundamental part of life, situations that happen also independently from our will and that are to be faced: in this way we give to the guys a goal in creating a mental space to keep and comprehend the unknown. The fable is purposed as an occasion of reflection and learning because it teaches that the unexpected facts of life can be faced and exceeded.
- Never express judgements and evaluations on what is happening, never comment the event, but to present it as a matter of fact of life of characters of the fable.
- To foresee the chance to keep the ending of the fable open, not necessarily giving prepared solutions to the events that are narrated: every person of the group must have the chance to build in a creative way an ending that reflects his/her emotional experiences, recognizing it as adherent to his/her own life experience and chances.

WORKING WITH THE GROUP

The work is made inside a room prepared on purpose, to create a mood that can favour attention towards the narrator as much as possible.

In the room there are only a carpet and coloured cushions on which the group will sit down.

The disposition of the guys is made on the basis of the needs of the singles and of the necessity that everyone could be filmed with a camera placed in a fixed position.

An educator in turn tells the story, while the other educator and the conscientious objector watch after the group, watching the dynamics, support and contain.

The work, for each fairy, lasts at least four meetings, with a weekly frequency.

The stages of work for each fairy are the following:

The telling of the story: after the guys have been sitting down in a circle, the Educator-narrator has to create a mood of attention, listening and involvement to the story. During the narration, on every

regarding moment, the narration is supported by drawings representing emotions and events that the protagonist is living. (see the enclosure). Everyone can stare at the drawings for all the time that he needs, he can express valuations, opinions, comments on what the protagonist of the drawing is living, and he can compare what he sees with his/her life. The drawings are then a purpose for a deepening instrument about emotions and important events of his/her lifetime, a graphic support that allows to the guys to see a situation and to understand it better.

Infact the drawing allows a strong identification both with the protagonist and the represented event and allows to recognize the expression of a an emotion, functioning as a goad and guide during the narration.

At the end of the narration, we ask to the guys to express their feelins and emotions.

Everyone can then stop on what in the fairy he or she has found more interesting (characters, events, emotions...), using and commenting on the drawings.

The fairy is then run over by the single person, and everyone tells about a narration of his or her own, starting from the most meaningful emotions.

In this phase the Educator is a goad to record or to interpret the looks and gestures for all that cannot record.

This modality allows the active participation for all the members of the group.

The story revisited. In the following week the Educator tells again the story, underlining the most important and meaningful points.

The drawings are spread around the carpet and everypne is invited to choose the one he/she prefers.

The guys, using this goads, are free to remake the story modifying and completing it however they like.

Everyone then can insert his/her life stories and can load the story with personal emotional and symbolic meanings.

To all of the channels of expression a great importance is given, everyone in the group can live as a protagonist being in the centre of the circle. At the end of every reconstruction of the story, the group receives the protagonist with an applause and with other expression of nearness and warmth.

The journey in the emotions. This phase of work can take one or two meetings a week, on the basis of what emerged in the previous phases. In this phase, the attention is pointed not much on the story told before, but on the elaboration of the emotions thet emerged and were communicated to the guys. The conduction of this spaces is given with a series of variables like the availability of the singles and use of different materials to properly express emotions (the dolly if there's a need of consoling, objects that can be broken or throw away).

It's important to take this moment with flexibility and will to accept this messages, the dynamics and the mood of the group and of the singles.

The expression of some emotions can infact bring to reactions sometimes unaspected and hard to manage by the guy. It is important to take everyone trough the journey in his/her emotions, taking care not to force and not to simplify what everyone is feeling.

At the end of every cicle of work on the story, a break of one week has to be taken before the following meeting ; that permits to make the emotions and the create feelings decant.

QUALITY INDICATORS

PREMISES

The final part of this report is dedicated to the individuation of a series of quality indicators of the work done, diversified according to the various stages of the project and to the persons involved (i.e. E.P., users, families).

Before affording this final section we would like to draw the reader's attention on the project's source, on the moving cause of "Let's get emotional" project: the "trust in human potentiality".

The basis of the experience suggested to the group users, with which we are still getting ahead, is the bet of affording together with handicapped persons the themes linked to the discovery and the understanding of others' or one's own emotions.

The trust in everyone's potentiality contributes to the coexistence of the variety of differences in the group without judging them, but welcoming and making the most of what is being expressed, even if it is not clear and understood at once.

The activity suggested to the group users appears as a creative proposal, a possibility offered to everyone for an events' working-out, for a discovery of emotions, for expressing and better understanding what is felt and lived.

The tales narration is a creative proposal which permits a working-out of events and emotions, it is a suitable instrument to kindle images, moods and reactions.

The contents and the form of what is narrated must be obviously suited to the understanding of the young people, they must be adjusted to their world of images, words and meanings. Our professional and human attitude is based on one hand on the deep respect for the capacities and the limits of everyone, on the other on the maximum receptivity for whatever of unexpected and unusual could happen.

A meeting is something magic, and we believe that we cannot take anything for granted if we want to help another person and ourselves in growing.

QUALITY INDICATORS: CLASSES DIVISION

The quality indicators have been divided in three classes, according to the reference object and subjects:

- Users
- Families
- Socio-educational work

USERS

Attention paid to the expressed emotions: if you give another person a hearing, you offer him/her a space in which express him-/herself; it requires silence and empty space, that is, a space where the word, the gesture and the glance could resound with sense and meaning.

During a socio-educational work the space for giving another person a hearing is often offered only if there is a problem to be solved or an emergency to be faced. On the contrary, we believe that in order to come to somebody's assistance, hearing must be given always as an opportunity, as a space where to welcome and to be welcome; a space where it is possible to grow, to satisfy the need for knowledge, the curiosity and the desire of understanding.

To be listening the other person becomes an educational choice, it is characteristic of the sort of relationships suggested to the group's users. At the basis of every kind of relationship, the condition to make contact and transmit some contents is listening to the others, as a dynamic principle between the person who speaks to be heard and the person who listens to understand. This listening dimension is proposed to the group's users in order to stimulate two psychological movements: on one hand a contact with ourselves and a contact with whatever is kindled in us by listening the others speaking. This is a way of introspection, a **dialogue with ourselves** and our own experience, a **stream of consciousness**, the occasion to interweave what the other person says with our life.

On the other hand, it is an incitation to **talk**, to compare ourselves and our life with someone else's experiences, without judging it.

Every emotion and every different kind of expression has its own dignity: every person is entitled to express emotions, to let them be recognized and not judged. The deeper part of the concept of "person" can be developed and stimulated by offering a psychological and physical place where freely express one's emotions and give hearing to others'.

Every expressed emotion has the same dignity, there is a space where everyone can show himself, talk about himself, feel himself well received: this is the basic condition to let oneself go, to express hidden emotions, even the sad ones, that sometimes we deny even to ourselves.

It is an educational attitude the reception of what is expressed by words or by gestures, showing directly a particular mood (e.g. crying), it is based on the deep respect for the diversities of each user of the group, both for the contents of what is said, and for the choice of the expressions to communicate.

Welcome, respect and absence of judgement are the basis for a true meeting, for a comparison, for an exchange and of a personal growth.

Support for the development of an integrated and complex "self": the emotions play an important part in the development of a person's identity. Indeed, the growth of a person occurs through the understanding of what is felt, and the acquisition of the capacity of consciously managing one's own emotions.

Often it is not clear what does an emotion provoke, and this leads to a closing and to a breaking off of relations, that affect the possibility of a working-out of the events within and outside ourselves.

Closing and breaking off of relations are also linked to the fear felt by a person who does not understand what is feeling in that moment. This involves a strong moral judgement on ourselves (e.g.: I am bad if...).

The method proposed to the group's users starts from the emotion provoked by an event and offers a framework where everyone can express oneself, understand and accept what the emotion induces inside. This permits to afford with a greater clearness what is happening as regards oneself, giving the possibility to try alternative relationship behaviours.

Some important events of the personal life are run through again: a possibility is given to go over again some important events of one's life; it means that a person can be given the possibility to read his/her own becoming, as a person with a past, a present and a future, feeling to be the leading actor of his/her history.

The understanding of what above mentioned, on every level, sustains the forming of a strong identity, within the flow of all the facts and events forming everyone's life.

Support to the empowerment process, offering all those strategies which permit to improve the power on the management of one's own life, through the working-out of functional strategies and a resources retrieval that permit to reach personal purposes and social aims.

THE FAMILIES

Participants in the project: first of all it is useful to remember that, without the collaboration of the parents this project could not be realized. The collaboration with the families is the result of an intentional way of relation based on the transparency of the educational proposals and on the shared desire to reach the welfare of the son. All this, along the time, contributed to the construction of relationships based on mutual confidence and esteem and permitted, for this specific project, a meeting and an exchange of one's and one's own son's life. Parents entrusted their story to us,

believing that we would have preserved and respected it, using it in order to offer to their sons a possibility of growth and reflection.

Families have been the first to believe in this project giving their own availability, feeling themselves necessary and made valuable.

The narration of a family's history instead of a pathology : parents let us in their history, talking about a variety of their own life's events: how they met, got engaged and married, their job, their hopes, dreams, desires for themselves and their sons, their sacrifices. In few words the history of each family.

We have been welcome in their homes, we had the opportunity to know them through their personal belongings, smells, spaces and places of their life.

Through the photographs we saw the chronological evolution of their own and their sons' lives. All this gave us the possibility to know better the users and their families, the emotions provoked along the way guided us.

It has not been a simply and "professional" gathering of data and information, but a true, warm and exciting meeting among persons, all with a history to be told.

THE SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL WORK

The socio-educational work with seriously mentally handicapped adults put the E.P. in touch with various fatigues, such as discouragement, loneliness, fear of being destroyed by the sense of uselessness, by the difficulty to educate the user. All this can threaten its own professional identity, as affording the serious handicap means taking upon oneself the responsibility of an "impossible task".

Consequently, two different kind of mental behaviours can be put into effect:

1) the tendency to the disenchantment and to the disinvestments: the E.P. grows up, matures and gets depressed. One gives himself up to the "wisdom", thinking one is master of his own life, leaving behind the desire of new incentives, or to the "despair", to the apathy, loosing time and sense of one's own professional work.

The most common way out is to choose a new job.

2) the acquisition of a "maturity": availability to accept the challenge of a sense, looking for it through new and unusual openings, with an educational behaviour that stimulates one's own divergent thinking.

Within one's own professional sphere space should be left to amusement, giving outlet to the creative, merry and eccentric parts of oneself.

Starting from this latter mental behaviour, a **semiotic disposal of the socio-educational work** rotating on three axis comes out as follows:

1) the capacity of noticing, welcoming, interpreting and producing signs and indications of a sense, which is neither immediately given nor too clear, which could be explained as follows: "a work must be done to complete the serious handicap with a method of functioning which is not immediately approachable" ("The serious mentally handicapped").

2) the availability of paying attention to the other person, gathering evidences and looking into one's own conscience. Listening to the other is, first of all, a self-listening: a contact is made with someone else, but it presupposes a contact with ourselves, with what the other stimulates in ourselves. It is necessary to listen assuming a critical position towards our

own models of knowledge and values, giving up the sequential coherence and linearity wanted by our culture. This attitude permits to pay attention also to what is commonly looked upon as a nonsense.

- 3) The conception of the user as a text, partly written and partly yet to be written. A participation to the writing out of the “text-user”, which asks to be interpreted.

The increase in value of the unusual, of different points of view, without barring anything from the interpretation. The act of interpreting refers both to the causes and to the reasons of the sign: understanding and explaining are two different matters.

“The interpreter must **understand** and **explain**, only afterwards he interprets: he becomes an intermediary, he is neither the author nor the message receiver. He is a connection, a mediator.” (“Role Playing”).

For “Let's get emotional ” activity the interpretation consists of concretely showing anything, starting from a formal and explanatory way to a material and applicative one: all the coming out events and emotions become the more understandable and the more perceptible (in touch with one's own senses). The interpretation requires the preservation of wonder in oneself.; the task is not showing true meanings, but building relations among signs, behaviours and meanings, between contents and containers.

The interpretation permits the union of a conscious knowledge with an absence of knowledge, with something not known until then or with something “known but not thought” (Ballas).

We believe that such a semiotic disposal is a concrete and possible way to follow, because it is strictly connected to the every-day work of E.P. Such a disposal embraces all the dimensions which form the educational work:

- 1) **THE ETHICAL DIMENSION:** how much society can bear respect for diversity.
- 2) **THE AESTHETICAL DIMENSION:** poetry and mystery linked to the socio-educational work, the pleasure of work.
- 3) **THE HERMENEUTICAL DIMENSION:** acting to constantly build methods for sense awarding, always kindling different readings of the reality.