

Quando la Paura Bussa alla Porta: il Caso di un Albo illustrato

Apprendimento socio-emotivo nella prima infanzia in Cina e Italia

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Sommario

Le competenze socio-emotive coinvolgono abilità che permettono ai bambini di esplorare il mondo, comprendere se stessi e costruire relazioni con gli altri. Il libro illustrato può rivestire un ruolo importante, a livello interculturale, per evocare nei bambini la percezione, la facilitazione, la comprensione e la gestione delle proprie emozioni. Il presente studio esamina l'apprendimento socio-emotivo nella prima infanzia prendendo in considerazione il libro illustrato *Quando la Paura Bussa alla Porta* (An, 2018). I partecipanti erano bambini di età compresa tra 3 e 10 anni e insegnanti di scuola primaria e dell'infanzia provenienti da Cina e Italia. Lo studio è durato dal 2021 al 2023, utilizzando la metodologia della Ricerca-Azione. Questo contributo delinea un quadro pedagogico che si concentra sulla necessità di un progetto educativo integrato per uno sviluppo profondo e duraturo delle competenze sociali ed emotive e del benessere dei bambini.

Parole chiave

Albo Illustrato, Apprendimento Socio-Emotivo, Competenze di Vita, Cina, Italia.

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When Fear Knocks on the Door: The Case of a Picture Book

Social-Emotional Learning in Early Childhood in China and Italy¹

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Abstract

Social-emotional competencies involve skills that enable children to explore the world, understand themselves and build relationships with others. The role of the picture book can be an important source, cross-culturally, to evoke children to perceive, facilitate, understand and manage their emotions. The present study aimed at giving voice to early childhood from a social-emotional learning perspective, using an exemplarily selected picture book *When Fear Knocks on the Door* (An, 2018). Participants were pupils aged between 3 to 10 years and teachers from China and Italy, from primary schools and preschools. It lasted from 2021 to 2023 and used the action research methodology. This contribution⁴ starts with a pedagogical frame, focusing on the need for an integrated educational project shaping spaces and actions for deep and lasting development of children's social and emotional skills and well-being.

Keywords

Picture book, Social-emotional learning, Life skills, China, Italy.

¹ This essay, while being the result of participatory sharing, sees Rita Casadei individually responsible for drafting paragraphs 1, 2, and 3, and Pei An for the remaining paragraphs. The abstract is the result of joint editing.

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Introduction

Emotions are human needs (Maslow, 1968). They are complex, invisible and abstract, and they are present in our lives all the time (Peng et al., 1992). When the issue is complex, it is very important to be aware of it. It would be better to start from a young age, but how can you discuss a complex issue with young children who do not have much experience in life? The didactic approach with a pedagogical attitude needs to be explored and researched. Social-emotional actions involve interactions that enable children to explore the world, understand themselves and build relationships with others.

One line of research has concentrated on the study of emotional intelligence. In 1972, the American psychologist Ekman (1975) defined the primary emotions: anger, disgust, sadness, joy, fear, and surprise, and with this theory he became a pioneer in recognizing emotions by emphasizing facial expressions. Subsequent studies in 1992 indicated the importance of emotional education in childhood. Witkin (1974) and Ross (1974) were the first to tackle education in the emotional and sentimental fields with solid theoretical foundations, proposing a model of the development of feelings parallel to that of Piaget's sequential cognitive development. They supported the parallelism between rational and emotional intelligence so that it can be thought that if cognitive development follows a learning process, emotional development follows a process of awareness and socialization.

Their study was taken up and analysed in-depth by Dobson and Jackson (1982), who created and tested an operational model based on Witkin's theories. The ideas then developed into a more contemporary key in Goleman's (1995) concept of «emotional intelligence». In 1994, a passionate group of people came together to develop a field that would address the «missing piece» in education and support the «whole child» in practice (Durlak et al., 2011). The *Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning* (CASEL) was created, to make evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) an integral part of education from preschool through to high school (Devaney et al., 2006).

In this paper, the didactic approach was designed by the theory of the CASEL Big Five Model:

1. Self-awareness (achievement orientation, responsibility, self-control, persistence);
2. Self-management (stress resistance, optimism, emotional control);
3. Relationship skills (empathy, trust, cooperation);
4. Social awareness (curiosity, tolerance, creativity);
5. Responsible decision-making (sociability, assertiveness, energy).

Picture books are an important media source for young readers, as children learn to recognize pictures long before they develop an understanding of text

(Moerk, 1985, p. 547). The utility of picture books for teaching children about many topics, including nursery and preschool, adjustment, coping, poverty, race, and other forms of individual and family diversity, has also been demonstrated (Garner and Parker, 2018, p. 292). Good picture books are bridges between the author's words and images and the reader's perception and imagination, and they are cross-cultural and borderless. In this paper, an exemplarily selected picture book called *When Fear Knocks on the Door* (An, 2018) is used and a didactic design has been developed with it, according to the age of the pupils.

To my knowledge, there is no study that specifically addresses the negative emotion of «fear» by creating an original picture book as a writer and illustrator, practicing the didactic activities as a teacher, and documenting and analysing interviews, paintings, and texts as a researcher. Hence, the present study aims to examine whether the original Chinese picture book *When Fear Knocks on the Door* (An, 2018) can be used as an educational stimulus to conduct pedagogical activities in order to evoke children's emotional perception in formal education from 3 to 10 years of age, in China and Italy. What kind of pedagogical activities would be suitable? Which age group of pupils should it be focused on and researched in more depth? What can we learn from these selected cases in China and Italy?

The key-role of aesthetic experience on life skills education

Social and emotional learning is a topic of increasing focus in life skills education. Across research literature valuing the whole person's flourishing and the multi-language approach potential of it, there is widespread belief that artistic disciplines, such as visual arts, have a positive effect on children's and adolescents' social-emotional development. The project *When Fear Knocks on the Door* investigates the relationship between the picture book and social-emotional learning, exploring a theory of action and describing the nature of that relationship. This project shapes spaces and actions for deep and lasting development of children's social and emotional skills and well-being. The project aims to investigate to what extent arts education settings might be sites of great potential for long-term social-emotional competencies (improved emotional self-regulation, responsibility and awareness of peers' emotional states, and confidence in expressing complex ideas stemming from personal thoughts and feelings).

The first three paragraphs aim to propose a reflection on the key-role that the aesthetic experience takes on in education, especially in view of a pedagogical paradigm concerned with the growth of the whole person: body-mind-heart. In this view, educational action finds its meaning in the promotion of vitalizing and constructive forces, in order to unfold inner personal potential and realize fulfilment. The holistic paradigm is taken as a pronounced validation of ethical-

aesthetical education.¹ Pei An and I would like to devote specific attention to the key role of education through art, with a focus on art and emotional learning. Art has its own method of inquiry over human qualities to be developed and expressed, on the one hand, and for the «architecture» of effective educational experiences through it, on the other.

In this regard, space will be given to the description of the project *When Fear Knocks on the Door*, where art and its expressive potential promote emotional literacy. To begin with, I think it is fundamental to place education in close contact with life. Being co-extensive with life, education acknowledges the multiplicity of spatial-temporal dimensions of existence and provides pathways for human beings to realise their being and inter-being (Morin, 2012), made up of encounters and exchanges with «otherness» (Panikkar, 2002). The concept of otherness permits us to recognise a difference as a pedagogical figure (Gardner, 2007; Poletti, 2010), which is the sign of transformation as a condition inherent to the cycle of existence (Freire, 2015). There can be no single way to conceptually exhaust the idea of life cycle and time flow.

At the origins of Western philosophy are the concepts of *aion* (αἰών), *kronos* (χρόνος) and *kairos* (καιρός), each with a complex weave of meanings that cannot be discussed in all their depth here. By necessity of synthesis, *aion* can be brought back to the dimension of consciousness irreducible to a linear and quantifiable logic, *kronos* to quantifiable and calculable time, and *kairos* to the occasion as a propitious opportunity to be seized in its instantaneousness. Moreover, many — among educators, artists, and philosophers — recall the need for considering childhood under the sign of *aion* (a sense of time not limited by start and end), therefore as something inherently constitutive of human life, which should never be overcome (Kohan and Weber, 2020).

In this view, childhood refers to being in a continuous new beginning, a daily experiencing of life as if for the first time, with an intense sense of wonder and reciprocity. Such sensitivity allows us to develop a participatory disposition interested in and in love with life, filled with awe (Casadei and Mizushima, 2021). This emphasises how important socio-emotional education is to sense the depth of existence (Carson, 1998; de Saint-Exupéry, 1978), which is the core of emotional experience: one's sensing, understanding and feeling. From this perspective, education should provide opportunities to experience the self in its constitutive relational nature. The relationships are both intra and intersubjective. Enabling children to discover and express their potentials becomes an irreplaceable

¹ «Aesthetics concerns the entire sensible dimension (body, senses, sensations, sensibility) of the relationship with the world and the self. And naturally also the feeling of beauty, which is an integral and certainly not marginal part of this dimension. Education is the transmission of knowledge and the construction of representations of the world and the structuring of personal identities» (Dallari, 2005, p. 9, my translation from the original Italian version).

source for the entire relational life (individual and collective) involving parents, educators and the community constantly interacting with children to grow in emotional awareness throughout life.

Young people have their own world, their worries, their tears and their joys, their young thoughts, and their young poetry. They often hide from adults because they are ashamed, because they do not trust them, because they are afraid of being laughed at. They like to listen when adults argue, because they are curious. They want to know the rules of life (Korczak, 2017, p. 18).

In the light of the holistic paradigm and the unity of body-mind-emotion therein valued, aesthetic experience seems to be regaining educational relevance, since it is able to significantly encourage whole personal growth, involving discernment, sensibility and action. Teacher and learner are involved in their plural personal aspects with multiple languages, strategies and tools that help caring, enthusiastic, imaginative, sensitive, considered and creative attitudes.

In this respect, I would like to recall some significant points about the importance of aesthetic education:

- a) the preservation of the natural intensity of all modes of perception and sensation;
- b) the co-ordination of the various modes of perception and sensation with one another and in relation to the environment;
- c) the expression of feeling in a communicable form;
- d) the expression in a communicable form of modes of mental experience which would otherwise remain partially or wholly unconscious;
- e) the expression of thought in a required form (Hickman, 2004; Read, 1958).

It would be relevant to recall the work of Malaguzzi in designing an education — from childhood and throughout life — strengthened by the variety of experiences and plurality of languages to create a healthy life project: *the child is made of one hundred*.

«The child is made of one hundred [...] but they steal ninety-nine. The school and the culture separate the head from the body [...]. They tell the child to discover the world already there [...] And thus tell the child the hundred is not there. The child says: no way. The hundred is there» (Malaguzzi, 1995).

Children expect — from the beginning of their life adventure — the help and truthfulness of grownups (Edwards et al., 2017).

Educating and learning heartfully

I venture a play on words, using both English terms for heart and for art, in order to create a combination of the two that at once reveals their constitutive reciprocity and significance in being inseparable human aspects, each serving

and benefiting the other. Both are mutually supportive in enabling and enhancing vision and understanding of the world, in the fullness of a cognitive and sensitive knowing. An integrated learning experience does not stop at intellectual description but questions about sense and takes the form of learning and feeling relationships (involving subjective and intersubjective spheres). Education through art creates the conditions that would allow us to find art an avenue for adventure, discovery, reflection, inquiry, and empowerment. Actually, working with materials, learning how to represent ideas, thinking through a medium, and engaging with works of art can produce a personal sense of power and capacity, which has an impact on coping with emotions.

Art offers a non-judgmental environment in which deeper engagement can be fostered: the individual feels motivated to participate in community through artistic and aesthetically meaningful practices. Teaching art means developing human capacities that have their roots, from infancy, in the nature of the human species. Educators through art might foster the development of visual language and frame investigations of materials that reveal the ways in which materials can communicate meanings — encouraging creative, visual, spatial, and temporal modes of thinking and knowing that will lead to a better emotional personal and interpersonal understanding.

Researches [...] validated the notion of the narrative construction of meaning through art, providing a more significant way of speaking about self-expression. The construction of self-identity through the development of coherent personal narratives is an integrative process that helps make sense out of the world of experience. Holistic theory is helpful for several aspects. It offers a way of thinking about development as moving in the direction of greater mastery of a medium, greater complexity of ideas, and greater ownership of the creative process (Carroll, 2006, p. 24).

It also helps define learning as «transformational» in the sense that previous notions have been deconstructed, reconstructed, and reintegrated with more depth, complexity, and understanding. The importance of a caring environment (what some would call a safe community for learning), positive mutual regard (between teacher and pupil and among members of a learning community), and existential or self-reflective questions (what some might call questions of inquiry) are challenged. A thematic node that this article intends to emphasise is the pedagogical responsibility of art in promoting careful literacy in emotional and relational competences, in terms of an education that is aesthetically rich, in other words, dedicated to recognising the importance of affectivity and feeling. Artistic language enriches the possibilities of expressing and representing what one feels and how one feels; it is capable of crossing the boundary of literal meaning. The

graphic gesture, the colour and the form allow the word to become a narrative, freeing symbolic, metaphorical and lateral thinking capable of intercepting the motion of emotions and narrating them (Dallari, 2005; Read, 1958).

When art and self-understanding are right at the core of education

Here I propose a direct reference to the Rights of the Child² and more precisely to articles 13 and 31.³

Article 13

The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.⁴

Article 31

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

² Adopted and opened for signature, ratification, and accession by the General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989.

³ The importance of play and recreation in the life of every child has long been acknowledged by the international community, as evidenced by the proclamation in the 1959 *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*: «The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation [...]; society and the public authorities shall endeavour to promote the enjoyment of this right» (art. 7). This proclamation was further strengthened in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (the Convention) of 1989 which explicitly states in article 31 that «States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts». However, based on its reviews of the implementation of the rights of the child under the Convention, the Committee is concerned by the poor recognition given by States to the rights contained in article 31. Poor recognition of their significance in the lives of children results in lack of investment in appropriate provisions, weak or non-existent protective legislation and the invisibility of children in national and local-level planning. In general, where investment is made, it is in the provision of structured and organized activities, but equally important is the need to create time and space for children to engage in spontaneous play, recreation and encourage such activity.

⁴ Arts education, as well as education on cultural heritage, are an integral part of fostering global citizenship education and its close interconnection with human rights protection and peace education. The role and benefits of artistic and cultural education for health and well-being, as well as social cohesion, was also stressed as a priority area for which research on the social impact of arts and culture education should be better supported and invested upon (UNESCO, 2017).

The right to expression must be matched by authentic educational attention that intentionally wants to help the child to know themselves, to experience their inner world with their outer world, supporting the processes of decoding and regulating their emotional-imaginative-creative world. Emotional literacy is the basic objective for an educational process that has at heart the child's wholeness and the integrality of an educational project closely related to life planning.

The right of the child to have full access to cultural and artistic resources must be matched by a pedagogical culture capable of assigning full educational value to art, in its being a transversal language of knowledge, experimentation and expression of human complexity and reality.⁵

Moreover, the right to be able to fully experience the playful-recreational-expressive-imaginative sphere needs to be answered with a pedagogical culture willing to recognise the profound transformative potential of artistic language and its central — and not marginal — role in the education of the person's wholeness, according to a perspective that enhances the aesthetic dimension that allows one to confront the signification at an emotional level of intra- and inter-subjective experience. The pedagogical responsibility of art finds its first challenge in steadying the importance of play, recreation, and cultural and artistic participation in the growth, development, and well-being of children.

Literature review

Historical background of primary schools in China and Italy

Generally, the difference between Chinese education and Western education is displayed. As far as pedagogy is concerned, «educate» comes from the Latin *educare*, literally meaning «to lead out», to bring out something that is hidden. The term «Pedagogy» literally means «education of the child» (Mortari, 2007). The Greek origin of the term is neither casual nor irrelevant: it is in fact in Ancient Greece that the paradigmatic model of the educator was consolidated as an indispensable basis for the formation of Greek pedagogy, which was born and

⁵ Major concerns are about the difficulties faced by particular categories of children in relation to enjoyment and conditions of equality of the rights defined in article 31, especially girls, poor children, children with disabilities, indigenous children, children belonging to minorities, among others. Furthermore, profound changes in the world are having a major impact on children's opportunities to enjoy the rights provided for in article 31. The urban population, especially in developing countries, is increasing significantly, as is violence worldwide in all its forms — at home, in schools, in mass media, in the streets. The implications, along with the commercialization of play provisions, are influencing the ways children engage in recreation, as well as in cultural and artistic activities. For many children in both rich and poor countries, child labour, domestic work or increasing educational demands serve to reduce the time available for the enjoyment of these rights (General Comment 17, released in March 2013 by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, UNCRC, focusing on Article 31).

consolidated from the conviction that education, understood as a pedagogical practice, is indispensable in order to give everyone their own conscious identity from childhood as an individual and as a citizen. An educational project does not only aim to transmit knowledge, but also to foster personal expression in order to form conscious identities and participate in the evolution of contemporary society in the complexity of its aspects and changes (Lorenzi et al., 2020).

Piaget and Inhelder (1951) state that: «The main objective of the school is to create men who are capable of doing new things and not simply repeat what other generations have done» (p. 43). Instead in Chinese culture, a famous phrase that defines teachers according to the famous philosopher Han Yu is: «They are preachers, they teach and solve puzzles». From this statement we can already understand a glaring difference: Western pedagogy recognizes the competence of pupils. Teachers must know how to bring out or elicit what is already inherent in the child, who is considered an active subject and participates in a process where the relationship with the teacher becomes cooperative-egalitarian to the point of becoming a 'reverse influence' in which the teacher also learns. Chinese pedagogy, on the other hand, confirms that pupils are blank slates that lack competence and considers that the role of teachers is superior to the role of children. On the other hand, there are some compatibilities, the philosopher Confucius was instrumental in the development of Chinese thought.

In the book *The dialogues* (Confucius, 2017), he underlined the importance of investing in training because: «Make no social distinctions in teaching; provide education for all people without discrimination; with education there is no distinction between classes or races of men; proper education levels all social classes» and «Each individual must find the time and resources to devote himself to the care of his own education and of one's own person». On the side of the West, Malaguzzi (1995), Italian creator and builder of the relational pedagogy that guided the Reggio experience, had no doubts in considering children «citizens of the present»: bearers of rights, values and culture. The responsibility of adults, educators, administrators, and politicians is to build cultural, social, political and educational contexts capable of welcoming children so that they can express their great potential for building human rights (Rinaldi, 2017).

The context of social-emotional learning in China and Italy

With regard to emotional education, it is useful to refer to the Western view of classical Chinese educational theory; the Canadian professor Moeller (2007) in his book *The Philosophy of the Daodejing* (p. 205), stated that the whole Confucian «project» could be described as a well-founded plan on the cultivation of emotions. As Confucius stated: «The standardization of behaviour becomes emotional and inner control. Maximum control is self-control» and «Order is a result of the

stereotypical cultivation of feelings. The rebel, to be such, must first emotionally free himself from the obligation of standardization». If Confucian methodology still influences present-day Chinese society, in the West, as I mentioned in the introduction, Goleman's (1995) concept of «emotional intelligence» is highly sought-after. The social and emotional life of human beings is literally «rooted» in the experience of childhood and education. The function of the ritual — in other words, the set of rules that sanction adequate behaviour — is to provide society with pervasive ceremonial structures to be taken into account not only during official celebrations, but in almost all everyday circumstances. In addition to allowing you to act appropriately, ritual appropriateness allows us, at the same time, to achieve an even greater goal of excellence: that of experiencing adequate emotions.

As president of the well-known Italian pedagogical foundation, Reggio Children, Carla Rinaldi has clearly defined the importance of emotion in the early childhood educational field: «Our actions are largely determined by emotions and emotions have their reasons and their logic. Learning about feelings helps children to be aware of the *Reasons of their heart*. Children are not afraid of feelings even if they do not understand them completely: but if they are listened to, their feelings are legitimized, then they talk about them, narrate them, share them. Thus they can give them a form, to contain them and to accept them» (Rinaldi, 2021, p. 107). However, China's «rational» education approach has also been emphasized in schools and classrooms. «Rational» education highlights the dissemination of rational knowledge and tends to downplay the accumulation of emotional experience. «Rational» education emphasizes training and the improvement of pupils' abilities in language, logic and reasoning rather than abilities to perceive and express emotions (Lin and Yao, 2014). It mainly imparts content which comprises clear, logical and systematic scientific knowledge, theories and professional skills through classroom teaching, and adopts standardized tests to evaluate teaching effectiveness. In the main, such a standardized education mode neglects the development of pupils' emotional development (Lin and Yao, 2014, p. 76). In primary school, research on emotional penetration is less, and there is no systematic theoretical reference and practical case, it is necessary to further efforts to learn and to explore emotions. In Chinese primary school teaching, the importance of emotional education is highlighted to cultivate pupils' aesthetic sense and values (Tan, 2020).

The context of aesthetic education in China and Italy

According to the principles of aesthetic education in ancient China, Confucius considered that «a gentleman must know the art». Then the Song dynasty (960-1279 AD) created the first academy of fine art to have excellent artists; in

the meantime, the best artists could take on political roles to fulfil the dream of «climbing high»: which shows that the value of art was officially appreciated by power. From history to today, the director of Project Zero (Harvard University), Gardner (1993), described his trip to China in 1980: «In China, art is understood as the good and the beautiful, but I was amazed by the incredible production art of Chinese children. From the time of Confucius to that of communism, authoritarian, hierarchical and patriarchal behaviors have probably been common in China and far from the dominant beliefs in the West» (Quan and Yao, 2014). In 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced the «new era»: China defeated absolute poverty in 2020. In the National Education Conference, he added a statement on aesthetic education: «Beauty is an important source of pure morality and rich spirit. Aesthetic education is education in sentiment and spiritual education. It is also an education that enriches the imagination and cultivates innovative consciousness. It can improve the aesthetic quality, cultivate emotions, warm the soul and stimulate innovation and creativity, further strengthen the function of the aesthetic education school and build an educational system that comprehensively cultivates moral, intellectual, physical and artistic...» (Liu et al., 2021).

From a Western point of view, art is also considered important. Art is an expressive language, art education is grammar (Francucci and Vassalli, 2005). Art is one of the universal languages, it crosses all cultures and unites all peoples (Francucci, 2016). Children seem to know this: the enthusiasm and naturalness with which they come into contact with artistic language is at the same time a source of amazement and reflection for us adults, a sign of hope for the future. Children make the object of cultural exchange what is given and said through artistic communication (Dallari, 2005). «Not because everyone is an artist, but because nobody is a slave» (Rodari, 2013). For these two scholars, art has a close link with freedom. Schiller wants to demonstrate that beauty is the foundation of human freedom and at the same time represents proof of it. The pedagogist Dallari (2005) wrote: «Aisthesis (aesthetics) concerns the original and profound dimension of the subjective and collective psyche, it is educable, orientable, but not controllable, it lives and is rooted in culture and its productions, but it is often disturbing because it recalls the panic chaos of origin, it is irreducibly visceral and politically incorrect» (p. 234). The role of art in the development of children in preschool and primary school is a field of research which began in the twentieth century, then was expanded and analysed in more depth in the 40s/50s. Theoretical and practical studies, in fact, show that art allows children to express themselves and complete their intellectual development: Eisner (1972) identifies the development of visual language that is equally important and complementary to the written and spoken one. Gombrich (1978) insists on the role of art in the development of individuality and identity of the self and others; Hirst (1974) defines it as primary knowledge and therefore necessary for

the development of the intellect; Heinich and Shapiro (2012) observe this evolution, and also define art as a form of action or as the artist himself. Children can become art themselves, in action, study and interpretation. As an example, the Kindergarten, founded by Friedrich Fröbel in 1881, was a revolutionary educational programme for children, which uses simple objects of common geometric shapes, also associated with drawing practices. This method influenced the generations of artists who started abstract art: in their works there are numerous references to the childhood experiences of preschool. The famous abstract artist Georges Braque (1882-1963) frequented the Kindergarten as a nursery; Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) was also influenced by this methodology. Indeed, the artist Johannes Itten (1888-1967) brought the Kindergarten methodology into the artistic training courses of the Bauhaus (certainly not aimed at children) also because, having been a teacher in the Kindergarten, he was inspired by that method of art education (Perniola, 2015).

Historical background of picture books in China and Italy

John Amos Comenius created the first ever known picture book for children in 1658, entitled *The World Illustrated*. In Italy of the early 1940s, we find innovative picture books designed by Bruno Munari, but the fortune of the picture book asserts itself around the 60s, the baby-boom era, thanks to American publishing, where illustrators succumb to the fascination of contemporary art: the picture book becomes a terrain for visual, plastic, literary, sociological, and psychoanalytic experimentation (Sendak, 1984). In addition, Maria Montessori notes that adults are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of their children's first years of life, and the theatres, books and magazines expressly intended for children are indicative of this new awareness (Grandi, 2016). Many parents include reading a story as part of the bedtime ritual, many also share a picture story book or an illustrated magazine at other times when the child is upset or bored (Wells, 1986). It means that picture book reading has become recognized by parents and accepted by children in their informal education.

While for the Chinese part, it is important to cite the director of the National Library of China, Wang Zhigeng: in the Ming Dynasty, children's enlightenment books, such as *Three Character Classic* (Wang Yinglin, 1223-1296), *Hundred Family Surnames* (unknown author), and *Thousand Character Classic* (unsure author, 502-549), which formed basic literacy training, were drawn in illustrations. It is more than 200 years earlier than *The World Illustrated* (Comenius, 1658). It means that China not only embraced picture books, but had also created its own original picture books long before the West. However, one of the key reasons why *The World Illustrated* (Comenius, 1658) is recognized as the progenitor of the world picture book is the influence of Comenius's educational philosophy (Wang,

2021). These historical examples of both countries also prove that picture books were accepted in both countries and originally created to be seen as educational tools. However, the Cultural Revolution interrupted the development of picture books in China. In the late 1990s, the publishing economy was not smooth, and the massive loss of editors led to a slump in picture books. Coupled with competitive video games in the children's comics market, it robbed children of their reading time.

At the same time, the creation of original Chinese picture books began to go downhill, with a regrettable decline in the quantity and quality of published books (Wang, 2021). Recently, from 2000 to 2002, there was spontaneous promotion of picture books in early childhood education and publishing, although this involved a small number of picture book researchers and was a niche act. Most editors and readers still failed to understand the important role of picture books for children's development, and educators did not have a deep understanding of picture books. From 2006 to 2008, with the importation of a large number of foreign picture books, a boom in the private sector in the act of reading and promoting picture books occurred. Even though not all adults have time or the intuitive understanding to engage in interaction with picture books, some of them adopt a more instructional approach, although this is unlikely to have a positive effect. However, we should also see hope that, in general, Chinese adults are paying more and more attention to picture books.

The role of picture books in social-emotional learning

Concerning the importance of emotional picture books, the logic of the emotional mind is associative and uses elements that symbolize reality, or that record for memory, and treat them as reality. This is the reason why similes, metaphors and images speak directly to the emotional mind, as do art, stories, poetry, films, songs, theatre and opera. Great spiritual teachers have touched the hearts of their disciples by speaking in the language of emotions, teaching by parables or fables and stories. The Italian pedagogue, Loris Malaguzzi, views children as authors, actors and researchers, each possessing a «hundred languages». This metaphor highlights the diverse cognitive processes, creativity, and knowledge construction abilities inherent in every child (Vecchi, 2010). Unfortunately, picture books have largely been neglected as a forum for emotion socialization, as professor of the University of Cambridge, Nikolajeva (2014) described. Later, she reflected: «In reading images, we project our own embodied emotions onto represented figures. Conversely, picture books offer images of characters that help us understand people's emotions in real life» (Nikolajeva, 2014). She not only suggested that using picture books to talk about emotional topics is a gap in the current research, but also affirmed the positive effect of picture books

on the emotional education of children. In addition to her, many other scholars have affirmed the positive role of picture books in emotional education. Picture books frequently address the emotional experiences of story characters and, therefore, also provide an important context for learning about emotions and how to regulate them (Garner, 2010). Engagement with picture books can also provide opportunities to develop solutions to emotional challenges without the burden of in-depth verbalization and interpretation (Cole and Valentine, 2000). Children whose parents frequently ask them to focus on and talk about their emotions during shared book reading are more likely to respond with prosocial affect and behaviour in response to a needy adult (Brownell et al., 2013). Teachers also frequently use picture books as a context for teaching children about emotions (Sigmon et al., 2016) and their use may facilitate teachers' own competence in this area. Thus, we evaluated whether preservice teachers' participation in a child development course infused with social emotional learning (SEL) content could be used as an intervention and support for them to learn about the use of emotion picture books in the classroom.

Method

Action research

Hence, my research is exploratory, and I use the qualitative method. For the empirical research component, Kurt Lewin's action research is used (Burns, 2007). This approach is particularly relevant when a study views emotions as cultural artifacts, whose meanings are symbolically constructed, historically transmitted, and expressed by individuals in instances of situated communication (Carbaugh, 1996; Fitch, 1998; Philipsen, 1992). A study of emotion expression is also a study of the moral, cultural, and political life of a people and can yield anthropological knowledge about the social structure and cultural values that are reproduced and negotiated in the communication of emotions (Lutz, 1988). The research of Tobin et al. (2000), who studied Japanese, Chinese and American cultures through their childcare services, inspired this study (Tobin et al., 2000). Specifically, it subsequently focuses on the theoretical details of the methodology and then further elaborates on the design of method.

Co-participatory design approaches

By and large, co-participatory approaches require young people to become involved in the research process and share with the researcher the power to decide on the study contents, assuming an agentic role (Mortari, 2004).

Picture-book-based methods

In co-participatory social and educational research, art-based methods are emerging as a successful strategy for empowering young people and giving them participation opportunities in the research process. Generally, arts-based methods cover a wide range of activities, photos, sculptures and picture books, which allow participants to explore their ideas, experiences and translate them into artistic creations (Anderson, 1981). Compared to traditional qualitative methodologies, creative activities emphasize some of the aspects of visual information (Denzin, 1978).

In picture book-based methods (Herne et al., 2009), creators produce texts and pictures to interact with and in which we can find tacit and implicit information which is perhaps difficult to express in verbal language, for instance, facial emotions. At the same time, the playful nature of this approach offers opportunities to learn certain knowledge, such as collaboration skills, social-emotional learning and picture book creation (Southworth, 1982).

Participants and procedures

The present study was part of the PhD project entitled *The Use of Picture Books for Social Emotional Learning in Primary School Case Studies in China and Italy*, conducted over seven years (2017-2023). From the creation of the exemplarily selected picture book *When Fear Knocks on the Door* (An, 2018) to finding the suitable age of participants and designing the procedure of empirical research, the main objective of the PhD project was to analyse, using the case study methodological approach (Yin, 1981), and documentary method (Bohnsack et al., 2010), resources for teachers and pupils, aimed at promoting the use of picture books in formal education and raising awareness of the issue of social-emotional learning. In the present article, we discussed the first part of work of the main project.

Participants were 225 pupils aged between 3 to 10 years and 69 teachers from China and Italy, in 7 different primary schools and 2 preschools (The researcher's mother tongue is Chinese and their Italian is C1 level). It lasted for three years, from 2021 to 2023, using the action research methodology to conduct experiments on different ages and with different didactic designs, in order to find the most suitable didactic method. In March 2021, a pilot study in China with 13 pupils aged 7-8 and one class teacher was concluded. Due to the pandemic, the researcher was unable to return to China. It was conducted using electronic devices for online teaching. In April 2022, another pilot study in Italy with 22 pupils aged 7-8 and one class teacher was concluded. It was conducted under everyday living conditions after Covid-19, so facemasks were obligatory. These two pilot studies offered one workshop: the researcher narrated the selected picture book

and invited pupils to reflect and draw their individual fears. In addition, due to practical constraints, there was a certain degree of variation in the classes we could find. Regarding the length of the lessons, we chose to respect the routines of the classes in both countries. It is important to mention that the selected Chinese pupils are left-behind children in a remote village. As the World Vision China Foundation Limited announced «In Aug 2018, there were 6.97 million left-behind children in rural areas across China. Children left behind often struggle to receive emotional and academic support at home, which affects their physical and mental development. In order to help these children and the challenges they face; effective social support and policies need to be in place». It could be useful to offer opportunities to them for social-emotional education, at the same time, if the «no experience» children could understand the didactic method, it would be a great affirmation. From the findings of the two pilot studies, the interest of pupils and teachers in this didactic activity and the creative potential of pupils were shown.

Two earlier pilot studies encouraged us to expand and enhance this research in order to understand pupils' perspective of emotions and expression of picture books more in depth. The didactic method was changed to a more complex form and all of the workshops were conducted in person. In March 2023, four 120-minutes workshops were conducted in three primary schools in Italy, with 55 pupils aged 7-10 and 4 teachers. Briefly, in the first workshop the researcher narrated the selected picture book and invited pupils to reflect and draw their individual fears. In the second one, pupils worked in pairs and sketched each other's facial expressions, with and without Covid-19 face masks. In the third and fourth one, pupils worked in groups of 4-5 to create a picture book based on an emotional theme of their shared choice. Before and after these workshops, the researcher conducted a one to one interview with the class teachers who also observed the workshops. In June 2023, the same empirical research was conducted with 100 pupils aged 7-10 and 21 teachers from two Chinese primary schools. After four workshops and two interviews, a focus group was held with different material and different grade teachers. In November 2023, after having gathered the Chinese data, the researcher came from China to Italy to conduct the focus group with Italian teachers.

In order to understand the reaction of younger children to this didactic design, in the same period of the empirical research in primary schools in both countries, two 60-minute workshops were conducted in a Chinese preschool with 48 pupils aged 3-5 and 4 teachers, another one was conducted in an Italian preschool with 22 pupils aged 3-5 and 4 teachers. Briefly, in the first workshop, the researcher narrated the selected picture book and invited pupils to reflect and draw their individual fears. In the second one, pupils worked in pairs and sketched each other's facial expressions. Before and after these workshops, the

researcher conducted a one to one interview with one of the four class teachers who had also observed the workshops. All performances at primary schools and preschools in Italy and China were documented with video and audio.

During all workshops, the researcher was present to explain to pupils the objectives, encourage participation and facilitate task orientation when necessary. The class teachers were present as facilitators, assisting the researcher in communicating with their pupils in a familiar way. Participants were informed about the project goals, the confidentiality of their work, and the voluntariness of participation. Informed consent from parents was also collected with no family refusing. The study was conducted in agreement with ethical guidelines for protecting human participants. Nevertheless, researcher intervention was reduced to a minimum and participants were left free to decide the contents of their work. By and large, most participants worked productively and collaboratively.

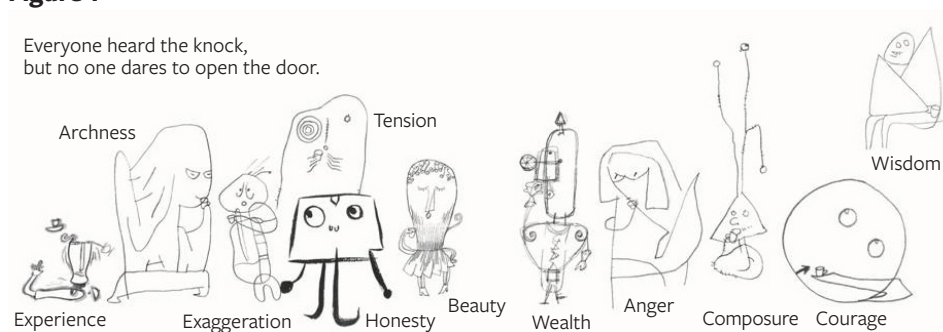
Development of the picture book *When Fear Knocks on the Door*

Social-emotional literature is an important component of successful peer interactions between children, and school readiness (Denham, 2006). Therefore, high-quality children's books about emotional education are extremely critical. In addition, the famous Italian children's literature writer, Gianni Rodari (2013) states: «When you have to do with children, and you want to understand what they do and what they say, pedagogy is not enough, and psychology does not manage to give a total representation of their manifestations». For this reason, he wrote fairy tales, short stories, nursery rhymes and poems, in the belief that picture books can solve psychological and pedagogical problems, stimulating children's imaginations and creativity. Fear was chosen as the theme to create upon, because fear is not only one of the basic emotions (Ekman, 1975), but it is also one that often affects children's lives and the relationship between children and adults as well. Some parents see their child scared of wetting their pants and will scold them; this erroneous way will make the child feel more afraid. As diversion is better than interception, a child-friendly story can undertake the assignment of an emotional education medium. Literacy is fundamental, but a love of reading only comes about when a child understands that fascinating stories are being told in books (Montessori, 1938).

Hence, the story was written in a child-friendly linguistic way, using anthropomorphic dialogues to develop the story of the picture book *When Fear Knocks on the Door* (An, 2018): one day Fear knocks on the door, there are 11 characters at home: Courage, Experience, Beauty, Wealth, Honesty, Intelligence, etc., but nobody wants to open the door (fig.1). After a long discussion, Courage opens the door and there is nobody there at all. It finishes in an open-ended way in

order to interact with young readers. Even though some parents and teachers unfortunately seem to think that they should quiz children about the «facts» of the story, the talk frequently takes the form of a more open-ended exploration of what the child finds interesting in the story, helping the adults to provide the sort of information that the children want or need (Tizard and Hughes, 1984). In addition, according to professor of the University of Cambridge, Nikolajeva (2014): «clever picture books make use of ambiguity created in the interaction between media when conveying a character’s emotional state». Specifically, the pedagogue Dewey (1916) stated: «The process of emotional learning is active and not a passive transmission of pre-packaged knowledge» (p. 59). For this reason, both in telling and listening, children must be urged to think critically. The dynamics of interaction between children, as they write, expose, and draw feelings and emotions, must include dissent and provocation. Hence, this story is considered in its pedagogical value to evoke readers’ thoughts. Either when they read individually or with an adult, children could question using this open ended method.

Figure 1



There are 11 characters at home, it is from the inner pages of the picture book *When Fear Knocks on the Door* (An, 2018).⁶

Apart from the literature point of view, it is also considered a picture book from an illustration perspective. Children have a great ability to «read» pictures which may be overlooked by adult authors. It is a question that comes down to the «connection between narrative imagination and pictorial representation» (Sowa, 2012) to «making pictures and images talk» (Maiwald, 2012). Therefore, the creation of a picture book requires attention to a number of specific factors, including consideration of the consistency between text and illustration, the functionality of illustrations to provide more information than the text. In the case

⁶ The pictures used in the article are all original works from *When Fear Knocks on the Door* (An, 2018). Jiang Su: Fenghuang.

of emotional picture books, you need to know how to visualize abstract concepts and simplify complex concepts without losing the character of the conception «emotion». Emotions — in this case the concept of «fear» — are good examples of abstract concepts that are central, common and contestable (Murriss, 2014). «Art is talking about emotions» (Francucci and Vassalli, 2005). Hence the tacit connection between the concepts of emotion and abstract art should be seen. The language of abstract painting is more appropriate than figurative painting for topics of emotion. In addition, many scholars believe that there are many similarities between children's paintings and the works of abstract artists. For both, art provides a privileged and perhaps unique path through which to express ideas and feelings of the utmost importance to them (Gardner, 1993). Thanks to numerous experiments with the Tate Modern London, Page et al. (2006) have identified various reasons why abstract and contemporary art is particularly suitable for teaching children. Contemporary art has the ability to interest and involve because it is current and contextualized with contemporary social dynamics; because it requires an intellectual process for understanding; and because it is not immediate, and children have to ask questions and find answers (Schulte and Thompson, 2018).

The picture book *When Fear Knocks on the Door* (An, 2018) employs artistic elements reminiscent of Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, and Joan Mirò to craft its characters, thereby creating a narrative bridge to these modernist artists. At the narrative's conclusion, young readers are acquainted with the artists and their seminal works, facilitating an interactive engagement whereby readers match story characters with specific artworks. This activity enhances comprehension of the narrative while fostering an appreciation for the artists. The book subtly integrates emotional and aesthetic education through its philosophical content, engaging children on multiple developmental levels. Specifically, Klee's art, often likened to children's drawings for its simplicity, embodies a profound connection to psychoanalytic themes prevalent during his time, including the exploration of the unconscious by Freud. Subsequently it will show the creative idea of this picture book. «A picture book is the first art gallery a child can visit. In my books I try to discover a new world very close to contemporary art. I am sure that children need a strong artistic approach» (Neugebauer, 1933). The fairy tale could not have its psychological impact on the child if it were not first and foremost a work of art (Bettelheim, 1977).

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed for their content by considering the different topics of each workshop. Data were organized hierarchically and included

five primary themes: Pupils' individual drawing of fear; Pupils' drawing in pairs of peers' facial expressions with and without masks; Drawing and text of pupils' picture book creation; Class teachers' interviews in words; Focus groups with teachers in words. Given the primary exploratory nature of this study, we calculated descriptive statistics for the data variables. Considering this is qualitative research, no statistical analysis was carried out. In the second phase, the documentary method (Mannay and Pauwels, 2019) will be used to analyse children's drawings to find more tacit information, and to analyse the interviews and focus groups to achieve a deeper understanding of the main PhD project. In this article, we present some results that were analysed in the first phase.

Results

This research leverages the CASEL *Big Five Model-Self-awareness, Self-management, Relationship Skills, Social Awareness, and Responsible Decision-making* to evaluate the impact of the picture book *When Fear Knocks on the Door* (An, 2018) in fostering emotional intelligence among diverse age and cultural groups. The study reveals that the book significantly enhances children's emotional awareness and understanding, enabling them to express their feelings of fear through both verbal and artistic means, including depicting primary emotions such as joy, surprise, disgust, sadness, anger, and fear.

The analysis also uncovers cultural disparities in emotional expression and teamwork capabilities. Specifically, Chinese pupils faced greater difficulties in tasks involving drawing facial expressions and collaborative book creation compared to their Italian peers. The use of picture books as educational tools not only for reading but also for stimulating creativity is affirmed as vital in formal educational environments. Further, classroom observations from video recordings illustrate distinct behavioural patterns and management strategies in Chinese and Italian schools. Chinese pupils generally maintained disciplined postures and focused attention forward, while Italian pupils showed more relaxed and varied orientations. These findings highlight the necessity for culturally tailored teaching methods and underscore the effectiveness of creative educational resources in promoting social and emotional learning.

Conclusions

The objective of this study was to investigate the pedagogical efficacy of the Chinese picture book *When Fear Knocks on the Door* (An, 2018) as a tool to enhance emotional perception among children aged 3 to 10 in both China and

Italy. The research sought to determine the appropriate pedagogical strategies for different age groups and to draw insights from the experiences in these two diverse educational settings.

The findings confirmed that the picture book was comprehensible to children within the targeted age range in both countries and served as an effective medium for social-emotional learning, aesthetic education, and diverse applications within formal education settings. Action research revealed that pupils aged 7-8 were particularly responsive to the activities, demonstrating a strong grasp of the material, ability to work independently and in groups, and confidence in their artistic expressions. Feedback from Italian teachers indicated a strong interest in further exploring social-emotional learning within the curriculum, whereas Chinese educators expressed concerns about the duration of the project potentially impacting academic performance, suggesting a need for focused teacher training on integrating social-emotional learning and picture book usage effectively.

The study also identified challenges in group work and engagement, particularly in larger Chinese classrooms, where pupils showed varied levels of interest and capability in artistic and relational tasks. This suggests a future research direction involving more individualized methods, such as one-on-one interviews, to better understand pupil responses and engagement. Despite these challenges, most participants enjoyed their involvement, appreciated their roles as co-researchers, writers, and illustrators, and felt empowered by contributing to the project. This engagement highlights the importance of recognizing and harnessing pupils' voices in expressing and managing their emotions, suggesting that educational approaches should broaden beyond verbal communication to include creative expressions and consider the emotional dimensions of pupil experiences to enhance social support within formal education.

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