

La dimensione educativa ed ecologica della relazione nonni-nipoti

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Sommario

Gli andamenti demografici in atto nella società contemporanea evidenziano un forte incremento della popolazione anziana determinando, tra le altre cose, una nuova riorganizzazione della vita familiare. Ne consegue una reinterpretazione dei rapporti tra più generazioni (tra genitori e figli, tra nonni e nipoti) in direzione di una riscoperta del valore educativo e culturale, affettivo e sociale dell'intergenerazionalità.

Qui si vuole proporre una riflessione pedagogica sulla dimensione educativa della relazione nonni-nipoti assumendo una prospettiva non egocentrica — *eco-centrica* — che valorizzi la *differenza* (dei valori, delle esperienze e dei punti di vista, dei linguaggi) di ciascuna età della vita e promuova la qualità dei legami intergenerazionali.

Parole chiave

Famiglia, infanzia, vecchiaia, relazione educativa.

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The educational and ecological aspect of the grandparent-grandchild relationship

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Abstract

Ongoing demographic trends in contemporary society have shown a sharp increase in the elderly population, resulting in, among other things, a new reorganization of family life. It follows a reinterpretation of the relationships between different generations (between parents and children, between grandparents and grandchildren) toward a rediscovery of the educational and cultural, emotional and social value of intergenerationality.

We want to offer a pedagogical reflection here on the educational aspect of the grandparent-grandchild relationship, assuming a non-egocentric — ecocentric — perspective that appreciates the *difference* (of values, experiences and viewpoints, and languages) in each stage of life and that promotes the quality of intergenerational ties.

Keywords

Family, childhood, old age, educational relationship.

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An introductory observation

It is true that the family has undergone profound changes that, over the course of time, have given it an even more varied image today than in the past. Its structure and functions have become more complex in light of societal changes that, nonetheless, have not reduced its influence and value despite having been modified (Donati, 2012a).

The family has been able, and still is, to get through the turmoil of the crisis because of its creative adaptability and the intensity of the relationships dynamically supporting it. This is due to the extraordinary *open evolutionary potential* (Pinto Minerva, 2002) that distinguishes it, allowing it to survive (internal and external) changes. «The family system's ability to change is, indeed, the same "condition" of its survival: the degree and capacity of adaptability to endogenous and exogenous transformations have recently led — rather than to the "disappearance" or "death" of the family (Cooper, 1972) — to its overall reconsideration» (Loiodice, 2014, p. 11).

Isabella Loiodice underscores (2014) that, more than ever, what is asked of the family today is to evolve from a model of social conformability to a relational model based on forms of dialogue, participation, and sharing. It is a matter of reconsidering the roots of the dynamics of family relationships, not disowning the existence of the roles defined within it (parental, filial, etc.), but rather basing them on the *right mix* of dialogue, conflict, and support — between *agreements and disagreements* — to construct and maintain new emotional bonds, new mindsets, and autonomous perspectives of life.

Moreover, these are specifically the «relationships» that vertically «pass on and transform biological heritage, personal history, events and culture of the group to which they belong» (Dozza, 2016, p. 69) and horizontally constitute that «web of intersubjective bonds» (Dozza, 2016) built into various social contexts that leave «at least a generative sign» (Cambi, 2011, p. VIII) in the course of growth and education of all its members. This means that the result of family life — the quality of the relationships and interconnections initiated within it — *influences*, more or less consciously and intentionally, the construction of the subject's reality and identity. It is offered in a positive sense as material, intellectual, and emotional support — a *resource* — to the *process* of growth and emancipation and/or in a negative sense, prompting an educational process devoid of potential opportunities that depresses and compresses the multidimensional development of its members. In other words, «it may be simultaneously necessary and insufficient» (Cerrocchi, 2018, p. 101), emancipating or dysfunctional.

While not neglecting «dysfunctionality» as a possible family tendency, here we can only believe (and *hope*) *pedagogically* that the educational potential — the *transformational mandate* — of the texture of internal (and external) relationships

in the family-system (specifically of our discussion on those established between grandparents and grandchildren) can be improved and supported, convinced that the hope of planning will inspire the pedagogical commitment.

Then let us talk again about the family as an *educating community*. Taking Jerome Bruner's idea (1998) that «education takes place not only in classrooms but when the family is gathered around the table and its members try to make sense together of the day's events» (p. 9), we can recognize that the family — the first place to nurture affects, thoughts, values, and even cognitive abilities (Dato, 2014) — is configured as a generative «environment» of renewed responsibilities within which to encourage and support the capacity to aspire, plan, and become a person and consequently as a system that «*teaches how* to experience social relations (starting from parental ones) as a progressive discovery of *alterity* and, together, as an appropriation of a sense of one's own *identity*» (Frabboni e Pinto Minerva, 2013, p. 186).

Against this background of *intertwining* relational exchanges that crisscross the family system, a significant role is played by the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren. This is also in light of an increased longevity that extends old people's participation in family life and therefore the coexistence of different generations within it. The evident verticalization of the family leads to reconsidering (here the pedagogical aspect of the discourse) the concatenation of ties between grandparents, fathers, mothers, grandchildren towards a «dynamic, intentionally designed relationship-system in which a continuous, reciprocal teaching-learning process takes place among its constituent members» (Pati, 2014, p. 103).

According to Lizzola (2009), every important educational challenge must be played above all in terms of a «generational exchange», aware of the fact that «family ties do not concern only the *present and/or a recent past*. Instead, *they come back in different generations [...] generating effects of complex reciprocity*» (Cerrochi, 2018, pp. 103-104) in a non-negligible way and extending to «the different communities of belonging included in turn in the “world system”» (Loiodice, 2018, p.113). As already mentioned, here is an attempt to trace in that intergenerational intertwining of parental exchanges (of affects and responsibilities) that support the subject's education, be it child/adult/elderly, a *physical and mental place* within which «to construct the generative conditions of democratic and supportive thought and personalities» (Frabboni e Pinto Minerva, 2018, p. 13) indispensable for renewing ethical and aesthetic postures in comparisons of the world, and so of rethinking the way «to inhabit the earth» (Dozza, 2018, p. 195).

Starting from children and the elderly, «looking at them (in an alliance) together» (Mantovani, 2012, p. 111) can be described as an authentic educational encounter capable of encouraging co-responsibility and participation. Although not a simple matter, it is appropriate to point out and recognize the emotional

bond between grandparents and grandchildren by placing emphasis, however, on the *formative* and *trans-formative* aspect of this relationship and on the wealth of possible shared exchanges of knowledge and experiences intended «to guide the future» (Dozza, 2016, p. 69).

In the background

Important demographic and epidemiological changes have resulted in a sharp increase in the elderly population in contemporary society, creating expectations of a «good life» unprecedented in the history of humanity. Among other things, this has involved a change in family structure due to an increasingly important transformation in generational proportions. More specifically, recent ISTAT data (2019) have revealed that, in Italy, older people's support in managing family life is increasingly higher and more consistent (as opposed to past centuries when a lower average life expectancy did not permit grandparents to have sustained relationships with their grandchildren). In addition, it cuts across the whole country, with greater emphasis in central and southern Italy. Beyond the social, cultural, health, and age characteristics of the elderly — and the many nuances that the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren can take on (full-time, long-distance, etc.) — which also deeply affect participation in the grandchildren's care, what clearly emerges is that «becoming grandparents» appears increasingly to be «socially and culturally relevant». More than anything, family ties, especially following such critical events as retirement, loss of a spouse, dwindling friendships, etc., have become central to an elderly person's life. Moreover, «grandchildren» in particular, represent not only in instrumental terms (of mere caregiving) but above all in cultural terms,¹ an opportunity to restore relationships that had remained in the background until then.

On a pedagogical level, there are questions about the opportunity for the elderly (for the grandparent) to mediate the child/adult relationship (still today seeking a balance), giving it meaning and even countering the educational inconsistency of parenting that is uncertain and lax at times and authoritarian and domineering at other times. It restricts the spaces dedicated to the play, dia-

¹ The reference to the cultural and social value of the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren was fully justified with the Legislative Decree of 28 December 2013 no. 54, art. 42 that recognized the right of grandparents to «maintain» significant ties with their grandchildren. It is interesting to note that this document recognizes the significance and value of an *ongoing* relationship as an irreducible and fundamental right of grandparents to be protected and preserved. In this sense, the legislator has provided for the judicial authority to intervene if the grandparents are prevented from exercising this right: «The ascendants have the right to maintain significant relationships with the minor grandchildren. The ascendant to whom exercising this right is prevented may resort to a judge in the child's normal place of residence so that the most suitable measures may be taken».

logue, and conviviality and forces the child to live outside of the time and story of his age (Frabboni, 2012). This delicate task requires significant educational responsibility. In fact, the risk is in drifting towards awkward intrusions and even more ruinous attempts at parental substitution that could lead to a (mainly educational) impoverishment rather than protecting the virtues of the stages of life in a dialogue between generations. The grandparents' «mediation» can become a valuable educational resource if it is configured, as Donati would say (2012b, p. 51), as a «relational asset», as a space for identity, human and cultural growth within which a «generative» alliance of new openings and perspectives (of dreams, desires, projects) can be established that meshes the grandparents' need for the permanence of the integrity of the Self and the grandchildren's need for inclusion. This *alliance* knows how to accept itself, cultivating *other* alliances (with *other* educational systems) that are also transformative of the «ways in which, physically and/or mentally, socially and/or culturally, [the subjects] attribute value, perform, support, or choose and, consequently, act and/or, more generally, live life» (Cerrocchi, 2018, p. 106).

For the purposes of our discussion, all this refers to a discussion on «nonnità», or grandparenthood, (Vegetti Finzi, 2008; Pati, 2010; Gecchele, 2010; Caporale, 2011; Stramaglia, 2012; Dozza, 2016) as a *transition* (biography, social, cultural), in the background of family transitions that give educational *relevance*. For some time now, correlating the experiences of parenthood and of *becoming grandparents*, the human and social sciences have used the term (a suitably devised neologism) «nonnità»² to «describe the phase that involves the acquisition (certainly not by choice) of grandparent status» (Stramaglia, 2012, p. 199) and, above all, to restore value to the role and function «of grandparents» by renegotiating established relational structures to «create trust between generations» (Bodei, 2014, p. 94).

The generative work of grandparents

«Grandmothers and grandfathers keep rites and traditions alive; they have a reserve of stories. [...] They have an important duty to carry out, that of cultural transmission» (Hillman, 2007, p. 258).

Old age is a collection of memories, stories, successes and setbacks, conquests, rebellion and resistance, knowledge and know-how. All at once, it defends the idea of the future in a short-term society, since it is necessary to recover experiences accumulated in the past in order to think and plan for the future. Those

² The spread of the term «nonnità», or grandparenthood, which is now used in numerous scientific publications in the fields of psychology, pedagogy, sociology, etc., can be traced especially in Silvia Vegetti Finzi's studies and specifically to her work *Il romanzo della famiglia* (Vegetti Finzi, 2007).

life experiences handed down by the elderly from which to start anew to *imagine* improved transformations of existential frameworks in which children, young people, adults, and the elderly can meet, talk, and build together an intercultural and intergenerational society of peace and solidarity (Ladogana, 2017). In other words, it is memory, a community's symbolic and cultural heritage that supports and causes societies to evolve by giving them an identity. Moreover, it is the memories of elderly people (*grandfathers and grandmothers*) that opens up awareness spaces related to the ties that cannot fail to exist between different generations, past, present, and future, in all societies (Pinto Minerva, 2012), that *becomes* the «parent's gift» (heritage, in fact) to guide «the future of a world populated by new women and men» (Frabboni, 2018, p. 24).

It has been said before that extending life's possibilities allows the generational spectrum to come into broader contact and especially makes a more dialectical comparison of their different needs. Each generation's specific aspects and connotative qualities have a decisive impact on people's lives as well as their present and future. However, each age needs each other and each one has its own resources that can contribute to everyone's growth. «Each age can reach its fullness, its human quality that prepares for an additional wholeness, specific to another age» (Comenio, 1993, p. 141). This passing-on, *this giving* is the experiential heritage from one generation to another, from one stage of life to another.

Therefore, grandparents, have a generative job (Dozza, 2016), one laden with a strong emotional, playful, empathic, and donative connotation that takes place mainly in the story-telling dimension of *being together talking*, slowly and serenely. In particular, grandparents become «creators of history in this trans-generational passage» (Bobbio, 1996, p. 49).

By narrating their life experiences as children and adults, retelling important moments in their parents' childhoods, for example, grandparents allow their grandchildren to get to know three different ages through comparison and retracing that bond of *continuity* «with one's having been», that makes sense of one's own origin and supports the construction of one's own identity structure. It «reactivates the human being's sense of inconclusion» (Pinto Minerva, 2011, p. 7), creating *other* possibilities for encountering the world and pursuing a critical action to reconstruct historical, cultural, and social meaning and significance.

Becoming and knowing how to be grandparents thus means leaving «educational tracks that pass into the grandchild's attention and feeling» (Cesa Bianchi e Cristini, 2009, p. 188), accompanying the child along the entire growth process. It is this «transmission of family-value» that *becomes* a «transmission with transformation» (Dozza, 2016, p. 72).

Here then, grandparenthood becomes *a lovely time* (Pati, 2010) in which childhood and old age are experienced with a renewed perspective, in which to dream, to imagine *with* and *for* one's grandchildren, *with* and *for* one's grandparents, when

being and feeling an active part of the intergenerational narrative. The alliance of grandparent and grandchild *is used* for self-reflection and self-training, through which these two stages of life can be recognized and look together at the future.

An ecological opening of the grandparent-grandchild relationship

It used to be said that the interactions between grandparents and grandchildren «are essential for transmitting culture, value systems, and a sense of belonging» (Dozza e Cavrini, 2012, p. 89) and that, acting on both memory and an expectation (of the future), «simultaneously shape continuity and change» (Dozza e Cavrini, 2012).

In these interactions, a careful pedagogical look can only retrace the *possibility* for grandparents and grandchildren to ask themselves about the *beyond* of their own present, to extend their way of feeling about themselves and the world by giving *new* meaning to life and *new* shape to the future: learning to *take care of* one's existence (opening new ways of considering and living it). It follows that, in addition to high emotional intensity, the bond between grandparents and grandchildren is charged with a strong ethical (and aesthetic) value and therefore, with a strong *pedagogical sense* because it *teaches* (or it could teach!) in an ecological sense by cultivating the «emotional, social, and systemic thinking» (Cagol e Dozza, 2018, p. 5) essential to envisaging «more harmonious, responsible, and communal forms of all systems — plants, animals, waters, rivers, seas, lands, rocks, atmosphere — living together that share the planet's past and future with humans» (Ladogana, 2018, p. 15).

For that reason, an exercise of «consciousness of belonging» underlies the grandparents-grandchildren alliance, which can be substantiated *through education* in the forms of daily action and assume the traits of a «cosmic reflection that opens up radical questions about our existence and that of the world and its own meaning» (Cambi, 2010, p. 128).

It is obvious that the specific aspect of the grandparent-grandchild relationship is identified in this aspect of *care*. «Starting from the concept of care, in multiple forms of *taking care of oneself, others, and the world*, it may be possible to reshape the relationships between children and the elderly» (Loiodice, 2013, p. 19). This means that the grandparent-grandchild relationship, if included and supported within a pedagogical paradigm that interprets it as an educational model based on a sense of *care* (Sarsini, 2013), carries a high transformative potential *also* from an ecological point of view, returning (to children and the elderly) the «view of being-in-the-world-with-others» (Bertin e Contini, 1988, p. 60).

To (not) conclude, the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren could be the non-neutral background of the processes of «human co-evolution

with the physical and mental, social, and cultural environment» (Cerrocchi, 2018, p. 100) within which to *think* about (or just *imagine*) the construction of «a new *interculturalism*» (Pinto Minerva, 1988, p. 15) among all ages and «forms» of life interpreted and understood in a unitary logic, thus «complying with the generational pact between human beings and the *being* of the planet» (Dozza, 2016, p. 72).

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