

**FOSTERING MEANINGFUL EDUCATION: EXPLORING ETHICAL
AWARENESS AND ETHICAL LITERACY IN PRESCHOOLS
THROUGH QUALITATIVE RESEARCH**

**FOMENTAR UNA EDUCACIÓN CON SIGNIFICADO: EXPLORAR
LA CONCIENCIA Y LA ALFABETIZACIÓN ÉTICAS DESDE LA
EDUCACIÓN PREESCOLAR A TRAVÉS DE LA INVESTIGACIÓN
CUALITATIVA**

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the initial findings of a qualitative study investigating the relationship between ethics and education in Italian preschool settings. The research employs the methodology of Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) to emphasise the indispensable role of promoting ethical awareness in early childhood education. The preliminary results from the interpretation of intensive interviews with preschool teachers indicate that the structuring of ethically significant educational experiences can be a factor in the growth of ethical awareness. From a theoretical and practical perspective, the study posits that stimulating ethical awareness from early childhood can prevent the rise of an increasingly widespread phenomenon: ethical illiteracy.

Keywords:

Constructivist Grounded Theory; Early Childhood Education and Care; ethical awareness; ethical literacy; European Compliance & Ethics Community; moral education

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RESUMEN

Este trabajo presenta los primeros resultados de una investigación cualitativa sobre la relación entre la ética y la educación en las escuelas de educación infantil italianas. Mediante la metodología de la *Constructivist Grounded Theory* (CGT), la investigación subraya el papel indispensable de promover la conciencia ética en la educación infantil. Los resultados de la interpretación de entrevistas intensivas con maestros que trabajan en las escuelas de educación infantil subrayan cómo la estructuración de experiencias educativas éticamente significativas puede ser un factor de crecimiento de la conciencia ética. El estudio, desde una perspectiva teórico-práctica, sostiene que estimular la conciencia ética desde una edad temprana puede prevenir el aumento del analfabetismo ético.

Palabras clave:

alfabetización ética; Comunidad Europea de Cumplimiento y Ética; conciencia ética; educación moral; Educación y Atención Infantil; Teoría Fundamentada Constructivista

Introduction

The dearth of rational foundations supporting behaviour has emerged as a significant concern in Western societies, as evidenced by academic debate (Morin, 1999; Bauman, 2008; Gardner, 2011) and everyday conversations. As De Monticelli (2010) asserts, our era is distinguished by a *bankruptcy of practical reason*, wherein objectivity in moral judgement is eschewed. This issue is not only evident in twentieth-century European philosophical thought, but also in everyday activities. The increasing influence of subjectivism, relativism and nihilism has led to a growing divergence between rationality and practical action (De Monticelli, 2010). The surge in antisocial, violent, and fundamentally selfish conduct gives rise to the question of which institutions bear the greatest responsibility for moral education. This leads to the question of whether families, schools or extracurricular educational environments are the primary agents in this regard, or whether collective responsibility is a more appropriate framework.

To counter the prevailing ethical scepticism, it is necessary to affirm the rational foundations of practical reasoning. This process must consider the role of the emotions involved in this cognitive

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process, rather than excluding or denying them (Greenspan, 1995; Nussbaum, 2001).

Simultaneously, it seems crucial to disassociate oneself from an affirmative or evaluative concept of education (Colicchi, 2021, p. 47), which is oriented towards the pursuit of a particular ideal of humanity and society. This ideal is imposed and does not acknowledge the potential for emancipation and self-determination of those engaged in the educational process.

It is thus the intention to advance a *non-evaluative conception* of education (Colicchi, 2022; D'Antone, 2022), which entails the establishment of an environment wherein individuals can express themselves freely, even when their perspectives are in opposition to those of the educational institution (Ford, 2019).

In this sense, the various approaches to moral education – encompassing character education, moral reasoning promotion and the ethics of care – appear to diverge significantly.

Character education is predicated on the notion that there exists a fundamental set of *educational values* (Colicchi, 2021, p. 285), which are considered good, to be pursued and promoted in the persons being educated (Lickona, 2004; Berkowitz, 2011).

The perspective put forth by Kohlberg (1981) places greater emphasis on the advancement of moral reasoning competence, with a set horizon, delineated through a sequence of six stages, aimed at achieving a certain type of man who makes his own decisions following universal ethical principles (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989).

The ethics of care, on the other hand, offers a relational perspective that focuses on the definition of feminist ethics, which is characterised by connection, the meeting of different worlds and the creation of sincere relationships (Gilligan, 1995). Noddings introduces an affective perspective to it, situating care at the foundation of ethical life. This challenges the primacy of moral reasoning, universal principles and moral judgement, instead situating the implications of moral education within the ethics of care perspective (Noddings, 2002).

The recent proposal of a *Socio-Ethical Curriculum* (Baldacci, 2020) as a framework for school educational action represents a valid expression of the *non-evaluative perspective*, as it identifies

personal reflection, teacher-pupil dialogue, and peer discussion as the three pivotal factors of the curriculum (Baldacci, 2020, pp. 90-106). Baldacci characterises these three elements of the curriculum as indispensable practices for the formation of ethical mental habits. Personal reflection is consistent with Dewey's conceptualisation of *reflective thinking*, which entails a meticulous examination of the variables within a given situation, with the objective of identifying a solution that is commensurate with the prevailing circumstances. Dewey (1933/1986, pp. 180-193) posits that this process occurs in a series of distinct phases: suggestion, intellectualisation, hypothesis, reasoning, and hypothesis verification. This introspective analysis of one's own or others' conduct occurs within the context of an inner dialogue, though it can also be facilitated in group settings through narrative stimulation.

The dialogue between the adult and the child and the debate among peers are two of the key dimensions of the educational relationship and are based on the creation of a welcoming atmosphere, a climate of mutual listening, of attention and respect for otherness, of reciprocity in the relationship and motivation, on the part of each person to engage in this confrontation.

These are some of the most relevant features of the constructs that will be proposed below.

The objective of the curriculum proposed by Baldacci (2020) is to encourage individuals to adopt a critical and conscious approach to analysis, rather than adhering to dogmatic or mechanical ideals or opinions imposed by others. This approach is designed to facilitate an understanding of the universal, beginning with individual moralities and progressing through *democratic comparison*.

Thus, in this essay, we intend to explore the significance of fostering *ethical awareness* within educational environments, commencing from the early childhood stage, with the explicit intention of preventing *ethical illiteracy*. Furthermore, we emphasise the interconnection between education and social ethos (Dewey, 1899; Papi, 2003), acknowledging that individualism, a defining feature of neoliberal societies (Fratini, 2020; Baldacci, 2022), is accorded greater social legitimacy than reflective capacities.

The decisive rediscovery of the ethical perspective in education serves as the starting point for this research, particularly concerning prompts regarding the ethical task of education in the process of fostering awareness of being individuals within a community and as part of a species embedded in a natural context (Morin, 1999; Nussbaum, 2002; Gardner, 2011).

Therefore, the research design of the doctoral research, provisionally titled¹ *Reflecting Together: A Socio-Ethical Education Curriculum for Preschool*, will be described, with particular attention to methodology. It will then explore the initial data that emerged will be explored, namely the definition of the two categories – *ethical awareness* and *ethical illiteracy* – and, finally, their correlation. It is hypothesised that the promotion of ethical awareness starting from preschool may be an effective strategy to prevent ethical illiteracy, based on the analysis and interpretation of the interviews and the literature.

Method: Constructivist Grounded Theory in Education

The Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) proposed by Katy Charmaz (2014) was selected as the methodological framework for this research for two primary reasons: (i) its evident *ethical stance* (Bianchi, 2019, pp. 133-135); and (ii) its coherence with the reference epistemology, encompassing socio-constructivism, complexity theories, and critical pedagogy. All research is, to some extent, ethically oriented, whether this is a conscious or unconscious process. This is because research reflects the values that guide it, the level of involvement and attention given to participants, and the ethical attitude and perspective of the researcher (Creswell, 2007). CGT is characterized by the researcher's necessary awareness of the necessity to consider diverse ethical perspectives and the necessity to mediate between them, giving rise to an *emerging ethics* (Bianchi, 2019, p. 135). The ethical attitude of the researcher is evident throughout the various phases of the research process: in the interactions with the commissioning body, colleagues, and participants, in constructing the interview script, in transparency regarding all recursive steps of reading and rereading the data and what emerges from them, in the coherence between the data

themselves and the researcher's interpretations (Bianchi, 2019, pp. 135-136). It is incumbent upon the researcher to make their ethical stance explicit, demonstrating responsibility towards the wider academic community, their colleagues, and the users of their work (Gardner, 2006). This encompasses the accounting for epistemology, as von Foerster (1987) characterises constructivist epistemology as an *epistemology of epistemology*. It is imperative that researchers do not attempt to conceal their subjective perspectives behind the facade of objective, detached facts. They must be acutely aware of the impact their own views have on their research and their involvement in the study context. Furthermore, researchers bear the ethical responsibility of striving to understand the complex nuances of real-world problems, recognising the inherent subjectivity in perceiving the world around us (von Foerster, 1987).

The researcher is also responsible for interacting with the ideas and lives of other people. When engaging in a dynamic of co-construction of meanings, it is important to demonstrate profound respect for them: he or she also has a profound responsibility in terms of matching the co-constructed meanings with the participants' ideas.

CGT situates the founding principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1999) within the frameworks of complexity epistemology (Bateson, 1977; Morin, 1993) and socio-constructivism (Kelly, 1955; von Foerster, 1987; Maturana & Varela, 1992; von Glasersfeld, 1998). A departure from the positivist tenets of Grounded Theory (Tarozzi, 2008) is evident in CGT, where data is regarded as inherently subjective, and collection is seen as inherently biased (Charmaz, 2014). An understanding of reality is seen as contingent upon the interpretative lenses of each participant and the collective process of meaning construction and recursive interpretation of data (Bianchi, 2019, pp. 110-111).

Consequently, CGT emerges as the most suitable methodological choice, aligning with an epistemology that emphasises the co-construction of meanings and knowledge within a complex, dynamic context (Charmaz, 2014). Therefore, we employed a qualitative analysis leading to the development of a theory *grounded in data* (Tarozzi, 2008), wherein the understanding

is co-constructed rather than discovered, collaboratively created by both the researcher and the study participants.

In the present case, as proposed by Charmaz (2014), the research was not started through one or more research questions, to avoid projecting towards the validation of previous hypotheses. Instead, the focus was on identifying an area of investigation – the relationship between education and ethics – and on the co-construction of meanings through the encounter of scientific literature and the opinions of privileged witnesses and the researcher.

The context identified is the Italian preschool, which is attended by children aged three to six. This can be considered one of the first steps of entry into a community other than the family, like the infant-toddler centre, but, unlike the latter, much more uniformly spread throughout the country. Furthermore, it is an experience of democratic coexistence that is fertile for ethically aware educational work (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005; Mortari, Ubbiali, Valbusa, & Vannini, 2019; Mortari & Camerella, 2020).

The research process begins with the identification of *sensitising concepts* (Blumer, 1969), complemented by the researcher's personal and disciplinary interests. The sensitising concepts that gave rise to this research are *ethically oriented education*, *ethical competence*, and *shared reflection on values*.

A distinctive feature of CGT is *theoretical sampling*, which involves an ongoing construction of the sample. This contrasts with the probabilistic-statistical model, where the sample is identified a priori based on precise logics of fair distribution and representation of the reference population (Bianchi, 2019, pp. 106-107). Theoretical sampling, unlike probability sampling attempts not to orient the research, but to intertwine with the emerging theory, following the intentions of the researcher instead of statistical and probabilistic criteria. In the second model, the sample is chosen randomly; in the research describe here, however, the sample was identified through reasoned choices based on what emerged from the data analysis, in accordance with the CGT model.

The study commenced with the involvement of a group of pedagogues, university researchers and preschool teachers, operating in ten Italian regions, who were invited to participate as privileged witnesses. Subsequently, a second sampling was carried

out exclusively of preschool teachers. In total, more than thirty intensive interviews (Charmaz, 2014; Bianchi, 2019) were conducted throughout 2023.

The analysis began concurrently with the data collection phase, in line with the CGT methodology.

CGT is distinguished by a data coding process that is divided into three phases: open, focused, and theoretical. The open and focused coding processes begin during the data collection phase, with the objective of contributing to the process itself. This involves the refinement of some interview questions and the adjustment of the researcher's approach. The *open coding* stage involves exploring the data to identify as many potential concepts as possible. This is achieved by creating nominal labels that are related to each concept that is expressed during the interviews. At this stage, the data are subjected to a process of constructive dialogue with a view to exploring the widest possible range of speculative possibilities. This enables the identification of pivotal nodes or categories, the properties of which are described in the phase of selective coding. This process continues until theoretical saturation is reached. If categories require further data acquisition, a new data collection process is initiated until saturation is achieved (Tarozzi, 2008). The objective of *focused coding* is to identify the properties of the categories that have emerged and then proceed to further coding. Finally, *theoretical coding* is employed once theoretical saturation of each category has been reached. This involves explicating the relationships between the different categories and formulating an original theoretical hypothesis (Tarozzi, 2008; Charmaz, 2014).

Indeed, the process of CGT entails the identification of pertinent categories within the data coding, analysis, and interpretation stages. These categories are then associated with properties and characteristics, leading to the investigation of their relationships and the co-construction of meanings. This, in turn, facilitates the definition of a theory based on the data.

The data were co-constructed through an interaction between research participants, scientific literature, and the researcher, facilitating the exchange and comparison of diverse perspectives. Interpretative work led to the identification of a predominant core category, namely *ethical awareness*, and three

other categories: the *teacher's ethical stance*, the *ethical framework of education* and *ethical illiteracy*.

Results: The Relationship between Ethical Awareness and Ethical Illiteracy

This contribution aims to elucidate the relationship between *ethical awareness* and *ethical illiteracy*, following a description of the research design. For this reason, we will now focus on the intertwining of these two central aspects in the analysis of the relationship between education and ethics. From the earliest stages of research, in fact, the question was raised as to whether this could be translated into the promotion of *ethical skills* (Calidoni, 2022; Iori, 2023b) or *moral reasoning* (Kohlberg, 1981; Baldacci, 2020).

To avoid the potential pitfalls of a lengthy and ultimately meaningless list of competencies, it was decided to focus on *ethical awareness* as a sphere of human action, which can be trained, but which requires, first and foremost, that one takes care of the atmosphere in which education takes place, the context and the educational relationships.

The concept of *ethical illiteracy* (Iori, 2024c) inevitably refers to a lack of a competence, but it served, in this context, to bring out a widespread thought in the context examined – Italian preschool – concerning the structuring of meaningful educational experiences that were based on self-expression, through performances full of meanings and with a subsequent phase of reworking and thinking about those experiences, both individual and group (Massa, 2000).

The provision of opportunities for children and young people with the opportunity to express themselves, to have all-embracing experiences and then to be able to reflect on what they have represented for themselves and for others, probably represents the most comprehensive intervention aimed at everyone's acquisition of self-awareness, emotions, interests and aspirations awareness, cultivating the desire to be adult subjects, that is, to live an adult freedom "which we experience when we try to exist in and with the world and not only with ourselves" (Biesta, 2017/2012, p. 127).

Ethical Awareness: a core category of a qualitative research

The research has investigated the significance of reflection on ethical matters with children aged between three and six years, also as an action to prevent *ethical illiteracy* (Iori, 2024c). The *research-training* experiences conducted thus far in the context of early childhood education have demonstrated the value of introducing virtues and encouraging reflection on them from the age of three onwards (Mortari, Ubbiali, Valbusa, & Vannini, 2019).

Fostering ethical awareness is the *core category* of this research project, as it intertwines, connects, and serves as a guiding thread, a *fil rouge*, among other categories. The analysis of the interviews and the interpretation of data from them, in conjunction with insights drawn from scientific literature, have led to the definition of ethical awareness as a multidimensional construct that concerns both teachers and children and involves the awareness of the motivations that guided a certain action, along with the consequences it produced and the coherence with reference values.

Ethical awareness (Iori, 2023a; 2024a) can be defined as the “predisposition to observe oneself, to question the reasons behind one’s actions and their consequences, trying to understand whether it would have been better to take different paths and whether one has remained consistent with their own values” (interview with C.T., 22/12/23). Its reflection in the educational field is the promotion of such behaviours, also through a “reflective attitude on the part of the teacher, who acts as a model” (interview with T.R., 14/12/23), as well as the establishment of “specific moments for listening and dialogue on ethically relevant issues” (interview with I.D.F., 18/10/23), which allow children to feel comfortable in this particular situation and gradually reproduce it in their daily lives. Hence, the fundamental importance of the role played by the teacher emerges: “The teacher is also a model in the relationship with otherness. Their ethical competence is crucial in creating a climate of respect and dialogue with others” (interview with P.S., 14/12/23).

Ethical awareness is thus linked to the teacher’s *educational responsibility* towards children, families and society (Damiano, 2007) as a *moral professional*, who structures the *ethical atmosphere* of the classroom. Say two interviewed teachers: “The educational

responsibility of teachers is also expressed as an ethical and political responsibility for the future” (interview with L. M., 24/6/23); “We must always remember the ethics of responsibility that characterises our work. We have, as teachers, a responsibility towards children to grow, relationally and affectively” (interview with C.T., 22/12/23).

The actions of the teachers serve as a role model for the children with whom he or she is in a relationship. That is why it is necessary for the teacher to equip himself or herself, also through training courses, with a marked predisposition to awareness of his or her own actions, clear value choices, the ability to reason about them and the predisposition to confront others about these choices, coherence in practices and attention to respect for oneself, others, and the environment.

All this also produces the confidence in the teacher to reserve ample space for group discussion, even on ethically sensitive issues. And this also includes issues related to social class, gender, ethnicity, skin colour (Hooks, 1994). In the preschool context, this is done also through the teaching tool of the *assembly* (Martini, Mussini, & Gilioli, et al., 2020, pp. 117-120). The assembly enhances self-expression, listening to the Other and the reworking of lived experiences, building a *community of thought* (Michelini, 2016, pp. 71-111). Michelini identifies four decisive characteristics of this construct: the *reciprocity* between the individuals who are part of the group; its being a *democratic community*; the *dialogue* that ensues, respectful of the position of others, devoted to consensus between all subjects, in a climate of active listening; and the presence of *reflective persons* who know how to pause and reason about the actions experienced or observed. Deweyan echoes are very strong, particularly from the American pedagogue’s considerations on *reflective thinking* (Dewey, 1933/1986). The latter in fact represents a fundamental element, a sort of prerequisite, to be able to build ethical awareness and to support an educational process that is truly emancipative (Freire, 1970; Biesta, 2012; Catarci, 2023), that is, that promotes the free expression of the subject and his autonomous development, his critical thinking.

It thus falls upon the educational system to establish an environment wherein all individuals can express themselves freely, in accordance with their abilities and resources, and to articulate their

thoughts, emotions, and dissent, even in opposition to the institution itself (Ford, 2019). This may be regarded as the pinnacle of emancipation: the capacity to consciously rebel against the educational system in which one is embedded through the exercise of free self-expression.

It can be argued that every educational action conveys a certain idea of confrontation with otherness, of a relationship with error, with oneself and with others, of the importance of reflexivity, of listening, of respect, an idea of conflict and of the possibility or otherwise of resistance to what is proposed by the educational situation itself. Indeed, every educational action conveys the values that determine it and the consistency or otherwise with them (Colicchi, 2021, p. 285).

If we understand pedagogy in opposition to *indoctrination*, that is, to “pervasive systematic communication that aims to create uncritical acceptance of a certain world or life conception in a predominantly emotional manner” (Baldacci, 2020, p. 45, translated by the author), we can perceive it in a genuinely emancipatory light. In this sense, educational action is supportive of the full expression of the individual, their striving for an adult and mature freedom, which may be understood as the desire to become an adult (Biesta, 2017/2022, p. 127). This enables individuals to become aware of their own inclinations and to share them with others, thereby facilitating, alongside the study of the economic system, the process of effecting change in the real world (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Catarci, 2023).

As far as intentional contexts are concerned - which do not encompass the full range of educational situations - it is therefore the task of those who intervene in the structuring of the *educational setting* (Dozza, 2000) and the *mediation tools* (Riva, 2004, p. 173), thus defining the *educational dispositive* (Massa, 1987, p. 17), to deepen reflection and intervention on the ethical atmosphere.

A privileged witness states, “It is necessary for the educator to be aware of his own ethical positioning and his own ethically oriented education for it to be effective” (interview with A.D’A., 31/5/2023).

The ethical climate of a specific educational situation has many similarities with the school moral atmosphere (Power, Higgins,

Kohlberg, 1989), from which, however, it differs in its greater focus, instead of on normative and relational aspects, on individual and collective reflexivity about the actions performed or observed, their consequences and the motivations behind them. In this sense, there is a strong link with the conception of the school as a democratic community, in which an atmosphere of dialogue, listening and self-expression is built (Dewey, 1916/1974; Baldacci, 2020).

In conclusion, the translation of *pedagogical competence* (Fabbri, 1996) into everyday practice, also from an ethical point of view, therefore means intentionally structuring the ethical framework within which the conditions of the educational experience occur, and placing the multiple variables and the resulting acts at the centre of reflection, not so much with the aim of controlling them, but with the aim of creating spaces of real emancipation of the individual, a profound expression of the self, even at the cost of encouraging dissent from *what* (or *how*) is proposed by the adult of reference (Ford, 2019).

For this to occur, it is essential that the individual responsible for educational action possesses a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics that their actions shape, including the ethical implications, and the impact on the relationships involved. To navigate this complexity, two key elements emerge as crucial: *reflexivity* (Dewey, 1933/1986; Paterlini, 2019) and *pedagogical supervision* (Oggionni, 2013; D'Antone, 2023).

On the one hand, preparing the ideal conditions so that reflective thinking can be formulated and expressed, through meetings, moments of individual reflection, a research stance and an educational action project that recognises the fundamental role of thought in the development of educational practices.

On the other hand, the configuration of pedagogical supervision instruments that facilitate the work group's reflection on circumstantial events by drawing indications, ideas, and prompts for reflection on analogous situations, without establishing universal norms, or prescriptive solutions applicable to all experiences of a given type. Pedagogical supervision encourages the comparison of different points of view, in-depth reworking of practices, the emergence of contradictions, the analysis of the documentation

produced, self-education, and the identification of reflections that can reach educational practice.

Ethical illiteracy: an educational emergency

Ethical illiteracy emerges as a *saturated category* through the various stages of coding whereby its properties and relationships with other categories, are identified. It has been presented and discussed with the research participants as the horizon of educational work in ethical terms and as a social phenomenon involving, among others, parents, and teachers, who are the most prominent educational figures in the lives of children and the primary reference figures in terms of ethical education (Iori, 2024c).

The phenomenon of *ethical illiteracy* (Ibidem) remains relatively under-explored, or with only partial approaches (Franck & Osbeck, 2017). There are strong links between ethical illiteracy and education, particularly in relation to the responsibilities that education may have towards it.

A privileged witness offers the following definition of ethical illiteracy: "In my opinion, ethical illiteracy means being incapable of reasoning on ethical issues; of really knowing and listening to the other person" (L.G., 19/12/23).

Every human action is guided by values and beliefs (Colicchi, 2021, p. 43) and this also applies, in this perspective, to those who are in the condition of being *ethically illiterate*. The ethically illiterate person possesses their own values that direct their actions, but they adhere to them uncritically and unconsciously, allowing themselves to be influenced without being aware of it.

A witness offers the following insight: "Ethical illiteracy develops when one fails to listen to their inner self and employ reflective thinking. If I don't listen to my own needs, I cannot develop ethical competence. If I don't hear and perceive myself, I won't be able to relate to others. Similarly, if I don't engage in direct experiences. For instance, if children in a classroom don't encounter the world beyond that classroom, they won't have the opportunity to ask questions about it. Consequently, reflective thinking isn't encouraged. Furthermore, those who are ethically illiterate are more easily controlled because they lack critical thinking skills. For

instance, the fast-paced communication culture often leads to detachment from oneself" (I.D.F., 18/10/23).

The phenomenon in question is supported by the everyday lives of people in Western societies, which do not provide protection for spaces and times explicitly dedicated to reflection, let alone ethical reflection. This is evident in several contexts, including the workplace, educational institutions and public spaces, both physical and virtual, with only rare exceptions.

In the typical day of a citizen of a Western country, the rhythms are largely dictated by work. Free time is then dictated by leisure time and the use of social and mass media, whose timelines are increasingly reduced and pressed, thereby preventing the user from autonomously deciding what content to view.

We live in a reality where we are inundated with visual and auditory inputs (OECD, 2019), immersing ourselves in them, leaving little room for reflective thinking, which requires time, real sharing with others, careful evaluation, and active listening to others and oneself.

It is a challenging practice that requires training and dedication. It is not an immediate or natural process, yet it is one that produces aware individuals and an overall more prosperous situation.

Concurrently, neoliberal societies espouse individualism as a core value (Fratini, 2020). This is conveyed through the myth of the self-made man who, in competition with others, has excelled, achieving success, which is predominantly measured in monetary terms.

Furthermore, individualism can contribute to ethical illiteracy, as it encourages a narrow focus on one's own interests and success, with minimal consideration for the impact of one's actions on others. This approach often lacks the capacity for empathy and reflexivity, which are essential for ethical decision-making.

It can be argued that ethical illiteracy is a consequence of a lack of exposure to reflection on values. This lack of reflection may be due to a lack of exposure to the motivations that guided certain choices or to the consequences of those choices. This results in a gradual deterioration of this ability. An individual situated within this context is likely to be more inclined to adopt the values that are

prevalent within their society or those that are most useful and functional within the socioeconomic system in which they live. Without explicit reflective attention on the part of the adults of reference and deep shared reasoning on situations experienced or observed, in accordance with an ethical perspective, children and young people internalise those they encounter daily as positive values, which has the effect of atrophying their critical thinking skills (Iori, 2024c).

Discussion: Educational Reflective Practices to Prevent Ethical Illiteracy

Says a privileged witness: “Being reflexive and aware professionals is an educational responsibility of us teachers. In preschool we can work daily on respect for self and others, on the value of defending freedom, and one’s own ideas, one’s own thinking, but also of knowing how to mediate, to negotiate with others. That’s what we do every day in the assembly: work on the ability to listen, to speak one’s mind and negotiate with everyone’s ideas” (interview with C.R., 28/6/2023).

It is the responsibility of teachers to engage in reflective practice, as it is of the institutions within which they work. If the education system is to exert any influence on phenomena such as ethical illiteracy, it must create an environment conducive to the daily training of professionals in reflective practices.

This can be achieved if the academic training system invests in the creation of communities of thought (Michellini, 2016) from the outset, and if, once in service, professionals are able to access the conditions required to continue to reflect, both individually and in groups, and to nurture their professionalism through continuous training (Potestio, 2022) and pedagogical supervision practices (D’Antone, 2023).

It is only through this approach that educators can foster the capacity for original thinking, the capacity to challenge dominant values, or to adhere to them in accordance with one’s own values and identity, from the earliest stages of education.

A useful perspective in this regard may be that proposed by Colicchi (2021). In his analysis of the relationship between values

and pedagogy, he identifies a relational perspective that is linked to a pragmatic paradigm, situated in experience and within a social context. This perspective focuses the individual's attention on the ends of their own educational action, in the specific situation and in relation to the given context in which they find themselves.

The question, therefore, is not what universal values constantly guide our actions, but “we, in the given situation and ‘all things considered’, what ends do we consider it good (and possible) to pursue in order to educate, and by what means is it possible to do so?” (Colicchi, 2021, p. 300, translated by the author).

Every human action is determined by the underlying beliefs that inform it and has consequences for the individual, for those around them, and for the whole reality. The ability to reflect on these dimensions and to formulate one's own thoughts demonstrates a fundamental ethical competence (Calidoni, 2022; Damiano, 2007; Iori, 2023a) and cultivates ethical awareness (Iori, 2024a, 2024b).

Ethical awareness is closely linked to the concepts of *personal intelligence* (Gardner, 2010), *agency* (James, 2009; Varpanen, 2019) and *self-awareness* (Goleman, 2011), which constitute the ability to observe, analyse and reflect on one's own and others' actions, in contrast to the lack of awareness that characterises ethical illiteracy.

Therefore, a school system that promotes ethical awareness can act in contrast to ethical illiteracy.

The ability to identify values, whether considered positive or otherwise by the individual or the community, and to engage in critical thinking about values should be promoted from an early age. This is a key skill in addressing the phenomenon of ethical illiteracy (Iori, 2024c).

This is because this set of competences is fundamental for a life of well-being, enabling individuals to consciously position themselves in a complex and multidimensional reality, and to avoid situations of oppression, whether enacted or suffered.

The promotion of ethical literacy, i.e. reflection and sharing with others on situations experienced personally or observed from an ethical perspective, and thus the ability to explain one's own actions and those of others, the motivations behind them and their consequences for oneself and others, can be understood as a right

of every individual, according to one's circumstances and possibilities.

In this context, the task of pedagogy, understood as an engaged pedagogy (hooks, 1994), is considered. This approach advocates for the well-being of individuals and the enhancement of humanity's quality of life through the transformation of the *status quo*.

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¹ The title will be replaced at the end of the overall work, when the emerging theory is achieved: indeed, it will be the theory that will give the research its name, in keeping with CGT tradition.