

Education never stands still—it moves, adapts, and transform in response to new realities, while reshaping society in turn. This collection explores some forces defining learning today: digital tools, intercultural dialogue, artistic expression, and the call for ecological responsibility. At its core, education remains a space for negotiation and reinvention.

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PROCEEDINGS

02

Cultures, Practices, and Change

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Vol. 2

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Practices,
and Change**

Organizers and partners



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ETHICAL AWARENESS: A CROSS-CUTTING ELEMENT IN THE INTERCULTURAL SKILLS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS

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Ethically responsible behaviour has been identified as a key element in the context of global citizenship education (UNESCO, 2015; Tarozzi, 2024). By integrating the findings of a qualitative empirical study on the relationship between education and ethics with an investigation into the intercultural competences of early childhood educators, this article introduces the construct of *ethical awareness* as a transversal element between these domains. After exploring the intercultural competences of early childhood educators, using the competence models proposed by Fiorucci and Deardorff as a point of reference, the article explores the research design and the concept of ethical awareness in formal educational settings for children aged 0–6 years. Finally, it examines ethical awareness as a transversal element in the field of intercultural competence.

ethical awareness; intercultural skills; early childhood education; early childhood educators; Constructivist Grounded Theory

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the relationship between early childhood educators' *intercultural competencies* and *ethical awareness*, with reference to findings from the qualitative research project *Promoting Ethical Awareness: a Grounded Theory on the Socio-Ethical Education Curriculum in Preschool*.

The article begins with an analysis of the intercultural competencies of '0–6 educators'.

The following section presents the research design and provides a detailed account of ethical awareness in early childhood education and care (ECEC) contexts.

The final section will address the relationship between the promotion of ethical awareness, the intercultural competence of '0–6 educators' and the concept of meaningful education.

1. INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES OF THE 0–6 EDUCATOR

In a globalised, multicultural society, the engagement with diversity and the fostering of relationships with plurality are central to the educational process (Reggio &

Dodi, 2017) also with the aim to realize *social justice* (Tarozzi, 2011). This is particularly pertinent in early childhood services, where educators' roles and trust-based relationships with children and families necessitate robust *intercultural competencies* (Fiorucci, 2020). Furthermore, the development of these competencies represents a pivotal objective in the pursuit of effective education (Council of Europe, 2019; UNESCO, 2020).

Deardorff's (2009) and Fiorucci's (2020) models of intercultural competence are particularly relevant in the context of early childhood education. Fiorucci (2020, pp. 104-107) outlines three core areas: decentralising perspectives, shifting from ethnocentrism to *critical ethnorelativism*, and engaging in intercultural mediation. Deardorff (2009) highlights the educator's role as a behavioural role model, fostering openness, cultural self-awareness, and attentiveness to others' values and norms.

The achievement of ethnorelativism necessitates the overcoming of inherent ethnocentrism through the development of self-awareness, openness, and active engagement with difference (Bennett, 1993). *Mediation*, a key competency, involves the utilisation of constructive dialogue to create a 'third way' that transcends cultural differences (Deardorff, 2009, p. 33). *Conflict*, approached with inquiry and reflective communication, becomes an opportunity for mutual understanding.

In early childhood services, these competencies manifest as practices that embrace diversity, challenge stereotypes, and promote active listening and reflection (Fiorucci, 2019, 2020, pp. 95-96).

2. ETHICAL AWARENESS: AN EMERGING CATEGORY IN A CGT QUALITATIVE RE-SEARCH

2.1. Research design

This study employs *Constructivist Grounded Theory* (Charmaz, 2014) as its methodological framework. This approach was selected for its *ethical stance* (Bianchi, 2019) and alignment with the epistemology of reference: socio-constructivism, complexity theories, and critical pedagogy. In contrast to an approach based on hypotheses and research questions, it focuses on the *co-construction of meanings* through a process of engaging with the scientific literature, the opinion of privileged witnesses and the researcher's own perspective.

The context identified is that of Italian preschools, which are regarded as spaces for early democratic coexistence and *loci of ethical practice* (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005). Therefore, more than thirty *intensive interviews* (Bianchi, 2019) were conducted mostly with pre-school teachers.

The data coding and analysis (Charmaz, 2004) identified four categories¹: Promoting ethical awareness; Making the ethical framework of educational action

¹ In order to enhance the procedural dimension that characterised it and constituted its unavoidable backbone, in accordance with the tradition of *Constructivist Grounded Theory*, the gerund form was used in the name of the categories.

intentional and explicit; Positioning ourselves ethically in the educational relationship; Becoming literate in emerging ethics.

2.2. Ethical awareness

Ethical awareness is a multidimensional construct that can be defined as the capacity to reflect on the motivations behind actions, their consequences, and their consistency with reference values (Iori, 2023; 2024a; 2024b). This entails questioning one's choices, considering alternative paths, and ensuring alignment with personal values.

It is therefore closely associated with the concepts of *personal intelligence* (Gardner, 2010, pp. 343-344), *agency* (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998) and *emotional intelligence* (Goleman, 2011). This encompasses the analysis and expression of one's own states of mind, observing and understanding them, as well as the motivations and emotions of others, without neglecting the ability to act autonomously, choosing between different possible alternatives, also in function of social change (Iori, 2024a, 2024b). This approach could prove effective in preventing ethical illiteracy (Iori, 2024c).

In educational contexts, ethical awareness is manifested in the promotion of behaviours that facilitate *reflective thinking* (Michelini, 2016), *democratic dialogue* (Baldacci, 2020), and *active listening* (Sclavi, 2003).

Teachers occupy a pivotal position as ethical role models, facilitating discourse on morally salient issues and cultivating an environment of respect and dialogue. This encompasses the creation of an environment that enables children to freely express themselves and develop their critical thinking abilities, with the gradual integration of these practices into their lives.

In preschools, tools such as *assemblies* (Martini et al., 2020) provide opportunities for self-expression, listening, and collective reflection, thereby fostering the development of a *community of thought* (Michelini, 2016).

These practices contribute to the development of an *ethical atmosphere*, which is of the utmost importance for an educational process that is emancipatory. Emancipatory education (Freire, 1970; Biesta, 2012; Catarci, 2023) fosters the free expression of individuals, enabling them to engage with their reality in a critical manner and strive for transformative change.

Therefore, it is imperative that intentional educational settings prioritise reflection on the ethical atmospheres that shape the relational dynamics, values, and responsibilities embedded in educational practices (Massa, 1987; Riva, 2004).

3. INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCES AND MEANINGFUL EDUCATION: WHAT ROLE DOES ETHICAL AWARENESS PLAY?

It is inevitable that the cultural plurality of society will be reflected in early childhood services (Fiorucci, Pinto Minerva & Portera, 2017). Therefore, it is important to cultivate and support the intercultural competences of early childhood educators in

order to increase their effectiveness (Portera, 2016).

In fact, every relational context involves an encounter with a variety of cultures, as everyone is the custodian of his or her own cultural traditions (Fiorucci, 2020).

This dynamic, particularly in 0-6 institutions, necessitates the implementation of a targeted intercultural training programme (Pescarmona, 2021). Professional development in this regard comprises the provision of the requisite tools for staff to effectively address the diverse situations they may encounter.

In this sense, the concept of *meaningful education* is put forth as an alternative horizon of meaning to that of *quality education*, associated with neoliberal logic (Dahlberg, 2016).

With regard to the quality of early childhood education and care (ECEC) systems, one well-established perspective, particularly within the field of economics, views the qualification of early childhood institutions as a means of reducing public expenditure by preventing future costs in essential or emergency services linked to poor quality of life (Heckman, 2020).

Nevertheless, some scholars contest this neoliberal interpretation of quality (Dahlberg, 2016). They argue for a relational and transformative perspective, whereby the quality of education is determined by the creation of a framework in which children can express themselves, construct meaning through deep observation and listening (Moss, Dahlberg & Pence, 1999; Clark & Moss, 2014).

This perspective challenges the limitations of traditional views of quality, which are often limited to measurable learning outcomes.

In contrast, the approach emphasises the significance of establishing material and symbolic conditions that facilitate children's engagement in meaningful experiences and collectively reworking these expressions (Massa, 2000).

It is of the utmost importance for those working in the field of education to develop and maintain the ability to interact effectively with individuals from a variety of cultural backgrounds. This enables educators to engage with a diverse range of realities, plan and act in a reflective manner, and relate to those who are different from them using appropriate frameworks (Deardorff, 2009). This is particularly crucial in the context of early childhood education, where stereotypes and prejudices tend to emerge, influencing attitudes towards diversity (Tabet, 1996).

Interviews with preschool teachers indicate that *ethical awareness* is a fundamental aspect of *intercultural competencies*.

Ethical awareness, as defined by intentionality, responsibility, and reflective capacity, is associated with values such as attentiveness, respect, and dialogue (Fiorucci, 2019). It allows teachers to model reflective behaviours and create spaces for listening and engaging with diverse perspectives (Iori, 2024d).

Educators demonstrating *intercultural sensitivity* (Bennett, 1993) are aware of the necessity to deconstruct their own stereotypes and demonstrate flexibility in managing inner resistance and conflicts when engaging with otherness. They utilise innovative strategies to facilitate communication and navigate the complexities of

dynamic balances. An inclination towards comprehending the other is a fundamental attribute that facilitates the acquisition of these competencies. This process, however, is continuous and iterative, as exposure to otherness evolves over time.

This necessitates the development of analytical skills that extend beyond cognitive or cultural frameworks, incorporating reflective and metacognitive abilities aligned with ethical-political directions (Fiorucci, 2020, pp. 66-67). Secondly, effective intercultural engagement requires self-awareness, which encompasses the recognition of one's limitations, vulnerabilities, and the influence of lived experiences, including the educational processes shaped by one's cultural context, on one's worldview. Such self-awareness must be coupled with efforts to approach the other's perspective through interaction, mutual understanding, or *cultural shocks* (Cohen-Emerique & Rothberg, 2016), which may be defined as emotional and intellectual experiences arising from encounters with unfamiliarity. A fundamental aspect of this undertaking is the educator's ability to regulate emotions, tolerate individual peculiarities, refrain from hasty judgments, and adopt a self-critical perspective while creating an environment conducive to the other's cultural creativity. To genuinely comprehend the other, it is essential to first gain an understanding of oneself (*Ibid.*).

Therefore, *ethical awareness* also serves as a foundation for essential intercultural competencies, including the ability to shift perspectives and mediate differences (Bennett, 2015). To cultivate these competencies, initial and in-service training must facilitate cognitive decentring and mitigate ethnocentric biases (wa Thiong'o, 2000). Educators must be equipped to reflect on their biases and serve as role models for critical engagement with otherness and *intercultural citizenship* (Tarozzi, 2005, 2024; UNESCO, 2015).

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