

«Happily, they embraced each other»^{*}: contributing to the Third Mission with stories to include and create community? A review of experiences[^]

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Abstract

Recent studies show the inclusive potential of children's literature, not only in the themes proposed but also due to the access to the language it allows. In this way, children's literature contributes to that ideal of inclusion understood in a broad sense that characterizes the Italian context of special education. Through the analysis of exploratory cases conducted in different territorial contexts with which the University found itself collaborating, in this contribution we aim to reflect on the potential that children's literature can also have in the context of the third mission, above all encouraging the building of alliances and communities aimed at working together and reflecting on practices, including particular subjects and actors.

Keywords: children's literature, inclusion, third mission.

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1. Introduction and theoretical premises

In the Italian context, the area of Special Pedagogy has been developed together with the ideas of integration, before, and of inclusion, after; the latter is the predominant one nowadays. Without the intention of making a full

^{*} The quote is taken from *Piccolo blu e piccolo giallo (Little Blue and Little Yellow)* by Leo Lionni (2015).

[^] This contribution takes up, updates and expands, some parts taken from case studies described in the following works by the same authors: Ascenzi, Girotti (2023a); Ascenzi, Girotti (2023b); Girotti, Ascenzi (2023); Boaro *et al.* (2023).

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historical excursus¹, we would like to point out how the idea of inclusion looks also at the contexts and at the idea of social integration (Pavone, 2009) in the attempt to build the “possible futures” intertwining educational and didactic planning and «to go beyond disadvantages widening and ensuring the individual and collective capabilities» (Giaconi, 2020, p. 265, our translation). As Canevaro and Malaguti recalled, the entire discussion on inclusion invites «a fundamental theoretical position that intends to put an end to every form of segregation and social, institutional and educational exclusion; it also requires focusing attention not only on the individual and on the shortcomings but on the functioning, on the capabilities and the context» (Canevaro, Malaguti, 2014, p. 99, our translation). The conclusion that emerges is that it is necessary to alter the current social, educational, and academic structures to enable everyone, including those with disabilities, to fully and actively participate in society (Canevaro, Malaguti, *Ib.*).

Looking at the the Italian context and going beyond the specific field of Special Pedagogy – while, at the same time, including it – it can be observed that the discourse on full and active participation in society and collective life is historically connected, also, to the ability to “possess language”. An attitude that, in our view, is well expressed by the following words by the Italian writer Simona Baldanzi: «*Il motto di mia mamma era “studiate bambini, studiate”, e continuava, “perché è brutto quando non ti vengono le parole per difenderti, ti vengono sempre dopo, quando è tardi”*»² (Baldanzi, 2019, p. 41). According to us, the aforementioned words testify a position towards language appropriation and linguistic mastery that goes back to the beliefs and efforts of Don Milani, his *Scuola di Barbiana*, the work of scholars such as Tullio De Mauro and the endeavour made by *GISCEL*, together with the experiences of famous school teachers such as Mario Lodi, Bruno Ciari, Gianni Rodari³. A position that recalls also Paulo Freire’s thought based on the idea that giving access to language and words implies a growth in awareness (Crescenza, 2020; Aglieri, Augelli, 2020).

Taking into account the “power of mastering language”, we also return our gaze to the field of Special Pedagogy where – hoping that the inclusive perspective could and should become the overcoming of a reductive integration sometimes reduced, mostly, to «an individual classificatory heritage» (Canevaro, 2011, p. 21, our translation) and preferring instead to implement

¹ For an extensive overview on the subject, see Giaconi C. (2020).

² «My mother’s motto was “study children, study”, and she continued, “because it’s bad when you don’t have the words to defend yourself, they always come later, when it’s late”» (Baldanzi, 2019, p. 41, our translation).

³ For a deeper overview on the subject, see Roghi, 2017; Meda, 2020; Crescenza, 2020; Augelli, Aglieri, 2020; Simeone, 2020.

«the dimension of welcome, sharing and involvement» (*Ib.*) for everyone – Andrea Canevaro quotes Don Milani himself and recognises, in his teachings and in the experiences he carried out, the primary objective of making children competent, capable of using words and with words reason, linguistic structures combined with logical structures, the ability to investigate: not only to understand what is written but because it is written in a certain way in a newspaper, and the same fact is presented in a very different way in another newspaper; because reconstructing the chain of facts is important and, therefore, we need to learn not to leave them isolated; we need to reconstruct frameworks in which to place simple information. All this means growing up and taking on active responsibilities towards the laws, with the awareness that we need to follow them and modify them if they prove to be unjust. But it cannot be an injustice towards one's idea, and a desire to adapt the laws to one's aspirations. We need to think in social terms (Canevaro, 2011, p. 17, our translation).

Being capable of thinking in social terms and of expressing it seems to be particularly relevant also due to the fact that the ability to understand and use language goes with the abilities to listen to and tell a story or many stories: as underlined by recent research (Giaconi et al., 2019; Taddei, 2020), creating stories can be considered as «a pedagogical device of undeniable potential in promoting paths of emancipation and self-determination of people with disabilities» (Taddei, 2022, p. 240)⁴. In this way, stories and the use of language(s) contribute also to the acceptance of someone's own differences and peculiarities: an acceptance that may come both by being “in relationship” with other people and their stories, and by having access to and being in contact with stories shared, for instance, through literature and books (see Canevaro, 2009) considered as one of the various tools, resources, and objects through which narration is given shape and promoted (Taddei, 2022).

Considering the premises presented so far, this contribution intends to recount some case studies conducted as part of some thesis works; they aimed to observe and verify in the field how some experiences, carried out through children's literature and using different approaches to it, could favor the real opportunity to “put into practice” inclusion understood – as briefly mentioned so far – precisely as acceptance and respect for differences and individual peculiarities and personal stories, but, above all, as the possibility for everyone of exercising collaboration, participation and active citizenship in collective contexts (Canevaro, 2011). This last dimension related to collective contexts seems particularly relevant to us also because it makes it possible, in our

⁴ On the same topic, see also Giaconi et al., 2019; Taddei, 2020. Furthermore, for an in-depth analysis of narrative theories placed in the broader context of the history of nature, see Cometa M., 2017.

opinion, to connect the case studies presented to the broader context of the third mission. Among the complex issues and critical points that arise from the latter topic⁵, we would like to underline how it has also been considered as an element that can and must promote social integration (Savino, 2015, p. 65) due to the ability of the University to «generate common goods and public discourse» (Balducci, 2014, p. 9). Speaking of common goods, a significant point of view is, in our opinion, that of Schildermans that attempts to reconfigure the discourse on the third mission and, therefore, the relationship between University and Society, precisely «through the lens of the common» and from a bottom-up perspective based on and enacted by practices (Schildermans, 2022).

The aim here is to understand if and how the experiences recounted might fit into the aforementioned perspectives and aims, as actions on the social body implemented through children's literature focused on the promotion of inclusion, cohesion, closeness, and reflection on practices. In the next section we will take a closer look at these actions.

2. Case-studies proposed

There are four exploratory case studies (Denzin, Lincoln, 2018, p. 607) to which we will refer below. Before going into detail about each of them we want to underline that the experiences proposed were conducted in four different contexts: two local nursery schools, one cultural association involved in different projects on the local territory and a nursing home for the elderly that collaborates with an outdoor kindergarten. They were all external to the University and well connected to the local reality. In all cases, there was the attempt to establish a dialogue, through children's literature, between the different actors and environments involved; as a matter of fact, different typologies of the "book object" were used and different modalities to interact and deal with language (visual, textual, auditory) were made reference to; picture books, silent books and audio-books were used. We will now proceed to analyze the four cases in more detail.

The first case study was conducted at a nursery school with around 120 children aged 3 to 5; the participating children were normally used to reading picture books in class, and, on this specific occasion, they experimented with an alternative way of listening to stories: for three meetings they listened to

⁵ For an extensive review on the Third Mission, see Cognetti, 2013; Compagnucci and Spigarelli, 2020.

some of the *Storie da ascoltare* proposed on the Babalibri publisher's website⁶. A quarter of the children involved were children from disadvantaged social contexts and/or second-generation migrants born in Italy, with one or both parents of foreign origin. The investigation aimed to observe how these types of stories could encourage participation, involvement and even linguistic understanding in children. It seems important to us to remember that linguistic and comprehension difficulties, attention and listening problems, and difficulties in independent work were reported as peculiar to every class. Finally, among the participants, there was a child diagnosed with high-functioning autism and one with a motor disability. Seven teachers were involved. There was a preliminary meeting with the teachers involved to better understand the contexts of the class; there was also an online meeting with the publisher Babalibri to investigate the genesis of this editorial product and, above all, receive suggestions on which stories to propose, taking into account the age group involved and the very ability of each single story to generate interest. Of all the Stories available, three were indicated, namely *Sono io il più forte* by Mario Ramos (2020) and suitable for 3-year-olds; *Luna e la camera blu* by Magdalena Guirao Jullien and Christine Davenier (2020), recommended for 4-year-olds; *Il Principe Tigre* by Chen Jiang Hong (2020), suitable for 5-year-olds. However, the teachers had full freedom regarding how to introduce and carry out the activity; at the end of the latter they would have had to answer a semi-structured questionnaire which consisted of 4 sections made up of open and closed items (Trincherò, 2004) which investigated the composition of the class and its characteristics; the participants' relationship with children's literature; the methods of introducing the Stories to be listened to and the children's reactions; possible differences observed after repetition of the task.

The second case study explored was conducted at a local association which groups together many other associations active in the area in different sectors, such as the cultural, social and environmental ones⁷. In particular, the meetings took place during after-school activities and homework support managed by volunteers; they involved a small number of children of different ages: three boys and five girls between 6 and 8 years old, two 9-year-old girls, a girl and a 10-year-old boy, all born in Italy but in families with a migratory background; for some of them there was difficulty in using Italian, as well as the presence, in some cases, of certified SEN (Boaro et al. 2023). During the three meetings organised, the children "encountered" three different children's literature books, namely *Piccolo blu e piccolo giallo* by Leo Lionni (2015); *Pezzettino*

⁶ The *Storie da ascoltare* (Stories to listen) have been an editorial project realized by the publishing house Babalibri freely available online on the publishing house's website. Currently, they are no longer accessible. To have more information on the topic, see Ascenzi, Girotti, 2023.

⁷ Casa delle Culture website <https://www.casacultureancona.it/> (last access 08/04/2024).

by Leo Lionni (2019); *Luna e la camera blu* by Magdalena Guirao Jullien and Christine Davenier (2020). The stories were proposed with different modalities: *Piccolo blu e piccolo giallo* and *Pezzettino* were initially presented as illustrated books whose story had to be reconstructed collectively by looking at the images; the hypothesis made was «verified by listening to the sound version» (Boaro *et al.*, 2023). During the third meeting, the *Storia da Ascoltare* of *Luna e la camera blu* was initially listened to and then verified with the images⁸. In this second case, too, the aim was to observe the degree of motivation and participation of the children, and how, through the focus on the stories and their understanding, mechanisms of understanding, negotiation and mutual construction of meanings were activated within children. Moreover, room was left for sharing personal experiences and emotions (*Ib.*).

The third case study was carried out at another local nursery school; the proposed activities were part of a wider project focused on making children accustomed to children's literature being read aloud. Between May and June 2023, every week, six boys and four girls between 2 and 3 years old met in the school library (Neroni, 2023). Some of the participants – coming from families with migratory paths – had difficulties in language and understanding and using the Italian language; these difficulties gave rise to episodes of isolation, reduced involvement or uncertainty when interacting with the other children and the educators. Among the objectives of the activities was the aim to encourage familiarity with the language and the creation of relationships within the peer group. We wanted to observe how reading activities could help develop an attitude towards listening and caring for one's own emotions and those of others. Among the various reading proposals, one of the *Storie da ascoltare* was selected: *Che Rabbia!* by Mirelle D'Allancè (2020); it was listened to twice during the same meeting and then reconstructed with drawing and collaborative dialogue in a subsequent meeting.

In the fourth and final case, the activities took place at a local nursing home for the elderly which houses an outdoor nursery located in an historical building and park; the latter aims to offer the children both daily contact with the environment and meeting with the elderly guests of the structure⁹. We would like to remember that it is a protected residence in a centuries-old park which houses a retirement home, a residential community for the elderly, a social-health service with people with Alzheimer's and finally a day centre (Carducci, 2019, pp.77-83). It is a place that takes care of the needs of non-self-sufficient people and those with disabilities; moreover, it carries out training and updating

⁸ For a more detailed discussion on the different types of book objects used see Boaro *et al.*, 2023.

⁹ For more information see Nido d'Infanzia Grande Albero <https://www.comune.macerata.it/nido-dassociazione-grande-arancio/> (last access 08/04/2024).

activities aimed at guests, but also at the facility's staff. In this context, the educator involved worked in advance with some of the elderly people in the facility, asking them questions aimed at understanding and learning about their life stories and their experiences and sensations within the facility. It was then proceeded with reading meetings with the children from the nursery: during these activities, the elderly "collaborated" in telling the story or in reconstructing it. In particular, the *Storia da ascoltare Che Rabbia!* was listened to; then, during another meeting, a little girl and an elderly man read together, for everyone else, the book *Piccolo blu e piccolo giallo* by Leo Lionni; the educator involved then proposed *Un pesce è un pesce* by Leo Lionni, using reading aloud techniques (Panza, 2015; Terrusi, 2014); finally, in the last meeting, the readings of the albums *Pezzettino* by Leo Lionni and *Io vado* by Matthieu Maudet were proposed. The reading activities – in which children and elderly people were present – saw the collaboration of the latter not only in the narration and reconstruction of the stories but also during the subsequently organized activities such as making drawings or playing dress-up. From the preliminary conversation with the elderly people involved, the happiness of the latter regarding the meetings with the children was already evident; this element became even more present after the proposed reading activities.

3. Results and conclusions

In other works (Ascenzi, Girotti, 2023a; Ascenzi, Girotti, 2023b), we investigated how the different typologies of the book object have contributed to creating different degrees of participation and inclusion; we reiterate it in this work while focusing, however, on how they have also favoured the creation of connections and inclusive communities spread across the territory, in a dialogue between the University and other local and non-local actors involved. In fact, in all the cases seen, we managed to observe increased participation and inclusion of children of non-Italian origin, children with language difficulties or, again, elderly people, thus allowing, in the last case, the «systematic transfer of knowledge, skills, competences, norms and values between generations» (Patricio, Osorio, 2016, p.85). Around these moments of sharing words and stories, possibilities of connection and closeness appeared to have emerged and could be observed within the impressions and gestures of the participants. Thus, the cases proposed seem to favour, to a certain extent, what bell hooks, quoting Parker, defines as «intimacy that does not cancel the difference» (Hooks, 2022, p. 85, our translation). On the contrary, sometimes there was the chance to talk and reflect together on these differences – especially in the cases conducted respectively in the local cultural association and at the caring home for the

elderly connected to the outdoor nursery school. What we would like to particularly stress here is the fact that this type of participation and inclusion achieved through access to words and stories was also made possible thanks to a network that saw the University collaborating with local schools, an association, a publishing house, a public rest house located in a historic public residence and surrounded by a large natural park that has a history within the city. Consequently, there were several bodies involved in implementing an exchange of knowledge and creating and observing together – to share, to put in common – possible practices, also with a view to professional updating.

We must reiterate that the cases seen are not part of a longitudinal study: they are rather surveys which demonstrate in our opinion the potential for impact on the third mission of children's literature looked at through the paradigm of inclusion, a potential glimpsed in the creation of microcosms and communities, temporary but intertwined to effectively work together, to reciprocally tell and listen to each other, to look each other in the eyes – in a way recalling Levinas – trying to grasp each other's differences at the same time recognizing their own elusiveness (Todd, 2001).

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