

Educating emotions and dialogue through picturebooks: A research-training path in early childhood 0-6

Maria Buccolo*, Valerio Ferro Allodola**°

Abstract

The article presents and discusses the data collected regarding a research-training experience conducted with nursery school teachers and kindergarten teachers. The survey aimed at educating emotions and relationships in early childhood (0-6 years) through picturebook, as a tool for (self)training to promote dialogue and pro-social behavior, with the perspective of inclusivity for all. The survey results confirm the pedagogical potential of picturebooks in the training of educators and teachers – aligning with documents issued by European institutions and the United Nations, urging states to commit to sustainability and social cohesion (such as the UN Agenda 2030) – to guide children towards awareness of their responsibility as human beings towards society and the environment, their task to “build” future humanity, and their role as active citizens in the world (Morin, 2020).

Key words (max 6): early childhood 0-6 years; emotions; dialogue; prosociality; picturebooks; research-training.

First submission: 14/04/2025, accepted: 23/05/2025

1. Introduction

Childhood is a crucial period for learning about oneself and others. The fundamental skills needed to thrive in the world – cognitive, socio-emotional,

* Europea University of Rome.

** Mediterranea University of Reggio Calabria.

° The paper is the result of joint work by the two Authors. For the sole purpose of scientific evaluation, paragraphs 1 and 4 are attributed to Maria Buccolo, Paragraphs 2 and 3 to Valerio Ferro Allodola. The Conclusions are common to both Authors.

Doi: 10.3280/ess1-2025oa19954

and physical – primarily develop from birth and before entering school, through a cumulative process (Save the Children, 2019).

Neuroscientific research has extensively shown that the neural connections controlling functions such as vision, hearing, language, and critical cognitive functions like memory, self-control, perception, motor coordination, and planning are most developed in the early years of life (Jack, Shonkoff, Phillips, 2000), starting from a strong integration among different organs and systems (Damasio, 1995; Rizzolatti, Sinigaglia 2006; Contini, Fabbri, Manuzzi, 2006).

All strategic guidance documents developed at the international level – based on scientific evidence – emphasize the need to invest in early childhood (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2019; EU, 2018; 2021). Interventions to promote children's development should particularly include economic, educational, and service support to families for children's well-being (Guerra, Luciano, 2024). The proof lies in Agenda 2030, specifically Goal 4 and the National Plan for Early Childhood Development.

In this regard, it is useful to remember what Postman (2005) states: “childhood is a social phenomenon, not a biological category” (p. 9). Furthermore: When the idea of childhood emerged towards the nineteenth century [...], it was composed of two intellectual currents: what we could call Lockian, or Protestant, and what we could define as Rousseauian, or Romantic. According to the Protestant conception, the child is a person not yet fully formed, who through literacy, education, reason, self-control, and a sense of modesty can be transformed into a civilized adult. According to the Romantic conception, the issue is not the child not yet formed but the deformed adult. The child possesses, as innate qualities, candor, the ability to understand, curiosity, spontaneity, qualities that are diminished by literacy, education, reason, self-control, and a sense of modesty” (p. 79)¹.

Franco Cambi specifies: “the two childhoods, opposite and separate, ideally and socially, will be the protagonists in the history of children even in the nineteenth century. However, during this century, there will be an increasingly sensitive growth of the first image of childhood [...]. The nineteenth century was therefore the century in which the two childhoods confronted each other, compared on the ground” (Trisciuzzi, Cambi, 1989, pp. 50-51)².

From a historical-educational perspective, the recognition of the importance of the early years of life is a recent and revolutionary achievement that has brought benefits not only to children but to all humanity.

Childhood emerges as the fundamental age in which the foundations are laid for the complete development of the adult individual; every child has the right

¹ Translation by the Author.

² Translation by the Author.

to live in conditions of well-being that can guarantee their development; childhood is the time for school: every child has the right to receive adequate education; childhood is the time for play, discovery, and initial socialization: every child has the right not to work to provide for their own sustenance.

However, this transition also requires that, in addition to needs, the competencies of girls and boys are recognized. At the beginning of the twentieth century, there is a decisive rethinking of the relationship between children and adults and a questioning of the historical inferiority attributed to childhood. Childhood begins to be seen as “other” and not inherently inferior.

The reflection on the humanity of the child, the originality of each and every one, the acquisition of autonomy, the ability to act and to develop representations of the world and reality, begins. Alongside the increasingly full, albeit still embryonic, awareness of childhood competencies, the numerous needs of boys and girls are perceived, from being listened to, to education and play; from the recognition of individual capacities to accepting that these needs ultimately correspond to rights.

The revolution comparable to the Copernican one, carried out by Maria Montessori, lies in imagining a new center for the cultural debate on the representation of childhood: no longer the adults, the teachers, or the content to be transmitted, but the boys and girls, the natural inhabitants of that period of life.

Maria Montessori’s contribution, directed towards childhood, its potential, and the enhancement of the competencies of boys and girls, had a significant impact nationally and internationally. Montessori fought for the assertion of a renewed conception of childhood no longer to be humiliated, punished, or molded, no longer seen only in deficient elements, but within an educational relationship, which, as such, remains asymmetrical but, at the same time, is characterized by devices (tools for observing and caring for the environment) aimed at becoming aware of both the needs, to be able to respond and correspond to them, and the potentials, to be able to accompany them in their development.

“Those who have followed this educational movement know that it was and still is debated. What has sparked the most discussion is that reversal between adult and child: the teacher without a lectern, without authority and almost without teaching, and the child made the center of activity who learns on their own, who is free to choose their occupations and movements. When it did not seem like a utopia, it appeared as an exaggeration” (Montessori, 1986, p. 148)³.

³ Translation by the Author.

A paradigm shift and, at the same time, a renewed idea of childhood are necessary – to be discovered – that rejects the presumed superiority of adults over children and the concept of education that does not evoke the image of an empty vessel to be filled, but is based on processes of accompaniment and guidance, thinking of education as aid to life. It is precisely in these terms that education is proposed by Montessori: the fundamental attention of the adult involved in education must be not to create obstacles to the harmonious, integral development of each boy and each girl.

The focus, therefore, shifts from knowing *what* to do to *thinking* about how to do it, ultimately leading to the necessity of thought and reflective action on the part of adults.

The fundamental concept for education is, therefore, to never become an obstacle to the child's development. What is fundamental is not knowing *what* we should do, but understanding the *prejudices* and *distortions of meaning* on which we need to work to make ourselves “ready” for the child's education.

Montessori calls on the responsibilities of the adult world to understand childhood and to design appropriate educational paths, assuming the scientific position of an observer.

For Montessori, the Method is that of a child-subject in dialogue and in continuous osmosis from birth, already as an active, communicative, relational newborn, in the integration of mind, body, reason, and emotion.

“This is education understood as aid to life; an education from birth, nurturing a revolution free from all violence, uniting everyone for a common purpose and drawing them towards a single center. Mothers, fathers, statesmen, all will agree to respect and help in this delicate construction, developed under psychologically mysterious conditions, under the guidance of a further teacher. This is the new bright hope of humanity. Not reconstruction, but assistance in the construction that the human soul is called to complete, construction understood as the development of all the immense potentialities with which the child, the son of man, is endowed” (Montessori, 1949, p. 6)⁴.

Consequently, “The pedagogy of childhood makes its way when the child is considered a subject currently capable of expressing and realizing an act of total humanity: it is the great principle of Froebel, according to which ‘education has the task of forming humanity in childhood,’ because ‘in every child, the totality of man and human life prevails’” (Orlando Cian, 1970, p. 147)⁵.

⁴ Translation by the Author.

⁵ Translation by the Author.

On these epistemological foundations, the contribution aims to present and discuss the data collected on a research-training experience conducted with 71 nursery educators and kindergarten teachers in the Municipality of Rome, Italy.

The investigation was aimed at educating emotions and relationships in early childhood (0-6 years), to deconstruct prejudices and stereotypes through the picture book as a tool for (self) training to promote dialogue and pro-social behavior, with the perspective of including everyone.

2. Picturebooks as a (self-)educational tool to teach about emotions and dialogue to promote pro-social behavior

Montessori's construct of "cosmic education" refers to an educational model that promotes global awareness and responsibility to build peace and solidarity among peoples. Montessori emphasizes that peace is a regulating principle of human relationships and an urgent goal for humanity. This interdisciplinary and unitary approach includes concepts of ecological education, peace, and global awareness, integrated with ethical and aesthetic implications. Montessori's "cosmic" mission requires a widespread educational commitment to achieve peaceful coexistence, surpassing political efforts against wars. Educating about the importance of peace is crucial for the common future, as it involves awareness of human purposes and the bonds of interdependence and social solidarity.

The primary responsibility of early childhood and primary school teachers, therefore, is to guide children to an awareness of their responsibility as human beings towards society and the environment, their task of "building" future humanity, and their role as citizens of the new world (Montessori, 1970, p. 31).

It is in the ability to arouse interest, to nurture that sense of wonder, that Montessori believes the secret of "good teaching" lies, starting from the premise on which she constantly insists, that the subjective assimilation of knowledge is possible only if activated in a process of inquiry set in motion by the desire to know. To animate it, to connect the child with culture, as in the previous growth phase with developmental materials, is the primary task of the primary school teacher, who should aim to have students who are "passionate" rather than "complacent." The sense of wonder can become a natural opening to the feeling of the "co-presence" of all living beings, but it will emerge most effectively when it is linked to the emotional experiences of the early years (Honegger Fresco, 1985, p. 10). The principles that have guided the Italian school in recent years go in this direction, making Montessori's reflections profoundly current and vital. The National Guidelines for the curriculum of

preschool and the first cycle of education in 2012 – with the subsequent integrations of 2018 – entrust the school with the primary role of "educating citizens capable of consciously participating in the construction of increasingly broad and composite communities, whether national, European, or global" (MIUR, 2012, p. 6). In the National Guidelines and new scenarios of 2018 – which reinterpret and integrate the previous Guidelines in light of documents issued by European institutions and the United Nations, urging States to commit to sustainability and social cohesion (such as the UN Agenda 2030) – the common goal of the various disciplines is identified as the development of skills for active citizenship and an "ethic of responsibility" towards others and the environment. The teacher has the role of "educator of new citizens" (MIUR, 2018, p. 15) and is tasked with providing students with "compasses" to navigate the society of the future, to consciously build a new "global" and "plural" citizenship.

In this scenario, Children's Literature can be one of those "compasses," as it tells of human complexity and offers spaces for expressive freedom. Children's books allow for the exploration of possible worlds and the construction of knowledge, countering moralism and "groupthink"; a place where expressive freedom becomes a cornerstone for the formation of a rich and ideal imaginary, aimed at the development of a reflective and aware citizen.

The picturebook, in particular, represents the very first encounter of the child with reading, with images, and with the world of books; a complex system characterized by shapes, figures, and words that intersect and collaborate to tell a story.

Thanks to picturebooks, children can build the skills of the individual/reader and create the idea of themselves as readers.

The text and illustrations interact on the pages, complementing, deepening, or even overturning the content of the message being conveyed (Hamelin, 2012, p. 40).

The picturebook represents a valuable educational resource in the context of sharing and socializing narrative spaces (Campagnaro, 2013). First and foremost, the images of a picturebook create a shared space for free discussion in which children, even the youngest or those with reading and learning difficulties, have greater access due to the presence of visual language. To interpret and give meaning to the visual-narrative sequences of the picturebook, children draw on their previous knowledge and experiences. They learn that visual memories can become a valuable resource for seeking similarities, finding differences, or attributing meanings. Furthermore, children are encouraged to freely express their visual ideas and enrich them through comparison and collaboration with their peers.

The skills of visual literacy, developed through dialogic and interpretive reading of picturebooks, contribute to enhancing the emotional and cognitive skills of the child. This process stimulates a sense of wonder and amazement that fuels the desire to further explore and deepen reading experiences. Dialogic and interpretive reading of the picturebook, in particular, allows the child to become aware of the possibility of equipping themselves with “a toolbox” from which to draw to develop new and enriching visual and literary analyses, through which to develop the process of emotional participation in reading a work. From an educational perspective, some picturebooks can help dismantle gender stereotypes, offering children diversified models that reflect the complexity of reality. For example, a picturebook that narrates a child's fear could become a model for other children who identify with that moment in their growth. Reading stories that sensitively and freely address children's daily challenges can help them express themselves and build their own identity (Fierli, Franchi, Lancia & Marini, 2015). The picturebook is an important educational resource that serves as a bridge between text and image, facilitating reading learning, stimulating the creativity and imagination of young readers.

It offers an engaging multisensory experience, helping them to better understand stories through illustrations that provide visual context and support for children, especially those with reading difficulties. In addition to teaching basic language skills, it promotes the development of empathy and pro-social behavior from an inclusive perspective (Grandi, 2020; Trisciuzzi, 2020).

Today, inclusive picturebooks speak to the youngest to ensure that diversity and difference become richness. Reading such picturebooks allows us to discover that we are all different, prompting empathy and respect towards all those people who appear different, special to our eyes.

“Reading books that talk about diversity also allows young readers to connect with the identity of the protagonists and can be a vehicle for an encounter that manages to overcome distrust by offering metaphors and representations” (Filomia, 2023, p. 118)⁶.

The main purpose of inclusive picturebooks is to help all of us recognize the incredible diversity that distinguishes us and help us see it as a resource for everyone. An inclusive education path starts right here, from reading picture books, where the language of storytelling activates an emotional relationship with the character of the story and consequently also with the friend who shares the same characteristics or disability. An education that “focuses on the possibility of overcoming prejudices through the mediated encounter that

⁶ Translation by the Author.

literature offers” (*Ibid*, p. 11)⁷. The picturebook also educates in observation as it invites attention to textual details and their meaning from the perspective of relational reciprocity, promoting careful and slow exploration of the page space and the care of words, both considered as forms of listening. It is therefore essential to learn to listen to words, as well as images, and explore their expressive possibilities, recognizing their infinite nuances and ambiguities, and treasure them to use them later in various verbal expressions (Negri, 2016).

The picturebook educates in mutual listening. The openness to the meaning of images allows for personal and collective reflections to be activated; in a sort of hermeneutic practice, adults must be able to stimulate and guide children in valuing the uniqueness and cultural singularity of each individual (Negri, 2016). Narrative dialogue and the use of symbolic materials offer opportunities to create a unique relational style between adults and children. This style extends beyond the narrative itself, encompassing multiple aspects of their educational and personal relationship, thus enriching their shared experience.

Reading picturebooks promotes the development of social and relational skills as, through discussion and sharing of stories, children learn to collaborate with others and respect diverse opinions and perspectives. The happy fate of the characters, along with their anxieties, fears, and challenges to face, represents a rich heritage capable of shaping and giving identity to a wide range of emotions and concerns that can grow and develop over time, transforming them into feelings and passions. Narratives contain a thousand affective nuances of good and evil, beauty and ugliness, hatred and love (Campagnaro & Dallari, 2013). Through narratives, children develop skills that enrich their cultural and intellectual baggage, transferable even outside the narrative context. These skills influence thinking, representation, and communication, contributing to the construction of thought, knowledge, and identity (Campagnaro & Dallari, 2013, p. 56).

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Setting and Participants

The nursery and kindergarten school are fundamental spaces to ensure better growth opportunities for all. The three-year training plan for the personnel of Rome Capital starts from the awareness of the importance of the role that 0-6 services play in the children’s growth, for their future prospects, and aims to support the valuable work that educators and teachers carry out every day.

⁷ Translation by the Author.

The training was aimed at recognizing participation in research and documentation of good practices as criteria to enhance and encourage professionalism through innovative learning methods and quality training paths. In-service training provides greater skills, including strengthening self-confidence through reflection on practices and work. Furthermore, it promotes the ability to broaden one's theoretical perspectives, reflecting critically on educational policies and the objectives of the practices carried out in different educational services. In educational settings, training is conducted according to the Research-Intervention model, as it offers educators and teachers the opportunity to critically question the link between theory and practice in their daily work.

3.2 Research procedure

Joint training between educators and teachers (educational groups composed of about 15/20 people) included a theoretical first part on the following theme: deconstruction of gender stereotypes, education on emotions and relationships, followed by a careful reflection on educational practices with research-intervention methods. The phases of the training process are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1 - Phases of research-training

Phase 1	Identification of the theme, scope, and content, based on shared needs and objectives (in relation to oneself and working with children).
Phase 2	Initial training phase of a laboratory type, based on the circular relationship between experience, reflection, and theoretical-methodological deepening and on the group.
Phase 3	Support in planning and identifying observation/evaluation methods and tools in progress (regarding the effectiveness of what is proposed).
Phase 4	Implementation of innovative educational and organizational proposals 0-6 by educators and teachers.
Phase 5	Systematic (monthly) meetings for sharing, deepening, and group reflection.
Phase 6	Exchanges in facilities with observation of educational practices 0-6; - field observation to detect working methods in the nursery and in early childhood education.
Phase 7	Completion of a questionnaire on the path taken.
Phase 8	Webinar to present the training course and observational exchanges in facilities 0-6.

3.3 Questionnaire Development

The questionnaire – titled “Tools for deconstructing gender stereotypes in early childhood 0/6” – was conceived and constructed by the authors of this contribution and structured into 13 questions according to the following sections, using Google Forms:

- Section I (multiple choice): demographics (gender, age, education level, years of work experience, affiliated school, specific facility).
- Section II (multiple choice and open-ended): respecting children’s specificities (Table 2).
- Section III (multiple choice and open-ended): satisfaction with the training course (Table 2).

Tab. 2 – Sections II and III of the questionnaire administered to training course participants

Section II – Respecting Children's Specificities	
1	Choose games and books carefully: try as much as possible to avoid selecting titles that reinforce a worldview where women are in an inferior position and men in a superior one, but stories where children, adults (and animals that are often the protagonists of children's books) can do and be what they want regardless of being male or female. Give an example.
2	Give all children the opportunity to have the same experiences driven by curiosity and individual specificities, for example in dress-up games, do not deny boys the chance to dress up as a princess: every game a child plays helps them to discover a piece of themselves and the world they interact with. Share your experience.
3	Give children the opportunity to feel and express what they are feeling in that moment, without holding back and suppressing the expression of their emotions, which we must remember does not mean accepting the destructive manner of their expression: if a child is angry because something was denied to them, they have the right to feel that way, but they are not allowed to hit and bite those who deprived them of that toy. How do you handle these situations in your daily life?
4	Since you started attending the training course, have you tried to expand play opportunities by following the preferences of boys and girls? (Explain your answer)
5	Have you tried to involve families in activities related to the deconstruction of gender stereotypes through readings of picture books or playful workshops with children? (Explain your answer)
SECTION III - Satisfaction with the training course	
1	The experience of Theatre of the Oppressed during the training course (for the training groups where it was conducted) was useful for your personal development regarding gender. (Explain your answer)
2	The playing cards (“for those who teach” and the cards “on Women’s words”), used during the training course, led you to reflections on your personal and professional aspects? (Explain your answer)
3	Among the picture books suggested, which one did you choose for the work in your section?
4	Explain how you carried out the activity and what gender-related observations emerged. Were you able to deconstruct stereotypes by proposing this activity over time?
5	The picture book “Rosaconfetto” was chosen to work on continuity 0/6. Share your experience...

6	Within the training course, was the discussion between educators and teachers useful in promoting the exchange of information and knowledge on gender?
7	Was the training course useful for you? (Explain your choice)
8	Free observations

4. Results and discussion

No. 35 nursery school educators and no. 36 kindergarten teachers participated in the training course – a total of 71 individuals – aged between 25 and 50, with 52.1% aged 50 and above.

Regarding educational qualifications, it is noted that 67.6% (48 individuals) have a high school diploma, 22.5% (16 individuals) have a university degree, and 9.9% (7 individuals) have postgraduate training.

49.3% (35 individuals) reported over 20 years of work experience; 35.2% (25 individuals) between 10 and 20 years; 8.5% (6 individuals) from 1 to 5 years; 7% (5 individuals) between 5 and 10 years.

In Section II of the questionnaire, for question no. 1 "Choose games and books carefully: try as much as possible to avoid selecting titles that reinforce a worldview where women are in an inferior position and men in a superior one, but stories where children, adults (and animals that are often the protagonists of children's books) can do and be what they want regardless of being male or female. Give an example". the respondents highlight that:

- *Games and books are not selected based on gender but prefer books and games that have specific goals to achieve.*
- *I usually choose readings that I believe might interest children more regardless of gender but considering their age group.*
- *Attention towards the proposed picture books and games is essential so that these can serve as a positive example and an effective stimulus for each child. The choice is therefore based on themes that are considered useful to address and that require support.*
- *Areas of interest and games enjoyed in mixed groups. The picture books are carefully chosen to reinforce equality between the female and male figures.*
- *Play builds and is built together with others in the form of narratives and actions that, each time, change. The games in the section are shared by both genders. The available picture books cover themes that concern all boys and girls: emotions, creativity, sense of life, solidarity, etc., regardless of being male or female.*

For question no. 2 “Do you give all children the opportunity to have the same experiences driven by curiosity and individual specificities, for example in dress-up games not denying boys the chance to dress up as a princess: every game a child plays helps them to discover a piece of themselves and the world they interact with. Share your experience,” some particularly interesting responses were collected:

- *In our section, we have a dress-up corner that children have been using frequently lately, and it is common to see girls/boys wearing bags and headbands and using raffia skirts interchangeably. Sheriff hats on girls and princely outfits on boys. Our intervention involves putting on the clothes upon request for help.*
- *When I introduce the dress-up corner to the children, I leave them completely free to wear what they want, sometimes I even invite them to tell me why they made that choice. Once a girl in the older group told me: “I dress up as a superhero because I am as strong as my brother!”.*
- *In our sections, regarding the game part, the play spaces are structured according to diversification criteria and characterized based on specific functions and exploratory possibilities. For example, ample space is given to the kitchen corner, which aims to stimulate both pretend play with toys and furnishings that evoke the home environment and to encourage children’s activities through encounters with materials and real tools to explore. Alongside this, there are other spaces like the dress-up area, the atelier space where each child is free to choose what to be and what to do.*
- *Every game a child plays is an opportunity to experiment and discover a piece of themselves and the world around them. When a child experiences, for example, the “role of a princess,” they have the opportunity to enrich their imagination and understand and accept differences.*

For question no. 3 “Do you give children the opportunity to feel and express what they are feeling at that moment, without restraining and repressing the expression of their emotions, which, let’s remember, does not mean accepting the destructive mode of their expression: if a child is angry because something has been denied to them, they have the right to be angry, but they are not allowed to hit and bite those who deprived them of that game. How do you handle these situations in your daily life?”, some responses were collected, for example:

- *It is necessary to calmly shift the child’s attention towards the adult, trying to make them understand that hitting and biting their peers is not constructive, but instead, we must learn to ask and/or share.*

- *If a child is angry, I talk to them, ask them what made them angry, and try to make them understand that it's okay to feel that way but that situation should always be resolved through communication and not violence.*
- *In conflict situations, I let the children handle it among themselves, usually someone gives in and moves on or an agreement is reached on the ways or waiting times. Where the conflict does not end but is fueled by aggressive behavior towards others, I intervene because there is a high risk of harm being done, saying that the action caused a friend to cry and it's not nice towards them, that the contested game can be asked for instead of forcefully taking it from the other's hands.*
- *During the increasingly frequent moments of frustration resulting from a denial of immediate gratification of children's desires, I believe it is important to let children experience emotions to help them understand that they can manage the moment and overcome it. The adult's role as an emotional mediator becomes important. When the reaction to the emotion is on a descending phase, it is important for the child to feel welcomed and guided rather than blamed.*
- *I welcome the child and their anger and try not to make them feel wrong. I make them feel that I am there and that together we can manage this moment. After calming down, I explain that it's okay to be angry and that it's not wrong, but rather I shift their focus to the pain, suffering, and sadness that their anger has caused in the other child, helping them empathize with the other. I help by providing anger-related books in the section.*
- *The teacher is called to play a mediating role, proposing effective and concrete alternatives to dysfunctional behavior. In these situations, it is important to contain the child, establish empathic contact, demonstrate appropriate behavior: "I understand that you want that game because you like it, but now A has taken it. Why don't we suggest playing together, having a fun game? If you want, I could help you convince him."*

For question no. 4 "Since you started following the training course, have you tried to expand play opportunities by following the preferences of boys and girls?", 46.5% (33 subjects) answer "yes," 33.8% (24 subjects) "partially," and 19.7% (14 subjects) "no," highlighting that:

- *In the section, there is a quarterly rotation of games, the reflection after the course was to include more daily life activities so that there is a sharing of practical activities between genders.*
- *My educational choices have always been based on the idea of providing the same opportunities to both girls and boys, and I have always followed*

their preferences, curiosities, and specificities. With the course, I have strengthened what I have always believed in.

- *I have continued to monitor their games and observe their behaviors. Beyond what may be considered "for boys" or "for girls," in reality, children play what they truly like. The more the play contexts are shared by both genders, the more the game itself enriches and contributes to forming a broader view of the world they are immersed in.*
- *In the section, we have tried to carry out motor activities to promote physical games that stimulate coordination and socialization without gender divisions, such as ball games (basketball). Promoting shared play among children of different genders so they can learn to cooperate, communicate, and face challenges together. Peer interaction is also fundamental for the development of social skills. We try to avoid labeling games as "for girls" or "for boys." Avoiding phrases like "that's a game for boys" or "this is a game for girls" and letting each child explore and have fun with what they like the most.*

For question no. 5 "Have you tried to involve families in activities related to the deconstruction of gender stereotypes through picture book readings or playful workshops with children?", 56.3% (40 subjects) answer "no," 29.6% (21 subjects) answer "partially," and 14.1% (10 subjects) answer "yes," highlighting, for many, how there has not been an opportunity to do so, or how they are discussing with colleagues to understand how to address the topic with parents.

In the third section of the questionnaire, for question no. 1 "Was the experience of Theatre of the Oppressed during the training course (for the training groups where it was conducted) useful for your personal development regarding gender?", 42.3% (30 subjects) answer "no," 38% (27 subjects) answer "yes," and 19.7% answer "partially." In particular:

- *The Theatre of the Oppressed with the instructor was fun but also profound because it naturally leads you to show even what you generally try not to show due to social conventions. It would be interesting to do it with children;*
- *It was not easy for me to represent something through acting that I would have preferred to narrate. Acting in front of strangers makes me uncomfortable;*
- *I had never had a similar experience, I believe that being able to confront roles and attitudes sometimes very distant and different from one's own is an opportunity for enrichment and reflection.*
- *Through theatre, hidden things that have been oppressed both in past years and in the present come to light.*

- *It was a very interesting individual experience, an “introspective” journey based on dialogue and discussion among colleagues and the instructor.*

For question no. 2 “Did the playing cards (‘for those who teach’ and the cards ‘on Women’s words’), used during the training course, lead you to reflect on your personal and professional aspects?”, 46.5% (33 subjects) answer “no,” 38% (27 subjects) answer “yes,” and 15.5% (11 subjects) answer “partially,” specifying, for example, some reflections:

- *They were an interesting tool for reflecting on professional growth.*
- *Personally, I believe that women unfortunately still have to struggle a lot for their human value to be recognized beyond gender stereotypes. Regarding my profession, it is still considered “feminine,” but I do not think so.*
- *Yes. The card I drew is “the skill lies in what one does with their mistakes,” a very reflective card for me because it always makes you question your behaviors. This card made me reflect on the fact that I consider myself a person who sometimes makes mistakes but always tries to improve from them.*
- *It was surprising to discover how the choice of the card, seemingly unconscious, was actually in the subconscious the answer to personal and professional reflections that I had never thought of. The chosen card encapsulated a part of me that I engage in my work and relationships every day and that I had never paid particular attention to.*
- *They made me think more on a personal level, in my role as a mother of a teenage daughter and the responsibility that this carries, and how parental examples are fundamental in the construction and deconstruction of stereotypes.*

For question no. 3 “Among the picture books proposed, which one did you choose for work in the section?”, these were the choices made:

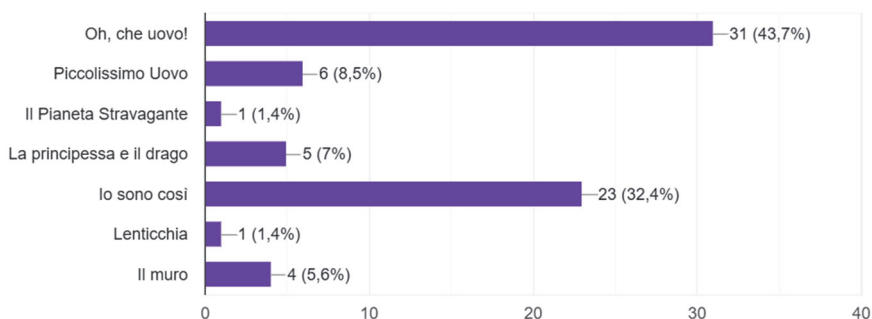


Fig. 3 – Picturebooks chosen by the interviewed sample

For question no. 4 “Describe how you carried out the activity and what gender-related observations emerged. Were you able to deconstruct stereotypes by proposing this activity over time?”, for example:

- *We represented the characters of the story with cardboard cutouts and materials (like the straw from the nest) known by our boys and girls. Telling a story to children of this age group generates astonishment and attention if it concerns the characters themselves... the concept of that story, the purpose, however, remains quite incomprehensible.*
- *I worked simultaneously on Cinderella and on the princess and the dragon, trying together with the children to grasp their similarities and differences, also showing the courage of both, the first in overcoming the mistreatment of the stepsisters, the second facing the dragon. The strength in overcoming adversities of both in different ways. And finally, there is a different happy ending in the princess and the dragon that can unfold in various ways, including the princess remaining alone and self-sufficient. After dramatizing and conducting interviews, we created a large mural in the section with recycled materials.*
- *Knowledge and recognition of others are directly connected to self-knowledge. The picture book “I am like this” allowed children to reflect on themselves, their characteristics, and their interests. Comparing will not only allow the presentation of themselves but also an evaluation of the similarities/differences that contribute to the maturation of identity and knowledge of the other.*
- *The idea is to read the story to the children many times to make it familiar. The reading involves showing the book’s images and using different voices for each character. We will ask all the children to draw a picture of the story just read. The idea was also to create a moment of dialogue with the children about the story just read. Subsequently, we will introduce the presence of the story’s characters (built by us with the help of the children), making it animated, a kind of theater. We wanted to suggest to all parents to take the book home and read it together as a family.*

For question no. 5 “The picture book *Rosaconfetto* was chosen to work on continuity 0/6. Tell us about the experience...”, there are several interesting experiences reported, for example:

- *Yes, it was chosen by us to work on it in the section for the little ones. We will propose transfers with salt with different pink and blue colors and point out to the children the difference with little elephants made by us colored differently, trying to make them understand that the freedom to do what you want is fundamental in life.*

- *The picturebook Rosaconfetto was first read, as with the picturebook “Oh che uovo!,” incorporating it into daily reading, then an environment was recreated with openable cardboard boxes with the various characters, and the story was told in a dramatization that captured much more the attention of the children. It was interesting for me to hear from the kindergarten teachers the responses of their students regarding the understanding of the protagonist’s desire for freedom. For the nursery, at the moment, a girl expressed the desire to play in the water of the pond.*
- *After creating the illustrated panel with the various characters, we told the story to the children who welcomed the mimed story with interest, willingly accepting the explanations we gave while telling the story and the desire for freedom of the little elephants. The same story with the kindergarten children, enriched with interviews, is an excellent goal to share a thought from the perspective of deconstructing gender stereotypes.*
- *Sharing the picturebook allowed us to address the same theme with differentiated activities and proposals based on age group. The picturebook allows for creating a continuum not only in the experience of continuity but could be used at the beginning of the school year as a bridge between nursery and kindergarten.*

For question no. 6 “Within the training course, was the exchange of information and knowledge on gender useful between educators and teachers?”, 60.6% (43 subjects) answered “quite” 33.8% (24 subjects) “very”; only 2.8% (2 subjects) answered “little,” and 2.8% “not at all.”

For question no. 7 “Was the training course useful for you?”, 52.1% (37 subjects) answered “quite” 39.4% (28 subjects) “quite”; only 7% (5 subjects) answered “little,” and 1.4% (1 subject) “not at all.” Below are some specific reflections:

- *Discussing with colleagues was useful to enrich my professional background, also regarding personal experiences and how they were managed by the colleagues themselves. The course and the chosen topic proved to be very interesting and especially current.*
- *Training on gender deconstruction is important in a society in constant change where increasingly broad contexts of gender and interculturality are shown.*
- *It was an opportunity to discuss with colleagues and to take inspiration on how to address the situations and dynamics that arise in everyday life.*
- *Society is changing, and it is right to stay updated. This course helped me promote games and activities without gender barriers, which is useful for children who have the opportunity to explore their natural inclinations,*

develop a wider range of skills, and grow in an environment that celebrates diversity and equality.

Conclusions

The research-training experience presented here has brought out some fundamental themes in the education of children aged 0-6: self-perception, perception of one's body and gender, professional roles, emotions, and the plurality of family models observed in readings. The main path – as emerged from the questionnaire administered to the interviewees – is that of educational processes: to increase the awareness and critical capacity of girls/boys regarding gender stereotypes and prejudices that then translate into inequalities.

It is the awareness of those in educational roles regarding the responsibility of not imposing rigid and stereotyped models, but of enhancing the talents and potential of boys and girls and the quality of their relationships. The picturebook represents an extraordinary means of relationship that brings together many different paths because there are so many possibilities it offers to children, girls, boys, and the adults who accompany them on the path of growth.

Reading can be a useful methodology for deconstructing gender stereotypes because through picturebooks, we talk about diversity, emotions, families, love, friendship, and respect for others, regardless of gender, culture, etc. Reading picturebooks through shared reading for a narrative that enhances a particular proxemics attests to the importance of reading aloud, the importance of the physical and emotional relationship.

In the experience presented, picturebooks have become, at the same time, moments of growth and training for adults and special moments for boys and girls, happy to have access to a possible library with the sharing of books that can also be taken home to be read together with families to create a bridge of knowledge and sharing. Reading represents a useful tool to seek new opportunities for discovery from childhood. A childhood that deserves to grow in respect of diversity, that deserves to live in a society capable of going beyond appearances, that deserves opportunities and chances.

References

- Battut E. (2020). *Oh, che uovo!*. Trieste: Bohem Press Italia.
- Biemmi I., Mapelli B. (2023). *Pedagogia di genere. Educare ed educarsi a vivere in un mondo sessuato*. Milano: Mondadori.

- Buccolo M. (2019). *L'educatore emozionale. Percorsi di alfabetizzazione emotiva per tutta la vita*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- Buccolo M. (2024). *Il coordinatore pedagogico nel sistema integrato 0-6. Teorie e modelli educativi per il cambiamento organizzativo*. Lecce: Pensa Multimedia.
- Campagnaro M. (2013). Le potenzialità delle immagini. Educazione visiva ed emozionale attraverso gli albi illustrati. In M. Campagnaro, M. Dallari, *Incanto e racconto nel labirinto delle figure: Albi illustrati e relazione educativa*. Trento: Erickson.
- Campagnaro M., Dallari M. (2013). *Incanto e racconto nel labirinto delle figure: Albi illustrati e relazione educativa*. Trento: Erickson.
- Commissione europea/EACEA/Eurydice (2019). *Cifre chiave sull'educazione e cura della prima infanzia in Europa – Edizione 2019*. Rapporto Eurydice. Lussemburgo: Ufficio delle pubblicazioni dell'Unione europea.
- Contini M., Fabbri M., Manuzzi P. (2006). *Non di solo cervello. Educare alle connessioni mente-corpo-significati-contesti*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina.
- Degl'Innocenti, F., Ferrara, A. (2014). *Io sono così*. Cagli (PU): Settenove edizioni.
- Fierli E., Franchi G., Lancia G., Marini S. (2015). *Leggere senza stereotipi. Percorsi educativi 0-6 anni per figurarsi il futuro*. Cagli: Settenove.
- Filomia M. (2023). *Abitare la soglia. Sguardi inclusivi nella letteratura per l'infanzia*. Lecce: PensaMultimedia.
- Grandi W. (2020). Il sorriso di Clara Sesemann. Narrazioni per l'infanzia e disabilità. In E. A. Emili, V. Macchia, *Leggere l'inclusione: Albi illustrati e libri per tutti e per ciascuno*. Pisa: ETS.
- Guerra M., Luciano E. (2024). *Accanto a bambine e bambini. Questioni e prospettive per educare nello 0-6*. Bergamo: Edizioni Junior.
- Hamelin (Ed.) (2012). *Ad occhi aperti. Leggere l'albo illustrato*. Rome: Donzelli.
- Honegger Fresco G. (1985), Il bambino e la natura. *Il Quaderno Montessori*, maggio-giugno, 4: 7-16.
- Macri G., Zanotti C. (2018). *Il muro*. Vercelli: Nuinui.
- Mencaroni C. (2020). *Lenticchia. Dall'altra parte del mondo*. Siracusa: VerbaVolant edizioni.
- Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca (2012). *Indicazioni nazionali per il curriculum della scuola d'infanzia e del primo ciclo di istruzione*, -- https://www.mim.gov.it/documents/20182/51310/DM+254_2012.pdf (ultima consultazione: 03/04/2025).
- Ministero dell'Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca (2018). *Indicazioni nazionali e nuovi scenari*, -- <https://www.mim.gov.it/documents/20182/0/Indicazioni+nazionali+e+nuovi+scenari/> (ultima consultazione: 03/04/2025).
- Montessori M. (1949). *Educazione e pace*. Milano: Garzanti.
- Montessori M. (1970). *La mente del bambino*. Milano: Garzanti.
- Montessori M. (1986). *Il segreto dell'infanzia*. Milano: Garzanti.
- Morin E. (2020). *Cambiamo strada. Le 15 lezioni del Coronavirus*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina.

- Munsch R., Martchenko M. (2014). *La principessa e il drago*. Torino: EDT-Giralangolo.
- Negri M. (2016). Dal verso al giro di pagina. Testualità e valenze educative dell'albo illustrato. *Ricerche di Pedagogia e Didattica. Journal of Theories and Research in Education*, 11(3): 117-138. Doi: 10.6092/issn.1970-2221/6451.
- Orlando Cian D. (1970). *Pedagogia dell'infanzia e scuola materna*. Brescia: La Scuola.
- Pardi F. (2011). *Piccolo uovo*. Milano: Lo Stampatello.
- Postman N. (2005). *La scomparsa dell'infanzia. Ecologia delle età della vita*. Rome. Armando.
- Rizzolatti G., Sinigaglia R. (2006). *So quel che fai Il cervello che agisce e i neuroni specchio*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina.
- Save the Children (2019). *Il miglior inizio. Disuguaglianze e opportunità nei primi anni di vita*. Roma. -- <https://s3.savethechildren.it/public/files/uploads/pubblicazioni/il-miglior-inizio-disuguaglianze-e-opportunita-nei-primi-anni-di-vita.pdf> (ultima consultazione: 31/03/2025).
- Trisciuzzi L., Cambi F. (1989). *L'infanzia nella società moderna*. Rome: Editori Riuniti.
- Trisciuzzi M. T. (2020). Sguardi sulla diversità. Leggere fuori dai margini. In: Emili E.A., Macchia V., editors, *Leggere l'inclusione: Albi illustrati e libri per tutti e per ciascuno*. Pisa: ETS.
- Turin A. (2016). *Rosaconfetto*. Milano: Motta Junior.
- UE (2018). RACCOMANDAZIONE DEL CONSIGLIO del 22 maggio 2018 relativa alle competenze chiave per l'apprendimento permanente (Testo rilevante ai fini del SEE) (2018/C 189/01). -- [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604\(01\)](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32018H0604(01)) (last consulted on 14/04/2025).
- UE (2021). RACCOMANDAZIONE (UE) 2021/1004 DEL CONSIGLIO del 14 giugno 2021 che istituisce una garanzia europea per l'infanzia. -- <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021H1004&from=FR> (last consulted on 14/04/2025).