

SAGGI – ESSAYS

WHEN EDUCATIONAL WORDS BECOME VIOLENT: THE RISK OF HATE SPEECH WITHIN THE EDUCA- TIONAL RELATIONSHIP

di Elisabetta Biffi

Within the debate around hate speech, the paper aims at examining the role of words within the educational relationship, approaching the risk educators, specifically teachers towards students, have of using – awarely or unawarely – words of hate.

The chosen perspective from which the theme will be analyzed, is the one of the international strategies, in defense of children, which, under the label of *corporal punishment* include the use of any kind of punishment – not only physical – that aims at degrading, belittling, humiliating, menacing, frightening or ridiculing the child (UN, CRC, *General Comment n. 8*(2008), CRC/C/GC/8). This specification sharpens the centrality of the pedagogical aspect of the issue: it connects words in themselves with the intentionality of who speaks them and with the sense the receiver gives them.

Benning from a reflection on the role of words in the educational relationship, it will be possible to approach a pedagogical analysis which will question the pedagogical implications of hate speech by the teacher, as well as the conditions and contexts that allow the perpetration of hate speech, more or less consciously, by adults that have educational roles and task.

All'interno del dibattito sul discorso dell'odio, il documento mira a esaminare il ruolo delle parole all'interno della relazione educativa, avvicinando gli educatori al rischio, in particolare gli insegnanti nei confronti degli studenti, che devono usare – in modo inconsapevole o inconsapevole – parole di odio. La prospettiva

scelta da cui verrà analizzato il tema è quella delle strategie internazionali, a difesa dei bambini, che, sotto l'etichetta della punizione corporale, prevedono l'uso di qualsiasi tipo di punizione - non solo fisica - che mira a degradare, sminuire, umiliare, minacciare, spaventare o ridicolizzare il bambino (ONU, CRC, Commento generale n. 8 (2008), CRC/C/GC/8). Questa specifica affina la centralità dell'aspetto pedagogico della questione: collega le parole in se stesse con l'intenzionalità di chi le parla e con il senso che il destinatario gli dà. A partire da una riflessione sul ruolo delle parole nella relazione educativa, sarà possibile affrontare un'analisi pedagogica che metterà in discussione le implicazioni pedagogiche del discorso dell'odio da parte dell'insegnante, nonché le condizioni e i contesti che consentono la perpetrazione del discorso dell'odio, più o meno consapevolmente, dagli adulti che hanno ruoli e compiti educativi.

1. Introduction

«You're a stupid when you behave like this!».

«Let me clean you because you don't know how and you'll end up getting dirty all over again and I don't have time to clean you another time».

«You all be quite otherwise you'll have to deal with me!».

Which is the limit between playful words and offences? What makes a certain expression of reproach humiliating?

Educational work is a “work of daily time”, made up of *ordinary* words and actions that, especially when addressed to children, are gestures of proximity, an intimate taking care of (help eating, blowing the nose, going to the bathroom). The words that accompany these practices become mediators that allow to share, clarify and reinforce the pedagogical meanings of those actions. Even when referred to learning, they mention the progress of the child, or they contain behaviours that might overpass the doorstep of what is appropriate at school.

Adults, often, weightlessly or thoughtlessly, are unaware of what passes through those words, how much those words are able to reaffirm or uncover the implicit intent hidden in the gesture.

«But I was joking!».

«You misunderstood me!».

«I didn't exactly say that!».

Adults who have educational roles in schools and educational and care services are constantly involved with that ambiguous border between a word that may make one laugh and a word that might hurt. The sense of those words is, certainly, given by all that surrounds them – the voice, gesture, context – but, with exception of vulgar words which are easily identifiable as deserving a sanction, often the educational relation passes through words that are not solicitous, that become words of punishment, words of violence even without being visibly vulgar.

The present paper aims at introducing a pedagogical reflection on words that live on that ambiguous boundary, to try and understand how it is possible for educators¹ to manage them and, especially, which dynamics encourage educators to hide in that ambiguity, becoming violent. In order to develop the reflection, the starting point will be the perspective offered by the framework of *corporal punishment*, practices that keep being the most widespread type of violence in childhood (UNICEF, 2019).

Beginning with this perspective, it will be possible to question some educational dimensions that may favour, if not cause, an unrespectful use of words, whose consequences will pour on the unaware receivers.

2. *Violence against childhood and corporal punishment*

Without being able to profoundly delve on the changes that, beginning with the signature of the United Nation Convention on

¹ In this paper the words *educator* and *teacher* will be used as synonymous.

the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989, have occurred in the last 30 years in the context of the promotion and protection of childhood, this reflection will begin within the debate on violence against children within international documents.

With the drafting of the UNCRC, the United Nations have had a fundamental role in reminding and underlining in all documents and official contexts that violence against children is not acceptable and legitimate. If, in fact, the UNCRC had signaled the central importance of respect of the child all-round, at the beginning of the second millennium the Committee on the Rights of the Child established the 23rd session of the Days of General Discussion. The point was to underline that all violent methods of *discipline* (such as corporal punishment or other degrading, humiliating and cruel practices) are not coherent with the respect of the dignity of the child (CRC, art, 28.2). It is in fact stated that:

The new vision of the status and dignity of children represented by the concept of child rights provided the context in which to define violence. In that context even the argument that corporal punishment could have a “beneficial” effect became questionable (CRC/ C/111, 28th session, 28th September 2001, p. 6).

Approaches to preventing violence should be positive and guided by a vision that focused on the human dignity of the child rather than on violence itself (CRC/C/111, 28th session, 28th September 2001, p. 7).

In this vision relations between and among children and parents or teachers (as well as other family members or students) are mutually respectful and the safety and security of all is promoted (CRC/C/111, 28th session, 28th September 2001, p. 8).

The discussion resulted into the individuation of the Independent Expert for the Secretary-General *Study on Violence against Children*, Paulo Sergio Pinheiro who presented his final report to the UN General Assembly in 2006 (A/61/299). In this document it is underlined how «violence against children takes a variety of

forms and is influenced by a wide range of factors, from the personal characteristics of the victim and perpetrator to their cultural and physical environments» (UN General Assembly, *Rights of the Child: note/by the Secretary-General*, 29 August 2006, A/61/299). Being free from any form of violence is, in fact, a legitimate right of the child: this is what the recent General Comment No. 8 (2006) states *The right of the child to protection from corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment* (arts. 19; 28, para. 2; and 37, *inter alia*).

The international strategy promoted by the United Nations was carried out with the networks OHCHR, UNICEF and WHO, and with the collaboration of ONGs that work on protecting childhood and promoting its rights. On these basis, the recent document, published in November 2016 by The International NGO Council on Violence Against Children, *10 Years on: Global Progress & Delay in Ending Violence Against Children – the Rhetoric & the Reality*, can be read. This document can be considered the latest step in the battle against violence against children, initiated by the UNCRC. The report underlines the measures that have been taken within the mentioned battle and the important achieved results, for example the number of States that have adopted the full ban against corporal punishment (in terms of an explicit normative ban of violence in all contexts, including the home and the school) have tripled since the first publication of the first study of the United Nations, yet an estimated one billion children still experience physical violence in the home on a regular basis (The International NGO Council on Violence Against Children, 2016, p. 4).

The battle is still going on: within the *Sustainable Development Goals* identified by the *UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* we can find the goal 16.2: *End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children*, that remarks the international efforts in facing violence against children. To this end, a

Global Partnership has been promoted²: the international strategy is at work.

The report by UNICEF *Hidden in Plain Sight. A statistical analysis of violence against children* (2014) provides impressive data on the phenomenon. As stated by J. O'Malley in the mentioned report, the international commitment of the last 20 years has uncovered a widespread and pervasive problem. Not without reason, the above mentioned Days of General Discussion were dedicated to the State violence, otherwise defined as the violence directly or indirectly caused to children within educational/care institutions.

In general, the expression *corporal punishment* indicates:

Any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light. Most involves hitting (smacking, slapping, spanking) children, with the hand or with an implement – a whip, stick, belt, shoe, wooden spoon, etc. But it can also involve, for example, kicking, shaking or throwing children, scratching, pinching, biting, pulling hair or boxing ears, forcing children to stay in uncomfortable positions, turning, scalding or forcing ingestion (Committee on the Rights of the Child, *General Comment* n. 8, 2006, art. 19).

Non-physical forms of punishment that are cruel and degrading and thus incompatible with the Convention are included in the same definition, for example punishment which belittles, humiliates, denigrates, scapegoats, threatens, scares or ridicules the child. Humiliating words and violent expressions can be read within the last part of the definition, which remarks the necessity of maintaining a great attention on *dignity* and *respect* of the child. This especially within educational contexts, particularly within schools. The present situation concerning corporal punishment presents a scenario in which: 58 states have achieved prohibition of corporal punishment in all settings, including the home; 54

²Main information at: www.end-violence.org [30 october 2019].

more states are committed to achieving a complete legal ban (Global Initiative to end All Corporal Punishment, 2019).

For what concerns Europe: 32 of the 47 Council of Europe member states have now achieved full prohibition of corporal punishment in all settings, including the home (Council of Europe, 2009). The Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, which brings together representatives from all 47 member states' parliaments, has adopted a Recommendation calling for Europe to become a *corporal punishment-free zone*. With regard to the corporal punishment within schools, the recent studies attest that 132 states have prohibited corporal punishment in all schools, it is lawful in some or all schools in 67 states, including 34 states with policy against its use (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2019).

From our national perspective, it has to be specified that Italy is at the moment in a very ambiguous position. On one side, indeed, the Italian Constitution strongly prohibits any form of violence against all citizens:

All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions. It is the duty of the Republic to remove those obstacles of an economic or social nature which constrain the freedom and equality of citizens, thereby impeding the full development of the human person and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic and social organization of the country (Art. 3, Constitution).

Furthermore, in 1996 the Supreme Court judgment outlawed all violence in childrearing³. For what concerns schools corporal punishment has been unlawful since 1928 but prohibiting legislation still has to be identified. In secondary school the level of ambiguity augments: the Decree of the President of the Republic of 29 May 1998 states that no student shall be subject to discipli-

³ Judge Ippolito, Supreme Court of Cassation, 18 March 1996.

nary sanctions without having been first invited to explain their reasons but it doesn't seem to explicitly prohibit corporal punishment. Moreover, there is no specific law which explicitly and directly referred to ban corporal punishment the home (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment, 2019).

First of all, it has to be mentioned that within the described strategy specific attention has been payed to fighting violence in schools and educational settings. If the educational intervention is based on the premise of a fundamental recognition of the child dignity and respect, the argument supporting corporal and humiliating punishment in the right of an educational effect on the children became hardly legitimated.

3. Words as gestures of a violent education

The history of childhood demonstrates how much *black pedagogy* (Rutschky, 2015) is spread (Borruso, 2017; Miller, 1995), how it was the recognised educational form till the nineteen hundreds and the most spread till after the second world war. As the data mentioned in the previous paragraph has underlined, the use of force and humiliation are still recognized as educational forms (better said forms of punishment).

The historical and pedagogical points of view on the theme have been studied in depth (Borruso, 2013; DeMause, 1974; Miller, 1995; Riva, 1993; 2017; Rutschky, 2015; Ulivieri, 1990) and will not be resumed here, still some considerations are essential. The body of the child has been considered as the place of education: in order to educate, the body of the child had to be disciplined and, accordingly, punishment passed through it. This is an ancient idea, if we considered that an ancient Egyptian scroll reported: «The ear of the child is on his back, and he listens when he is beaten» (Manacorda, 1983, p. 34).

The long process that lead to recognizing and protecting childhood in our days saw a movement that went from the use of

physical violence to the use of psychological violence, more subtle, that draws on the sense of guilt and social recognition.

A German teacher in the Seven-hundreds wrote:

If a child deserves punishment, I make him sit at the back of the classroom, I do not question him, I do not allow him to read out loud, in brief, I behave as if he did not exist. This treatment is so painful for children that it makes the punished ones pour warm tears (Salzmann, 1976, cit. in Miller, 1995, p. 22).

Acquired knowledge on childhood, especially during the Nineteen-hundreds, moved educational practices towards supporting children, nonetheless different forms of punishment investing on the sense of guilt remain. Francesca Borruso states that during the Eighteen hundreds the hard physical punishment is gradually substituted by the deprivation of a toy or food, from going to bed without supper or being secluded in a room, while the system of the “affective blackmailing”, which is spreading and is based on the sense of guilt of the trespasser, it conditions in a more penetrating manner compared to any other corporal punishment (Borruso, 2013⁴). The phenomenon of physical punishment is still part of daily life. The reason is connected to the movement from the external world, the body, to the internal world, the psyche, of the punitive practices. In this contribution the aim is to focus on words and on the risk, they become vexing, humiliating and violent when their power is underestimated.

In her *The Drama of Being a Child* (1995) Alice Miller underlines how the recognition of the dignity of the child is the first step to the construction of one’s own self: a primary need of the child is

⁴ «Nel corso dell’800 la punizione più duramente fisica viene gradualmente sostituita o affiancata da quella psicologica. Così la “verga” o la bacchetta vengono sostituite dalla privazione di un giocattolo o del cibo, dall’andare a letto senza cena o dalla reclusione in camera, mentre il sistema del “ricatto affettivo”, sempre più diffuso e basato sulla colpevolizzazione del trasgressore, esercita un condizionamento più penetrante di qualunque altra punizione corporale» (Borruso, 2013, p. 95).

to be considered and taken seriously right from the beginning for what he/she is in each moment of growth. She specified that the expression “what the child is from time to time” refers on feelings, sensations and their expression right from birth.

There is violence, instead, when the adult lacks authentic and emotional comprehension of one’s own infantile destiny, that is not taken seriously, and a total ignorance of one’s real needs, leaving aside the aim of obtaining the highest profits. If a child grows up in an environment that is unable to recognize and legitimate his or her needs and feelings, in order not to loosen the love bound that is necessary to survival, he or she will build a *false self* that apparently satisfies the requests that come from the outside, blocking or impoverishing the development of the *true self*, that remains encapsulated (Winnicott, 1970).

From another perspective, also educators and teachers can absolve the function of containment and resonance: teachers are the *frame*, the container that help or interfere with mental and emotional development (Pontecorvo & Pontecorvo, 1986, p. 151).

For certain children, for those who cannot count on an empathetic and supportive family environment, teachers have the possibility to offer alternative and different relational experiences on which a more constructive approach can be based (Pontecorvo & Pontecorvo, 1986, p. 151). Or, on the contrary, reinforce the *false self*. The image of containment, that reminds us of the image from W.R. Bion (1970) of the mother as a container of negative images that the child projects on her in fragmented shapes, that is able to reassemble them without allowing them to destroy her. The teacher, when able to attune on the feelings of the child, can function as a container, even when the child has aggressive behaviour:

The answers of the teacher often contain not only what she perceived and interpreted of the lived experience of the child, but also what she lived reactively. From her capacity to not give rigid answers and to attune with the child without prevarication in a determined space in which reciprocal change is possible, derives the possibility to

trigger a process of growth in the child through the mobilisation of his/her psychic energy both on the relational-affective level and on the cognitive-symbolic one. [Le risposte dell'insegnante spesso contengono non solo ciò che essa ha percepito e interpretato del vissuto del bambino, ma anche gran parte di quello che lei stessa ha reattivamente vissuto. Dalla sua capacità di dare risposte non rigide e di sintonizzarsi con il bambino senza prevaricazioni in uno spazio intermedio in cui sia possibile un processo di reciproco cambiamento, deriva la possibilità o meno di innescare nel bambino un processo di crescita attraverso la mobilitazione delle sue energie psichiche sia sul piano affettivo-relazionale che su quello cognitivo-simbolico] (Fratini, 1990, p. 135).

In this perspective, one can retrieve the violent meaning that words may assume when they play the role of identification or disparagement. Disparagement is the weapon of the weak, and at its origin is always in the dimension of the power, more or less conscious, uncontrolled, hidden that the adult exerts on the child (Miller, 1990). Mocking words, sarcastic comments on behaviour or performances of children ("stop acting the giddy goat") and words used to establish the hierarchical order ("You must do as I say") are educating children to a certain relation with the other and the self.

Words used in the educational relation become the filter through which the image that the adult has of the child is vehiculed, an image that contributes to the creation of the image that the child has of him/her self. From words, that apparently are less dangerous compared to actions, the image of what the child must be emerges, a *must be* of the child that is always more similar to the adult (rational, level-headed, silent: mature).

In these terms, it is not only evidently *bad* words that are not good. Words of reinforcement sustain behavior that aims at making children *good*, they absolve the function of not recognizing those children who are fighting to define their *true self*.

Winnicott reminds us that it is dangerous when an intellectual approach and a false self are connected. When a false self develops in a subject with high intellectual potential, there are high probabilities that the intellect will become the site of the *false self*

and a dissociation between intellectual activity and psychosomatic existence may occur (Winnicott, 1970). So the combination of reinforcing *adult* behavior and performance and mockery and sarcasm against *childish* behavior and those *uncomfortable* experiences, that end up developing an apparent maturity, sometimes excessive, cover a great affective vulnerability and fragile identity (Fratini, 1990).

At this point it is legitimate to ask why, if one is talking about words, they should be juxtaposed to *corporal punishment* when used in a careless way. The body is the space of application of words as practices of subjugation and domestication: the tone of voice in mocking sentences accompanies a posture that remarks the distance and superiority of the adult, the body of the child, to whom words are addressed like stones, closes on itself, as to defend itself.

On the other hand, the use of expressions and words that aim at mocking, at humiliating, making fun of, scaring children are part of the punishment dynamics as discipline of growth and as sufferance as a teacher of life:

Every punishment is *corporal* because the body is the surface of application: an injured body (because of beating), a secluded body (you will not leave your room for all afternoon), a trained body (you will have to do ten extra math exercises), the effects of punishment is always to make one think that their body is subject to someone else's will: a limit to a healthy and autonomous growth. [Ogni punizione è "corporale" perché vede nel corpo la sua superficie di applicazione: che sia il corpo ferito (dalle botte), corpo recluso (non uscirai di camera tua per tutto il pomeriggio), corpo addestrato (farai dieci esercizi di matematica in più) l'effetto delle punizioni è sempre quello di far pensare che il proprio corpo sia soggetto alla volontà di qualcun altro: un grave limite alla possibilità di una crescita sana e autonoma] (Mantegazza, cit. in Schermi, 2016, p. 152).

In the words that *accompany the* gesture of the educational relationship, in the words that *are a* gesture of the educational relationship, the pedagogical dance is performed: in other words, the

possibility to learn a *full* word, to construct a language to share what one feels in a manner that corresponds to the inner self.

An adult able to use good enough words is educating the child to being able to use good words for him/her self, to trust what he/she feels, and to trust that the other is able to feel what he/she is feeling. On the contrary, when words are used to mine the sense of security, to threat or denigrate, the child will have proof (or a re-prove, if the same emotional climate characterizes his/her family life as well) that the other will never be able see him/her for what he/she is, that he/she cannot trust what he/she feels and moreover that one must do what he/she is told to, without taking into account what one feels. If this happens from the first years of life, in educational contexts for early childhood and beyond, it is easy to understand how violence becomes almost an inevitable constant of the contemporary scenario, like words of hate are the chosen weapon against one's own not understood aggressivity.

4. The role of educators

The described panorama underlines a complex pedagogical game, which is played on the subtle eve of words and language, recalling at the same time an awareness of one's own role in prevention of violence against children and in the promotion or "sufficiently good" educational relationships. The CRC's General Comment No.8 on *The right to protection from corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment* (esp. Art. 19; 28 para. 2; and 37, inter alia, adopted in May/June 2006), specifies that:

It is valuable if professional codes of ethics and guidance for teachers, carers and others and also the rules of charters of institutions emphasize the illegality of corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment (par. 35).

The international strategy described in the opening of this contribution aims at targeting educators as spearheads in fighting

violence against children. The debate on violence against children is often underlying how there is a lack of researches and studies on the ECE training about corporal punishment against children (Global Initiative to End all Corporal Punishment of Children, 2019). Moreover, several researchers underlined how educators of children can lack sufficient preparation for their child protection role (Goldman, 2007; McKee & Dillenburger, 2012). Specifically, there is a lack of knowledge – in terms of roles and rules – and a lack of confidence – relational competences. Actually, there are several ECEP training curricula in childhood protection (Arnold & Maio-Taddeo, 2007; Biffi, 2018a; Kenny, 2004; McKee & Dillenburger, 2012), but are mostly directed to increment knowledge.

What is particularly interesting for the purposes of this paper is the underlined lack of confidence in terms of relational competences. This is extremely important if we consider that, as stated above, the relational dimension within the educational intervention is a key aspect, especially in order to not contribute to create a violent and unsafe mood within the schools and educational services. In this sense, it is related to a specific training for professionals, which can support them in becoming aware of the role of words and verbal expressions within the educational experience (Bell, 2002).

This in consideration of the fact that the child is not only touched (in the body) by what adults says but also by the fact that the child learns to relation him/her self through the example adults give. Learning how to become aware and sensitive to one's own emotional state protects children from being involuntary target of adults' not listened to – or unexpressed – aggressive states.

Being unaware of the seriousness of some words said at school by teachers is not a signal of inadequacy but of not being used to listening to what is being said, to host words in the body before pronouncing them, that recalls not only thinking before speaking but also listening to what one feels in order to create space for others. Adults, after using harsh expressions against children (“if you don't stop I'll make you!”) seem genuinely unaware of the seriousness of the words they used (“But it's not what

I meant!"), they are maybe not cruel adults but certainly unable to listen to the effect that the words produce on children, unable to get in contact with la fear that the children perceive, a fear that themselves maybe had experienced when they were children, or at least unable to give those words the correct meaning. Because behind the reckless word of an adult threatening, mocking there is a pleasure, Miller (1990) would call, of feeling powerful, stronger, that derives from remarking the minority of the child.

5. Conclusion

At the end of this refection, the reader might ask him/herself if there is no way out. If the teacher must always be concerned with the possible meanings of every single word that is used, if he/she must be so preoccupied by the power of words to decide to remain quiet. This doubt appears to me to lack sense: if not frightened, wouldn't' he/she use good words? Why is the reader preoccupied of his/her words only now, after reading this contribution? My opinion is that the fear of being violent corresponds to the awareness of being violent. In other words: you already know. But being aware invites one to be prudent and prudence passes through formation that aims at developing those professional competences necessary to being able to manage also one's own spontaneity within the educational relation. To little, according to me, are professionals of education trained to know and understand one's own being in resonance with what childhood moves within them. The mirroring dynamics that the relationship with childhood activates, recalling lived experiences of when they were children, are object of pedagogical work (Riva, 2004) that professionals manage with difficulty. Since it is something powerful, if the professional is not ready, he/she may feel he/she is not able to manage these dimensions, preferring to delegate them to experts, to other professionals (Biffi, 2018b). This is a mistake in evaluation, because it is these dimensions that act in the educational intervention, and not being aware shows a lack in profes-

sional competences that requires a courageous training and specifically aimed at oneself and on one's own professional role. In order not to become unaware mediators of words of hate.

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