

Protecting Children: Reflective Practice for Future Educators

Silvia Zanazzi, Università degli Studi di Ferrara, Italy

The European Conference on Education 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

In Italy, Bachelor's degree courses in Education Sciences prepare future educators who can work within public, private and third sector organizations in the planning, implementation and evaluation of educational interventions. A curricular traineeship of 250 hours is foreseen, preceded by a 50-hour training course on critical situations in educational contexts. During their traineeship, students participate in supervision meetings in small groups, moderated by a professor. To prepare for the meetings, each of them is asked to write a critical incident based on their field experience. The analysis of critical incidents is a training strategy that helps people to clarify their assumptions and to understand, through comparison with different perspectives, the value assumptions that guide their own and others' behaviors. During the meetings, the critical incidents are analyzed by the group starting from three key questions: what is the problem being narrated? Who should take charge of this problem? What could/should be done? In the trainees' narratives collected over the years there are some episodes of child maltreatment in school and educational services. It is essential for a future educator to be able to reflect on the distorted educational conceptions which, on the one hand, generate these phenomena and, on the other, prevent them from being eradicated. The paper, starting from the analysis of critical incidents reported by the trainees, focuses on the reflective practices necessary for future educators to build awareness of what maltreatment is and how to prevent, identify and manage it in educational contexts.

Keywords: Educator, Reflective Practice, Curricular Traineeship, Critical Incident, Child Maltreatment

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

In Italy, Bachelor's degree courses in Education Sciences prepare future educators who can work within public, private and third sector organizations in the planning, implementation and evaluation of educational interventions. A curricular traineeship of 250 hours is foreseen, preceded by a 50-hour training course on critical situations in educational contexts.

During their traineeship, students participate in supervision meetings in small groups, moderated by a professor. To prepare for the meetings, each of them is asked to write a critical incident based on their field experience. During the meetings, the critical incidents are analyzed by the group starting from three key questions: what is the problem being narrated? Who should take charge of this problem? What could/should be done?

The analysis of critical incidents is a training strategy that helps people to clarify their assumptions and to understand, through comparison with different perspectives, the value assumptions that guide their own and others' behaviors. The method was first developed by Flanagan (1954) in the 50s to observe and identify factors responsible for success and failure in the training of pilots. Since then, it has been further developed and applied to a range of contexts in management, services and social sciences.

At the roots of the critical incident strategy is the concept of reflective thinking. Many authors have underlined its importance in education.

Among them, Kolb (1984) described the experiential learning cycle in which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience in four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation.

Mezirow (1991) described the interplay between critical thinking and transformative learning, based on a change in the frames of reference that build assumptions and expectations in the minds of adults. This kind of profound change requires critical reflection and thinking in such a way as to transform ideas, knowledge and practice, forming new frames of meaning.

Going on, Schön (1983, 1987) identified two types of reflection: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. The first is the process that allows professionals to reshape the situation while it is happening. This way, they may generate both new understanding of the experience and a change in the situation. Reflection on action takes place after the experience. The professionals reflect on what they did and whether they could have acted differently, examining alternative ways to improve their practice.

Mortari (2013) argues that education is an action intended to cultivate in others the desire to take care of themselves. She elaborates a concept of care meaning cultivating the life of the mind, educating people to think, to give sense to their experience.

Striano (2002) affirms that education professionals, faced with problematic situations, must be supported by two forms of rationality: heuristic-reflective and critical-emancipatory. The first guides the professional in investigating the experience in order to build the necessary knowledge

to interpret and manage it. The second makes the professional an agent of transformation and change. For this to happen, it is necessary to develop awareness and the ability to recognize the conditioning and distortive elements that prevent educational action from adequately responding to the actual needs of the people.

Narration is nourishment for reflective thinking. Authors such as Bruner (1987), Demetrio (1996) and Mortari (2003, 2013) underlined how reflective autobiography through narration can be an effective method for reworking and re-signifying experiences, making them an active part in the construction of one's daily actions. In a learning context, it is essential to promote a relational environment based on acceptance, mutual listening, real interest in the experiences of the others: the "cognitive scaffolding" must be implemented in close connection with the "affective scaffolding" (Mortari, 2013, p.50).

Theoretical Framework

This project falls within the framework of action research, first theorized by Lewin (1946), that provides for the investigation to be conducted on the field, on the basis of close collaboration between researchers and practitioners.

The action research strategy is based on the constructivist principle according to which knowledge is elaborated by subjects through practice and problem solving, in everyday circumstances that require attention (Sorzio, 2019). We can therefore speak of "experiential knowledge" (Mortari, 2007, p. 210) or of "situational" knowledge" (Sorzio, 2019, p. 151)¹.

Ultimately, action research is aimed to generate improvement and change in the context in which it is implemented.

The roots of the action research approach can be found in Dewey's thought and in its criticism of the traditional separation of knowledge and action (1938). The philosopher hoped that the extension of experimental inquiry to social practice would lead to an integration of science and practice: in his view, knowledge implies not only the adaptation of the organism to the environmental conditions, under external pressures, but also the active modification of the environment itself to adapt it to one's needs and desires in the most effective way possible. In the interaction between organism and environment, they are both constantly changing: knowledge in itself implies the modification of the reality that is known.

Any reference to action research must also acknowledge Freire's work (1970) in which learning is described as the process of developing critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action. "Conscientization" concerns the relationship between the subject and the world. When the human being lives in the world being subject only to its constraints, his conscience is in a state defined as "intransitive": the state of oppression - material, spiritual, psychological, cognitive - is such as to prevent any transformative interplay with reality. While being "in" the world is the condition of every living being, being "with" the world is a specific human condition that implies to be able to establish processes of exchange and reciprocal

¹ All the translations from Italian into English in this paper are by the autor.

influence with others and with the reality in which we live. In order to be with the world, it is necessary to develop “critical transitive consciousness”. While natural transitive consciousness tends to explain contradictions and problems uncritically, adopting routine and standardized ways of thinking, critical transitive consciousness, on the contrary, seeks explanations that are also scientifically valid, goes beyond the boundaries of conformism, reveals contradictions and sees problems as opportunities to build new knowledge. The passage from natural transitive consciousness to critical transitive consciousness can only occur through education. Critical awareness must be taught, but certainly not through the transmission of conceptions, ideas, attitudes in a way that would still be of a depositary nature. The Portuguese educator brings a "problematizing" and "dialogical" perspective in education, according to which knowledge is a problem for the person who has to build it, a question to be addressed critically, not alone, but through dialogue between those who teach and those who learn. In the dialogue, different types of knowledge are dialectically compared: the predominantly theoretical ones come into contact with the practical ones to produce new knowledge.

Reflective Practice

The term “critical incident” or “critical episode” refers to “non-ordinary events and issues that produce a moment of surprise, disorientation, criticality” (Fabbri & Romano, 2017, p. 153). The request to share an event that happened in one's own experience is within everyone's reach and this method is effective to avoid the risk of “getting lost” in non-substantive matters (Mortari, 2003). The discussion must take place in small groups, where it is easier to agree to submit one's own thinking and action to the others' critical scrutiny. The group chooses which topics to investigate in depth and the interaction stimulates deep reflection on the different interpretations provided by the participants.

As previously described, each trainee has to take part in at least two meetings during their traineeship. Before the meeting, participants must write and share their critical episodes in the google classroom. They are asked to describe the episode (what happened, when and where, who were the people involved, what each of them did, how they felt ...) and then they must answer three questions: 1. What is the problem being narrated; 2. Who should take charge of the problem; 3. What could/should be done to address the issue? In small groups, under a professor's supervision, the trainees analyze the episodes, exercising their critical thinking. Finally, a common conclusion is drawn up to answer the final question: what could/should be done?

Protecting Children: A Collective Responsibility

Over the years, some critical incidents were collected potentially referring to child maltreatment, defined by the World Health Organization (from now on, WHO) (2002, p.59) as “physical and/or emotional ill-treatment [...] resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power”.

Some studies assume the perspective of collective responsibility referring to “institutional abuse”, a form of “additional” maltreatment mostly of an emotional/psychological type, or omissive violence or abuse of power, by the same institutions that are responsible for the care, protection and safeguarding of children, such as schools (Dissegna, 2022). It is important to

reflect on the distorted educational assumptions which, on the one hand, generate these phenomena and, on the other, prevent them from being eradicated. The result of research and the dialogue among professionals in educational contexts have revealed that it might be difficult to identify and name violence and that there are unconscious mechanisms of denial that make violence invisible and cause the victims feel guilty (WHO, 1999, 2002, 2006).

In the foreword to the 2002 *World report on violence and health* by the WHO, Nelson Mandela reminds us that violence is not an intrinsic part of the human condition, on the contrary it can be prevented: security and serenity are the result of concrete actions and investments. Governments, communities and individuals can make a difference. Each of us can help making a difference.

In training programs for future educators, reflexivity is essential to build awareness that educating implies “being on the side of the human being” (Bastianoni, 2021, p.204). In other words, future educators must be aware of what is maltreatment, they must know how to identify risk and protective factors and be able to decide how to intervene. The perspective of institutional abuse emphasizes the importance of “taking care of care systems” (Dissegna, 2022, p.12). Promoting collegial reflection on action is a way to take care of systems and people.

Lisa, trainee in a nurse school in the Fall 2022, has brought two critical episodes to supervision². The same educator is responsible for the ill-treatment in both episodes. This element of recurrence helps to define a situation of abuse.

CRITICAL INCIDENT 1

The children play serenely, unlike Mirco, 2 years old, who is very nervous today and cries desperately, non-stop. The educator Roberta, with cell phone in hand, limits herself to supervising the children, does not play with them and appears very annoyed by Mirco's behavior. After half an hour of the child's desperate crying without any intervention on her part, Roberta approaches him shouting angrily “Stop crying! Put the pacifier! You have to learn how to stay with others!”. He continues to cry and then Roberta takes him by the arm, yanking him, opens the door to a room where no one is present and puts him in there for punishment. Obviously Mirco screams even louder, desperate, so Roberta reopens the door, drags him into the playing area, sits him on the mat and, still yelling, says to him “Stay there if you don't feel like playing!” Mirco is exhausted, he cries non-stop and the educator starts using his cell phone again.

(Lisa, trainee, Fall 2022)

CRITICAL INCIDENT 2

Today's dance and movement activity has been really intense. At lunchtime, the kids are tired. In particular, I notice that Lucia, 2 years old, has sad expressions while eating. So I go over and help her eat, but I see that she's still sad. I think the reason is that she is particularly tired. In fact, once the meal is over, Lucia falls asleep on the table; therefore, I decide to pick her up and let her sleep in my arms. The educator Roberta, however,

² Names are invented. The critical incident has been rewritten to make people and contexts unrecognizable, leaving the meaning intact.

immediately tells me that this is not good, that Lucia can't sleep now, she has to go to bed later with all the other children. Then he snatches her from my arms and sets her up still asleep. She rudely drags her to the bathroom and washes her face to wake her up.

(Lisa, trainee, Fall 2022)

During the supervision meeting, both critical incidents were analyzed, read and re-read by adopting an authoritarian/institutional perspective vs. a perspective focused on educational responsibility. In the first, interventions are oriented according to standardized procedures which take the form of self-defense mechanisms, avoiding relational involvement. In the second perspective, the educational interventions pursue the pre-eminent interest of the recipient (Bastianoni & Zanazzi, 2023).

The following table summarizes the content of the group discussion.

Critical incidents at the nursery school	
<p>[...] almost all the children play, unlike Mirco who is very nervous, cries desperately, does not want the other children to come near him. The educator Roberta ...</p> <p>[...] I notice that Lucia, aged 2, has sad expressions while eating. So I go over and help her eat, but I still see that she's always sad. I think it is because she is particularly tired. In fact, once the meal is over, Lucia falls asleep on the table. So, I decide to pick her up...</p>	<p><i>“Reading” the critical incidents from an authoritarian or institutional perspective</i></p> <p>WHAT IS THE PROBLEM? M. and L. have wrong behaviors that are not suitable for the nursery context. WHO SHOULD TAKE CHARGE OF THE PROBLEM? The children, who must learn to respect the rules of coexistence at the nursery school. WHAT COULD/SHOULD BE DONE? Isolate, scold, punish, force the children to understand which are the correct behaviors and which are the wrong ones.</p>
	<p><i>“Reading” the critical incidents from the perspective of educational responsibility</i></p> <p>WHAT IS THE PROBLEM? The educator, whose behavior is marked by reproach and punishment, does not respond to the needs of the children. WHO SHOULD TAKE CHARGE OF THE PROBLEM? The problem lies with the organization that should intervene to protect children from any form of abuse and with the educator who should radically change her approach to children. WHAT COULD/SHOULD BE DONE? Action must be taken to ensure that the relational rights of children are defended and their real needs are listened to.</p>

Table 1 – Discussion on critical incidents at a nursery school

If we read the critical incidents with an authoritarian approach, the problem lies in the children’s behavior that is not suitable for the nursery context. Punishment, scolding and isolation will work effectively to make them understand the difference between correct and wrong behaviors.

Differently, if we read the critical incident from the perspective of educational responsibility and educational relationship, the problem is that the educator, whose behavior is marked by reproach and punishment, does not respond to the needs of the children. Therefore, the problem lies with the organization that should intervene to protect children from any form of abuse, and with the educator who should radically change her approach to children. Action must be taken to ensure that the educational rights of children are defended and their real needs are listened to.

During the supervision meeting, Lisa was suggested to take a position to protect the children in the nursery school. Supported by the group of peers, she accepted to speak directly with Roberta, the educator, and to report to Sara, the Director of the nursery school.

Despite her courage, Lisa was not listened to. His interlocutors raised a wall: the institution provided a response based on denial, deciding to protect itself rather than protecting children. Before her second supervision meeting, the trainee wrote a follow up of the critical episode:

I felt scared because, being a trainee, I have a hierarchically lower position than an educator and I didn't know how she could react. However, I asked Roberta to talk to her and she accepted. I told her my judgment on her behavior. Unfortunately, my emotions translated into crying while I explained everything to her. The answer seems conciliatory: Roberta said that she was glad that I had presented my doubts to her and added that she would take my perspective into account. After the interview I feel really bad, because I had not been able to hold back my tears, thinking about the two children victim of a form of violence. Moreover, I had felt in awe of a person in a higher position than me.

As soon as I saw the Director Sara, we went to her office to talk. Again, I couldn't hold back the tears, I felt very agitated. Sara had expressions of astonishment, she almost seemed incredulous and immediately belittled what I was saying. She also immediately forced me to take a defensive position by asking me "Lisa, this is your first experience in a nursery, isn't it?" and then, again: "it's the first internship you're doing, I guess?" and, to my affirmative answers, she replied "ah ok ...". All this to underline that I wasn't able to understand the dynamics I have witnessed, because I had no experience. Then she clearly stated that I was a beginner and, having only studied theory at university, I still had to understand that then, in the field, things change completely. She added that Roberta had behaved correctly, that she had also talked with the psychologist, who had assessed her educational action as positive and fair.

In her final traineeship report, Lisa reflected on the experience and reiterated that speaking up was *the right thing to do*. In the difficult circumstances described, she used both her heuristic-reflexive rationality and critical emancipatory rationality (Striano, 2002). The first, to understand, the second, to act and foster change.

It was really difficult for me to be able to criticize the work of an educator. I felt oppressed by the Director, I felt devalued, embarrassed, immensely sad.

Despite everything, I think that speaking up was the right thing to do for Mirco and Lucia.

In the face of maltreatment, we must not stop. Maltreatment must be identified and highlighted so that it is no longer repeated.

Writing this traineeship report helped me process many events of my experience at the nursery school and it's good because, this way, I'm overcoming, "metabolizing" the pain I've suffered.

I'm sure I don't want to become an educator like Roberta, but I also treasure the belief that what I have seen, I will absolutely avoid in the future.

With reference to institutional abuse, the literature describes risk and protective factors. The following table summarizes some of them, particularly relevant for the critical incidents analyzed in this paper (Paradiso, 2018, pp.115-118).

In the context where Lisa carried out her traineeship, all the risk factors listed below were present and no protective factors have been identified.

Risk factors	Protective factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Absence of collegial meetings to discuss quality of relationships at school ✓ Absence of controls and sanctions by the school governance ✓ The school governance not taking charge of formal or informal reports ✓ Tolerance of behaviors that approve and/or instigate the dynamics of violence ✓ Denial or underestimation or silence by the educational and auxiliary staff who witnessed the episodes [...] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Spaces for discussion/training on the quality of relationships at school ✓ Governance system aimed at prevention, monitoring and control of educational and organizational quality ✓ The school governance listens to situations of discomfort and takes charge of formal and informal reports ✓ There are systems and methods for monitoring and evaluating educational quality and giving formative feedback [...]

Table 2 – Institutional abuse: risk and protective factors

Institutional abuse against minors occurs in the presence of some situations that can be considered risk factors: firstly, the drive towards educational autonomy and independence released from any form of supervision of team work; secondly, the adoption of an institutional model of education, centered on the needs of the adults instead of the children's; thirdly, the absence of an institutional governance that monitors educational and relational quality, and of ethical guidelines. Ultimately, institutional violence on minors represents the outcome of an organizational process that fails to limit, control and sanction maltreatment and abuse. On the contrary, the protective factors are the actions for the co-construction of an organizational

context capable of monitoring educational quality and protecting the pre-eminent interest of the minor (Paradiso, 2018).

Conclusion

In the training of future educators, it is fundamental to help build a pedagogical culture of child protection in order to foster the definition of organizational models, tools and processes aimed at the prevention, control and management of the phenomena of child maltreatment and institutional abuse, in all its possible forms.

We believe that reflective practice can contribute to the achievement of this goal.

In the face of situations of abuse, the education professional must make a difference. Above all, it is essential to build and strengthen the awareness that violence can be prevented, that safety and serenity are the result of concrete actions and investments made in educational contexts (WHO, 2002).

For an educator, taking the side of justice and protecting the relational rights of every human being is an ethical imperative. In education neutrality is not an option: one must necessarily take a stand (Freire, 2021).

References

- Bastianoni, P. (2021). I diritti relazionali dei bambini. In P. Bastianoni (Ed.), *Tutela, diritti e protezione dei minori. Una lettura psico-socio-giuridica* (pp. 203-232). Parma: Junior.
- Bastianoni, P. (2022). *Supervisione e narrazione nella relazione educativa*. Roma: Carocci.
- Bastianoni, P., Zanazzi, S. (2023). *Educatori in divenire. Percorsi formativi per il tirocinio universitario*. Parma: Junior.
- Bruner, J.S. (1987). Life as narrative. *Social Research*, 54, 1, 11-32.
- Demetrio, D. (1996). *Raccontarsi. L'autobiografia come cura di sé*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Logic, theory of inquiry*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Dissegna, A. (2022). *Maltrattamento istituzionale. Criticità del sistema di garanzie dei diritti dei bambini, degli adolescenti e delle loro famiglie*. Milano: Franco Angeli.
- Flanagan, J. C. (1954). The critical incident technique. *Psychological Bulletin*, 51, 4, 327-358.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Freire, P. (2021). *Il diritto e il dovere di cambiare il mondo. Per una pedagogia dell'indignazione*. Trento: Il Margine.
- Fabbri, L. and Romano, A. (2017). *Metodi per l'apprendimento trasformativo. Casi, modelli, teorie*. Roma: Carocci.
- Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Lewin, K. (1946). Action research and minority problems, *Journal of Social Issues*, vol. 2 (4), pp. 34-46.
- Mezirow, J. (1991). *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mortari, L. (2003). *Apprendere dall'esperienza. Il pensare riflessivo nella formazione*. Roma: Carocci.
- Mortari, L. (2013). *Aver cura della vita della mente*. Roma: Carocci.
- Paradiso, L. (2018). Maltrattamento e abuso dell'infanzia nelle istituzioni educative e formative: dall'analisi del fenomeno alla definizione di azioni di prevenzione e di intervento per un modello di buon trattamento. *Formazione & Insegnamento*, XVI, 1, 109-120.

Schön, D.A. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner: how professionals think in action*. London: Basic Books.

Schön, D.A. (1987). *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Toward a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Sorzio, P. (2019). La ricerca-azione. In L. Mortari & L. Ghirotto (Eds.) (2019), *Metodi per la ricerca educativa*, pp. 143 - 160. Roma: Carocci.

Striano, M. (2002). *La razionalità riflessiva nell'agire educativo*. Liguori, Napoli.

World Health Organization (WHO) (1999). *Report of the Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention*. Download from <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/65900>

World Health Organization (WHO) (2002). *World report on violence and health*. Download from: <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9241545615>

World Health Organization (WHO) (2006). *Preventing child maltreatment: a guide to taking action and gerating evidence*. Download from <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/43499>

Contact email: silvia.zanazzi@unife.it