Chapter #28

THE MELARETE PROJECT TO FOSTER CHILDREN'S ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

Luigina Mortari & Federica Valbusa
Department of Human Sciences, University of Verona, Italy

ABSTRACT
The chapter presents the MelArete project, which includes the following components: (a) a theory of ethical education, conceived as education to care and virtues; (b) an educational programme aimed at encouraging primary school children to reflect on ethical concepts and experiences; and (c) a qualitative research to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of the designed educational activities in fostering the development of children's ethical thinking. In particular, the chapter outlines the theory of ethical education in which the educational programme is grounded, also by comparing it with the main traditions in this field. Then, it presents in detail the educational activities designed for primary school and, in the conclusion, discusses them with reference to research findings.

Keywords: MelArete, ethics education, primary school, care, virtue.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ethical education is at the same time both essential and urgent, since ethics nourishes one's commitment to search for what is necessary to make one's own life and that of others and whole communities something that is good. Nowadays, scarce consideration of others' needs, rights and problems; individualism and egocentricity, which increase indifference towards the common good; disregard for environmental degradation; and widespread political disengagement among young people are elements of an ethical crisis that has at its core a lack of space and time to cultivate the disposition of thinking. Since, as Arendt (2003) highlighted, engaging in thinking is crucial for the development of an ethical consciousness, ethical education should encourage people to think about ethical issues and actions. In order to pursue this educational goal, the Center of Educational and Didactic Research (CRED) at the University of Verona (Italy) developed the MelArete project, which includes the following components: (a) a theory of ethical education, conceived as education to care and virtues; (b) an educational programme aimed at encouraging primary school children to reflect on ethical concepts and experiences; and (c) a qualitative research to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of the designed educational activities in fostering the development of children's ethical thinking.

2. ETHICAL EDUCATION IN THE LITERATURE

The main traditions in ethical education are traditional character education; the cognitive-developmental approach, or moral development; and the caring approach. Applying Lickona (1989)'s definition of character as consisting of three interrelated components, Howard, Berkowitz, and Schaeffer (2004) individuated the main focus of traditional character education as doing good, that of the cognitive-developmental approach

as knowing good and that of the caring approach as desiring good. To highlight the specificities of these approaches, it is necessary to briefly outline the history of their development (McClellan, 1999; Howard et al., 2004; Althof & Berkowitz, 2006; Graham, Haidt, & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008). Traditional character education developed in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century and was characterised by the indoctrinative purpose to instil traditional values and inculcate desirable habits in young people, starting from the belief that ethical education can rely on a list of virtues assumed to be universal. This tradition was criticised by the cognitive-developmental approach, which developed from the Kohlbergian studies on the stages of moral development (Kohlberg, 1975; Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977) and, contrasting the conception of ethical education as the inculcation of a predetermined set (or 'bag') of virtues, was interested in fostering students' moral reasoning through discussions of moral dilemmas. Kohlberg's theoretical proposal was criticised by feminist theorists, and the dominance of the cognitive-developmental approach decreased in the late 1980s and 1990s. In particular, Gilligan (1982) revealed the gender bias within Kohlbergian research, highlighting that the original sample had been completely constituted by male participants, and on the basis of new empirical data, suggested that two ethical perspectives exist, the 'voice of justice' and the 'voice of care'. The caring approach to ethics education highlights the importance of cultivating caring and empathic relationships and emphasises the role of moral sentiments (Noddings, 2002; Slote, 2010). Nowadays, it is common in the literature to find the expression 'character education', referring not to a specific approach but to the entire field of ethical education and including a wide range of pedagogical strategies and educational practices (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006; Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). Character education sometimes even seems to refer to education as a whole, for example, when it is considered able to promote students' social, moral and emotional development as well as academic achievement (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004).

Comparing the approach to ethics education proposed by MelArete with the other three specific approaches mentioned above would require an in-depth discussion, but put briefly, it can be said that like traditional character education, MelArete emphasises the importance of virtue education, but without it resulting in inculcation or indoctrination. In fact, MelArete shares with the cognitive-developmental approach the idea that ethical education should not result in the direct teaching of a priori established values but rather encourage students to engage in moral reasoning and discussion. Like the caring approach, MelArete emphasises the concept of care as paradigmatic in ethical discourse, highlights the importance of constructing caring learning context and recognises the role of moral sentiments in ethical decisions. However, it conceives feeling as always being interrelated to thinking, as taught by the cognitive conception of emotions (Oatley, 1992; Nussbaum, 2001).

3. A THEORY OF ETHICAL EDUCATION AS EDUCATION TO CARE AND TO VIRTUES

'MelArete' combines the ancient Greek terms *meléte*, meaning 'care', and *areté*, meaning 'virtue', which are the main conceptual cornerstones of the theory in which the educational programme is rooted. This theory argues the thesis according to which (a) ethics must be congruent with the essence of life; (b) the essence of life is care, and consequently, the ethics of care has ontological primacy; (c) the vital nucleus of care is ethical in its essence because the practice of care is carried out through ways of being that can be defined as virtues; and (d) ethical education should be conceived as education to

care and, since the ethical core of care consists of virtues, it can take the form of education to virtues.

The human condition is essentially characterised by ontological weakness and fragility. Human beings are called to find their most proper form without having any sovereignty on their own becoming. We are seeds of possibilities called to look for what it is that allows us to flourish. This task can be defined as ontogenetic, as it consists of giving shape to our being. In searching for a form that better realises our existential possibilities, we discover we are not sufficient unto ourselves, since we intimately need the other. The answer to one's own neediness and to the neediness of the other is care. The ontologically evident datum that everybody needs care makes it a necessity for everyone to care for others. That care is fundamental in life is the assumption that we first encountered in Plato's dialogues, where Socrates highlights the importance of caring for the soul and urges his interlocutors to do so, and which, after having been neglected for much time by Western culture, was revived in the last century by several scholars (Heidegger, 1927/2010; Noddings, 1984; Mayeroff, 1990; Tronto, 1993; Kittay, 1999; Held, 2006; Mortari, 2022).

To care for oneself and for others is not only a possible ideal of being but the prime and original necessity of the condition of being (Heidegger, 1927/2010). If educational action must be considered with regard to what has a primary value in life, and if care is of primary importance, then education can only be education to care through care. According to theoretical and empirical research (Mortari, 2022; Mortari & Saiani, 2014), the essential core of care is made by ways of being that can be defined as virtues. Indeed, as the basis for the practice of care, it is generally possible to find virtuous dispositions, such as sense of responsibility, generosity, respect, courage and rightness. Therefore, assuming that the educational action consistent with the ontological quality of the human condition is an action of care aimed at urging people to care for themselves and for others, and assuming that the ethical core of care consists of virtues, how is it possible to educate people to be virtuous? This is the central question that forms the basis of our proposal for ethical education.

In *Protagoras* (320b) and *Meno* (96c-d), Socrates doubts that virtues can be taught and, formulated in this way, this thesis can be supported because educating is not the same as teaching or instruction. Indeed, education should not be conceived as the didactic transmission of predefined content and concepts; consistently, Socrates points out that he never promised to teach anything and has not done so (*Apology*, 33b). Indeed, his *paideia* is an educational, not an instructional, practice, and it is aimed at cultivating the ability of thinking among his interlocutors. In this educational perspective, Socrates suggests a way to educate people to virtues, saying: 'It is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day' (*Apology* 38a). This is what he does with his interlocutors, guiding them into reasoning about virtues to understand their essence. The Aristotelian proposal is different. According to Aristotle, ethics has a practical purpose, namely, to act well (*Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 1102 b; VI, 1144 b), and virtues are learned by putting them in action. Accordingly, he states: 'We become just by doing just actions, temperate by doing temperate actions, brave by doing brave actions' (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II 1103b).

The recovery of these educational suggestions from ancient Greek philosophy is the basis for the educational proposal of MelArete, which combines both the Socratic and Aristotelian perspectives in designing instruments that encourage children into reasoning about the essence of ethical concepts and reflecting on their ethical actions. The first educational aim follows the Socratic suggestion, whereas the second one embraces the Aristotelian suggestion without directly prescribing children to act in a specific way, since doing so would mean to interpret ethical education as a way of shaping children's

behaviour from outside, and that is not the purpose of an authentic caring educational practice. Instead, in the MelArete programme, the Aristotelian suggestion to focus on virtuous actions is translated into activities that require children to reflect on their own and others' ways to act virtuously.

4. EDUCATIVE RESEARCH FOR CHILDREN

MelArete can be defined as an educative, not merely educational, research, since it does not only conduct research on the phenomenon of education but it also carries out, more specifically, research that involves the participants in experiences aimed at fostering their ethical flourishing. Indeed, MelArete pursues both an educational programme for children and a qualitative research aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of its implementation. Educative research is ethically grounded if it (a) seeks the benefit of the participants and (b) characterises the researcher's way of being with ethical postures. Consistently, MelArete is a research 'for' children, not merely 'on' them, because it aims to offer them positive and significant experiences. To embody an ethical profile, the researcher should not only follow ethical codes, which are necessary but not sufficient, but s/he should also develop ethical relational postures, beginning with the capability of authentically listen to participants as well as with the ability to give time to them, also remembering that if they feel they are in a good relationship, participants will generally take part in the research in a more active way.

5. THE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMME IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

The MelArete programme for primary school is structured in 12 meetings focusing on the ethical concepts of good, care and virtues and on the specific virtues of courage, generosity, respect and justice. The activities are designed along with a narrative framework that serves as an integrative backdrop, namely a 'Wood of virtues' inhabited by animals with names taken from Platonic dialogues or Greek literature.

Since 'educative research' is designed to have both an educational and a heuristic purpose, every activity in the programme is aimed both at fostering the development of children's ethical thinking and collecting data for research that are needed to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of the educational experience. Activities are implemented in class by the researcher in the presence of teachers, and before the beginning of the programme, signed informed consent is provided by parents regarding the purposes and methods of the research. In particular, parents are invited to agree that all the meetings will be audio recorded and that all the data will be transcribed verbatim in anonymous form.

Meeting 1: the initial activity

The 'Story of Puc and Pec' is told; in it, the little jaguar Puc is sad because he will have to stay for a few days far from home, and Pec gives him some caring thoughts that will help relieve Puc's homesickness. After the story is told, a Socratic conversation, in the form of a dialogue about the essential meaning of a concept without predefined answers, is carried out in the class, starting with the researcher asking the children what comes to their minds when they hear the words 'good' and 'care'.

Meeting 2: first explorative activity

The children take part in a game named 'The basket of virtues', during which cards are handed out with names of different 'things' (jobs, games and virtues). The students are

asked to group the cards into three baskets and to give a name to each basket. The words 'courage', 'generosity', 'respect' and 'justice' are then extracted from the 'basket of virtues', and every child is required to define them in writing.

Meeting 3: second explorative activity

The researcher reads to the children 'The story of Alcibiades', in which the donkey Alcibiades brings water to a thirsty cow, Chloe, who, in thanks, gives Alcibiades a bucket of milk. The donkey then shares the gift from Chloe with the other animals in the wood. During the dialogue between the animals, the following two questions arise, which the children are invited to answer individually in written form: what are virtues, and how can virtues be learned?

Meetings 4 and 5: activities about courage

In the fourth meeting, a story is told to encourage the children to reflect on a courageous gesture. Two story options are proposed to enable the teachers to choose which is more suitable for the educational needs of their classroom. In the first story, entitled 'The grass lawn', Alcibiades, looking for a green pasture where he can find fresh grass for breakfast, is bothered by a group of wild boars, who will not let him pass. Although he is small, the squirrel Theaetetus finds the courage to defend his donkey friend. In the second story, entitled 'Xanthippe and the edelweiss', the marmot Xanthippe sees that the ibex Laches is trampling some beautiful and precious edelweiss flowers with his hooves. Xanthippe finds the courage to turn to Laches and point out to him what he is doing.

After the reading of the story that has been chosen, the children answer the following questions. What is the virtuous gesture of Theaetetus/Xanthippe? According to you, which thought was in his/her mind that has guided him/her? Which effects has produced his/her gesture? After having acted, what has he/she felt inside him/her? The children initially answer the questions individually in writing, and then share their answers with the class, dialoguing together.

In the fifth meeting, the ludic activity 'The pathway in the wood of courage' is used to deepen the children's understanding of courage. During the game, the children roll a die twice; the first time, they move a token along a pathway representing places of the wood, and the second time, they move the token along a pathway representing animals. Each child then writes a story set in the place and with the animals assigned through the two die rolls.

As an alternative to the game, an activity consisting of vignettes can be chosen that represents a stimulus to reason on an ethical problematic situation. Three different actions are presented to students as pictures, each representing a different way in which one can react to a scene in which a child argues with another and gives her a push. The activity is divided into the following four tasks given to the children: individually writing a description of the three situations; individually choosing which situation demonstrates courage and writing down why; discussing their ideas together; and individually drawing a situation involving courage.

Meetings 6 and 7: activities about generosity

In the sixth meeting, a story is used to encourage the children to reflect on a generous gesture. Again, two story options are proposed. In the first story, entitled 'The hibernation of Xanthippe', Laches offers half of his supplies to Xanthippe, who has not accumulated enough for hibernation. In the second story, entitled 'The fall of the owl Socrates', Theaetetus gives up a picnic to devote time to the owl Socrates, who has been injured in a flying accident.

After the chosen story has been read, the children answer the following questions. What is the virtuous gesture of Laches/Theaetetus? According to you, which thought was in his mind that has guided him? Which effects has produced his gesture? After having acted, what has he felt inside him? The children initially answer the questions individually in writing, and then share their answers with the class, dialoguing together.

In the seventh meeting, a game or vignettes can be chosen. The game is organised as follows: a poster containing a crossword puzzle, which is to be completed by the children, is brought into the classroom. Once completed, the word 'generosity' appears highlighted. The researcher then explains that this virtue can be realised by 'giving something to someone else', 'giving time to someone else' or 'doing something for someone else'. The children are then asked to write individual stories about generosity, choosing one of the three meanings presented.

In the vignettes, three different options representing different ways of responding to a classmate's need for a pen are presented to the children as pictures. The children are then invited to do the following: individually describe in writing the three situations; individually choose which situation demonstrates generosity and explain in writing why; discuss their ideas together; and individually draw a situation involving generosity.

Meetings 8 and 9: activities about respect

In the eighth meeting, one of two stories about respect is used to encourage children to reflect on a respectful gesture. In the first story, entitled 'The plucked duck', the otter Eurydice welcomes into the woods the duck Andromache, who has been rejected by the other animals because they consider her ugly and dirty. In the second story, entitled 'The dance of Alcibiades', Alcibiades pays attention to the flowers planted by Xanthippe, taking care not to step on them.

After the chosen story has been read, the children answer the following questions. What is the virtuous gesture of Eurydice/Alcibiades? According to you, which thought was in her/his mind that has guided her/him? Which effects has produced her/his gesture? After having acted, what has s/he felt inside her/him? The children initially answer the questions individually in writing, and then share their answers with the class, dialoguing together.

As for the other virtues, the activities about respect continue in the ninth meeting with a game or vignettes. The game is entitled 'Puzzles and the scale of respect' and is structured as follows. The children are presented with ten different scenes showing acts of respect (e.g. raising a hand to ask to speak in class, shaking hands with an opponent at the end of a game) and disrespect (e.g. pulling a cat's tail, throwing litter onto the ground), cut out into puzzle-like pieces. After the children have reassembled the puzzles (individually, in pairs or in groups), they are asked to describe verbally the actions represented in them. Then, during a classroom conversation, they assign an ethical order to the different scenes, placing them on a scale ranging from -5 (maximum degree of disrespect) to +5 (maximum degree of respect).

The vignettes about respect represent three different ways of welcoming into the classroom a new child who arrives in a 'strange' outfit. As for the other virtues, the activity continues with individual descriptions of the three scenes, individual choice of the one showing respect and argumentation, a class discussion and an individual drawing of a respectful situation.

Meetings 10 and 11: activities about justice

In the tenth meeting, a story is used to encourage children to reflect on a just gesture. Again, two options are provided. In the first story, entitled 'Supplies for the winter',

Alcibiades and Socrates propose two different ways of distributing hay to Chloe, Laches and Xanthippe. In the second story, entitled 'The raspberry binge', the blackbird Timaeus finds the best way to repair the harm that he and other friends have unintentionally committed, which was to have eaten all the raspberries picked by Xanthippe.

Again, the children are invited to answer questions concerning the quality of the virtuous gesture (for the first story, this question is formulated as: 'According to you, who is right between Alcibiades and Socrates?'), the thought underlying it, the effects produced by it, and the emotions felt by its author. The children initially answer the questions individually in writing, and then share their answers with the class, dialoguing together.

Since one of the justice concepts the children can be invited to reflect on is that of rights, in the eleventh meeting, they contribute to the creation of a 'Memory of rights'. They are presented with eight drawings on which people of different ages are represented. Each drawing constitutes the first piece of the memory game. The children are then asked to make the second piece, on which they draw or write the rights of the person represented in the first. The activity can be carried out individually or in groups.

As an alternative, vignettes on justice can be proposed. In the activity, three different ways of distributing gifts to three children in different situations are presented to the students as pictures. The students are invited to describe the three options, choose which is the just one and explain the reasons for their choice, discuss this in class and draw a scene representing justice.

Meeting 12: final activities

A story narrating the end-of-school celebration of the animals in the 'Wood of virtues' is presented to the students. Starting from the story, each child is again invited to define in writing the virtues of courage, generosity, respect and justice, and to answer the following questions. What are virtues? How can virtues be learned?

By comparing the data collected at the beginning and at the end of the programme, the researchers will gain an understanding of if and how the children's thoughts have developed over the course of the educational experience.

The 'diary of virtues': a reflective writing activity

Over the course of the educational experience, after the third meeting and until the end of the programme, the children are invited, at least once a week, to write down in a reflective journal the courageous, generous, respectful and just actions they have carried out or seen carried out by others. The time and space devoted to the activity are decided by the teachers, since this activity is managed by them under the guidance of the researchers.

6. CONCLUSIONS FROM RESEARCH FINDINGS

In literature, it is frequent to find references to programmes of ethical education, but not always are the underlying theoretical sources well explained and the practices described in detail. Clarifying the purposes of a programme in terms of children's development, as is generally done, is important but not enough. Indeed, it is also essential to make clear the horizon of thinking that gives form to the educational goals as well as to describe how each goal is translated into an educational activity. Consistently, in this chapter we decided to present MelArete by focusing on two elements, those being its theory and practice. However, there is another element that we do not have the space to deepen in this context, but which is equally important, namely the research carried out on the realised educational activities. Since it is the research alone that allows the researchers to rigorously identify the

effectiveness of a programme, we would like to conclude this chapter by discussing the activities of MelArete on the basis of some of the findings that emerged from a qualitative analysis of the data collected during the first implementation of the programme in some Italian primary schools. In particular, the programme involved 106 8-10 years old children, attending 6 fourth grade classes of 4 primary schools located in the North and Centre of Italy. The collected data – i.e., audio-recorded conversations with and among children, children's written answers about the presented stories and vignettes, children's entries in their diaries of virtues – were faithfully transcribed, and the data concerning each single activity were then analysed through a methodological crossbreeding (Mortari & Silva, 2018) between the phenomenological method (Mortari, 2008; Giorgi, 1985; Moustakas, 1994) and the grounded-theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006). Consistently with phenomenology (Husserl, 2012), the analysis was carried out by engaging in the practice of *epochè*, which recommends to bracket any pre-given theory, belief and assumption which could affect the heuristic process. Consistently with the grounded-theory, the analysis implied the heuristic actions of labelling and categorizing. The purpose of the research was to evaluate the effectiveness of the realized educational activities in fostering children's ethical thinking, and to understand the children's idea about the ethical concepts of good, care, virtue, courage, generosity, respect and justice, as well as the essence of their ethical experience. Socratic conversations were analysed not only in terms of content, but also by focusing on the discursive practices, which characterized the dialogical exchanges among children.

Briefly summarizing the research findings, the Socratic conversation promoted in the first activity was shown to be effective in fostering the co-construction of children's thinking in a respectful dialogical environment in which each child listened to the other and enriched, changed or better clarified their own perspective thanks to those of their classmates. Concerning the stories about virtues, it is important to specify that they do not have classical morals, meaning that they are not constructed to convey the children's thinking in a precise direction; instead, different ethical positions, through dialogue among animals, are presented, so that the children can reflect on them, starting with open endings. The research findings that emerged from an analysis of the children's answers following the presentation of the stories revealed the children's capacity to see both the complexity of the virtuous action—indeed, they sometimes referred to more than one virtue in describing the gesture of the protagonist—and its difficulty—they appeared aware that choosing what is good is not always the simpler solution. Also, the vignettes activity is structured in such a way as not to suggest to the children a precise solution but to give them the opportunity to think. In this case, the research data confirmed the importance of asking children to describe the scenes before choosing the virtuous one, since the interpretation of a scene conditions the choice and its argumentation. Furthermore, an interesting datum emerged, that the children were able to identify the ethical dilemmas that we normally included among two of the three options, and in making their choice, some of them considered both dilemmatic options as virtuous, arguing for the two choices with different reasoning. The children appreciated the play activities, not only because they were fun but also because they provided an opportunity for reflection. Furthermore, the research experience revealed the importance of structuring the final activities with the same questions as the explorative activities, since this allowed the researcher to compare data from the beginning and end of the programme, so as to explore if and how children's ethical thinking had developed. Finally, much was revealed by the research data collected through the diaries of virtues; in particular, writing proved to be an essential tool for facilitating reflection on ethical experiences.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The MelArete project is funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities and Research (MIUR).

AUTHORS' INFORMATION

Full name: Luigina Mortari
Institutional affiliation: Department of Human Sciences, University of Verona, Italy
Institutional address: Lungadige Porta Vittoria 17, 37129, Verona, Italy
Biographical sketch: Ph.D. in Education, is a full professor at the University of Verona. She teaches Philosophy of education at the Department of Human Sciences and Epistemology of qualitative research at the School of Medicine. She founded the Center of Educational and Didactic Research (CRED) and she is the Director of the Melete-Center of Ethics for Care of the same University. Her research interests include philosophy and politics of care, and qualitative methods in educational and healthcare research.

Full name: Federica Valbusa
Institutional affiliation: Department of Human Sciences, University of Verona, Italy
Institutional address: Lungadige Porta Vittoria 17, 37129, Verona, Italy
Biographical sketch: Ph.D. in Education, is Research Assistant at the Department of Human Sciences of the University of Verona, where she teaches Educational research at the Combined Bachelor's and Master's degree in Primary teacher education. She is a member of the Center of Educational and Didactic Research (CRED) of the same University. Her research interests include phenomenology and educational research, ethical education and social-emotional learning.