

## From childhood to adolescence. Training educators for an unpredictable age group

*Da bambini a adolescenti.  
Formare educatori per un'età incerta*

**Mirca Benetton**

Associata di Pedagogia Generale e Sociale / Università degli Studi di Padova

abstract

*Early adolescence is a particularly complex stage of life where the building of personal identity is concerned, although its educational needs can tend sometimes to be underestimated. Contemporary pedagogy must therefore focus attention on the real needs of early adolescents, during a period when the stages in the course of human life seem disrupted and the very sense of growing up is hard to grasp. This means that there is a need for educators – not only in the family and in schools, but in the non-formal system too – having the responsibility and skill to take up the educational mission of accompanying early adolescents on their journey through what should be a flourishing life.*

**Keywords:** *social pedagogy, early adolescence, life cycle pedagogy*

La preadolescenza rappresenta una fase di vita particolarmente complessa per la costruzione dell'identità della persona, ma talvolta non del tutto riconosciuta nelle sue esigenze educative. La pedagogia contemporanea deve perciò porre attenzione ai bisogni reali del preadolescente in un periodo in cui le fasi del corso di vita umana sembrano stravolte e si sta perdendo il senso da dare alla crescita stessa. Servono pertanto educatori, non soltanto nella famiglia e nella scuola ma anche nel sistema non formale, in grado di assumersi con responsabilità e competenza la mission educativa di accompagnare il viaggio della vita del preadolescente come *flourishing life*.

**Parole chiave:** pedagogia sociale, preadolescenza, pedagogia del ciclo di vita

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## 1. Recognizing early adolescence

Early adolescence is a stage of life during which, more than any other, the individual growing up brings into play abilities for adaptation and reorganization.

From a chronological standpoint, early adolescence spans a period from 10-11 years of age (onset of early adolescence occurs at 10-11 years for girls and 11-12 years for boys) to 14-15 years of age (Riverso, 1993). Chronological age, needless to say, is not of itself enough to generalize the profile of an early adolescent, whose development at this time of life is geared to somewhat personal specifications. All youngsters experience early adolescence in their own way and with contrasting patterns of growth, typical of the age group, which however cannot be left to chance but must be balanced, adopting a pedagogical perspective that acknowledges them and gives them direction, not least ethical. Hence the need to accept that *every early adolescent* experience is *singular* in nature (Orlando Cian, 1998), and to support: the process of reorganization and development typical of this age bracket; the challenge of successes and defeats, of limits and possibilities in the analysis of reality and the realization of goals; the awareness that development is marked by the presence of biological laws and cultural constructs – genetic and environmental – and moments of dependence alongside others of independence.

Early adolescence cannot therefore be considered simplistically or generically as a stage in the overall period of adolescence, internally of which it is identified conventionally with that of puberty, definable on the basis of physical and biological changes. Puberty is not synonymous with early adolescence, inasmuch as it identifies no more than the physical and biological condition that marks the transition from childhood to adulthood, beginning with the appearance of secondary sex characteristics and ending with acquisition of the capacity to reproduce. Consideration must also be given to the notable social and psychological changes identifying

*early adolescence* as a specific age (Williams, Currie, 2000; Galardi, Quadrio Aristarchi, 2001).

Notwithstanding the acknowledged need today for a distinct connotation of early adolescence, conducive to a more suitable pedagogical and educational approach, the reality is that in educational practice one still sees a tendency – possibly a legacy of the past – for this period of life to be assimilated with the stages immediately preceding and following, that is to say infancy and adolescence (Cirigliano, 2013). Consequently, there is the real risk that the characteristic signs of early adolescence in a child will be missed, and the smooth process of identity growth disrupted.

The impression of early adolescent subjects being at stages of life inconsistent with their age can also be created due to the fact that they retain certain peculiarities constitutive of infancy while at the same time manifesting other exploratory tendencies typical of full adolescence, or even adulthood. During early adolescence “characteristics of exceptional *brevity* take over – everything happens in a few swift years – along with frequent, almost continuous incursions forward and back, digressions into neighbouring territories, and a natural *alternation* between being a child and being a grown-up” (Toffano Martini, 2012, p. 29). Educators are often destabilized by these very occurrences, but should not in any event allow themselves to be sidetracked by them, otherwise early adolescents could be led to adopt behaviour patterns typical of and exclusive to adolescents or, by contrast, find themselves lingering in a state of infancy.

In this state of uncertainty and instability, early adolescents tend to undertake a reorganization of their plans for the future. It is a situation resulting from a reaction to changes in the body of which the impact is not fully understood, and changes in thought reflecting the development of the brain. Embracing “the dimension of the possible”, youngsters are led into complicated thought processes, to questions and representations of the self and its surroundings that are unreal and highly imaginative, emotionally charged and often contradictory, depending on when they come to mind. Confused they may be, but these notions nonetheless represent the first outline of what will become a lone path followed by the young in establishing their identity, and building their own committed and responsible life plan. Accordingly, they are attitudes that must not be disparaged, but guided, occasionally kept in check, and given direction.

It follows therefore that any adults close to boys and girls going through this tricky stage of growing up must provide them with shrewd and attentive educational support. An important role is undoubtedly played by parents and by lower secondary school teachers, who are the figures most representative of the learning environments where children

of this age still spend much of their time (Benetton, 2012; Moscato, 2013; Arcangeli, 2002). No less important however – especially when considering the current “abdication of educational responsibilities” by the family and the school – is the relationship developed by educators with youngsters they meet in non-formal educational settings, experiencing the pathway of secondary socialization typical of this age group.

And this, by the same token, invites reflection on the training that educators should receive so that they can acquire scientific knowledge, relational and caring skills and ethical-professional grounding such as will place them responsibly and dependably in the occupational sphere focusing today on *lifelong* and *lifewide education*. The fields of action open to the educator, which are many and various in the non-formal education system, are in fact suitably identified in Bill 2443 currently before the Italian parliament, concerning *Regulation of the professions of socio-pedagogical professional educator, social health professional educator and pedagogue*<sup>1</sup>.

It must not be forgotten, however, that educators have difficulty in defining an educational blueprint for early adolescence, due not least to the fact that the “laws of humanization” they might abide by have apparently disappeared (Brezinka, 1989). Indeed on the one hand one senses a loss of direction, or even of meaning, that should be given to personal growth and realization, whilst on the other it seems that the stages of life and the relative growth tasks are easily interchangeable. In effect, every historical age has interpreted the stages of life in its own way, and with corresponding educational implications, but there had always been some kind of reference to an ontological and value-based order and to laws governing physical-biological and psychic growth. To an order of meaning. Today, by contrast, given the excessive destandardization of the life cycle, models of behaviour and social norms once considered consistent with a certain stage of life are regarded as adoptable in other stages as well. In short, individuals feel free to follow their every inclination and end up by accumulating numerous different experiences, at times devoid of meaning and continuity, living for the moment... Thus, in disrupting the stages of

1 Article 1: Educators “operate in the fields of education, training and teaching, in relation to any given activity conducted formally, non-formally and informally, during the various stages of life, in a perspective of personal and social growth”.

Article 3: “The socio-pedagogical professional educator and the pedagogue engage with persons of all ages, predominantly in the following fields: education and training; school; social security and health, limited in this instance to socio-educational aspects; social welfare; parenting and family matters; cultural; legal; environmental, sport and integration and international cooperation”.

life, one actually has adults who, rather than exemplifying generativity, showing care and concern for younger generations (Erikson, 1992), seek to present an image of youthfulness, even exhibiting forms of infantile egocentricity. By contrast, a child will seek out experiences typical of older age groups – where the process of growing up has already begun – and appears as a precocious adult, albeit without the maturity needed in order to make informed choices. At the same time, children in this situation feel the lack of reliable guidance from adults capable of understanding their difficulty in growing up and of helping them discover their identity.

## **2. The educator faced with the early adolescent**

To do their job properly, educators must be able first and foremost to identify the profile of early adolescents and their educational needs. Firstly then, an effort must be made to understand the existential continuum of the subject, considering that every stage of human growth involves particular needs – unique and occurring once only – of which the educator has to be aware. This also means adopting a research-oriented approach that excludes any deterministic identification of the stages of life, and must be based rather on the personal biography of individuals and their spatio-temporal experiences. It is a matter of helping youngsters to understand biological changes, but also to find answers as to who they might be, why they are here and what the future may hold, while continuing to take in new and not easily manageable experiences.

In effect, it is not enough for adults to “suspend judgement” when faced with the disturbing and often incoherent attitude of youngsters in early adolescence, thereby leaving them at the mercy of their own imaginings, of their escape from reality, or their hypercritical views of reality. Similarly, certain attitudes of the early adolescent that appear provocative, abrupt, sometimes reactive, risky, impulsive and arrogant, should not be mistaken for deviant behaviour. These are often simply the manifestation of a stage in the development of the brain, combined with an as-yet incomplete balance between the different regions of the brain and a still limited ability to control the emotions. Awareness of the emotions will certainly improve during early adolescence, although not sufficiently for the individual to govern them totally, or use them to best effect.

It is also known that during early adolescence, the family circle is no longer enough for boys and girls who now feel the need to explore new environments and discover new experiences with their others of their own age. Meeting places are typically not far from home and will often be con-

nected with activities organized by the “non-formal education network” (toy libraries, education trusts, gym facilities, cultural presentation initiatives...). But there are also less structured, informal situations that begin to acquire value by favouring the interaction of youngsters – youngsters who freely “self-manage” the time they spend together without specific aims, such as that of needing to bring a particular activity to a successful conclusion.

Precisely in the sphere of the non-formal, as already intimated, the job of the educator first and foremost is to favour a healthy process of socialization, considering that the self-esteem and self-confidence of youngsters in early adolescence increases or decreases according to whether they are part of a group or excluded from the group (Larson, Richard, 1991). The search for friends is still narcissistic in nature, in the sense that the purpose of measuring oneself against others is to evaluate the new self-image now being built. But away from the family and the school, early adolescents can find themselves, discover their possibilities, test their abilities in different learning situations and take stock of an as-yet unclear experiential reality.

The under-protective attitude assumed by certain adult educators – be they parents, teachers or tutors – may not seem pedagogically correct, but neither does an approach that is educationally over-protective, intrusive and bossy, leaving no room for youngsters to explore and experience new visions, thoughts and encounters, and keeping them in a state of uncertainty, fear and dependence.

In the age of migrations, transition or “in transition”, in the “suspended age”, the age of “hidden growth”, or “real crisis” (Magnoni, Venera, 2009; De Pieri, Tonolo, 1990; Marocco, Muttini, 2007) – all definitions of early adolescence – the task of educators, whether in the formal environment, along with teachers, or indeed in non-formal situations, as entertainers, trainers, scoutmasters, community educators... is to prepare their educational proposals to best possible advantage. The content must stimulate early adolescent subjects to fully express the cognitive, physical, emotive-affective and moral potentialities they possess, all developing at different rates one from another – the cognitive brain, for example, appears to be less mature than the emotive brain (Pellai, Tamborini, 2017, p. 141) – and certainly none yet stabilized. During early adolescence, in effect, youngsters begin to acquire a greater awareness of the biological, psychic and spiritual, experiential and social changes with which they are involved as humans, but still do not know how best to manage their “human plasticity”.

The educator, as member of an educating community – which today is hard to find – can guide the early adolescent toward a creative adaptation

of the self. This must reflect the outcome of individuals acting freely and responsibly, without ignoring the “human” laws of their physical, emotional, psychological and moral development.

### 3. Education strategies for early adolescents

Certain indications given by Galli concerning the commitments that must be made by the educator in *looking after* early adolescents still seem relevant today. Educators must help to ensure that youngsters deal with the process of maturing sexually, experiencing their bodies with equanimity and respect; that they handle the process of socialization understood as cementing ties of friendship and solidarity with one’s peers; that they set out on the path to independence from their parents; that new relations with adulthood are promoted; that they appreciate the importance of school as influencing an ethically orientated life plan; that they know how to use free time for self-enrichment; that they are conscious as to the discovery of their own original identity; that they become actively and fruitfully engaged in the structure of civil society (Galli, 1990, p. 38).

Educators often find themselves operating in groups of early adolescents with the task of supporting them as they take on the trials of growth through puberty and sexual development, maturing psycho-socially, and reorganizing their perceived identity. The educator provides a point of reference for the early adolescent, engaged in a multi-dimensional and multi-directional process of resymbolizing the Self. This process is especially personal, since the challenges of growth are presented at different times and in different ways for each individual, depending on his/her life story.

In the light of these representations on early adolescence, educators must engage with boys and girls knowing and understanding their reality and assuming a positive and trusting attitude toward every member of the group.

Educators work with early adolescent children in a variety of situations – after school hours, sports, games, holiday camps, community groups – often focusing too much attention on the single item of interest (a subject in the school curriculum, a motor skill, a theatrical performance, the way a game is played, the observance of a rule) and giving only secondary importance to individual learners, to what it is that motivates them, and to the dynamics created within the group. In practice, these children need an educator who is capable of taking a holistic approach and developing a democratic kind of leadership, listening to and interacting with individuals, encouraging and looking after them personally,

avoiding the tendency to rely on utterances of a general, abstract or imperative nature (Azzali, Bottura, 2007). If empathy forms part of the skill set that every educator should possess (Schiedi, 2017), it can be said that this is especially so in the case of an educator entrusted with early adolescents. It is a question of the educator showing to the boy or girl that they are accepted unconditionally, their experiences understood (whether approved or otherwise), and that they will be offered the right guidance on the basis of their choices and their need to act, with fulfilment the ultimate aim. At times, early adolescents can feel “threatened” (Macario, 1992, pp. 168-169) by the proposals of the educator given that, in a period of general uncertainty, they could be led into a situation of insecurity that they feel reluctant to take on, fearing they could be defeated, humiliated by it. Thus, the child could end up “resisting” the learning experiences suggested and recommended by the educator. But if the educator has succeeded in building a relationship of trust, acceptance and valorization with early adolescent children – in short, if these children feel appreciated – then they will be able to tackle new situations, put themselves to the test, evaluate the risk, and ultimately add a new piece to the jigsaw of their maturing process.

By the same token, the educator must help to train the “educational” group of early adolescents (Comoglio, 1987), in which individuals can explore enriching interpersonal relationships, and experience self-expansion accomplished socially and ethically in the act of relating with others. Care must be taken in this situation not to favour maladaptive behaviours or enable negative hetero-evaluation of individuals by peer-groups; neither are motiveless physical gatherings desirable, serving as they do only to pass the time, without the capacity to generate a positive sense of belonging. The educator thus helps to determine a placement of the group in the educational sphere, which can be institutionalized to a greater or lesser degree, hence definable as “the context in which the individual can develop his/her identity, independence, freedom, and ability to establish relationships. In this setting, youngsters can redefine themselves within a new framework of values and meaning” (Comoglio, 1987, p. 20). The group is not a self-referential entity, but a reality open to the world outside. In an environment of cultural stimulation, the educator coordinates the operational activity of the group, ensuring it becomes an instrument that can offer security and balance to each member, and help the educational need to evolve without developing other forms of massification, constriction and submission (Pollo, 1990, pp. 34-35). Be it a group or an individual of early adolescent age, the rule is the same: there are no growth tasks and no needs that can be generalized; these must be suitably identified according



to the history of the group and the biographies of its members. “Educators cannot utilize the same plan and the same pathways for every group of people; on the contrary, they must always start from the potential discernible in the actual situation of the group, hence of the individuals, they find themselves dealing with. In short, they must appreciate the existential reality of the group and identify the possible ways in which its members can mature and evolve” (Pollo, 1990, p. 25).

The educator who knows how to manage the educational relation with early adolescent children creates a pedagogical plan that can be reformulated and adapted in response to the feedback received, and driven by ensuring the youngsters take part in the journey they have embarked upon. In this participatory exercise however, the educator must continue to play the role of “grown-up”. There are times when the generation gap between educators and their charges in non-formal situations is so small that the educator can assume behavioural traits similar to those of the selfsame early and full adolescents, presenting him/herself more as a friend than as a figure of authority. “Dealing with early adolescents, adult educators tend mostly to rely on two relational models that are equally unsuitable and inadequate, adopted rigidly and devoid of flexibility and circularity: either the symmetrical relation, or the complementary rigid relation. The first produces a situation of permanent conflict [...]; the second has the effect of unbalancing the symmetry in favour of the adult” (Del Piano, 2000, p. 29). In reality, early adolescent children want an educator on whom they can depend: an adult who respects their identity but is also responsible and authoritative and credible – genuine – and will back up with deeds what he or she wishes for them.

The job of the educator involved with early adolescents is therefore an especially demanding one: tolerance toward not altogether acceptable behaviour manifested by the young, excusable on the basis of their early adolescent age, has to go hand in hand with clear and appropriate preparation and planning on the pedagogical-educational front, which must be wide ranging and offer multiple opportunities to all individuals, so that they can test and measure themselves in search of those directions for growth considered most likely to bring success.

Given the variability of personal life cycles, social instability, and the lack of value-based direction in modern society, it is important that educators review the competences of their action, both in theory and in practice, reflecting on the methods adopted and on the targets they have set – the *flourishing life* of the early adolescent *first and foremost* – and on how these are being achieved, not least when considering that, in the meantime, the individual early adolescent and the group to which he or she be-

longs are subject to continuing adaptations. This means that particularistic approaches must be avoided, relations promoted, community ties consolidated, and preference given to non-stereotypical identity-building procedures.

*The journey of life* is therefore a factor affecting early adolescents who, through “trials of independence” between infancy and adulthood, seek to mature and to achieve a balance of different functions so that they can *learn to do things well*, but also the educator, who must be well aware of the requisite initial and ongoing instructional pathway so that – armed with a well-stocked and up-to-date toolbox – the task of ferrying the early adolescent to the shore of adulthood can be accomplished effectively and responsibly.

Indeed such a one can claim to be a true social-pedagogic educator, i.e. “a professional who performs intellectual functions with scientific independence and ethical responsibility, using specific cognitive tools of theoretical and methodological type, for designing, planning, implementing and evaluating the results of educational and supervisory measures targeted at individuals and groups in various educational and training environments, for the entire duration of their lives, along with a didactic activity embracing research and experiment”<sup>2</sup>.

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