

MelArete: A Research Project to Promote Ethical Education in Kindergarten and Primary School

By Luigina Mortari , Federica Valbusa[±] & Marco Ubbiali[°]*

MelArete is a research project on ethical education realized in some Italian kindergartens and primary schools by the Melete Center of the University of Verona. The paper presents: the ethical theory at the basis of the project, which is rooted in the ancient philosophy, with particular reference to the Aristotelian and Socratic perspective, and in the contemporary philosophy of care; the educative experience realized for the children, that is structured in the following typologies of activities: thinking through stories, reasoning together, writing the diary of virtues, debating vignettes, inventing stories and playing with virtues; the empirical research carried out on the first edition of the project in order to qualitatively evaluate its effectiveness, based on the results obtained from the children's answers to the following question: "What have you kept in your heart and in your mind about the MelArete project?", asked at the end of the educative experience.

Keywords: MelArete, ethical education, kindergarten, primary school, qualitative research

Introduction

Our time is characterized by a widespread indifference for the other, by the deficiency of the sense of responsibility, by the general disinterest for the environmental degradation and by the prevailing of the logic of consumption that reduces the natural reserves and, at the same time, weakens lifetime. This situation makes the lack of ethical consciousness evident and, at the same time, demands the researchers to engage in the development and study of projects of ethical education aimed at fostering an ethical thoughtfulness in people already starting from the first levels of schooling. In dialogue with the main international approaches to ethical education, the Melete Center of the University of Verona (Italy) has promoted an educative-research project entitled "MelArete", a word that integrates the Greek terms "*melete*", which means "care", and "*arete*", which means "virtue"; indeed, the ethics of care and the ethics of virtue are the fundamental references of the ethical theory at its basis.

The purpose of this article is to present the MelArete project in its theoretical foundations and pedagogical intentionality, by analysing its effectiveness from the perspective of the children involved (evaluative research). Specifically, starting from the pedagogical assumption that the participants are the titular subjects in the evaluation of the projects themselves, the research presented in this article intends to investigate the aspects of educational design that the children report were the elements that most affected their experience. Such a report provides researchers with

*Full Professor, University of Verona, Italy.

[±]Associate Professor, University of Verona, Italy.

[°]Associate Professor, University of Verona, Italy.

important elements not only for evaluation, but also for validation and revision of the project itself, with a view to new editions and publication for use by educators.

The article is structured as follows:

- The first part presents the educational program in its entirety, both in terms of its theoretical foundations (a vision of virtue education inspired by the philosophy of care) and its educational structure, projected for kindergarten and primary school children.
- The second part presents a section of the empirical research carried out on the program, in particular through the analysis of the children's responses to the question "What have you kept in your heart and in your mind about the MelArete project?" which was asked of them at the end of the meetings held.

Theoretical Framework

Nowadays, schools which recognize the importance to foster the whole development of their students are used to integrate ethical education interventions in their curriculum. An analysis of literature allows to identify three main traditions in the field of ethical education: character education, cognitive-developmental approach, and care ethics education. Character education emerged in the U.S. in the late 19th century and, in its so-called "traditional" version, was aimed to "instill traditional values and virtue as a struggle against the perceived corrosive effects of modernity" (Howard, Berkowitz, & Shaeffer, 2004, p. 191). This indoctrinating approach, with its aspiration to preach and teach the values of a culture in terms of a "bag of virtues", has been criticized by Kohlberg (1975), who suggests a cognitive-developmental approach to ethical education, which emphasizes the importance to foster moral reasoning and moral discussion (Blatt & Kohlberg, 1975; Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977; Colby et al., 1977); over time, this approach has developed on the basis of a significant amount of research on moral reasoning, moral judgment and moral development (Rest, 1980; Nucci, 1985; Nucci & Turiel, 2009; Killen & Smetana, 2006). While Kohlberg's research particularly focuses on justice, Gilligan (1982) points out the importance to consider also the voice of care, which is the central concept of the care ethics education, with its emphasis in fostering caring relations (Noddings, 1984, 2002a, 2002b, 2010a, 2010b).

The end of the last century has been characterized by a renewed emphasis in the promotion of character education (Lickona, 1993). In the last decades this field has encompassed a wide range of philosophical and pedagogical perspectives, and numerous character educators have incorporated the promotion of moral reasoning, moral discussion and critical thinking in their models (Althof & Berkowitz, 2006).

Nowadays, it is difficult to define what character education is in its specificity. Indeed, looking at the literature, "character education" is not only used in a broad sense to identify the entire field of ethical education (Howard, Berkowitz, & Shaeffer, 2004), but in many cases it is also used as an "umbrella" expression to identify any initiative aimed at the positive development of young people, including initiatives aimed at social and emotional learning, civic education, risk behaviour

prevention, and academic achievement (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Lapsley & Narvaez, 2006; Davies, Gorard, & McGuin, 2005; Pattaro, 2016; Singh, 2019; Watts, Fullard, & Peaterson, 2021).

Recent approaches emphasize the idea that character education contributes to human flourishing. One of these, is the Aristotelian character education, which theoretically frames the educational proposal of The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue (Arthur et al., 2015). In this perspective, the purpose of character education is defined as “helping pupils grasp what is ethically important in situations and how to act for the right reasons so that they become more autonomous and reflective in the practice of virtue” (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue, 2022, p. 6). According to the philosophical assumptions underpinning Aristotelian character education, it is impossible to achieve flourishing, that is, Aristotelian eudaimonia, “without being morally good – without actualising the moral virtues” (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 25).

The concept of flourishing is also at the centre of a recent educational model proposed by Berkowitz (2021), who used “character education” and “nurturing the flourishing of human goodness” as interchangeable (p. 13). This model proposes the acronym PRIMED, which refers to the following six principles: “Prioritizing character in the school; intentionally building healthy Relationships among all stakeholders; using Intrinsic motivators so student Internalize the core values of the school; Modeling the character you want student to develop; Empowering all stakeholders to be co-owners and co-authors of the journey; and taking a long-term Developmental perspective on the character goals and methods in school” (Berkowitz, 2021, p. 3).

MelArete dialogues with the traditions and approaches presented above, with the aim to provide an innovative proposal in the field of ethical education, rooted in a clear theoretical framework and with clear educational objectives. As character education, MelArete assigns importance to virtues, but does not confuse ethical education with indoctrination, inculcation of values or mere socialization within a cultural tradition, as traditional character education has been criticized to do; indeed, virtues are at the centre of an educative program in which children are invited to reflect on ethical concepts and ethical experiences starting from their own points of view. Compared to the current approaches of character education, MelArete shares the importance of conceiving ethical education as fundamental for human flourishing. As the Aristotelian character education, it is rooted in a philosophical framework and gives reference to Aristotle, but it integrates the Aristotelian ethics with the Socratic paideia and the contemporaneous philosophy of care. As the cognitive-developmental approach, MelArete recognizes the importance of encouraging the development of analytical, critical and deliberative thinking. However, this educational assumption does not give life to abstracted and intellectualistic educative proposals, since the eidetic reasoning inspired by the Socratic approach is integrated with the reflection on the lived experience, with reference to the concrete ethical dilemma that every person could face in his/her daily life. As care ethics education, MelArete assigns a central role to the concept of care that is at the core of its theoretical proposal, but takes distance from an interpretation of care that is too situational and predominantly affective. Indeed, we think that acting with care in specific situations does not exclude reasoning, which also takes into consideration principles of general value and that, since emotions are nourished by cognitive contents such as beliefs

and evaluations (Nussbaum, 2001; Oatley, 1992), the flourishing of an ethical way of feeling is interwoven with the development of ethical thinking.

Assuming at its core the theory of care (Noddings, 1984; Mayeroff, 1990; Lévinas, 1991; Tronto, 1993; Heidegger, 1996; Held, 2006; Slote, 2007; Mortari, 2022; Hamington, 2024) and interpreting it in light of the virtue ethics of Socrates and Aristotle, MelArete considers education to ethics as an education to virtues according with the principle of care. Human beings are, in their essence, vulnerable and fragile; consequently, they need to be cared for. This is the reason why care is considered as the answer to the essence of human condition. Since a) care is the fundamental ethical experience to search for one's good and b) searching for the good realizes itself in behaviours that are inspired by virtues (Mortari, 2006, 2022; Mortari & Saiani, 2014), then c) an ethical education from the perspective of care is an education to virtues.

Even if in *Protagoras* (320b) and *Meno* (96c-d) Socrates doubts that virtue can be taught, in *Apology* (30a) he states that daily discussing about virtue is the greatest good for human being; furthermore, with his educative example, as it is presented in the dialogues, he suggests the importance to examine what virtues are in their essence. Instead, Aristotle considers that virtues, defined as habitual dispositions to act well, can be learned by being practiced (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, 1103a, 27–33). The MelArete's educational proposal recognizes the significance of both the Socratic perspective, because of the centrality assigned to the examination of the meaning of virtues, and the Aristotelian one, because of the centrality assigned to the acting according to virtue. These two perspectives are integrated in the purpose of creating educative contexts in which children can learn both to reason together on the essence of virtue and to reflect on their ethical experience paying attention to their virtuous actions.

Moreover, according with the definition proposed by Ricoeur (1990), who intends morality as aimed at the definition of rules and codes of conduct and ethics as aimed at the comprehension of what is good for life, we define MelArete as a project of ethical, rather than moral, education.

The MelArete Project

The first edition of the MelArete project was focused on the ethical concepts of good, care and virtue, and on the specific virtues of courage, generosity, respect and justice, and involved six fourth grade classes of four primary schools and twelve groups of six kindergartens in the North and Centre of Italy. Among the involved 106 8-9-10 y.o. children of primary schools, 48 were male and 58 were female; among the involved 116 4-5 y.o. children of kindergartens, 55 were male and 61 were female. A whole school year, 2016-17, was dedicated to the project. In the following paragraphs, the MelArete project is presented in its entirety, highlighting the typologies of tools designed and the activities carried out with children.

Instruments and Activities

In line with the Socratic and Aristotelian perspectives, MelArete promotes activities aimed at facilitating children to 1) reason together on virtues in light of the ideas of good and care, and 2) reflect on their experience in order to understand what space can have virtues in human acting. The main educational principles that inspire the design of the educative program are the following:

- a) Virtues cannot be taught through their transmission; instead, it is possible to educate the children to continuously examine the essential ethical issues, in order to understand by themselves what acting with virtues means.
- b) The ways of acting according to virtue can be learned through experience by practicing the disposition to reflect on it; this practice acquires a transformative valence if the reflection is carried out in light of the ideas that are achieved through the examination explained in the point a).

On the basis of these educational principles, MelArete promotes the following typologies of activities: thinking through stories, reasoning together, writing the diary of virtues, debating vignettes, inventing stories and playing with virtues.

Thinking Through Stories

Since the ethical ideas are at the basis of the evaluations that inform our acting, it is important to examine them. The Socratic method, which consists in asking eidetic questions, i.e. questions about the essence of a thing, and analysing in depth the ideas which emerge in the dialogue, can be considered as an instrument useful to carry out such examination.

In the MelArete project, the eidetic questions asked to children have the ethical concepts and some specific virtues as their object: what is good? What is care? What is virtue? What is courage? What is generosity? What is respect? What is justice? Since a science that gives precise answers to these questions does not exist, they can be considered difficult enquiries. Nevertheless, it is possible to introduce the children to these questions, by developing educative instruments that are able to stimulate their thinking. In order to avoid the children's perception of being involved in a too intellectualist task, it is possible to use stories because the narrative thinking is the most similar to the children's one. Stories used in the MelArete project are invented by the research team and have as characters animals with the names present in the Platonic dialogues or ancient literature (for example, the donkey Alcibiades, the marmot Xanthippe and so on). The stories are characterized by the narration of a problematic situation in which someone carries out an ethical gesture; at the end of the stories, the researcher asks the children some questions aimed at inviting them to explore the phenomenology of the virtue at the centre of the narration. While in the traditional character education stories were used to inspire precise moral behaviours, in the MelArete project they are used as a stimulus to foster Socratic conversations.

Reasoning Together

After the presentation of the stories, the children are guided to reason together in order to find, in a co-constructive manner, an answer to some eidetic questions asked by the researcher. The method that facilitates the disposition to reason together is the Socratic dialogue, in which interlocutors are invited to examine their thoughts in a critical and reflective manner. The researcher should foster an authentic problematization of the ideas emerged in the dialogue, i.e. he/she should facilitate a deep examination of them by asking further questions, to which he/she does not claim to have a definitive answer. When the researcher is able to open his/her mind to various possibilities, then he/she can effectively move the children's thinking. In order to facilitate the flourishing of the other's thinking, the researcher should guide the dialogue with a constructive and positive attitude, so that the other can feel respected and considered, and know that his/her thoughts have value even when they are confuted. In order to encourage the children to express their thoughts, it is important to evaluate their ideas and thank for them. Since the mind of the child is plastic, every educative action requires the greatest possible thoughtfulness, delicacy and prudence: it is important to organize dialogical experiences where the passion to critically think on the ethical issues is nourished by the researcher, who should not provide pre-defined ideas, but only provisional insights in order to maintain the reflection open.

The kind of thinking that has ethics as its object, should be ethically oriented and, in order to realize this condition, each one of the participants to a community of thinking should follow these principles: he/she should feel the responsibility of what he/she is thinking and help the other to think by him/herself; he/she should interact with the other expressing generosity of mind and heart; he/she should welcome the other's thoughts but, at the same time, search for ways to generate a common thinking as the product of a critical co-construction of ideas; he/she should be respectful, giving to the other and to him/herself the time to think and express thoughts; he/she should be modest, being aware that it is not possible to gain an universal truth. Acting these principles, the participants to the dialogue manifest to take care of the dialogical thinking.

Writing the Diary of Virtues

Since, according to Aristotle, virtues are learned by practicing them, an educative project inspired to the Aristotelian philosophical perspective implies attention to experience. The challenge is to put the ethical acting at the centre of the educative practice without requiring participants to act in a precise way. Indeed, an educative practice that establishes in a priori way what are the good actions to carry out runs the risk to become coercive, as it shapes from the outside the being of the other. Given this premise, the educational question is the following: how is it possible to encourage the children to focus on the experience – in the perspective of the virtue ethics – without asking them anything in terms of things to do? It is necessary to find a method that, instead of requiring the children to act in a certain precise way, encourages them to reflect on their actions. In order to reach this goal, it is possible to introduce in the

educative program the task of writing the “diary of virtues”, in which the children are invited to describe virtuous actions they carried out in first person or see carried out by others. In primary schools, virtuous actions are written down by the children; instead, in kindergartens they are first drawn by the children and then some adults take note of the children’s orally description of their drawings. The actions of drawing or writing down the experience are important for the cultivation of the “life of the mind” (Arendt, 1978), because they foster the activation of reflective processes. Inviting children to keep a diary on their ethical experience responds to the intention of educating them to train their gaze to give attention to reality. To make this activity effective, it is necessary to carry it out regularly over the time; for this reason, it is important to involve teachers in the organization and management of this activity, asking them to provide a space for it at least once a week. Educating children to think of their virtuous experience and then put their thoughts in written or graphical form is very important, because it allows them to acquire ethical awareness. The pedagogical assumption that underlays this activity is that an authentic ethical learning develops only when the ethical experience is accompanied by a reflection on it. Since it fosters reflection on the experience, the “diary of virtues” encourages both experiential and reflective writing or drawing.

Thinking through stories and reasoning together, which – as explained above – foster the examination of virtues, should be conceived as strictly connected to the *diary reflection on the experience*, because this last activity encourages children to search for the lived experiences that realize the concepts examined through the former ones. A virtuous circle should be established between the educative purposes of reasoning on the meaning of virtues and reflecting on the virtuous experience.

Debating Vignettes, Inventing Stories, and Playing with Virtues

Since it is important not to force the thinking of the children in the repetition of the same activities, the MelArete project implies some educative experiences that are complementary to those presented above. In order to educate children to develop a rigorous ethical reasoning, we propose some vignettes that present an initial problematic condition or a situation faced with a dilemma and three different possibilities to respond to it. The children are required 1) to describe individually the three possibilities, because describing facilitates the understanding process, 2) to choose individually which one represents the virtuous solution, 3) to discuss their choices together in class, and 4) to draw individually a virtuous action, taking it from the vignettes or inventing it at all. However, ethical thinking develops itself not only thanks to the capacity of rigorous reasoning, but also thanks to the imagination. For this reason, the children who take part at MelArete project are also invited to invent stories concerning ethical actions. The narrative thinking (Bruner, 1990) is the way of thinking more faithful to the essence of our experience that is in continuous becoming. When one examines a concept, alone or with others, his/her mind stops on a precise focus; instead, in the narration of a story the thinking places itself in the temporal duration. The narration shapes the reality, but it can also structure a new vision of the world, that can open the experience to new existential gestures. Narrations can be produced in written form as well as recited. Sometimes, inventing

stories is a task that follows or accompanies a game. Organizing games on virtues responds to the necessity to make the learning enjoyable. Indeed, games are creative and enjoyable activities useful to deepen children's reflections on virtues.

The Educative Program

The educative program starts with a Socratic conversation about good and care, an activity that allows the children to analyse these ethical concepts within the class intersubjective context and therefore take advantage from the richness of many perspectives; then, we organize some exploratory activities to collect the children's thoughts about the concepts of virtue, courage, generosity, respect and justice. In primary schools, the children are also invited to think about how virtues can be learned. The central part of the project is dedicated to the examination of the four specific virtues of courage, generosity, respect and justice through the use of: stories, which facilitate children to learn different ways to interpret virtues; vignettes, which serve as a stimulus to debate ethical dilemmas; and games, which are useful to deepen the children's ethical reflections. After these activities or within them, it is also possible to ask the children to write or recite stories on virtues invented by themselves. The four specific virtues on which the project focuses have been chosen after a deep reflection within the research group. In particular, courage, respect and generosity were chosen because they had emerged to be the three more known virtues by the children who took part at an exploratory phase of the project. Even if justice was the sixth more known virtue – after forgiveness and honesty – we decided to propose it in this later phase of the project because of the relevance assigned to it by the Western ethical philosophy since Plato. Indeed, a good educative project takes into consideration the mental horizon of the participants and, at the same time, enlarges it in order to foster a wider vision of the reality. At the end of the project we propose again the same questions of the exploratory activities to understand if and how the children's ethical thought has developed thanks to the project itself. After the exploratory activities and until the end of the educative program, the children keep the "diary of virtues", writing and/or drawing and describing – at least once a week – virtuous actions they carry out in first person or see carried out by others.

Figure 1. A Visual Synthesis of MelArete Project



At the end of the educative program, we collected data regarding children's impressions and considerations about the project and their achievements from it. In all the involved kindergartens and primary schools the project ended with a celebrative moment, in which children received a diploma of participation.

The Research

The project was carried out in schools that expressed the need of an intervention of ethical education and it was included in their educative plan. The parent's informed consents, concerning the authorization to audio-record the meetings and use the children's data for research purposes, were collected by the teachers. From the epistemological perspective, the research we carried out on the educative experience realized with the children gave reference to the framework of "naturalistic inquiry" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), according to which the phenomena should be studied in the context where they appear. In our case, the school seems to be a privileged context to study educative experiences aimed at fostering the development of the children's thinking. MelArete project can be considered as an educative research, because it has both educative purposes – i.e. facilitating the children's ethical reflection on the concepts of good, care, virtue, courage, generosity, respect and justice – and heuristic purposes – i.e. exploring the children's ethical thoughts and experiences, and evaluating the effectiveness of the methods and activities we used. Regarding the participants, this educative research is not a research "on" the children, neither merely a research "with" them, but, more specifically, it is a research "for" children (Oakley, 1994; Darbyshire, Macdougall, & Schiller, 2005; Mortari, 2009), because it aims to offer positive and significant educative experiences to them.

In line with the definition of educative research, all the adopted instruments have the educative valence to involve children in ethical reflections and the heuristic valence to allow researchers to collect valid data for the study in a rigorous way. Data were collected with reference to each one of the educative activities we organized as well as to all the different focus of those activities. In order to obtain a complete evaluation of the educative effectiveness of the whole program, all the data collected during the meetings should be analyzed and critically presented in a publication composed of as many essays as the proposed activities (see Mortari, 2025). For the purpose of this paper, we analyzed the data collected during the last activity of the project, when the children expressed how the whole educational project affected their experience.

At the end of the educational program, each child was interviewed individually starting from the following question: "What have you kept in your heart and in your mind about the MelArete project?". The children of kindergartens answered orally while the children of primary schools answered in written form. This question allows the researchers to understand from the children's voice how the project is perceived by its participants.

Such a question adopts two anthropological categories, the heart and the mind, and encourages children to focus on the cognitive as well as the affective and relational aspects that have affected their experience. This evaluative research

approach (Kellaghan, 2010) operates within the well-established framework of educational evaluation (Stake, 1975), and assumes that children are able to express themselves about the complexity of their lived educational experience, to grasp its strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats, and to make suggestions for improvement, through the dialogue between self and self that takes place in individual reflection, peer discussion and with educator-researchers (Wilson & Trainin, 2007; Hyvönen et al., 2014). As far as the evaluation purpose is concerned, the theoretical models we have adopted refer to numerous perspectives, which we have combined in order to construct a tool that is as useful as possible for our purpose.

This approach is very much in line with the characteristics of the current historical period known as the “age of evidence”, i.e., it focuses on an evaluation that is committed to collecting research data (“evidence”), which is an essential element in activating effective professional development processes for educators/teachers, as well as in ensuring quality educational-didactic pathways for students (Määttä & Järvelä, 2013). It, therefore, assumes the task of a child-centered research (Brady, 2007; Gallagher & Gallagher, 2008).

Moreover, this question has, as the educative-research approach requests, an important educative aim: to invite children to reflect on their own experience, in order to catch the value of what they have learnt and felt as significant for their well-being (Awartani, Whitman, & Gordon, 2008).

The following paragraphs present the method and results of the data analysis carried out starting from the research question, which is divided into two sub-questions, in order to consider the experiences of kindergarten children and those of primary school children:

- Research Question 1 (RQ1): What aspects of the MelArete educational project are reported by kindergarten children as most meaningful to them?
- Research Question 2 (RQ2): What aspects of the MelArete educational project are reported by primary school children as most meaningful to them?

Method of Analysis

The collected answers to this question have been 91 in all the involved groups of kindergartens and 51 in four of the involved classes of primary schools (in the other two classes of primary school, we collected final data of different type, that we do not consider in this paper: in one class we collected answers from a deep conversation in class about the children’s achievements and in the other we collected greetings cards on which the children wrote some impressions about the project). For the analysis process, we adopted a methodological crossbreeding (Mortari, 2007) between the phenomenological method (Giorgi, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Mortari, 2008) and the grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Indeed, the purpose of the qualitative analysis was to explore the children’s thoughts in their essence, as it is suggested by the phenomenological perspective, through the procedures of labelling and categorizing typical of the grounded theory process. The methodological crossbreeding is legitimate when it allows researchers to reach the purposes of the

analysis better than by using a single method; however, it should be done in a rigorous way, by clarifying the reasons that make possible to integrate aspects of different methods. In agreement with this assumption, we decided to use together the phenomenological method and the grounded theory because both recommend carrying out an inductive analysis process, being careful to stay faithful to the data. Furthermore, both these methods encourage to accompany the analysis process with a reflective effort, also by bracketing all the comprehensions and previous theories, which could influence the researcher's perspective.

In particular, the heuristic actions carried out on our data for the analysis' purpose were the following:

- Verbatim transcription and anonymization of all the children's answers.
- Codifications of each one of the answers by the assignment of one or more labels that express their meanings; these labels are defined as first-level conceptualizations of meaning (CM).
- Examination of all the labels in order to group them into homogeneous categories (C) or second-level conceptualizations of meaning.

Examples of this process can be seen in the Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of the Analysis Process

Transcriptions	CM	C
"In my heart has remained respect, justice, courage and generosity, and in my mind have remained all the stories" (N., female, 9 y.o.)	Virtues on which the project focuses The stories	Virtues Activities
"This project made me realize how important are the virtues and how to use them in other occasions over all the pathway of my life" (A., male, 9 y.o.)	The importance of virtues How acting virtues	Virtues Achievements of experiential type

The final heuristic action was the elaboration of a coding system with the labels and categories emerged from the analysis process.

The Findings in Kindergartens

The findings concerning the RQ1 are summarised in the coding system in Table 2. Giving reference to the categories emerged from the data analysis, it is possible to state that the children in kindergarten have both learned virtues and how to act them, and that in their heart and mind remained the value of the good relationships, the activities of the project, some skills and a style of action. The category *knowing and acting virtues* collects all the answers in which the children express to have learned virtues, both in their conceptualization, i.e. at the cognitive level, and importance, i.e., at the experiential level. In answering, the major part of the children gave reference to the virtues on which the project was focused, but some others demonstrated to have learned the general concept of virtue and use it in reflecting

on other virtuous experiences, different from those on which the educative program focused.

Some examples of what children said are presented below:

- “[Virtues] are these gestures of good education” (S., female, 5 y.o.)
- “Respect means you respect another person” (V., female, 5 y.o.)
- “Respect, generosity, courage and justice” (E., male, 5 y.o.)
- “[I have learned] that you must respect the toys” (I., female, 5 y.o.)
- “[I have learned] to be generous” (A., female, 4 y.o.)
- “Now I am more courageous, I’m not afraid of wolves anymore” (I., female, 4 y.o.)
- “I have learned that virtues are the kindest things that exist in the world” (R., female, 5 y.o.)
- “[I have learned] that virtues are important [...] because they help you to be happy, glad and kind with people” (M., female, 5 y.o.)
- “I learned the forgiveness” (A., male, 5 y.o.)
- “Giving, giving, you must share things with your friends” (R., female, 5 y.o.)
- “[The most important thing I learned this year is] to help each other” (L., male, 5 y.o.)

Some answers, giving reference to the experiences of friendship, love, care and interpersonal boundaries in general, show that the children have learned and understood *the importance of the good relationships*. In our opinion, two answers are particularly significant because they explicitly nominate the practice of care that was one of the ethical cornerstones of the educative project:

- “I have understood that I must care for the children when they get hurt” (A., female, 4 y.o.)
- “I have learned that caring... makes friends happy” (F., male, 5 y.o.)

Many children said they have appreciated *the activities of the project*. Above all, they give reference to the stories, that at the end of the project are remembered by them in contents, details and characters (who were animated with puppets), but also to the vignettes, in particular those on generosity, to the games, in particular those on justice and respect, and to other deepening activities, such as those organized for the final celebrative moment. Some children also told they have appreciated the diary of virtues. Finally, two children answered that they bring the researcher into their heart, because he narrated the stories in a good way and proposed reflections and activities in a clear manner.

Some answers give reference to some acquired *skills*, not only connected to didactic activities, such as drawing and writing, but also to games, such as making puzzles, and, more in general, to expressivity, such as reciting. One child did not merely highlight a precise skill but, more specifically, *a style of action* – i.e. working and being engaged –, learned thanks to the activities and reflections proposed during the project.

Table 2. The Coding System Emerged from the Analysis of the Children's Answers in Kindergartens

CS	n.	C	
Virtues on which the project focuses	31	Knowing and acting virtues	
Other virtues	4		
The general concept of virtue	10		
Carrying out good actions	6		
The importance (and the effort) of acting according to virtue	2		
Friendship and its value	5	The value of the good relationships	
Love	3		
Interpersonal boundaries	1		
Care for the other	3		
The stories	44	The activities of the project	
The characters/the puppets	14		
The vignettes	1		
The games	9		
The diary of virtues	3		
Other deepening activities	9		
The posture of the researcher	2		
Drawing and writing	1		Some skills and a style of action
Reciting	2		
Making puzzles	1		
Style of action: working and being engaged	1		

The Findings in Primary Schools

The findings concerning the RQ2 are summarised in the coding system in Table 3. The answers of primary schools' children are in general very articulated because they give reference to several elements of the project. In the analysis process, we isolated the different dimensions in order to realize a coding system, which takes into consideration all the aspects; nevertheless, it is important to consider that in the children's answers it is possible to individuate different elements that integrate each other. If we look at the categories emerged from the analysis, we discover that virtues, activities, emotions and moments of sharing have remained in the mind and heart of the children; furthermore, the children clarify to have learned several things, that can be considered as cognitive and experiential achievements. Finally, some participants highlight some aspects of the researcher's posture.

In the same way as the children in kindergarten, also the primary schools' ones give reference to *the virtues* they have learned thanks to their participation to the project; some of them highlight, in their answers, the importance of virtues.

- *"In my mind have remained the virtues: generosity, respect, courage and justice"* (M., male, 10 y.o.)
- *"In my heart has remained a virtue that will serve to me for the life: generosity"* (A., male, 8 y.o.)
- *"The virtue that I liked most is justice"* (A., male, 8 y.o.)
- *"In my heart has remained mostly justice"* (A., female, 9 y.o.)
- *"In my heart has remained that virtues are important"* (V., female, 10 y.o.)
- *"This project made me understand how virtues are important"* (A., male, 9 y.o.)

Several children give reference to *the activities* proposed during the educative program. Some of them make general references to what was done, some others go more in depth, specifying the activities they have appreciated: the stories, above all the initial one about good and care, the games, in particular that on virtues organized during the exploratory activities and that of courage, the reflections, the diary of virtues and the group works. In answering to the final question, some children clarify *the emotions* felt during the project, such as happiness, joy, well-being and amusement, and in general the emotions felt during the conclusive celebrative moment. There are also some data that focus on *the moments of sharing* fostered by the project; in particular, the children appreciated to stay in company and live shared experiences, as the following answers show:

- *“In my heart has remained the emotions to stay in company with my classmates” (S., male, 8 y.o.)*
- *“In my heart has remained the moments in which we played together” (J., female, 9 y.o.)*
- *“To me remained all the beautiful experiences we live together” (C., female, 8 y.o.)*

Moreover, the children of primary schools highlight some aspects of *the researcher’s posture*. These aspects regard the educative intention (in particular, her action of helping and guiding) and the virtues they noted she carried out in class (in particular, kindness and patience).

In answering to the question about what has remained in their mind and heart, some children write what they have learned from the project. In this regard, we find both *cognitive* and *experiential achievements*: on one hand, they explain they have learned the concept of virtue, the meaning of virtues, virtues that they did not know before, and to express the sense of virtue; on the other hand, they write to have learned to be virtuous, that virtues are helpful in life and that one should be virtuous.

- *“We have learned virtues, that I did not know” (A., female, 8 y.o.)*
- *“I liked a lot this activity and I have learned the meaning of virtues” (S., male, 9 y.o.)*
- *“The thing that has remained in my mind has been to learn and discover these virtues” (H., female, 8 y.o.)*
- *“In my mind has remained a thought about virtues of when I have learned to express the sense of virtues” (A., male, 8 y.o.)*
- *“In my heart has remained that virtues are important and that you must be virtuous with yourself and the others” (V., female, 10 y.o.)*
- *“The virtues that I have learned have been of great help to me” (R., male, 10 y.o.)*
- *“This project led me understand what are virtues and how to use them. They will help me in the pathway of life” (H., male, 9 y.o.)*
- *“In my mind has remained that [...] I must be more generous and respectful” (R., male, 9 y.o.)*

One child expresses his intention to make the others learn virtues:

- *“I will try to make everyone learn them” (A., male, 8 y.o.)*

Table 3. The Coding System Emerged from the Analysis of the Children's Answers in Primary Schools

CS	n.	C	
The virtues on that the project focuses	15	Virtues	
Specific virtues	Generosity		2
	Justice		2
	Respect		1
The importance of virtues	3		
The things done	5	Activities	
The stories	12		
The characters of the stories	2		
The games	6		
The reflections	1		
The diary of virtues	1		
The group works	1		
Happiness	2		Emotions
Joy	1		
Well-being	1		
Amusement	1		
Emotions of the last day	1		
Staying in company	2	Moments of sharing	
The shared experiences	2		
Educative intent	3	Posture of the researcher	
Kindness	2		
Patience	1		
The concept of virtue	6	Cognitive achievements	
The meaning of virtues	2		
The discovery of virtues	1		
To express the sense of virtues	1		
How to act the virtues	4	Experiential achievements	
To be virtuous	3		
Virtues are helpful in life	2		
One must be virtuous	2		
To make others learn virtues	1		

Discussion & Conclusions

The aim of this contribution is to provide teachers with suggestions of instruments and activities for ethical education, which have been designed, realized and studied through a rigorous research process. The findings concerning what has remained in the heart and mind of the children involved in the first edition of the MeArete project, suggest that the educative program has promoted their ethical flourishing, both at the cognitive and experiential level.

Over the last two decades, the empirical research effort aimed at understanding what actually works in ethics education programs has grown (Berkowitz, 2002; Berkowitz & Bier, 2004, 2005; Arthur, Fullard, & O'Leary, 2022), and the study presented in this article shares the importance of a heuristic commitment that can rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of the educational activities and tools. In evaluating the impact of ethics educational activities and tools, the voice of teachers,

which we also collected at the end of the program, is certainly significant, but no less important is the voice of students, on which this article is focused. The importance to give voice to children in the research process is broadly recognized in literature (Balen, Holroyd, Mountain, & Wood, 2000; Barker & Weller, 2003; Grover, 2004; Clark, 2011; Christensen & James, 2017), and within the MelArete project this has not only meant to collect children's reflections on ethical concepts and experiences but also to collect their evaluations about what have been the positive aspects of the program according to them.

Based on the findings presented in this article, the MelArete project activity most appreciated by participants has been the presentation of stories. In fact, both kindergarten and primary school children said that the stories proposed during the program have remained in their hearts and minds. The use of stories is traditionally popular and recommended in ethics education programs (Noddings, 2002b; Carr & Harrison, 2015; Watts, Fullard, & Peterson, 2021; Valdez, de Graaf, Barasa, & Das, 2024), and the results of the research presented in this article furtherly confirm that this tool is considered meaningful also by students. It should be emphasized, however, that in light of the theoretical framework in which the MelArete project is rooted, stories should not be proposed as a tool to instill traditional values or inculcate desirable habits in students, but as a starting point to promote ethical reflection and critical thinking. To meet this goal, the stories that are used during the MelArete program are open-ended, and their presentation is always accompanied by Socratic conversations, concerning the meaning of ethically relevant concepts or specific virtues, or by written reflection activities that are followed by classroom discussion.

Research conducted over time on the MelArete project, which includes the study presented in this article but also others related to different activities (Mortari, 2025; Mortari & Valbusa, 2017, 2019, 2023), confirms the success of the program in fostering children's ethical thinking, both in kindergarten and in primary school, but an enlargement in the number of the participants and in the geographical areas is needed to better evaluate the educational effectiveness of the project.

The experience of the first edition of MelArete, as well as the educational and heuristic considerations made by the research group starting from the obtained results, was helpful in designing the second edition, which is specifically focused on the virtues of friendship and gratitude (Mortari, Ubbiali, & Bombieri, 2023). In the perspective of a third edition, it would be possible to develop the structure of the educative program, by including other virtues or ethical issues, which children can encounter in their experience. At this purpose, it would also be important to involve the children who have already participated to the project, in designing new activities, that they think could be effective in stimulating the ethical thinking in their peers. In this way, the research would really be participatory, since the children would have the possibility to participate, in a reflective and concrete manner, to the development of an educative experience that they have really experimented and about which they could see strengths and limits from a perspective that is different from the one of the researcher but equally essential.

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