

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

MelArete is a research project on ethical education realized in some Italian kindergartens and primary schools by the Center of Educational and Didactic Research (CRED) 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 with reference to the findings emerged by the children's answers about their achievements.

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 moral education, this paper presents: 1) a theory of education to virtues that is inspired by a philosophy of care, 2) an educative project, developed for and realized in kindergartens and primary schools that implements this theory, and 3) the empirical research carried out on the first edition of this project in order to qualitatively evaluate its effectiveness with particular reference to the findings emerged by the children's answers about their achievements. The name of the project, promoted by the CRED (Center of Educational and Didactic Research) of the University of Verona, is "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.

Theoretical Framework

Nowadays, ethical and moral education is widely recognized to be necessary in promoting the personal flourishing, according to the perspective of the importance for schools to foster the whole development of the child. The main international approaches we find in literature are the following: character

1 education (Lickona, 1978, 1993, 2004; Howard *et al.*, 2004; Berkowitz, 2011),
2 cognitive-developmental approach or moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1975, 1981,
3 1984; Kohlberg and Hersh, 1977; Nucci, 1981; Nucci & Nucci, 1982; Colby &
4 Kohlberg, 1987; Turiel, 1998, 2002, 2010; Smetana, 1995, 2006; Nucci &
5 Narvaez, 2008; Killen & Smetana, 2008, 2010) and care ethics education
6 (Noddings, 2002). As the former, MelArete gives reference to the Aristotelian
7 theory in assigning importance to virtues, but does not confuse ethical education
8 with indoctrination, inculcation of values or mere socialization within a cultural
9 tradition, as traditional character education has been criticized to do (Kohlberg,
10 1975; Kohlberg and Hersh, 1977; Noddings, 2002); indeed, virtues are at the
11 centre of an educative pathway in which the children are invited to reflect on
12 ethical concepts and ethical experiences starting from their own points of view.
13 Furthermore, MelArete shares with the character education the belief that narrating
14 stories is an effective instrument of ethical education, but it uses stories to foster
15 critical interpretation of ethical experience rather than to inspire specific ethical
16 behaviours. As the approach of moral reasoning, MelArete recognizes the
17 importance of encouraging the development of analytical, critical and deliberative
18 thinking. Nonetheless, this educational assumption does not give life to abstracted
19 and intellectualistic educative proposals, since the eidetic reasoning inspired by the
20 Socratic approach is integrated with the reflection on the lived experience, with
21 reference to the concrete ethical dilemma that every person could face in his/her
22 daily life. As the care ethics education, MelArete assigns a central role to the
23 concept of care that is at the core of its theoretical proposal, but it takes distance
24 from an interpretation of care that is too situational and predominantly affective.
25 Indeed, we think that acting with care in specific situations does not exclude
26 reasoning, which take into consideration the principles of general value and that,
27 since emotions are nourished by cognitive contents such as beliefs and evaluations
28 (Nussbaum, 2001; Oatly, 1992), the flourishing of an ethical way of feeling is
29 interwoven with the development of the ethical thinking.

30 Assuming at its core the theory of care (Heidegger, 1996; Lévinas, 1991;
31 Held, 2006; Mayeroff, 1990; Mortari 2015; Noddings, 1984; Slote, 2007; Tronto,
32 1993) and interpreting it in light of the virtue ethics of Socrates and Aristotle,
33 MelArete considers education to ethics as an education to virtues according with
34 the principle of care (Mortari, 2019a). Human beings are, in their essence,
35 vulnerable and fragile; consequently, they need to be cared for as well as to care
36 for others. This is the reason why care is considered as the answer to the essence of
37 human condition. Since a) care is the fundamental ethical experience to search for
38 one's good and b) searching for the good realizes itself in behaviours that are
39 inspired by virtues (Mortari, 2006, 2015; Mortari & Saiani, 2014), then c) an
40 ethical education from the perspective of care is an education to virtues.

41 Even if in *Protagoras* (320b) and *Meno* (96c-d), Socrates doubts that virtue
42 can be taught, in *Apology* (30a) he states that daily discussing about virtue is the
43 greatest good for human being; furthermore, with his educative example, as it is
44 presented in the dialogues, he suggests that to live according to virtue is important
45 in order to examine what virtues are in their essence. Instead, Aristotle considers
46 that virtues, defined as habitual dispositions to act well, can be learned by being

1 practiced (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, 1103a, 27–33). The MelArete’s
2 educational proposal recognizes the significance of both the Socratic perspective,
3 because of the centrality assigned to the examination of the meaning of virtues,
4 and the Aristotelian one, because of the centrality assigned to the acting according
5 to virtue. These two perspectives are integrated in the purpose of creating
6 educative contexts in which children can learn both to reason together on the
7 essence of virtue and to reflect on their ethical experience paying attention to their
8 virtuous actions. Moreover, according with the definition proposed by Ricoeur
9 (1990), who intends morality as aimed at the definition of rules and codes of
10 conduct and ethics as aimed at the comprehension of what is good for life, we
11 consider MelArete as a project of ethical, rather than moral, education.
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14 **The MelArete Project**

15
16 The first edition of the MelArete project was focused on the ethical concepts
17 of good, care and virtue, and on the specific virtues of courage, generosity, respect
18 and justice, and involved six fourth grade classes of four primary schools and
19 twelve groups of six kindergartens in the North and Centre of Italy. Between the
20 involved 106 8-9-10 y.o. children of primary schools, 48 were male and 58 were
21 female; between the involved 4-5 y.o. children of kindergartens, 55 were male and
22 61 were female.
23

24 **Instruments and Activities**

25
26 In line with the Socratic and Aristotelian perspectives, MelArete promotes
27 activities aimed at facilitating children to 1) reason together on virtues in light of
28 the ideas of good and care, and 2) reflect on their experience in order to understand
29 what space can have virtues in human acting. The main educational principles that
30 inspired the design of the educative pathway are the following:
31

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

40 On the basis of these educational principles, MelArete promotes the
41 following typologies of activities: thinking through stories, reasoning together,
42 writing the diary of virtues, debating vignettes, inventing stories and playing with
43 virtues.
44
45

1 Thinking through Stories

2

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

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

26

27 Reasoning Together

28

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

1 nourished by the researcher, who should not provide pre-defined ideas, but only
2 provisional insights in order to maintain the reflection open.

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

14 15 Writing the Diary of Virtues

16
17 Since, according to Aristotle, virtues are learned by practicing them, an
18 educative project inspired to the Aristotelian philosophical perspective implies
19 attention to experience. The challenge is to put the ethical acting at the centre of
20 the educative practice without requiring participants to act in a precise way.
21 Indeed, an educative practice that establishes in a priori way what are the good
22 actions to carry out runs the risk to become coercive, as it shares by external the
23 being of the other. Given this premise, the educational question is the following:
24 how is it possible to encourage the children to focus on the experience – in the
25 perspective of the virtue ethics – without asking them anything in terms of things
26 to do? It is necessary to find a method that, instead of requiring the children to act
27 in a certain precise way, encourages them to reflect on their actions. In order to
28 reach this goal, it is possible to introduce in the educative pathway the task of
29 writing the “diary of virtues”, in which the children are invited to describe virtuous
30 actions they carried out in first person or see carried out by others. In primary
31 schools, virtuous actions are written down by the children; instead, in
32 kindergartens they are first drawn by the children and then some adults take note
33 of the children's orally description of their drawings.

34 The actions of drawing or writing down the experience are important for the
35 cultivation of the “life of the mind” (Arendt, 1978), because they foster the
36 activation of reflective processes. Keeping a diary on their ethical experience
37 responds to the intention of educating children to train their gaze to give attention
38 to reality. To make this activity effective, it is necessary to carry it out regularly
39 over the time; for this reason, it is important to involve teachers in the organization
40 and management of this activity, asking them to provide a space for it at least once
41 a week. Educating children to think of their virtuous experience and then put their
42 thoughts in written or graphical form is very important, because it allows them to
43 acquire ethical awareness. The pedagogical assumption that underlays this activity
44 is that an authentic ethical learning develops only when the ethical experience is
45 accompanied by a reflection on it. Since it fosters reflection on the experience, the

1 “diary of virtues” both encourages an experiential and reflective writing or
2 drawing.

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

10 Debating Vignettes, Inventing Stories, and Playing with Virtues

11
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13 Since it is important not to force the thinking of the children in the repetition
14 of the same activities, the MelArete project implies some educative experiences
15 that are complementary to those presented above. In order to educate children to
16 develop a rigorous ethical reasoning, we propose some vignettes that present an
17 initial problematic condition or a situation faced with a dilemma and three
18 different possibilities to respond to it. The children are required 1) to describe
19 individually the three possibilities, because describing facilitates the understanding
20 process, 2) to choose individually which one represents the virtuous solution, 3) to
21 discuss their choices together in class, and 4) to draw individually a virtuous
22 action, taking it from the vignettes or inventing it at all.

23 However, ethical thinking develops itself not only thanks to the capacity of
24 rigorous reasoning, but also thanks to the imagination. For this reason, the children
25 who take part at MelArete project are also invited to invent stories concerning
26 ethical actions. The narrative thinking (Bruner, 1990) is the way of thinking more
27 faithful to the essence of our experience that is in continuous becoming. When one
28 examines a concept, alone or with others, his/her mind stops on a precise focus;
29 instead, in the narration of a story the thinking places itself in the temporal
30 duration. The narration shapes the reality, but it can also structure a new vision of
31 the world, that can open the experience to new existential gestures. Narrations can
32 be produced in written form as well as recited.

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

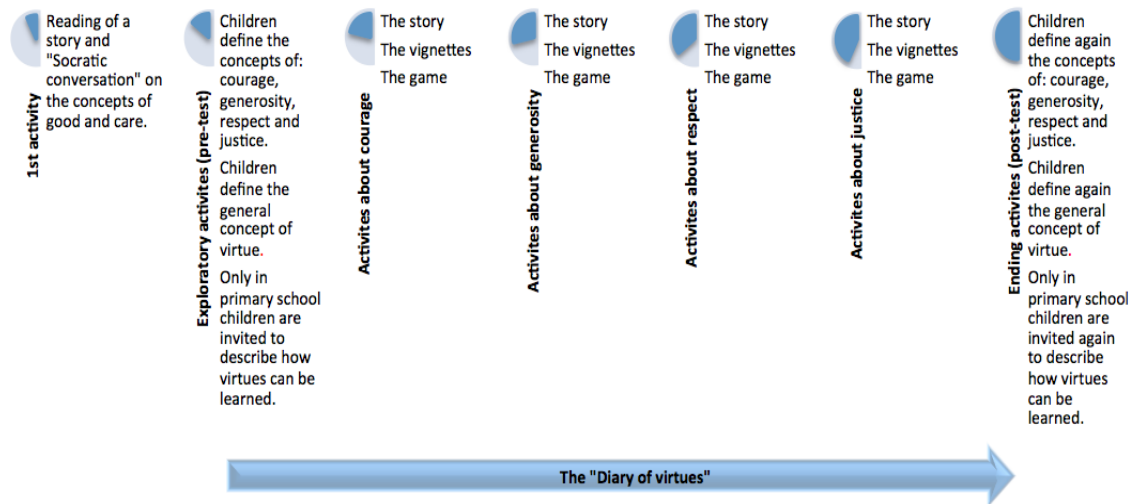
37 38 **The Educative Pathway**

39
40 The educative pathway starts with a Socratic conversation about good and
41 care, an activity that allows the children to analyse these ethical concepts within
42 the class intersubjective context and therefore take advantage from the richness of
43 many perspectives; then, we organize some exploratory activities to collect the
44 children’s thoughts about the concepts of virtue, courage, generosity, respect and
45 justice. In primary schools, the children are also invited to think about how virtues
46 can be learned. The central part of the project is dedicated to the examination of

1 the four specific virtues of courage, generosity, respect and justice through the use
 2 of: stories, which facilitate children to learn different ways to interpret virtues;
 3 vignettes, which serve as a stimulus to debate ethical dilemmas; and games, which
 4 are useful to deepen the children’s ethical reflections. After these activities or
 5 within them, it is also possible to ask the children to write or recite stories on
 6 virtues invented by themselves. The four specific virtues on which the project
 7 focuses have been chosen after a deep reflection within the research group. In
 8 particular, courage, respect and generosity were chosen because they had emerged
 9 to be the three more known virtues by the children who took part at an exploratory
 10 phase of the project. Even if justice was the sixth more known virtue – after
 11 forgiveness and honesty – we decided to propose it in this last phase of the project
 12 because of the relevance assigned to it by the Western ethical philosophy since
 13 Plato. Indeed, a good educative project takes into consideration the mental horizon
 14 of the participants and, at the same time, enlarges it in order to foster a wider
 15 vision of the reality. At the end of the project we propose again the same questions
 16 of the exploratory activities to understand if and how the children’s ethical thought
 17 has developed thanks to the project itself. After the exploratory activities and until
 18 the end of the educative pathway, the children keep the “diary of virtues”, writing
 19 and/or drawing and describing – at least once a week – virtuous actions they carry
 20 out in first person or see carried out by others.

21
 22

Figure 1. A Visual Synthesis of MelArete Project



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At the end of the educative pathway, 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, was 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 and 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 merely a research "with" the children but, more specifically, it is a research "for" children (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 this paper, we will focus on the answers given individually by the children at the end of the educative pathway, when we asked them the following question: "What has remained in your heart and in your mind?". 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.

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 and 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-eidetic perspective,

1 through the procedures of labelling and categorizing typical of the grounded
2 theory process.

3 The methodological crossbreeding is legitimate when it allows researchers to
4 reach the purposes of the analysis better than by using a single method; however, it
5 should be done in a rigorous way, by clarifying the reasons that make possible to
6 integrate aspects of different methods. In agreement with this assumption, we
7 decided to use together the phenomenological-eidetic method and the grounded
8 theory because both recommend carrying out an inductive analysis process, being
9 careful to stay faithful to the data. Furthermore, both these methods encourage to
10 accompany the analysis process with a reflective effort, also by bracketing all the
11 comprehensions and previous theories, which could influence the researcher's
12 perspective.

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

- 15
- 16 - verbatim transcription and anonymization of all the children's answers;
- 17 - codifications of each one of the answers by the assignment of one or more
18 labels that express their meanings; these labels are defined as a first level
19 conceptualizations of meaning (CM);
- 20 - examination of all the labels in order to group in homogeneous categories
21 (C) or a second level conceptualizations of meaning, those which gave
22 reference to a common dimension of achievement.

23
24 Examples of this analysis process can be seen in the Table 1.

25
26 *Table 1. Examples of the Analysis Process*

Transcriptions	CM	C
<i>"In my heart has remained respect, justice, courage and generosity, and in my mind have remained all the stories"</i> (N., female, 9 y.o.)	Virtues on which the project focuses The stories	Virtues Activities
<i>"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"</i> (A., male, 9)	The importance of virtues How acting virtues	Virtues Achievements Of Experiential Type

27
28 The final heuristic action was the elaboration of a coding system with the
29 labels and categories emerged from the analysis process.

30 31 **The Findings in Kindergartens**

32
33 Giving reference to the categories emerged from the data analysis (see the
34 coding system in Table 2), it is possible to state that the children in kindergarten
35 have both learned virtues and how to act them, and that in their heart and mind

1 remained the value of the good relationships, the activities of the project, some
 2 skills and a style of action. The category *knowing and acting virtues* collects all the
 3 answers in which the children express to have learned virtues, both in their
 4 conceptualization, i.e. at the cognitive level, and importance, i.e. at the experiential
 5 level. In answering, the major part of the children gave reference to the virtues on
 6 which the project was focused, but some others demonstrated to have learned the
 7 general concept of virtue and use it in reflecting on other virtuous experiences,
 8 different from those on which the educative pathway focused.

9 Some examples of what children said are presented below:

- 10
- 11 - “[Virtues] are these gestures of good education” (S., female, 5 y.o.)
 - 12 - “Respect means you respect another person” (V., female, 5 y.o.)
 - 13 - “Respect, generosity, courage and justice” (E., male, 5 y.o.)
 - 14 - “[I have learned] that you must respect the toys” (I., female, 5 y.o.)
 - 15 - “I have learned] to be generous” (A., female, 4 y.o.)
 - 16 - “Now I am more courageous, I'm not afraid of wolves anymore” (I.,
 17 female, 4 y.o.)
 - 18 - “I have learned that virtues are the kindest things that exist in the
 19 world” (R., female, 5 y.o.)
 - 20 - “[I have learned] that virtues are important [...] because they help you
 21 to be happy, glad and kind with people” (M., female, 5 y.o.)
 - 22 - “I learned the forgiveness” (A., male, 5 y.o.)
 - 23 - “Giving, giving, you must share things with your friends” (R., female, 5
 24 y.o.)
 - 25 - “[The most important thing I learned this year is] to help each other”
 26 (L., male, 5 y.o.)
- 27

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

- 33
- 34 - “I have understood that I must care for the children when they get hurt”
 35 (A., female, 4 y.o.)
 - 36 - “I have learned that caring... make friends happy” (F., male, 5 y.o.)
- 37

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

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

7
 8 *Table 2.* The Coding System Emerged from the Analysis of the Children’s
 9 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	
Collateral activities	9	
The figure 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	

10

11 **The Findings in Primary Schools**

12

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

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

- 4
- 5 - *"In my mind have remained the virtues: generosity, respect, courage and*
6 *justice" (M., male, 10 y.o.)*
 - 7 - *"In my heart has remained a virtue that will serve to me for the life:*
8 *generosity" (A., male, 8 y.o.)*
 - 9 - *"The virtue that I liked most is justice" (A., male, 8 y.o.)*
 - 10 - *"In my heart has remained mostly justice" (A., female, 9 y.o.)*
 - 11 - *"In my heart has remained that virtues are important" (V., female, 10 y.o.)*
 - 12 - *"This project made me understand how virtues are important" (AA., male,*
13 *9 y.o.)*

14

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

- 26
- 27 - *"In my heart has remained the emotions to stay in company with my*
28 *classmates" (S., male, 8 y.o.)*
 - 29 - *"In my heart has remained the moments in which we played together"*
30 *(J., female, 9 y.o.)*
 - 31 - *"To me remained all the beautiful experiences we live together" (C.,*
32 *female, 8 y.o.)*

33

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

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

- 45
- 46 - *"We have learned virtues, that I did not know" (A., female, 8 y.o.)*

- 1 - "I liked a lot this activity and I have learned the meaning of virtues" S.,
2 male, 9 y.o.)
3 - "The thing that has remained in my mind has been to learn and discover
4 these virtues" (H., female, 8 y.o.)
5 - "In my mind has remained a thought about virtues of when I have
6 learned to express the sense of virtues" (A., male, 8 y.o.)
7 - "In my heart has remained that virtues are important and that you must
8 be virtuous with yourself and the others" (V., female, 10 y.o.)
9 - "The virtues that I have learned have been of great help to me" (R.,
10 male, 10 y.o.)
11 - "This project led me understand what are virtues and how to use them.
12 They will help me in the pathway of life" (H., male, 9 y.o.)
13 - "In my mind has remained that [...] I must be more generous and
14 respectful" (R., male, 9 y.o.)
15

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

- 17
18 - "I will try to make everyone learn them" (A., male, 8 y.o.)
19

20 *Table 3.* The coding system emerged from the analysis of the children's answers in
21 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	Activities	
The things done	5		
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	Moments of sharing	
Staying in company	2		
The shared experiences	2	Posture of the researcher	
Educational intent	3		
Kindness	2		
Endurance	1	Intellectual achievements	
The concept of virtue	6		
The meaning of virtues	2		
The discovery of virtues	1		

To express the sense of virtues	1	Experiential achievements
How to act the virtues	4	
To be virtuous	3	
Virtues are helpful in life	2	
One must be virtuous	2	
To make others learn virtues	1	

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Conclusions and Discussion

The aim of this presentation 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 MelArete project, suggest that the educative pathway has promoted their ethical flourishing, both at the cognitive and experiential level. We found that the activities we proposed have been effective in fostering the children's thinking on ethical concepts and experiences, but we think that an enlargement in the number of the participants and in the geographical areas is needed to better study the educative 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 and Bombieri, 2023). In the perspective of a third edition, it would be possible to develop the structure of the educative pathway, 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 researchers but equally essential.

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