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
education (Lickona, 1978, 1993, 2004; Howard et al., 2004; Berkowitz, 2011),
cognitive-developmental approach or moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1975, 1981,
1984; Kohlberg and Hersh, 1977; Nucci, 1981; Nucci & Nucci, 1982; Colby &
Narvaez, 2008; Killen & Smetana, 2008, 2010) and care ethics education
(Noddings, 2002). As the former, MelArete gives reference to the Aristotelian
theory in assigning 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 (Kohlberg,
1975; Kohlberg and Hersh, 1977; Noddings, 2002); indeed, virtues are at the
centre of an educative pathway in which the children are invited to reflect on
ethical concepts and ethical experiences starting from their own points of view.
Furthermore, MelArete shares with the character education the belief that narrating
stories is an effective instrument of ethical education, but it uses stories to foster
critical interpretation of ethical experience rather than to inspire specific ethical
behaviours. As the approach of moral reasoning, MelArete recognizes the
importance of encouraging the development of analytical, critical and deliberative
thinking. Nonetheless, 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 the care ethics education, MelArete assigns a central role to the
concept of care that is at the core of its theoretical proposal, but it 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 take into consideration the principles of general value and that,
since emotions are nourished by cognitive contents such as beliefs and evaluations
(Nussbaum, 2001; Oatly, 1992), the flourishing of an ethical way of feeling is
interwoven with the development of the ethical thinking.

Assuming at its core the theory of care (Heidegger, 1996; Lévinas, 1991;
Held, 2006; Mayeroff, 1990; Mortari 2015; Noddings, 1984; Slote, 2007; Tronto,
1993) 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 (Mortari, 2019a). Human beings are, in their essence,
vulnerable and fragile; consequently, they need to be cared for as well as to care
for others. 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, 2015; 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 that to live according to virtue is important
in order 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 prosed 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 consider 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. Between the involved 106 8-9-10 y.o. children of primary schools, 48 were male and 58 were female; between the involved 4-5 y.o. children of kindergartens, 55 were male and 61 were female.

**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 inspired the design of the educative pathway 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 character education the approach through stories is used to inspire precise moral behaviours, in the MelArete project it is used as stimulus to foster a Socratic conversation.

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 shares by external 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 pathway 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. Keeping a diary on their ethical experience responds to the intention of educating children 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” both encourages an 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 the reflection 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 Pathway

The educative pathway 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 last 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 pathway, 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

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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,
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-eidetic 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 a first level conceptualizations of meaning (CM);
- examination of all the labels in order to group in homogeneous categories (C) or a second level conceptualizations of meaning, those which gave reference to a common dimension of achievement.

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcriptions</th>
<th>CM</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“In my heart has remained respect, justice, courage and generosity, and in my mind have remained all the stories” (N., female, 9 y.o.)</td>
<td>Virtues on which the project focuses</td>
<td>Virtues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The stories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“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)</td>
<td>The importance of virtues</td>
<td>Virtues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How acting virtues</td>
<td>Achievements Of Experiential Type</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**

Giving reference to the categories emerged from the data analysis (see the coding system in Table 2), 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 pathway 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… make 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, particulars 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 collateral 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

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

The Findings in Primary Schools

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 (see the coding system in Table 3), 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 intellectual 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” (AA., male, 9 y.o.)

Several children give reference to the activities proposed during the educative pathway. 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 endurance).

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 intellectual 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CS</th>
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<tr>
<td>The virtues on that the project focuses</td>
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<td>Virtues</td>
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<td>Specific virtues</td>
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<td>Justice</td>
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<td>The things done</td>
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<tr>
<td>The characters of the stories</td>
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<td>The games</td>
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<td>The reflections</td>
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<tr>
<td>The diary of virtues</td>
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<td>The group works</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Joy</td>
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<td>Well-being</td>
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<td>Emotions of the last day</td>
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<td>The meaning of virtues</td>
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<td>Intellectual achievements</td>
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<td>The discovery of virtues</td>
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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.

References


