



From children's literature to cancer care: reflective practices in the training of radiotherapists

Dalla letteratura per l'infanzia alla cura oncologica. Pratiche riflessive nella formazione del radioterapista

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Abstract (EN)

The present paper proffers a theoretical reflection on the role of the child's perspective in the training of radiation oncologists. This perspective is posited as a viewpoint capable of opening up new ways of understanding care and its relational dynamics. Within this framework, the article also presents a narrative training programme for radiation oncologists in specialist training. This programme is used as a case study to explore how storytelling can support processes of self-awareness, responsibility and professional development. The analysis of a piece of children's literature demonstrates the potential of educational practices that intertwine the symbolic dimension, relationships and self-formation. It is suggested that an approach inspired by the world of childhood can help to shape training programmes that are more humanising and attentive to the uniqueness of care narratives.

Keywords: narrative, medical training, soft skills, professional identity, care relationships

Abstract (IT)

Il contributo propone una riflessione teorica sul ruolo dello sguardo dell'infanzia nella formazione del radioterapista oncologo, inteso come prospettiva capace di dischiudere nuove modalità di comprensione della cura e delle sue dinamiche relazionali. All'interno di questo quadro, l'articolo presenta anche un percorso formativo narrativo rivolto ai radioterapisti in specializzazione, assunto come caso esemplare per indagare come la narrazione possa sostenere processi di consapevolezza, responsabilità e maturazione professionale. Attraverso l'analisi di un testo di letteratura per l'infanzia, la riflessione mette in luce la potenzialità di pratiche educative che intrecciano dimensione simbolica, relazione e autoformazione, suggerendo che un approccio ispirato al mondo dell'infanzia possa contribuire a delineare percorsi formativi più umanizzanti e attenti alla singolarità delle storie di cura.

Parole chiave: narrazione, formazione medica, soft skills, identità professionale, relazione di cura

1. Introduction

Human education, in all its forms, is predicated on the capacity to cultivate a perspective that is able to comprehend the intricacies of experience, to contemplate ambiguity, and to acknowledge the plurality of meanings that pervade both individual and collective life. In this context, childhood, with its dynamics, experiences and relationships, represents a privileged lens, a means of questioning, suspending judgement, welcoming the unexpected and allowing us to approach others with openness, curiosity and responsibility. This perspective is not confined to educational contexts, but is also valuable in professional training, especially in highly relational fields such as healthcare.

The concept of literacy (Corbi, 2016) is understood as a multifaceted and intricate skill. It can be interpreted in this manner: not solely as a technical proficiency, but as the capacity to interpret the world, to ascribe significance to events and to establish emotional and cognitive connections that foster lifelong learning (European Union, 2018). In consideration of the aforementioned points, the paper also presents a narrative training programme for radiation oncologists. This programme is described as a case study which illustrates the pedagogical application of the theoretical frameworks discussed. Children's literature, in its radical openness, approaches what some authors describe as a profound experience, capable of generating aesthetic and ethical engagement and fostering transformative processes (Manguel, 2023; Wolf, 2018), allowing access to forms of understanding that are not limited to the rational dimension, but include emotional, imaginative and relational aspects, which are fundamental for the construction of personal and professional identity (Smith, 2019). In the field of healthcare, and particularly in the context of training radiation oncologists, this perceptive and interpretative stance has the potential to facilitate more conscious care practices.

These practices would be attentive to the uniqueness of life stories and capable of recognising vulnerability as a space for encounter. The nexus between education and storytelling assumes a pivotal role. It is important to acknowledge the educational value of storytelling in a clinical setting. However, it must be borne in mind that its use does not automatically lead to greater awareness or improved skills. Without pedagogical guidance, it may prove ineffective, descend into rhetoric, or fail to transform experience into learning. This means that critical reflection on the conditions that enable its effectiveness is essential.

The act of storytelling, whether through active listening, narration or retelling, serves to deconstruct the notion of "canonicity" associated with the standardisation of life. It does so by drawing attention to deviations from the norm, which, rather than being considered mere stylistic choices, offer a reflection of social reality in a realistic manner. The concept of ambiguity, intrinsic to life and its dynamics, is a fundamental tenet of the theory. It is further postulated that moments of crisis, from a narratological point of view, serve to educate individuals about the importance of change, personal transformation and free will. Paying particular hermeneutic attention to children's literature in this sense does not signify a nostalgic return to the past; rather, it is an epistemic device that allows us to welcome such deviations as opportunities for learning and care. Without asserting an exhaustive nature, it is worthwhile to acknowledge certain research strands that have the potential to contribute to this discourse, fostering a productive exchange between the domains of medical sciences, educational sciences and narrative knowledge. This exchange is situated within a comprehensive and intricate reflective tradition that acknowledges narration as a vibrant, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary field of study.

It is evident that attention to narrative aspects is a particularly salient feature of P. Ricœur's work, as evidenced by his substantial analysis in *Time and Narrative* (Ricœur, 1983/1986). However, of particular interest are the evident implications of an in-depth analysis of the 'fiction' of the narrative with respect to the 'truth' of personal identity and an ethically oriented existence,

which are contained above all in the essay *The Self and Narrative Identity in Oneself as Another* (Ricoeur, 1990/2002). In the context of a dense and articulate discourse, it is worthwhile to consider some of the issues that emerge from the French philosopher's reflections, particularly when he explores the narrative's capacity for comprehension, organisation and configuration.

In the absence of this narrative structure, the individual "facts" of personal life, events taken in isolation, risk losing much of their meaning. Furthermore, this could paradoxically lead to a dangerous existential dispersion and a process of depersonalisation. Conversely, the narrative event is defined by its relationship with the very operation of configuration; it participates in the unstable structure of discordant concordance characteristic of the plot itself; it is a source of discordance, in that it arises, and a source of concordance, in that it advances the story (Ricoeur, 1990/2002, p. 233).

The unexpected and the surprising, both in everyday life and in literary works and fictional stories, do not remain elements that are completely foreign or separate from personal experience.

According to Ricoeur, narrative theory occupies an intermediate position between action theory and ethical reflection. It offers ample material for reflection regarding both the description of human practices and their moral evaluation, with particular attention to the individual agent who performs and shapes these actions in narrative terms. The question "Who am I?" is pertinent at both the narrative and evaluative levels, as evidenced by a dynamic discourse that explores possible responses and conveys the anguish of the self's existential-narrative crisis (Bruno, 2013). Ricoeur's reflection, in a dialogical mode, neither abandons the subject to the abyss created by the tension between identity and otherness nor allows itself to be drawn into depersonalising drifts. Rather, it foregrounds the ethical issue of responsibility, employing the most evocative and powerful narrative forms to do so. In this context, the subject moves between possession and dispossession of the self, between care and detachment, between affirmation and oblivion, between self-hatred and self-esteem, and between anguish and well-being, outlining a continuous tension that lends depth and meaning to the understanding of moral identity (Malavasi, 2024).

These categories, in turn, have profound ethical and educational significance, offering an interpretation that enriches our understanding of the human condition and its dynamics (Cattaneo, 2008).

2. A dialogue between narrative and pedagogy to rediscover the educational relationship

In contemporary society, storytelling finds significant uses in both economic and social contexts, extending beyond the scope of purely recreational purposes. While the practice of storytelling is undoubtedly interconnected with communication, information and representation, it appears to transcend these domains, owing to its cognitive and evaluative profundity, which flourishes within a milieu that is simultaneously epistemological, aesthetic and ethical. Despite the heterogeneity that characterises a wide range of professional domains, it is possible to identify the presence of pertinent narrative elements, which are occasionally overt and at other times more implicit. These elements serve to construct the cultural and axiological systems of reference that are unique to each professional community.

The advent of diverse modes of communication and contemporary infotelematic tools has led to an augmentation in the potential for the creation, enjoyment and reception of narrative.

Nevertheless, these developments have not impacted the intrinsic essence of storytelling as an existential experience. The narrative remains a privileged path for understanding oneself and others, whether in the private sphere or in the public, social and professional spheres. It is

imperative for the coherent placement of one's existence within the world, whilst simultaneously ensuring its uniqueness, personalisation, authenticity and, where possible, a fulfilling life.

The relationship between narrative and pedagogy is multifaceted, with the two fields being interconnected by practical, organisational and didactic considerations. Furthermore, both disciplines aspire to contribute – without asserting an exhaustive nature – to the revitalisation of an authentically formative vision of the professional and the individual, in all their existential richness, in the entirety of their humanity, and in their working role, which encompasses scientific, ethical, relational, psycho-social, cultural and educational aspects (Malavasi, 2020). Firstly, the human person, in their complex and varied meanings, is placed at the centre of the narrative and their education, considered in their actual, real, dynamic and vital dimensions. This approach eschews the reduction of the individual to a mere "object" and instead recognises their nature primarily as a "subject" (Cadei, 2017). Secondly, a fundamental element of pedagogical reflection on narrative is the question of otherness. In both colloquial and logical/philosophical discourse, the act of speaking about an individual invariably entails the presence of at least one other person. The notion of the "I" is invariably contextualised in relation to the "you". The human person, even in the role of a health professional, is deeply embedded in processes of relationality, communication and verbal and non-verbal interaction.

This is not an incidental aspect, but an essential component of being-in-dialogue and being-in-narrative (Castiglioni, 2016). Thirdly, the concept of formative stories merits attention, understood as a lifelong learning activity that spans the entire course of life and manifests itself in different work and social contexts. The process of growth and development of humanity and freedom, which includes existence, knowledge and values, is an intrinsically human and universal aspect. Education can be regarded as a collective responsibility, an authentic and ontological commitment to self-education (Levrero, 2022). These instances align with the socio-political perspectives of the so-called educating society, where education is regarded as both a process and a "given" acquired in the organisational world, and constitutes a cornerstone for the development of contemporary civilisation. In the context of a broad consideration of training environments and learning processes, it is imperative to emphasise the significance of situations in which the subject engages in care activities (Zane, 2023) voluntarily and first-hand, confronts the world of practices, decisions and moral choices, "puts themselves on the line" for themselves and others, and builds knowledge and ethical awareness in a reflective and narrative way that derives from experience. This process of gradual assimilation of experience is accompanied by an openness to respect and appreciation of the experiences of others (Mortari, 2023).

The significance of experiential learning and the efficacy of narrative methodologies should not be regarded as incompatible elements, but rather as complementary strategies and methodologies.

These approaches are characterised by a pronounced emphasis on the qualitative dimension of learning, the ethical-affective sensitivity of training, and the personalisation of the educational path.

In a variety of professional settings, particularly within healthcare professions, narrative and reflective training is incorporated into teaching and learning practices in diverse ways. These practices are explicitly designed to care for the uniqueness of the person, recognising and valuing their humanity, even when it is marked by fragility, pain or illness (Annacontini & Rodriguez-Illera, 2018).

3. The project "The caring relationship between the demand for health and the desire for salvation". An emblematic case study

The following exploratory analysis will utilise a design that has symbolic value in relation to the topic in question, as outlined in the theoretical framework above. This paper will discuss the project entitled "The care relationship between the demand for health and the desire for salvation", which was developed for specialist oncology radiotherapists at the A. Gemelli Polyclinic in Rome. The project was initiated at the request of His Excellency Claudio Giuliodori, General Ecclesiastical Assistant of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart. The heuristic framework within which the project is situated is that of reflection on the broad and rich theme of relationships in the healthcare context. Consequently, a training course was devised with the objective of encouraging participants to engage in reflection through the analysis of a thought-provoking text. The proposed text is "Oscar and the Lady in Pink" by Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt (2002/2003), which takes the form of a short novel about the relationship of a young cancer patient.

By narrating encounters with various professionals and non-professionals involved in the medical-health field, the protagonist constructs a story of his illness from his own point of view, interpreting reality and himself through a dense web of relationships. The child protagonist of the novel, Oscar, is representative of the multiplicity of relationships with others, evoking reflective scenarios that also include the spiritual needs of patients who, in conditions of suffering, need to be welcomed and understood. Little Oscar interacts with doctors and his family, but also with other patients, a relational dimension which is often overlooked in reflections on the subject. He engages with a variety of non-medical healthcare professionals, volunteers, and, as previously mentioned, he also engages in discourse with God as a present interlocutor. The decision to commence the reflection with an evocative text that focuses on the figure of the patient as a person in a relational context represents an opportunity for future specialists to re-examine their professional reality through a narrative that does not only take into account the technical and scientific dimensions, but also focuses on the purely human aspects of the experience of care and illness (Charon, 2006/2019).

The reference to an emblematic case, presented as a novella, is intended to be qualitative and hermeneutic. It does not lead to undue generalisations but rather stimulates ethical and educational reflection on a particularly evocative and emotionally engaging episode. This episode does not claim to be exhaustive but rather serves as a plausible case study to open up spaces for reflection between the professional self and the personal self, and for possible sharing within one's community of practice.

The specific proxemics of the trainee radiotherapist enable proximity to the patient, particularly paediatric patients (Zane, 2022), while maintaining constant contact with an experienced doctor, thus acquiring experience in a hybrid interpersonal situation. More specifically, the emphasis placed on a patient-centred approach in the relationship with the radiotherapy specialist enables the treatment pathway, which is characterised by repeated appointments and periods of daily contact, to be structured as a genuine journey of support and respect for the individual. This proxemic "juxtaposition" and the fact that they are still undergoing training represent an opportunity for radiotherapists undergoing specialist training to be guided through moments of reflection that will allow them to develop their professionalism not only through the acquisition of technical and practical skills, but also by measuring themselves against their own "meditative" and spiritual transformation abilities (Zannini, 2023). Reflecting on relational encounters with subjects involved in everyday work represents an opportunity to identify, in addition to practical and functional aspects, the symbolic relevance, educational value and existential depth that such encounters embody. The course's structure was informed by three keywords or evocative stimuli that served as guiding principles in the development of the reflection tool. The initial stimulus that

was put forward was the notion of "symbol", which encapsulates the allegorical requirements intrinsic to the patient's request for care. It is posited that every message, every interaction, and every communication from the patient profoundly articulates a fundamental human need for relationship.

The care relationship evolves from a representation of healthcare professionalism to a manifestation of trust and acknowledgement of the Other. The relationship evolves as the embodiment of relational needs, wherein interaction with the "other" serves as a medium for self-recognition (Buber, 1962/1993).

The second keyword that guided the design process was "education". As previously stated, healthcare professionals, notably doctors, also fulfil an educational function in relation to patients as individuals. Consequently, a pivotal responsibility of prospective specialists will be to confront the challenge of assisting patients in the process of coming to terms with their newfound dimension of life. It is within interpersonal relationships that ethical and moral motives are actualised or exposed. [...] They emphasise the plurality of interpretations: the undeniable fact that communication is inevitable; the problematic nature of human relationships from an ethical perspective; and the indispensability of a moral framework (Malavasi, 1995, p. 130). The third keyword that was identified during the project development phase was 'soft skills'. These skills are defined as a system of competencies that are widely recognised as the most transferable.

The European Union identifies them as resources that refer to communication skills for working in a team, flexibility and creativity, problem-solving skills, continuous adaptation, and cognitive flexibility. This group of skills does not refer directly to a specific job, but rather characterises the individual as being open to entering any professional context (European Union, 2011). Following a discussion on symbols, education, and soft skills, the operational tool was detailed, with a 'guided narrative-educational reflection' identified as the most functional for the purpose. This instrument employs a formative writing method to facilitate the development and acquisition of awareness regarding experiences pertaining to the relational and experiential communication of the medical professional. The tool was constructed by dividing it into areas of reflection according to the subjects involved in the interaction, presenting excerpts from the text, open questions, and dedicated spaces for reflection. These areas are identified as 'Target Areas' and direct reflection towards the relational assets that involve the trainee radiation oncologist, specifically with the patient, with other doctors, with the patients' families, with the various non-medical healthcare professionals working in the department (nurses, social and healthcare workers, social care assistants), and volunteers. Each target area is meticulously delineated into distinct sections, thereby facilitating the exploration of relational assets. Accordingly, substantial excerpts from the publication *Oscar and the Lady in Pink* are employed. This text serves as a guided reflection on the stimulus text, and the narration of a real-life experience in which soft skills were implemented. The text also comprises questions that are intended to stimulate discussion among participants regarding their own relational experiences in the workplace, as well as metaphorical aspects and existential/spiritual meanings.

The tasks assigned to the trainee doctor are meticulously structured into distinct operational phases, meticulously designed to facilitate a pedagogically guided reflective journey. The initial step in this process is to engage with the complete text of '*Oscar and the Lady in Pink*'. This action is recommended in order to establish the emotional involvement necessary to render the selected excerpts, which are to be the subject of future reflections, authentically evocative. The subsequent stage of the process involves the analysis of isolated textual segments selected for their alignment with particular subjects delineated within the report.

In order to facilitate a more structured reflection, a series of probing questions have been meticulously designed to encourage the trainee radiotherapists to engage in an emotional reflection, drawing upon Oscar's relational experience. Thirdly, the radiation oncologist in training is tasked with the recollection of a professional episode that is deemed to be of particular

significance in relation to the domain of communication/relationships under investigation. This recollection is to be accompanied by an emphasis on the educational aspects inherent in soft skills (Nosari & Guarcello, 2024). Through this narration, the physician reflects on episodes from their own experience and, through the mediation of writing, retraces them, confronting themselves with the effort of synthesising what they have perceived and experienced. This unconscious educational mediation enables the trainee to structure their professional identity in light of the practical experiments carried out (Demetrio, 2012). Subsequent to the formative narrative, the trainee is invited to respond to a series of reflective prompts that serve to enhance their reflection on the episode that has been narrated. The questions focus on relational aspects in relation to the expectations, content, emotional experiences of the different stakeholders, communication channels, spiritual needs, and influences on the target figure. Upon completion of the course, participants are tasked with synthesising the selected narrative through the utilisation of metaphor. This reference is connected to the reflection on the concept of 'symbol' as a project keyword and aims to detail the symbolic and spiritual research aspects in the relationships experienced (Marinelli, 2022).

The training and reflection programme was also conceived with the objective of amassing a database of original narratives pertaining to the doctor-patient relationship. However, it was conceptualised as an anonymous tool for reflection, with the intention of enabling trainees to feel more at ease and less subject to evaluative influences. Consequently, the sole piece of information requested is the name of the specialty school, with the objective of mapping the diverse backgrounds and assisting future users of these narratives in contextualising the experiences. The programme has been meticulously designed to function as a tool to facilitate individual reflection on their professional experiences, with the ultimate objective of establishing a collective repository of relational skills in the future. The project enables postgraduate students to share their reflections with the educationalists who designed the programme. This allows them to exchange ideas and arrange personalised guidance and counselling sessions if necessary.

4. Conclusion

The employment of narrative-based training methods has been shown to enhance self-awareness and extend an individual's repertoire of interpersonal competencies. The utilisation of these tools in conjunction with trainees, such as medical students, who are already obliged to interact closely with others, enables us to impart not only technical and scientific skills, but also the capacity to transcend these boundaries, integrating the practices they encounter with strategies for implementing soft skills and interpersonal skills. The project under discussion represents an opportunity for future specialist radiation oncologists to reinterpret their professional role through a narrative that focuses on the purely human aspects of the experience of illness and treatment, work, and relational and interpersonal aspects, for their self-realization as individuals and as professionals (Musaio, 2016).

Despite the project's notable level of participant engagement, incorporating systematic tools for assessing learning outcomes, such as rubrics, pre- and post-questionnaires, or structured qualitative analysis, was not feasible. This was partly due to the organisational and health-related constraints of the post-pandemic period. Consequently, the experience should be regarded as exploratory, while acknowledging the necessity for developing evaluation tools in the future that can more rigorously document the stability and depth of professional changes. Adopting the perspective of childhood entails embracing an attitude that interrogates without asserting ownership, that permits itself to be captivated by amazement, and that acknowledges the intrusion of the unanticipated as a potential conduit for comprehension. Such an attitude can facilitate a more nuanced interpretation of the emotional and relational dynamics inherent in clinical practice,

thereby rendering the professional more susceptible to a more sensitive and receptive encounter with the other.

Confronted with the challenges intrinsic to the medical profession and specialist training, acquiring the ability to articulate and discuss one's own professional development in a thoughtful manner, whilst also fostering a capacity for reflection and introspection concerning one's learning and interpersonal relationships, emerges as a transformative approach to cultivating an expert, balanced, trained, competent, and humanised medical professionalism (Sola, 2024). It is imperative to eschew purely regressive tendencies, favouring instead an ethical approach that enables us to maintain our capacity for listening, empathy, and responsibility towards others.

The narrative experience, as exemplified by the project "The care relationship between the demand for health and the desire for salvation," has been shown to enrich the cultural and professional background of doctors in training. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that the project opens up a broader perspective of human education and self-awareness. The integration of narrative practices into educational programmes has the potential to redefine the concept of education, transforming it into a dynamic and interactive process capable of responding to the challenges of a constantly evolving society (Batini, 2021).

The challenge for the future, therefore, lies in the ability to enhance and disseminate these practices so that they can contribute to an educational culture that promotes not only intellectual progress but also the psycho-emotional and relational well-being of each individual. In this sense, the integration of narrative models into healthcare training environments represents a significant opportunity for humanising the training process. This integration has the potential to foster a renewed vision of training, orientated towards self-awareness, ethical responsibility, and the construction of authentic and supportive relationships (Melacarne, 2022).

The potential of literature for children, adolescents, and younger generations in general, to facilitate interpretative pathways and enrich experiences, is significant in supporting this transformation and guiding healthcare professionals towards a practice that is increasingly attentive, reflective, and humanised.

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