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The love that frightens. Clinical-pedagogical Reflections

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1. Love in life and education

The experience of love is common to all human beings, of all ages, social classes and geographical origins (Bettetini, 2012; Passerini, 2008). Contemporary society has typically dragged love out of the intimate sphere, partly as a result of technological advances in the mass communication media, especially Internet. The media constantly dwell on the themes of love and sex, honing in on people's love lives and making gossip about them a global affair, exposing the most intimate details of the love affairs of the famous and not so famous, and shamelessly flaunting nudity. TV programs exhibit the private joys and sufferings of romantic partners for the entertainment of the general public, while soap operas keep millions of people glued to the screen, fascinated by the amorous intrigues of the characters (Mitchell, 2002). Contents such as these tap into the deep core emotions of all human beings, an outcome which is sometimes manipulated to suit the dominant understanding of the laws of market (Russell Hochschild, 2012). However, love remains little understood and developed at both the individual and the social level, not so much in terms of moral judgments, as in terms of knowing how to manage and relate to it (Irigaray, 2002). Educational and formative processes are particularly liable to encounter the dimension of love, given that by their nature they place adults in life contexts with children, teenagers, youths, other adults and elderly people (Riva, 2004). Educational processes enter into the "world of life" with their educational intentionality – sometimes conscious and sometimes less so – that is to say, with their "world of education": the two worlds then interact, are mixed together, fused and confused. The world of life consists on the one hand of a social, institutional and organizational world, with its norms, procedures, rules, actions, values and cultures, and on the other of the essential microcosm of each individual subject, populated by deep emotions, aspirations, needs, fears and unresolved childhood issues (Mortari, 2006).

The educational services provided by society – such as community centres, daycare centres for teenagers, elderly people and the disabled, communities for young offenders, residential communities for minors, people with disabilities, psychiatric patients, drug addicts, alcoholics, homes for single mothers and children or for women abuse victims, etc. – come to the encounter with the world of life with their pedagogical aims, their educational intentionality and their educational methods and tools (Villa, 2008). These services employ

helpers from a range of professional backgrounds to fulfil their primary duty, that of providing care and assistance to, and promoting the wellbeing and growth of, the subjects for whom they have “taken responsibility”. Thus professional teams are created that may be made up of educators, psychologists, doctors, psychiatrists and social workers, or of educators only. The key issue here is that all of these careers bring to the team their own particular pedagogical model and educational style, their own views on a range of educational issues, and their own mentality, which is a function of both their personal family and educational experiences and their sociocultural background. When educators carry out intentional educational actions, they inevitably imbue them with their own culture and values, and their own specific perspective on education. Each educator has his or her own idea of what is right and what is wrong in educational terms, what one must do and what one must not do, what is to be rewarded and what to be punished. It is therefore critical to identify and analyze how the various professional helpers intervene through their own concrete practices to orient, channel, judge and model their clients’ behaviors. This is the background against which we will examine the issue of love in educational processes, drawing on a specific case from real-life educational practice.

2. The case study

The context in which the case was observed was an educational community for adolescents, located on the outskirts of a large Northern Italian city. The community was founded about 15 years ago by a religious association, and the management was subsequently given over to a large and well-known cooperative in the social services sector. The coordinator of the community had a complex personal history: he had been a political activist during the 1970s. He subsequently encountered people who helped him rethink his life story and construct a new career for himself within the educational sector. He had therefore founded this community for adolescents which he managed together with a team of male and female educators, mostly aged between 30 and 40, with the exception of one or two older staff members. Given that the university research unit that I coordinate was conducting a study on evaluation models and procedure in educational services for minors, my colleagues and I visited the community on numerous occasions, carrying out a range of activities – interviews, focus group discussions, collection of institutional and individual narratives, observation – in the course of our field research. During one of our sessions, the coordinator and team of educators told us about how they approach the issue of love in education (or rather one of the possible manifestations of love). They recounted having wanted at all costs a mixed (male and female) community of adolescents and having battled with the relevant authorities to gain approval for this formula. They had then constructed a well-defined protocol that involved giving new entrants to the community a talking to on arrival. In the course of their first encounter with the newly-arrived teenager,

they explicitly addressed the issue of love in adolescence along the lines of: “You all have a lot of issues, each of you has a difficult background of your own so please don’t fall in love because if you do you’ll have the other person’s problems on top of your own, and it will be a disaster. So, be good and don’t fall in love with any of the boys/girls in the community, and everything will work out well”. The educators went on to tell us, that the previous year, a boy and girl had not heeded their advice and had fallen in love with one another, and that this had given rise to a critical incident. At first the relationship between the two adolescents had gone smoothly, but then they had quarreled over “something really silly, and I mean really silly”. The boy had gone to a disco with another girl, angering his girlfriend. The pair stopped talking to one another and this had created a dark and troubled atmosphere in the house. At that point, the educators called in the boy and decided to expel him from the community, thus restoring the peace (sic!).

3. Clinical-pedagogical reflections

This account presents a situation that was managed in a highly ambiguous manner by the community’s team of careers, and educational interventions that generated what Gregory Bateson (1956) has termed ‘double binds’. Contradictory messages were simultaneously sent to the clients. On the one hand the staff had held out to set up a mixed male-female community; on the other hand they wished to prevent the normal energy flowing between the sexes that attracts males to females and vice versa. The educators deliberately asked the teenagers entering the community not to fall in love, apparently failing to realize that falling in love is not something that can be voluntarily controlled. Equally paradoxical was their attempt to order adolescents not to fall in love, given that adolescence is the age par excellence in which individuals open up to the world outside the family, shifting the major emotional investments that they had previously reserved for their families to the external context. As is well known, preadolescence coincides with puberty, the development of the secondary sexual characteristics and of the ability to procreate (Vegetti Finzi, 2000; Waddell, 2002)). According to the theories of psychoanalysis, in parallel with the biological development of the body, at the psychological level on coming out of the so-called latency phase adolescents go through a reedition of the Oedipus complex. Specifically, Freud maintained that the Oedipus complex first appears at around the age of 4-5 years, bringing to the fore the desire to possess the opposite-sex parent and competition with the same-sex parent. This complex and emotionally demanding phase is then followed by a period of relative calm corresponding with the primary school years, during which children make space inside of themselves and concentrate on aspects related to the outside world, such as learning and socialization. In early adolescence there is a reawakening of the Oedipus complex stimulated by the endogenous biological development underway, with its related sexual and affective desires,

which can now be potentially put into practice. Given that incest is a strong taboo for our society, adolescents are led to direct their sexual and amorous needs and desires outside of the family context. Therefore, in this phase friendship and love play a vital role in promoting teenagers' psychophysical growth and development. Early adolescent love should be encouraged and supported, because it provides a channel – deemed appropriate by society – for the imposing force of teenagers' affective and sexual libido. If adolescents did not have the opportunity to channel their inner world of tempestuous emotions towards an external reference point, they would be forced to maintain a high level of affective investment in their family of origin, leading to serious psychological confusion.

In the latter scenario, the developmental course of adolescence would be obscured by a symbiosis with parents and siblings that would impede individuation of the self as an independent subject. Those who remain trapped in a symbiotic relationship with their families cannot go through the process that leads from absolute dependence, through relative independence, to the stage labeled by Winnicott as “towards independence”. These adolescents are therefore prevented from undertaking the process of separation from their family of origin, a process which – differently to in childhood – has now become an imperative if they are to imagine, experience and construct their own future adult lives. Thus, adolescent love plays a key role for several reasons: the most important of these is that it provides a platform from which teenagers can embark on this critical separation process. Love also helps adolescents to cope with the changes in their own bodies, which frequently occur suddenly and tumultuously. They no longer recognize their own bodies, which are becoming different to the childish bodies to which they were accustomed, and this frightens them, making them feel lost and insecure. They have the sensation that their body-psyche is shedding its old childish skin and is taking on a new skin, but given that they have never had this experience before it is difficult for them to understand what is going on. Sometimes the physical changes in the body can give rise to strong feelings of fragmentation of parts of the self, including unexplainable feelings of death, depression and despair. Therefore, adolescents have a strong need of their peer group, so as not to feel that they are the only ones going through this transformation. They experience the need to share tastes, dress, behaviors, vocabularies and myths with the rest of the group, because a uniformity of preferences and attitudes makes them feel that there is something solid that they can depend on (Maggiolini, Charmet, 2003).

Requited adolescent love provides the teenager with a sense of self-acceptance, a sense of being lovable and pleasant to others, which in turn promotes a sense of self-esteem and of being able to manage relationships with the opposite sex, as his or her own mother and father do and as society demands. Love enables adolescents to feel confirmed, reassured and comforted and to verify that their own body, although it has changed, is still lovable, and that the lost childish parts

have been replaced by new parts that are healthy, beautiful and good. This is also a key protection factor against the sense of fragmentation of the self, due to the loss of the childish body and psychological parts. Thus love plays a role in integrating the parts of self. Naturally, in addition to the support of their peer group and romantic partner, adolescents also need help from adults, in particular from educators, whether these are family members or professional helpers, both in the broader social context and in that of social and educational services. In the case of the residential community for minors, the situation is even more critical and delicate. The adolescents in this setting arrive there already in a state of crisis, often with a history of deprivation and abandonment on the part of their families. Their need to find sources of affective support, both amongst their peers and amongst the adult educators, is therefore all the greater (Kaneklin, 2003).

Clearly, these adolescents cannot but experience love in a way that is problematic, being compromised by their desperate but ambivalent need to form affective ties but at the same time to reject them. Those whose experience of the phase of affective dependence – an inevitable part of childhood – has been marked by neglect, abuse, violence and lack of affection, as they grow up will naturally come to desire affection just as strongly as they fear and run away from it. This ambivalence comes to the fore in adolescence, leading the teenagers to dip in and out of the affective relationships that they desire yet fear, both with their romantic partner and with their educators. Certain adolescent forms of acting out – such as forming an affective tie and then distancing oneself from it, seeking out serial romantic partners, breaking off relationships suddenly and without explanation, behaving contemptuously towards the affective relationship or towards the romantic partner themselves – may be connected to difficulty in sticking with a relationship that is desired but at the same time gives rise to anxiety and the fear of being abandoned or abused yet again. On the other hand, frequent changes of romantic partner may also be a normal adolescent behaviour. Adolescent love does not signify a pondered choice of partner but the need to explore the world outside the family, in order to get away from the specter of incest and to be confirmed as lovable people (Riva, 2012).

Educators working with this age group must therefore be aware of these complex psychological dynamics (Austin, 2003; Jeammet, 2008), which are part of normal adolescent development but are more pronounced in problem teenagers. Educators who have not received specific training in these developmental dynamics, or who have unresolved issues of their own – perhaps similar to those of the adolescents, which they have carried with them throughout their life stories – will inevitably encounter difficulty in managing educational processes with adolescents. The teenagers act as mirrors for the adults, reflecting stages of development that the adults thought they had long since gotten over and left behind (Barone, 2009). The educators are therefore strongly stimulated to confront their own outstanding personal issues, a process which may provoke feelings of

disorientation, stress, insecurity and intense suffering. Furthermore, as emphasized at the outset of this paper, they bring their own educational models and peculiar mentality to their professional work as educators. If they have not had the opportunity to work on themselves, through a self-formative process, they will not realize that they are arbitrarily introducing entirely personal elements into their educational action. Frequently unbeknownst to themselves, they pass off as valid in the absolute sense, aspects of their own *weltanschauung*, of their own idiosyncratic world view. This vision of the world has been influenced by educators' personal life histories, by their cultural backgrounds, by the educational models that they experienced in their families, by the dominant mentality in their social context, and finally, by the way in which they have processed over their lifetimes the good and the bad in their own life stories and educational histories. Over time, cognitive elements – such as representations, images, categorizations and systems of meanings – have combined with affective elements – including perceptions, sensations, emotions, feelings – in an inextricable interweaving of meanings that accompanies their individual experience and life events. The way in which professional helpers have emotionally experienced their own educational experiences from birth through their growth to maturity leads them to interpret the present through the selective filter of these emotive cognitions that are determined by their own particular life stories (Riva, 2011). When they encounter adolescents, who strongly draw them into contemplating the key questions of existence – love, sex, the meaning of life, death, corporeity, social rules and norms – educators are moved to deploy what is known as “pedagogical transfer”, that is to say, they reproduce in the “here and now” what they themselves experienced in the past.

The amorous moves of adolescents often bring into play educators' relationships with their own amorous education, which may have been complex and problematic in its own right. The challenges of romantic relationships are an essential part of the dimension of love, precisely on account of the complex set of social and personal factors that are at stake – a complexity that is often underestimated. Sentimental relationships have become particularly challenging since the collapse of the traditional models of family from the 1970s onwards that has disturbed the usual fit between the demands of society and conformity to same on the part of the individual. In the past, men and women for the most part adhered to the dominant social model, which defined a priori male and female roles, the relative positions of husbands and wives, the type of family to be formed and how sexuality was to be managed. In the wake of developments in much of Europe and the world – including the protest movements of the 1970s, the sexual revolution, the challenge to the authoritarian model, the female emancipation movement, and the enhanced value attributed, at least in theory, to childhood – the traditional models of romantic relationships have been totally swept away. Nonetheless, the generation that was growing up during the time of change had already internalized the old

rigid normative models that obliged individuals to conform to the dominant social model. Even the younger generations that grew up over the following decades partly identify with those models, because their families of origin – parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, educators and teachers – transmitted to them – on a more or less conscious basis – the models that were challenged by the youth movements of 1968. In consequence, in living out their romantic relationships, all of these generations have been faced with conflicting behavioral models – more traditional and rigid on the one hand and more modern and libertarian on the other. The educators of today, especially the older generation, have lived through historically difficult periods from the point of view of discerning how to live out and define romantic relationships: the majority has swung between reverting to the more judgmental and censoring models of the past and opening up to concessions of freedom previously unthinkable.

They have had to deal with the emancipation of their female partners and with pressure from the Catholic model which has always viewed sex and romantic partnerships outside marriage as sinful. This has given rise to hybrid identities, and a frequently unconscious binocular perspective combining old and new ways of viewing the world, romantic relationships and education. In the example of the community described above, it is obvious that the coordinator – who had been young in the 1970s – had drawn the rest of his team, made up of educators aged between 30 and 35, into his own personal model that was influenced by traditional models of romantic relationships and specifically of how adolescents should live romantic love. Along with his traditional views of how young people should manage romantic relationships, he also applied a traditional authoritarian model (Miller, 2007) of the educational relationship between adults and minors: this meant that the adult decided a priori what was good for the minor, without having to listen to the young person's viewpoint or needs. With difficult youngsters from disrupted and unstable family backgrounds, often characterized by a conflicting relationship between the parents themselves, the authoritarian model can often fulfill a valuable holding function, by giving the young people the feeling of being contained by someone who is strong and clear in their views. This is borne out by the fact that the staff of the community in question generally obtain positive educational outcomes. Thus, in a certain sense, the overwhelming need of these problematic youths finds a match in the educational model adopted by the educators. Adolescents suffering from a strong lack of love and affection, are not overly fussy when they find someone who is seriously committed to providing care for them. On the other hand, although this strong and decided approach to taking on responsibility for the clients may come across as reassuring, it is also partly manipulative, because the educators impose their unilateral, directive and ultimately castrating perspective on the youths: you must not fall in love. However, in any case, this injunction by its nature is impossible to respect because falling in love is outside of our control.

This case provides a good example of pedagogical transfer as outlined above, that is of how we tend to adopt in the present the cultural and educational models that we grew up with (Fabbri, 2012). The educators apply an authoritarian model, with the addition of moralistic and judgemental elements, according to which falling in love is considered to be wrong, adolescents are not meant to fall in love with one another, love is a waste of time and a passing whim, adolescents need to be educated using a model that requires them to conform without argument to the models defined by the adults, that human beings are passive and without reactivity. They therefore implicitly expect that the reeducation of their clients will follow a model of change that is almost automatic, linear and faithful to the stimulus-response sequence, in terms of instruction-execution of the adult's request. It goes without saying that such a model of change is destined to fail miserably as the case described illustrates. Nonetheless, the educators in question did not modify their own educational model or beliefs as a result of the negative episode. On the contrary, rather than modify their rules they continue to expel the young who are unable to respect them. Basically, the team has barricaded itself behind an ideology that is widespread in educational contexts in general and in this type of educational service in particular, according to which, with difficult clients, it is necessary to be strict about rules and norms, define narrow limits and make sure that these are respected at all costs. To this end, an initial pact is made between the team of educators and their clients, such that the minors are informed of the rules of the community and of the need for them to respect them, otherwise they will be expelled. At first sight, this educational perspective may seem sensible and appropriate especially in so-called reeducation contexts. However, on closer critical and clinical analysis, we can see that the development of the subject and the characteristics of human beings are defined in ways that are altogether arbitrary and unsuccessful in attaining educational goals, because they do not reflect the true nature of human development.

It is as though education were based on the deeply rooting notion that human beings may be conditioned, shaped and regimented (see Foucault, 1975; Miller, 2007; Massa, 1993), and that they can and should be inculcated with ideas, beliefs, values and feelings. The youth protest movements of the twentieth century as well as advances in the social science debate and in recognition of the rights of the weakest (see the many international conventions and charters of rights) have provided ample evidence that there are alternative ways of understanding education that are more respectful of the rights of children and youths. Psychology has documented the complexity of human development and the fact that the human subject, while predisposed to be conditioned by its social and cultural environment and to internalize norms and models, nevertheless retains some scope for personal agency. The specific case of reeducation poses a further complication, because the clients have already internalized the rules – whether good or bad – of their home background. Therefore, if the

educators adopt an educational model based on the inculcation of norms and rules, they find themselves clashing with the set of prescriptions previously internalized by the youths. If the reeducation of the clients is based on a model of conditioning via the imposition of norms, both educators and adolescents will experience great difficulty. Adolescents because even if they would like to immediately conform to the new rules are unable to do so because, inside of themselves, they are experiencing cultural and cognitive conflict between the old and the new educational cultures. The educators, on their part, are challenged (Palmieri, 2012) because they have selected a blunt instrument with which to fulfill their educational role, blunt is the sense of structurally ineffective in relation to the declared aim of reeducation of the youth. Lack of awareness of the dynamics governing the internalization by the individual of his or her social environment makes the team of educators blind to the efficacy of their chosen tools of work. If on the contrary they had such awareness, they would firstly be able to clearly identify the given, that is to say, the existing and significant levels of educational conditioning that their clients had already internalized and which cannot be wiped out either with a magic wand or through an authoritarian approach or on the basis of the so-called educational pact stipulated with clients when they enter the community. The educators would realize that by imposing predefined changes, they actually force their clients into a corner, leaving them to deal single handedly with the internal conflict between their previously internalized educational models and those currently demanded by the educators.

It may be that the adolescent clients wish to follow the new models and the new rules that they have been set, and they genuinely set out to do so, but then they come up against internal barriers, automatic behaviors and fears linked to past traumas that frighten them and drive them to activate strong defense mechanisms. When they experience such anxiety and fear they are disorientated and desperately need help to make sense of their fears. If the adults understand where these fears come from, they will also manage to be supportive of the youngsters; otherwise, they will believe – as unfortunately is frequently the case – that the youths are merely being awkward and that they are deliberately contradicting or rebelling against the adults. When anxious and insecure adolescents are not fortunate enough to encounter adults who are aware of the psychological mechanisms that are playing out inside of them, they begin to defend themselves from anxiety and conflict. Firstly they raise barriers in the relationship with the adults, they become locked up in themselves, communicating in monosyllables or set phrases. However, behind this facade they continue to unconsciously experience multiple cultural and emotional conflicts. The educators' demands for them to change their behavior, in practice mean modifying their base culture, assimilated from the familial and social context in which they grew up. Thus, asking youths to change their behavior is a source of great distress for them because of the strong affective and emotional valence of internalized culture.

Although this same culture is often at the root of adolescents' deviant behavior, it is connected to their affective ties with their parents and siblings, for better and for worse. Changing behavior means demolishing the culture assimilated together with the care, nursing and assistance received in early childhood. It is not a neutral operation: for example it can evoke strong guilt for betraying one's own roots, one's own family. In addition to internal guilt, at times the external context also intervenes in the shape of the family who truly may not approve of the changes, and refuse to recognize their own child any more. Therefore, the adolescents feel crushed between the two groups of significant adults, their own family and the educators (Bertolini, Caronia, 1999). The latter are slowly becoming a new and significant reference point for the young people in their care, especially for those who are physically or psychologically alone in the world.

No matter what, adolescents remain attached to their parents, even though they have been maltreated and neglected by them in many cases. The psychological phenomenon of abused children's attachment to their abusing parents, or battered women's attachment to their violent husbands is well known. In spite of the constant suffering and humiliation, the abused party never wishes to be separated from the abusers, especially if they are his or her parents. These considerations highlight the complex nature of the changes that clients are invited to make. It is not a question of willpower, as a particular educational ideology doggedly continues to insist, but of requesting a deep transformation of personality structure and of the core of individual identity that has formed over time. Youngsters' personalities were formed within the affective world of their early childhood experiences with their families. Their adolescent and adult experiences of love will be influenced for their entire lives by the type of attachment established with their parents as young children (Bowlby, 1979). The subject's personality and the love that he or she displays are closely related to one another. Therefore, cultural background, educational history, personality and identity and the type of love experienced must be jointly analyzed within a framework of reciprocal relationships. This level of understanding allows a solid platform to be created from which to plan an appropriate educational intervention for the specific situation. Authoritarian or punitive interventions, when applied to matters that are highly delicate and complex, are bound to generate consequences that are not always positive or under the control of the educators. As usual, imposing rules is used as a crutch when a deeper and richer understanding of the problem is lacking. If educators are not open to exploring the affective dimensions underpinning manifest behaviors and attitudes, they may inadvertently reiterate the abuse that their clients have already undergone, reproducing the conditions characterizing the original abuse.

For example, in the case analyzed here, all the responsibility and the blame were attributed to the boy, who was then expelled from the community. It is clear that what the adult educators do not properly

understand is unloaded onto the recipients of their educational actions. Furthermore, the educators – as representatives of the surrounding social and cultural macrocosm – confound aspects regarding the requirement to conform to the social norms of the context – in this case the community – with aspects of the subject's psychosocial development, such as early adolescent love. The injunction is paradoxical not so much with regard to specifying appropriate behaviors for the expression of love, as with regard to forbidding the youngsters to fall in love in the first place, because – as the educators remind them – they already have enough problems of their own. It is true that they have serious affective issues because as children they have been neglected, abused and manipulated. However, adolescent love, as well as being part of normal development, is also a sign of hope that something of beauty in life may still be aspired to. Therefore the intransigent order not to fall in love, because this will only augment their problems, inadvertently impacts on a very delicate area of adolescents' existence. This has to do with holding on to the meaning of existence itself, because it is practically impossible to live without even the tiniest glimmer of hope. Love is an intimate and private dimension that draws on the deepest wellsprings of one's sense of self, and lays the foundations of the most hidden core of identity (Lopez, 1987). Love is connected with the very founding of existence, not to mention the fact that every human being is generated because a man and a woman came together on the basis of some form of mutual attachment, whether good or bad. The case that we have described could lead us to comment that it almost seems as though the educators have chosen their profession more for themselves than for their clients. It is as though the educators approach their work with a preconceived vision of what is to be done in a certain type of setting, before having carried out a pedagogical diagnosis of the situation, of the specific issues affecting it and of its unique characteristics. It is as though they wish to work as educators in order to make events happen in line with their plans, replacing so to speak the territory with the map, as Alfred Korzybski and later Bateson have expressed it. It seems as though there is an invisible split between educators' intentions and their educational programs – based on a linear and simplified logic – and the complex reality of their clients, who often have no notion whatsoever of having to fit into educational programs.

The adolescents are going through adolescence for the first time in their lives and they move in the world on the basis of their own life experience and internal needs, even though they may not always have a conscious perception of the latter. This factor underlies the lack of understanding between educators and teenagers, because the former take for granted that the latter have assimilated their requests and provided their willing consent, whereas the teenagers on their part may be light years from even contemplating such a thing. In addition, these adolescents have often been remanded to the socioeducational services by the Juvenile Court and the local social services. Their lack of choice in the matter inevitably heightens their sense of

disorientation, feelings of anger and resentment, and inclination to engage in conflict. Often in these cases, the young people feel doubly constrained by society to adapt and conform. On the one hand they feel oppressed by the institutions of the Court and the social services with their tough verdicts imposed from on high, and on the other by the educators. The latter attempt to implement educational actions that translate into practice the recommendations of the Court. The educators are professionals who work with human beings, trying to modify them and coming up against the demanding educational challenge of reconciling the demands of society with the needs of the individual. The educators' task, bordering on impossible, is therefore to find a way to put together the distinct needs of leading their charges to adapt to social requirements – which obviously vary from one society to another – and facilitating them in constructing a relatively independent self (Levesque, 2002). Within this arduous dual task, educators and youths come up against the further challenge of falling in love and love, which by their nature overturn the pre-established order and rules and linear thinking. This is frightening both for educators – whose pedagogical castle comes tumbling down about their ears – and for adolescents – who are living this intense and meaningful emotional experience from the inside.

In the case examined here, it seems evident that the educators were frightened by the dimension of budding adolescent love, which required them to accompany their charges' growth through a turbulent phase of individual existence, such as adolescence. They were afraid of being caught up in the tensions, conflicts and typically adolescent – and amorous – behaviours of the 'sturm und drang' kind (storm and stress), in other words of being obliged to ride on an emotional rollercoaster. While this emotional intensity is perfectly understandable in light of the characteristics of adolescent development outlined about, it nonetheless disconcerts and causes anxiety in adult educators, who are no longer in touch with their own adolescent part. Educators are in this case more than ever called to enter into the complex dimension that Bion – borrowing an expression from the English poet, Keats – has defined as 'negative capacity'. By this he means the need for those in the helping and caring professions who support the development of children, youth, adults and the elderly – to tolerate conditions of uncertainty, which in turn can lead to a deep-seated feeling of insecurity. Love, by definition, involves a movement to change an established state of affairs, in the direction of a new phase in which one becomes open to the unfamiliar and the unknown, that is to say, to uncertainty. Furthermore, given that love implies openness to the relationship with the other who is distinct from oneself, it also involves a significant amount of adjustment in order to coordinate oneself with one's romantic partner. Educators are already under pressure on account of the difficult job that they do and so the sentimental ups and downs of their charges may represent an increase in their burden of stress and worry which they are not able to tolerate (Harris, Rendall, Nashat, 2011).

4. Conclusions

Love is frightening and educators, both at the individual level and as members of a team, are not always ready to deal with it. Educators fear love because it overturns their educational projects, forcing them to rethink the assumptions on which these projects are based and to question the validity of their methods and instruments. It upends the ready-to-go professional tool kit that the educators have partly learned during their initial and in-service training, partly developed on the basis of their practical experience and partly drawn from their personal pedagogical model as experienced in the family. Love goes outside fixed models, and this is even more so in the case of adolescents on account of the phase of biological development that they are going through: the advent of puberty, with its related bodily, cognitive and psychic changes. Educators require ongoing training, consultancy and supervision to help them reflect both on the specific nature of the problems that they encounter in their day to day educational practice and on the subjective dimension of their work (Graham, 2004; Bainbridge, West, 2012).

If they do not develop their awareness of the latter aspect, they are likely to inadvertently project it onto their clients, forcing them into situations that are ambiguous, difficult to manage and, above all, unfair. Professional training (Riva, 2004; Blandino, 2009; Ulivieri Stiozzi, 2004; Iori, 2010; Contini, 2001), both at the induction phase and in-service can play a key role in helping educators to gain awareness of their own stereotypes and judgments, and of their own beliefs about the different spheres of life and education. It is also critical to raise awareness, both amongst the general public and amongst social policy-makers, of the need to invest resources and thought in adult training in order to impact in turn on the wellbeing of children and youth, and therefore of society as a whole.

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