

Proceedings

# Art Pedagogy and Gender Education: The Dialectic between Images and Consciousness, Words and Meanings <sup>†</sup>

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**Abstract:** The close relationship between gender stereotypes, representations of masculine and feminine roles and the *images* of women and men produced by art, mass media and the collective consciousness is as self-evident as it is—all too frequently—underestimated and misunderstood. This evidence is closely related to the persistence of damaging stereotypes of gender roles still common accepted in the Italian culture (as well as in other UE Member States), nevertheless gender stereotypes reduce the life opportunities for women and girls, for men and boys. In fact, inequality between women and men, and the prevailing gender roles are deeply rooted in obsolete social structures and anachronistic mental attitudes. Thus, equal opportunities education beginning in early childhood plays a crucial role, both in *creating* a new language to underpin the relationship between the genders and in *enhancing* children’s critical understanding of the plurality and complexity of the life contexts, narratives, representations of gender and social roles and, also, symbolic universes surrounding them.

**Keywords:** art pedagogy; early childhood; equal opportunities education; gender education; picture books

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## 1. Introduction

Boys and girls learn from what they see, and what they see and experience influences the *way* they observe, interpret and internalize the images and meanings of the reality in which they are immersed over the course of their lives. Here the word *image* is used in a broad sense to describe the many means and forms of artistic representation—ranging from illustrations in books and newspapers to children’s books, from art to advertising, from movies to multimedia visual products—as inputs that generate an *aesthetic experience* [1–4], that is both subjective and collective, being a result of both the imagination and the creativity of individuals and the *taste* of a culture and the collective consciousness of an era [5–7].

The words produced by adults and listened to by children, the gender *images* and *models* perceived by children in the *iconosphere* that surrounds them (*à la* Gilbert Cohen-Séat), suggestions evoked by images in books, illustrations for children’s silent books and advertising contribute to defining existential *styles*, behaviours, thoughts, and the *perspective* through which children learn to know and interpret the world they live in [8–10]. Since children receive a lot of negative messages regarding intimate relationships and gender roles from the media it would be interesting and constructive to promote an education over another from early childhood, just by changing the mental attitude of adults [11–13]. Moreover, we use words to build shared meanings within the culture that “forms” and “deforms” us (*à la* Bruner), since it is well known that language not only reflects the

thoughts, ideals and values of a certain culture, but also contributes to determining and organising them [14]. Hence, it is inevitable that language, the adult *consciousness* (the ways adults express themselves and behave with respect to children in words, gestures, images, but also with *silence* and things not said) and gender stereotypes can be seen in the behaviours of children as early as at the infant-toddler centre [15,16]. As a consequence, it is possible to promote—in our proximal and ecological system (*à la* Bronfenbrenner) [17]—one kind of education in preference to another and to offer equal opportunities education from early childhood just by working with adults (educators, parents, grandparents, other adults who are *significant* for the child) to change their outlook and attitude: more specifically, if these adult figures are helped to *recognise* and *understand* their (explicit and implicit) educational *styles*, they can mindfully strive to adopt *behaviours* and *styles of caring* that are *intentionally* educative. As a result of establishing new relationships and an informed dialogue between parents, educators and researchers [18,19]. That is to say, they can multiply actions, behaviours and words capable of developing a *new lexicon* against discrimination and gender violence, as well as dialogue and *equal relations* as taking place in a “space in-between” (*à la* Arendt) [20]. Rather than perpetuating a rigid division of roles—in our proximal system, the family and cultural groups in which we are embedded—considered in dominant social representations as typically *masculine* or *feminine* [21–23]. It is a conduct that seeks to raise the awareness of *adults* of the most widespread linguistic and gender stereotypes—which they themselves convey, often unknowingly—as a premise to stimulate and develop in *children* both a *critical sense* of what they see and feel, and the use of an original and *metaphorical language* thanks to the possibility of experimenting synaesthetic experiences from early childhood [24]. That is to say, those aesthetic experiences generated by words, images, sounds and games evoked in the adult’s storytelling or reading aloud to the child, in a *narrative relationship* that allows the co-construction of shared meanings (between adult and child). A *metaphorical language* is free from stereotypes, prejudices and clichés, that is, from the closures and rigidity of common language [25,26], which to the contrary is based on ancient semantic and power dissimilarities (between masculine and feminine), sometimes not easy to decode and even less so to deconstruct and then overcome.

Hence, the hypothesis of *imagining* little boys and girls in a transformational sense with respect to overly sweet discussions about childhood, but also with respect to deeply rooted consciousnesses in adults as a result of a distorted and sexist use of language [11,12,22]. In contrast, by adopting a perspective of *proximity* between genders [20] starting with the games played in the nursery, it is possible to establish a more attentive and respectful *language* and behaviour (*versus* a language that is sexist and stereotyped, competitive and individualistic). The only conceivable way forward is to begin by transforming the *example* given by adults (parents, educators, teachers), who within a framework of personal and social empowerment become aware of *gender* and *power* stereotypes rooted in our culture, and accept responsibility for deconstructing, rejecting and dismantling them at home, at school, and in society [27,28], thereby adopting a new perspective on communicating and relating, caring and *performativity* [23] between adults and children, and between women and men.

## 2. Art Pedagogy and the Development of Visual Literacy

When analysing the intimate relationship between art pedagogy and aesthetic education, the thinking of John Dewey and Herbert Read offers a crucial point of reference.

In *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey defines art and the consumption of art (in general) as an integral part of human experience. Each work of art—whether it be a prestigious palace, a painting, a musical symphony or a statue—is not separate from human experience. In fact, the art expresses and manifests it in the deepest sense, because it can restore continuity between those refined and intense forms of experience that are works of art and events, the facts and the sufferings of every day that constitute experience. The work of art no longer coincides with the artefact, but rather with the experiential function aroused in the adult or child user, with which it creates a meaningful expressive relationship characterised by the globality of synaesthetic feeling [1]. In *Education through Art* (1943) H. Read also argues that art is a fundamental element of the educational process from childhood, therefore the encounter between children and art is essential, and writes: “[...] We want art in general

to be the basic foundation of education. In fact, no other discipline is capable of giving the child not just a consciousness in which image and concept, feeling and thought are connected and unified, but also an instinctive knowledge of the laws of the universe and an attitude or behaviour in harmony with nature" [2] (pp. 95–96). According to Read, aesthetic experience simultaneously expands *sensitivity* (sensation, education of the senses) and *reason* (thought), laying the foundation for the development of imaginative and manual skills as well as allowing them to learn to distinguish the beautiful from the ugly, the good from the bad, and the noble from the ignoble [2]. For this reason, he encourages the education of children *through art* as a profoundly aesthetic educational *method* capable of supporting children's natural desire to *do* and manipulate [29]. An idea, on closer inspection, in keeping with the Montessorian construct of serious and committed *work* (not mere play) on the part of the child, who is moved by the intimate desire to freely choose the activities to be carried out, and to be autonomous, in the sense of "doing things by herself" without the help of an adult or educator [30]. In early 20th century Italy, Montessori firmly believed in and advocated educating children in taste and *beauty*, as for example in her *Case dei Bambini* (*Children's Houses*) in Rome and Milan, with a view to broadening the children's experience and thereby potentially bringing about a change in the lifestyles of their families. However, this revolutionary idea was not shared by the important philosopher Benedetto Croce who - in the same historical period - felt that children were unfit for the enjoyment of "pure art", which requires "maturity of mind" to be understood. In the *Notice* that opens his *Handbook of Aesthetics* (1913), he argues that his *lessons* may be useful to young people who are embarking on the study of poetry and art in general, because no discipline can awaken interest and reflection in young people as readily as art and poetry, with their power to reveal the relationship between *form* and *content*, and between *intuition* and *expression* and thereby to overcome materialism, and, together, spiritualistic dualism.

The concept of art as experience, developed by J. Dewey and H. Read, has its roots in the 18th century, in the Alexander G. Baumgarten's intuitions (and his work *Aisthetica*, from the Greek αἰσθητικότητα/aisthánomai), or in the intuition of Charles Batteux and Edmund Burke (*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*), as well as Immanuel Kant (*Critique of Judgement*) and Friedrich Schiller (*Briefe über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen*) with his ideal of an aesthetic education for humanity, uniting *ethics* and *aesthetics*, sense beauty and politics, just to recall some of the more important Authors and works [31]. A concept that later recurs in Henri-Louis Bergson and in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* ("every consciousness is perceptual consciousness") in order to describe the phenomenology of consciousness, and is found again in the most interesting poetics of post-situationalist contemporary artists including the Cuban Tania Bruguera, who defines her works as *Arte Util* or *Arte de conducta* [32] (p. 94), underlining the inextricable link between *aesthetics*, *ethics* and *political* commitment. Today the concept of art as an experience underpins art pedagogy in schools and museums, given that it is now an established concept that aesthetic experience enriches thought and opens new pathways in the *consciousness* of children and adults [33–35].

According to the art critic Renato Barilli, "[...] aesthetics is a theory and a practice of qualitative improvement of the senses" [36] (p. 15); it follows that aesthetic education encourages the refinement of sensitivity, creativity, imagination and even of caring for people (for the environment and for things) as essential abilities for a life full of positive relationships and open to the future. Dewey argued that the intertwining of rational and aesthetic-emotional experience takes place because *the aesthetic* is the clarified and intensified development of traits that normally belong to any concrete experience. On the other hand, both science and art with their epistemological statutes embody the same fundamental principles of the relationship of life with its environment, and both meet the same basic needs of knowledge [1]. Given that, as H.R. Jausse maintains, in aesthetic activities that generate aesthetic education, doing, producing and representing are like *Poiesis*, communication is like *Katharsis* and the image of the world is like *Aisthesis* [37]. The economist Nobel Prize M. Yunus also agrees with this framework, believing that "[...] everything starts with *imagination*: before we do something, we must imagine it. We cannot create anything that was not first imagined, so it is

necessary to help the very young to imagine and work to make their dreams come true. Until we can *think differently* from the ordinary or usual, things will not happen differently” [38] (p. 38).

Hence, the work of children (and adults) in a *laboratory*—understood not just as a *place for teaching* but rather any place in which shared knowledge is produced—represents a privileged space for making, creating and playing with art, starting from the stories and experiences of the participants, and one of the most effective metaphors for existence. Indeed, the experience of play-art-work, when co-constructed with others in the course of mutual exchanges allows one both to refine one’s personal *taste* and to develop one’s own *identity*, in a continuous toing and froing between the *representation* of reality, *creation* (art as aesthetic experience) and *self-representation* [1,5,34]. Let us conclude this brief analysis with an observation by Agata Boetti who describes her privileged experience of encountering and playing with art—shared with her father and famous artist Alighiero Boetti—with these words: “We quickly browsed magazines and newspapers looking for images whose shapes might be interesting to us. [...] Everything was image, everything was potentially the foundation for a new idea or for a game” [39] (p. 60): a game that by broadening experience and knowledge exercises the ability to transform the present and go beyond the already given.

And not alone this. The digital revolution of the 20th century and the resulting spread of mass media, of personal and social media have profoundly changed our behaviour towards information, our ways of communicating and deciphering images and aesthetic experiences. For this reason, it is appropriate to educate children both in the enjoyment of looking at figures and images, making use of art in its different expressions to produce art and to have aesthetic experiences that train the imagination, consciousness and all five senses, and *visual literacy*—the skill defined in 2011 by the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL)—inherent in knowing how to comprehend, analyse and interpret the network’s visual information properly, in addition to knowing how to manage it to communicate effectively. The interaction between text and images (on paper or virtual) produces new meanings, not always expected, so it is necessary to know how to identify the stratification of information enclosed in a single image [15,34]. Which requires visual attention, able to transform the simple act of looking into knowing how to see: to know how to interpret and analyse the meaning of images, to critically evaluate information and sources, to be able to effectively use images and means of visual communication, know how to create images as a *means* of visual communication. Also through the retrieval and dissemination of visual material on the Internet, in an ethically correct manner. Hence, visual literacy prepares children (and adults) to better understand and contextualise the cultural, ethical, aesthetic and technical components inherent in the production and use of visual material. For this reason, this skill makes it possible both to learn how to use information from mass media more critically (and avoid the risks of Internet, e.g., fake news, cyberbullying) and to provide one’s constructive contribution to the sharing of new knowledge and cultures.

### 3. Gender as a Socio-Cultural Construct between Agency and Communion

In the *gender studies* and the post-structuralist perspective of American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler, expressed in her most significant works [23,40–42] gender is considered as a socio-cultural construct (a person’s self representation as male or female, including gender and social roles), versus the widespread tendency of common sense to see gender as only a *product of nature* (e.g., biological sex and differences in males and females). The differences of power between genders would therefore result from an ancient masculine and patriarchal legacy decreed and perpetuated arbitrarily and for centuries the subordination of woman to man, instead of social inclusion and gender equality [43,44].

From a different theoretical perspective, American psychologist David Bakan [45] claims that human existence is attributable to two fundamental modes of relationship with other living beings, namely *agency* and *communion*. The former manifests itself in self-expression and expansion, being autonomous, creative and result-oriented, having a good self-confidence, while in its negative form excessive agency can lead to self-referentialism and the desire for power, possession and domination. The latter is more oriented towards the creation of relationships, manifesting itself in knowing how

to relate to others with empathy and altruistically, knowing how to be collaborative, cooperative and constructive [46] to the point of being willing to sacrifice one's own needs to pursue the well-being of the collective. Hence, the need to balance the two dimensions so as to avoid excess and deviation. With respect to these two relationship modes, some research shows that women are less interested in power and less ambitious than men [47], if by power we understand having the means and resources to influence the actions of others and pursue private interests or those of a minority. The *power* that seems to interest women the most is *soft power*, the ability to create connections and policies of co-responsibility that make the most of the complementary nature of (masculine and feminine) roles, horizontal relationships rather than hierarchies, equal but different. In politics, for example, women tend to be more *policy-seeking* than *office-seeking* [48], confirming theories on gender differences with respect to values, which claim that men are more interested in promoting themselves and the acquisition of power for this purpose, while women tend to pursue more altruistic and collective ideals [49] in a transformative perspective and direction.

The *soft power* of women consists in *co-opting* rather than imposing, and is often combined with *smart power*, which is the expression of contextual intelligence that makes one flexible and capable of dealing with complex situations by knowing how to make the most effective decisions [50] while the more masculine hard power is based on authority and incentive understood as an exchange aimed at obtaining consent and negotiation. Finally, it has been shown that where there is greater gender equality both sexes have greater freedom to express the ideals they believe in [51].

From these reflections, a future change of cultural paradigm with regard to equal opportunities is only conceivable if women and men together are able to pursue their existential design and self-realisation (personal empowerment), and to produce a new *collective* identity driving a radical change in communicative-relational *styles* based on a shared, pervasive and transformative leadership. That is to say, acting as agents of a real and democratic cultural change inspired by ideals and values to which they tend (social empowerment) [52]. Since *style* always has communicative, relational and cognitive dimensions.

#### 4. Teaching Children to Care for Words (and Images) through Picture Books and Silent Books

Based on the studies of Judith Butler on the performative role of language, and taking on the assumptions introduced by *gender studies* that have demonstrated the socio-cultural character of the *feminine* and the *masculine* intended as categorical models of reference [21–23,27,28], we now briefly present a laboratory project that is part of a broader Action-Research (A-R) [53,54] and a programme still in progress, in the municipally-run infant-toddler centres and nursery schools of the Municipality of Comacchio (Ferrara, Italy), on the themes of gender and equal opportunities education and respect for all forms of difference. The laboratory-course (conducted by the author during the 2017 school year, after a previous two-year period of training involving the educators in other theoretical and practical activities) [55–57] is based on the methodology of the *Laboratory of Operative Epistemology* (LOE) by Alberto Munari [58] and aimed at analysing the representation of *masculine* and *feminine* in advertising, art, picture books and silent books. The purpose is to encourage educators—and through their mediation arrive at the point of changing the *perspective* of children and parents—to critically *recognise, analyse and deconstruct* gender *models* that are particularly superficial, deleterious and counter-educational in order to collectively develop new and alternative ones. The LOE methodology was chosen because it promotes experimentation, multi-sensory research and simultaneously a reflection on the cognitive processes triggered in the group and individuals, as well as on the ethical and aesthetic values underpinning laboratory work shared with others. Given that “Playing with art becomes the best opportunity to have a creative experience” [59] (p. 7), it was chosen to work on illustrated children's books, beginning with the analysis of 45 top Italian and foreign interesting picture books and silent books (published by: Giralangolo EDT, Orecchio Acerbo, Settenove, Salani, Sinnos, Donzelli, Flammarion (Paris), Penguin Random House (D), Rose Sélavy, Giunti Junior, Einaudi Junior, just to recall some small or big *publishing companies engaged in drawing* new trends in children's book publishing): *interesting* for the artistic level and quality of their *texts* (and contents) and *illustrations*. Some of them represent gender roles properly, others do not, precisely to compare

the different representations and narratives. On the one hand, the activity has the purpose of preparing and training educators to create new and original ones, suitable for real, “flesh and blood” children at the nurseries where they work. And, in fact, in carrying out this workshop they involved the parents of the children in the creation of images and photos useful for the new picture books. On the other hand, the activity derives from the fact that picture books and silent books are *polysemic* works generated by the dialectical dialogue between text (words), images and *metaphors* [60] where each can imagine his or her own path of interpretation. Incorporating problems and complexities in the narrative on multiple levels, stimulating the curiosity and pleasure of learning in adults and children.

The 21 female educators (average age 34 just one university graduate with only two years of service, while the others all have over 10 years’ experience) who took part in the project after reading the picture books analysed the relevance of mental and symbolic processes of a *logical* nature, but also *analogical*, *metaphorical* and re-combinational that picture books can stimulate in children. The pedagogical function of picture books regards the relationship they generate between the adult who reads and the child that listens, intrigued by a text and a “metatext” whose signs, images and *metaphors* stimulate emotions, trigger the *imagination* and *discovery*, but also require research and personal reflection to understand it [61]. For example, a good silent book must have a decipherable metaphor, but also something indecipherable, because the child must not become used to an environment in which everything is known, easy, immediate: in fact, the things that children do not immediately understand set their imagination in motion and ignite their curiosity [6,24,61] accustoming them to thinking and reflecting. Ultimately, the picture book can stimulate and intrigue the young reader by allowing him or her to find a written (verbal) and iconic text to explore, journey through and imagine: every time bringing it to life—with every reading by an adult—in a different way. With pages of a text whose signs, images, empty spaces and metaphors stimulate emotions, triggering the imagination and discovery no less than reflexivity. Marco Dallari argues that: “Approaching an illustration is very different from looking at a pictorial work, an advertising image or a road sign [because it] is in itself an intertextual device” being linked to a written text and interrelated to other codes with which it contributes to building the story [62] (p. 172).

As noted by a female educator (the only university graduate of the group), A-R involves and engages one in a journey that is “[...] very interesting but also ‘difficult’ [...] because we have not been provided with any easy ‘ready-made’ solutions, but has stimulated us to reflect, encounter after encounter, on the subject of gender differences (as well as on the most common stereotypes related to it) [...]”. Guided by the trainer prof. Manuela Gallerani, we realised that despite being convinced that we are educating in a ‘neutral’ way (so making no ‘differences’ between one boy and another, one girl and another), in reality this doesn’t happen because culture and language are never neutral, as she has extensively explained and illustrated. In particular, she made us reflect on how culture in all its forms (from television to advertising to childhood books and picture books) is not neutral and therefore strongly influences adults, children and even us educators. It is precisely this awareness that we gradually developed that led us to be more open and attentive not only in our educational work, but also in our daily lives [...] stripping ourselves of prejudices and stereotypes that lead us to have limited visions” [63] (pp. 19–20).

## 5. Conclusions and Proposals

In conclusion, the action-research workshop that involves constructing simple picture books has the precise aim of helping to conceive a path of equal opportunities education and respect for others by focusing on the correct use of an oral, written and iconic language that is as free as possible of sexist stereotypes. For the educators—care professionals—this represents a genuine *challenge* that is still open. With the power to stimulate new questions and actions, behaviours and educational styles that have not yet become fully part—or any part—of early childhood education practice. However, only by getting children to *experience*—in the family, at school, through extracurricular activities—the *interchangeability* of gender roles (and equality of roles even given their specificities and differences), from early childhood, through meaningful play and narratives is it possible to achieve

an education that is critical, democratic and capable of developing life skills, competencies and active citizenship in children.

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