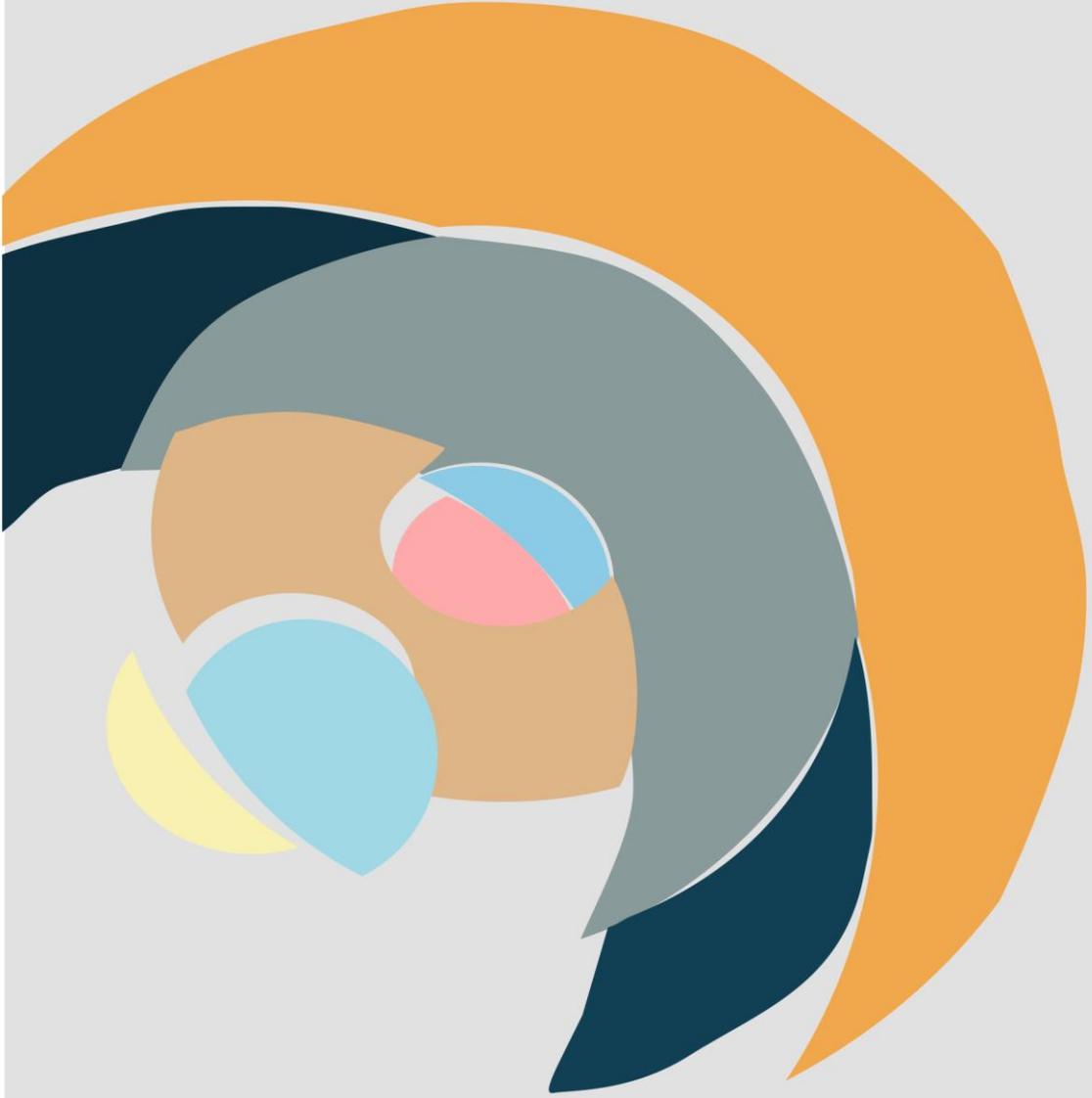Education never stands still—it moves, adapts, and transform in response to new realities, while reshaping society in turn. This collection explores some forces defining learning today: digital tools, intercultural dialogue, artistic expression, and the call for ecological responsibility.
At its core, education remains a space for negotiation and reinvention.

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of the journal **Scuola Democratica**

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02

Cultures, Practices, and Change

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ADDRESSING THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY AND THE ESCALATION OF CONFLICTS: PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN PATHS IN THE AUTONOMOUS PROVINCE OF TRENTO

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This paper addresses the issue of democracy and the erosion of democratic values, considering the school as a starting point for change. It explains the Philosophy for Children (P4C) project by the Rosmini Center, emphasizing the integration of local philosophical resources and cultural heritage. The project involved collaborative activities that engaged students with contextually rich content, including discussions based on literary, multimedia, and musical stimuli. Theoretical conclusions suggest that P4C serves as a valuable resource for fostering philosophical thinking through critical, creative, and caring approaches

P4C; philosophical thinking; didactics; cultural heritage; democracy

INTRODUCTION

Since John Dewey's educational project (1916), schools have played a pivotal role in fostering democratic values and civic engagement among students. This is achieved through Democratic Activities, which mediate the impact of students' social backgrounds on political participation, civic knowledge, and self-efficacy. Advantaged students, however, report greater participation in such activities (Mennes et al., 2023). Schools also influence socio-political attitudes and behaviors through curricula and democratic experiences, forming a key element of socio-political socialization (Eckstein, Noack, 2016). Inclusive civic education has proven effective, particularly in engaging marginalized groups and improving civic skills and attitudes (Bartlett, Schugurensky, 2024). These efforts foster a "We-Mentality", linked to increased civic participation and positive attitudes toward civic issues (Hüning, 2022).

Nevertheless, promoting civic engagement faces significant challenges. First, a complex relationship between civic engagement and education in Western societies is shaped by polarization, extremism, societal changes, and the digital divide. Additionally, a shifting global context, marked by media transformation and post-

digital challenges, necessitates teaching critical reflection on technological stimuli. Virtual relationships woven on social networks, media of all kinds, from newspapers to television, portray an increasingly problematic, polarized, and violent society. Everyday experience is not immune to this conflict, which also affects the school environment and enters the classrooms. As educators, it is crucial to acknowledge the tensions and disagreements present among younger students, bring them to the surface, dual aim of promoting and offer tools to manage them. Educational research underscores the impact of social imbalances on young people's relationships and school experiences, highlighting the need to focus on both cognitive and emotional development. (Haidt 2024; PISA 2022; Chiosso et alii, 2021).

1. PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN AND LEARNING DEMOCRACY

Philosophy for Children (P4C) is an educational approach designed to foster critical and argumentative thinking among young people, with the democratic communication and active citizenship. Its distinctive features include non-competitive argumentation, continuous questioning, and the collaborative exchange of ideas. Rooted in the reflective and pedagogical traditions of philosophy, P4C emphasizes the "community of inquiry", a concept introduced by Matthew Lipman and expanded by thinkers like Matthews and Kohan. This model encourages reflection, critical thinking, rational dialogue, and self-awareness within both educational and community contexts.

P4C aligns with moral education (D'Addelfio, 2011) and with the framework for civic education and citizenship (ECC) outlined in the Eurydice guidelines (2017), which focus on competencies such as constructive interaction, critical thinking, social responsibility, and democratic engagement. By integrating these competencies, P4C supports individual growth while preparing students to become active, responsible democratic citizens.

2. THINKING WITH ROSMINI: P4C IN AUTONOMOUS PROVINCE OF TRENTO

The Antonio Rosmini Study and Research Center at the University of Trento launched a Philosophy for Children (P4C) program during the 2023/24 school year, involving 11 primary and secondary classes in Trentino. Chosen collaboratively by the Municipality of Rovereto and the Antonio Rosmini Study and Research Center, the project emphasized connections with the territory's rich cultural heritage, including Casa Rosmini and its philosophical traditions. This approach reflected P4C's socio-constructivist and aporetic roots, prioritizing community-based philosophical inquiry to foster reflection, critical thinking, and dialogue. In fact, the assumptions of Lipman and his followers' P4C, emphasize "forms of community-based philosophical investigation, a sign of a pronounced socio-constructivist component, but in fact also of an instance of an 'aporetic' type, so to speak, perhaps as old as philosophy itself" (Volpone, 2016, p. 80).

The initiative addressed the contemporary issue of conflict, aligning with SDG 16 of

Agenda 2030, which advocates for peaceful, inclusive societies. The theme "conflict" was selected in response to real classroom dynamics, marked by relational challenges and complex management issues. Many participating schools, particularly those in peripheral areas, faced additional challenges, including a significant presence of second-generation immigrant students and those with learning difficulties or certifications. Teachers actively supported this theme, recognizing its relevance to their students' contexts.

The program was structured collaboratively by facilitators and reference teachers, who prepared sessions centered on texts chosen as stimuli for dialogue. Each session involved activities with students, reading the stimulus text, collaboratively building an agenda, and conducting self-assessments.

Facilitators documented each session using structured forms and, where consent was given, recorded sessions to analyze outcomes. By emphasizing collaborative learning and leveraging local resources, the program fostered a stronger bond between education and community, offering a holistic strategy for conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

2.1. The realization of the sessions

The five sessions took place during school hours. Below (tab. 1) is a schematic illustration of how the general theme 'conflict' was structured, the stimulus text used and the main outcomes of the dialogues, taken from the philosophical Inquiry Agenda, the facilitators' reports and the teachers' and students' feedback.

Tab. 1 – Description of sessions. Source: data collected by the authors.

Session	Stimulus	Main outcomes
Conflicts and inner emotions.	Scene from the film *Inside out* (2015, Pixar Animation).	The questions and the development of the dialogues focused on the contrast/difference between joy and sadness (why do Joy and Sadness see the world differently?), on the connections and differences between sadness, anger and revenge, on the possible coexistence in the inner experience of contrasted emotions and on the observation that emotions can be together even if in contrast with each other
Conflicts in the family and with adults.	Lisa goes shopping (from *Lisa* by Mattew Lipman).	dialogues on the difficulty of negotiating and understanding different opinions and wills, but also the importance of having different ideas, otherwise we would all be the same. Opinions have been expressed that Lisa wants to decide independently how to dress because she is fine with herself, she has her own style that is not that of her mother. There hasn't been much insight into intergenerational conflict.
The conflict generated by unfair behaviour.	The Ring of Gyges (from the myth of Plato, *Repubblica: II* 358a-	Students have observed that there are different behaviours when you are alone or with others. Other opinions expressed: invisibility (not being discovered) leads to loneliness and conflict and to individualism;

	360d).	one becomes irresponsible and the will to have more power causes injustices to be carried out. The conclusion of many sessions was that Gyges used power in the wrong way and it's better if there are shared rules in the classroom.
The exclusion of those who think/express themselves differently.	Everyone sees things differently (from *Il prisma dei perchè* by Mattew Lipman).	Many students said it is difficult to understand others and that they argue with those who have different opinions; there is also fear of expressing ideas that feel different from those of others. Many young people have concluded that a compromise can be found between opinions: by including in the group those who feel different, it can help them express themselves more freely.
The war	final scene of the movie *WarGames* (1983).	Pupils expressed appreciation for video games. Regarding war, they said that those who make war have no interest in the people who die and that it is the desire for power that causes wars. Anxiety was expressed about the current wars because they could come to us: it would be better to reach peace agreements.

At the end of the five sessions for each class, a meeting was organized at the birthplace of A. Rosmini[1] to summarize the sense of the experience made and to understand from the participants what they have taken away from the activity. In this final meeting, when asked by the facilitators "What have we done in these meetings?" and "Is the dialogue concluded?", the students responded "We have philosophized, with questions and in-depth discussions" and "After this experience, one can continue to ask questions endlessly. Before this, it wasn't possible because we hadn't learned to always ask questions".

2.2. Main results of the experience

Five sessions of P4C are certainly not enough to eliminate the widespread conflict even among boys and alleviate negative emotions such as anxiety, dissatisfaction, sadness, and anger reported by themselves in their relationships with their peers and towards the events that dramatically occupy the daily news. However, they can incorporate a method into their training that can assist them. Philosophizing, understood as a process of detaching from immediate emotions, allows for the integration of conflicting feelings into a general and abstract reasoning process. It facilitates mediation of these feelings through dialogue with others and with oneself. This is made possible by connecting (explicitly or implicitly in classroom activities) with the philosophy of authors who have addressed the themes under discussion in the dialogues.

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[1] Cf.: http://casanatalerosmini.it/.

The main strengths and weaknesses of the P4C approach to conflict are outlined below in tab 2.

Tab. 2 – Main strengths and weaknesses of the P4C approach. Source: data collected by the authors.

Weaknesses of activity	Strengths
Difficulties in inserting the activity of P4C in the daily curriculum of the school.	The choice of the topic addressed a real and widespread need in the schools involved.
Often the working hours were reduced and were carried out when students are tired.	The work shared with the teachers (only one teacher was male) who collaborated significantly.
Interpersonal difficulties with various individual challenges in the classes in which they were inserted.	The positive response of the students to the activity, even at the time of the final self-evaluation.
Due to time constraints, there was no final presence meeting with the class teachers.	Many teachers have included the P4C path in the civic education and citizenship program.
Some of the tools used by the facilitators (structured grids, recordings of meetings, etc.) need to be improved.	The connection with the territory and the cultural resources presents in it and their support

3. PARTIAL CONCLUSION

The Rosmini Center's P4C project emphasized critical thinking, community inquiry, and dialogic learning as integral to an educational journey aimed at fostering personal and collective growth. Grounded in the belief that philosophy transcends abstract theorization, it framed philosophy as an accessible, transformative practice relevant to all individuals, regardless of age. The core principles of this approach are:

1. *Philosophy as existential inquiry*: philosophy was presented not just as a logical tool but as a means to explore individual thoughts and emotions in the pursuit of meaning, helping students understand themselves as rational, emotional, and embodied beings.

2. *Relational nature of philosophy*: dialogue and interaction were central, reflecting the relational nature of human beings. This dialogic approach reshaped internal thought processes, opposing monologic reasoning.

3. *Critical Thinking as a means*: Critical thinking was used as a tool to challenge students' comfort zones and foster active engagement with reality, encouraging them to become agents of change while embracing collective growth.

In addition, this project shows a structured Educational Design: it integrated established philosophical ideas with the lived realities of students. The theme of *conflict* was explored through five classroom sessions using varied stimuli, literature, multimedia, and music. The culmination featured a reading from Antonio Rosmini's *Philosophy of Law*, enabling students to connect their reflections with the

insights of a philosopher deeply engaged with the topic (Tian & Liao, 2016). This deliberate choice not only introduced advanced philosophical concepts but also highlighted Rosmini's local significance, connecting academic inquiry to the students' cultural context.

There also a few innovative elements. First, local and experiential dimensions in P4C: engaging with Rosmini's work at his birthplace added a tangible layer of historical and cultural context. The final session, held at Casa Rosmini, incorporated museum education to link abstract concepts to real-world artifacts, enriching the students' philosophical reflections. Guided tours and exposure to Rosmini's life and environment fostered a sense of identity and belonging, leveraging regional heritage as a learning stimulus (Echeverría & Hannam, 2017).

Second, an interdisciplinary impact: by blending P4C methodology with local cultural engagement, the project exemplified the value of interdisciplinary education. The students' transition from a research-focused community to a listening community underscored active participation, reflection, and the contextualization of abstract ideas in tangible experiences.

In conclusion, the Rosmini Center's initiative demonstrated how local cultural resources, integrated with philosophy and innovative teaching methods, could foster critical thinking, deepen students' appreciation of cultural heritage, and address contemporary issues through inclusive and reflective educational practices (UNESCO, 2007).

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