Taking Care of the possible: Relational Devices and Educational Transformation in Contexts of Vulnerability

Antonio Sacristano (Corresonding author)

Pedagogist

Adjunct Professor of Special Pedagogy

Support Course Department

https://orcid.org/0009-0007 -4280-1622

Carmine Genovese

MIM Teacher

Expert in Special Pedagogy

E-mail: carminegenovese@hotmail.it

Stefania Di Nicola

MIM Teacher

Italian Ministry of Education and Merit

E-mail: stefaniadinicola2003@yahoo.it

Abstract

This contribution explores the pedagogy of help as a relational and transformative practice, grounded in an ethical-phenomenological understanding of care and vulnerability. Help is not understood as a unilateral act, but as a gesture of proximity, openness, and co-responsibility, situated within a dialogical relationship in which the subject is recognized in their singularity and otherness. Care, as the style of help, implies an educational posture that is attentive to the other in their irreducible fragility and potential, avoiding functional or paternalistic logics. In this perspective, vulnerability is not a deficit to be filled, but an epistemic and ethical resource

that opens up possibilities for encounter, transformation, and relational justice. The text weaves together references to the phenomenology of intersubjectivity, the ethics of responsibility, and critical pedagogies, to outline a conception of educational help as a space of resistance to forms of dehumanization and exclusion. Help thus becomes a political and generative act, capable of reactivating the meaning of the educational relationship as a place of hospitality, recognition, and shared construction of meaning.

Keywords: educational help, care, vulnerability, relationship, critical pedagogy.

Introduction

In a time marked by profound social, cultural, and anthropological transformations, educational action is called upon to redefine its meaning starting from the relationship with the other, especially when the latter is in a condition of vulnerability. In contemporary educational contexts—both formal and informal—practices capable of welcoming, supporting, and transforming the existential trajectories of individuals affected by discontinuity, exclusion, or fragility are emerging with increasing urgency (Milani, 2020, pp. 15-18; Rossi & Mortari, 2019, pp. 42-45).

Within this scenario, pedagogical devices are situated that conceive of help not merely as a remedial response to difficulty, but as a foundational category of the educational process, with epistemological, ethical, and operational significance. This approach is rooted in a vision of pedagogy as a transformative practice, capable of restoring centrality to relationship and subjectivity. Freire (1970/2004, p. 79), in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, emphasizes the value of help as a dialogical act that breaks asymmetries and recognizes the other as a subject capable of speech and transformation: the educator, in their role, does not "assist" but co-constructs meaning together with the learner, generating contexts of conscientization and critical praxis.

In a similar vein, though centered on care as a relational principle, Noddings (2012, pp. 54-57) proposes an ethics of education based on responsive attention and empathetic listening. In this framework, help assumes an affective and relational connotation, taking shape as an intentional gesture that promotes the other's growth not through the imposition of knowledge, but through the construction of a trustworthy and humanly sustainable environment. The learner's agency—their capacity to act, choose, and attribute meaning—is made possible by an educational relationship that does not merely "serve" but accompanies and legitimizes lived experiences, enhancing active participation and co-responsibility in learning processes (Biesta, 2010, pp. 19-23).

Operationally, help is manifested through cooperative teaching strategies, intentional use of peer tutoring, project-based learning, and all practices in which support is not exclusively delegated to adults but distributed within the learning context. In this sense, pedagogical help is not a supplement but an epistemic infrastructure of teaching and learning, capable of generating inclusion, mutual trust, and openness to otherness (Tronto, 1993, pp. 104-107; Meirieu, 2005, pp. 62-65).

The focus thus shifts from performance to encounter, from standardization to singularity, from transmission to co-construction, in a pedagogical perspective that rejects the reduction of education to mere content delivery or performance assessment device (Biesta, 2013, pp. 35-39). This shift implies a profound reformulation of the concept of teaching, no longer understood as a unidirectional act, but as a situated, dialogical practice open to the unpredictability of the other. Education, in this view, becomes a relational space in which knowledge is not transferred but generated through interaction, and in which the student's subjectivity is recognized as constitutive of the learning process (Rancière, 1991, pp. 24-26).

This orientation is situated within a post-critical framework that rejects the logic of accountability as the sole parameter of educational quality, in order to restore value to what Biesta (2009, p. 39) defines as "the act of existing" in the educational relationship—an act that cannot be standardized because it is founded on contingency, listening, and reciprocal responsibility. The educational encounter, in this sense, is not just a didactic event, but an opportunity for recognition, in which the singularity of the other—with their cultural, emotional, and cognitive dimensions—becomes an epistemic resource rather than an anomaly to be normalized (Todd, 2015, pp. 88-90).

Moving from transmission to co-construction also implies rethinking traditional roles: the teacher is no longer the sole holder of knowledge but a facilitator of meaning-making processes, while the student is not a passive container but an agent capable of contributing to the construction of shared knowledge (Dewey, 1938, pp. 75-78). Thus, learning becomes a reflective, social, and contextualized process that values lived experience and promotes the emergence of authentic and shared meanings.

Help, when understood not as mere instrumental support but as an intentional, situated, and dialogical gesture, becomes the foundation of an authentically relational educational action rooted in care, responsive listening, and the recognition of the other as a subject. This perspective fits within a vision of education as an intersubjective and transformative experience, in which the encounter is not an accessory element but a foundational event structuring the learning process. In this direction, authors like Kesselring and Müller (2011, pp. 31-33) have reinterpreted the educational relationship in light of a "pedagogy of encounter," in which reciprocity is lived as a condition of possibility for all meaningful learning and for the construction of subjectivity. Education thus becomes a space of resonance (Rosa, 2019, pp. 154-157), where people feel heard, recognized, and empowered to respond, actively participating in the co-construction of knowledge and meaning.

This leads to a conception of educational action as a generative response, capable of embracing vulnerability, supporting potentialities, and creating shared spaces of meaning. Such help cannot be rigidly standardized but must emerge from the concreteness of contexts, from continuous negotiation among the subjects involved, and from the construction of situated educational bonds (Formenti & West, 2018, pp. 101-104). From this perspective, help ceases to be a compensatory gesture and becomes a generative experience—a fertile ground for the exercise of agency and autonomy of the learning subject.

This approach, rooted in the phenomenological tradition and in critical pedagogy, opens new perspectives on the concept of educability, no longer conceived as a measurable quality according to predefined normative criteria, but as a dynamic openness to transformation and possibility. In this view, education is configured as an embodied, situated, and co-constructed experiential process that values subjectivity, self-narration, and the recognition of the other as bearer of meaning, history, and growth potential (Mortari, 2023, pp. 44-47; Cifali, 2020, pp. 17-19).

The phenomenological perspective allows for the suspension of reductive and objectifying judgments typical of standardized assessment in favor of a hermeneutic and dialogical attitude

that privileges listening, thick descriptions of experiences, and the understanding of educational life-worlds. Mortari (2023, pp. 49-52) insists on education as care for life, emphasizing the need to restore centrality to the subject in their existential wholeness, and not just in their cognitive performance.

Likewise, critical pedagogy—following the path traced by authors such as Freire (1970/2004, p. 81) and developed by Giroux (2011, pp. 102-105)—questions the power mechanisms embedded in seemingly neutral educational devices, challenging the authority of evaluative paradigms that rigidly define who is educable and who is not. Educability, in this view, is not a pre-existing quality of the subject but a potential to be activated in relationship, within inclusive and generative practices, where knowledge is built through reciprocity and negotiation of meaning.

To critique normative and diagnostic devices is thus to reject all forms of deficit-based essentialism and to embrace a pedagogical anthropology that values the multiplicity of pathways, trajectories, and forms of knowing. As Cappa (2015, pp. 57-59) emphasizes, every educational act implies an ethical and political wager on the value of the person, regardless of their presumed limits or shortcomings, and requires pedagogical thinking capable of holding together vulnerability and resources, limits and desires, individuality and belonging.

This contribution aims to explore the nature and function of relational devices operating in processes of educational help, focusing on their theoretical foundations, methodological implications, and transformative effects in real educational contexts. Through an interdisciplinary analysis, it will investigate how such devices can contribute to building spaces of possibility, fostering practices of resilience, participation, and recognition (Mezirow, 2003, pp. 58-61; Sen, 1999, pp. 30-32; Fraser, 2003, pp. 92-95).

1. Help as a Relational and Generative Category.

To deeply understand the educational value of help, it is necessary to situate it within a relational pedagogical framework that recognizes relationship as a generative space of meaning and mutual transformation. From this perspective, help cannot be reduced to a technical performance or a functional response to a codified need; rather, it is configured as a dialogical and responsive event, rooted in the willingness to engage in authentic encounter and co-presence. As Luigina Mortari (2015, p. 43) emphasizes, to educate means first of all "to dwell in the relationship," acknowledging that every meaningful educational action arises from an ethics of attention and presence, where the other is welcomed not based on their conformity to norms or expectations, but in their irreducible alterity.

Authentic help implies an embodied responsibility, manifesting in the ability to be-with the other in their becoming, supporting their processes of subjectivation without exerting control or imposition. Along this line, Joan Tronto (2013, p. 34) points out that care—as a concrete and situated practice—requires moral and relational competencies and cannot be reduced to a mere affective disposition or an episodic gesture. Help thus emerges as a relational and dialogical dispositif that engages shared vulnerability and interdependence, transcending the dichotomy between helper and helped (Pulcini, 2020, p. 104).

From a pedagogical standpoint, this entails recognizing the co-constructed nature of the educational relationship, in which both subjects—educator and learner—are engaged in a transformative process. Such a posture is grounded in a logic of recognition (Honneth, 2002, pp. 130-136) that rejects any form of objectification or reduction of the other to a case, diagnosis, or function, and opens education as a space for legitimating experience, desire, and voice.

This implies a significant epistemological shift: from an objectifying paradigm of knowledge about the other, grounded in observation, classification, and intervention, toward a dialogical paradigm of knowledge with the other, where knowledge is neither possession nor one-way transmission, but a co-generative process of meaning. In this view, knowledge is not reducible to a body of content to be transferred but is shaped as shared experience, emerging from the relationship and grounded in the concreteness of the educational encounter (Rossi & Mortari, 2019, pp. 23-25). This relational epistemology is based on an ethics of transformative co-existence, where help develops as a dialogical and reflective practice capable of generating change for both subjects involved—not according to performative logics, but along intersubjective trajectories of recognition and valorization.

This approach aligns with post-constructivist theories and pedagogical practices inspired by co-agency (Biesta, 2021, pp. 40-45), where learning and educational support are rooted in the ability to inhabit relational space with openness, reciprocity, and shared responsibility. Help, within this horizon, is no longer understood as a "doing for" but as a "being with"—a modality that enables the construction of shared meanings through negotiation, narration, and situated reflexivity (Bove, 2022, p. 58).

Pedagogically, this perspective also calls for a revision of assessment tools and educational authority: it shifts from a normative framework to a dialogical design, where the value of educational experience is measured by its ability to promote agency, relationality, and critical awareness among those involved (Barbier, 2013, pp. 115-118).

In this sense, a pedagogy of help is configured as a generative practice capable of influencing processes of subjectivation and educational justice. It is not simply about supporting those in disadvantage through compensatory tools, but about activating relational and cultural conditions that make recognition and the actual exercise of capabilities possible. Thus, educational help assumes an enabling function, rooted in the potential to generate new self-narratives and new forms of agency (Sen, 1999, pp. 18-21; Nussbaum, 2011, pp. 25-30). The centrality of capability refers to a pedagogy that does not intervene on the other, but with the other, promoting the expansion of choices and the co-construction of shared meanings within respectful and dialogical relational contexts.

Fraser's (2003, pp. 29-32) concept of recognition further integrates the ethical-relational dimension with the socio-political one: educational help generates transformation only if it breaks the asymmetries that marginalize the other and legitimates their presence and voice in educational spaces. In this sense, recognition is not merely an affective or interpersonal fact, but an act of symbolic and structural justice, enabling marginalized subjects to reclaim their future as an open project, not a predetermined fate.

Contemporary critical pedagogies (Mejía & Walsh, 2017, pp. 11-15) also stress the need to conceive help as an emancipatory process, linked to the possibility of deactivating mechanisms of exclusion and redefining the very boundaries of educability. In this view, help is not a unilateral act, but a dialogical and plural process that transforms both the educator and the educated.

Educational help, from an emancipatory perspective, does not operate on the helped, but unfolds with them, as a dialogical practice based on reciprocity and the co-construction of meaning. This approach recalls Paulo Freire's (1970/2004, pp. 72-75) maieutic pedagogy, for whom authentic education is grounded in the practice of freedom—understood not as concession but as a participatory and critical process through which individuals become aware of their existential situation and transform it. Within this horizon, educational help is not a unilateral act nor a technocratic intervention, but a political gesture that breaks the implicit hierarchies in the "helper/helped" relationship and becomes a pedagogical alliance.

This alliance entails a shift from a logic of intervention to a logic of encounter, in which both subjects are involved in a process of mutual transformation. As Mezirow (2003, p. 61) and Illeris (2014, p. 45) argue, meaningful learning occurs when the implicit assumptions shaping our experiences are challenged—something possible only in relational contexts marked by trust, listening, and openness to otherness. Help, in this sense, becomes a generative relational event, in which an educational "we" is produced through shared action and co-responsibility in learning processes.

Moreover, this vision is consistent with contemporary radical dialogical pedagogy, which problematizes educational devices as sites of power and proposes accompaniment practices that support the emergence of the voices of marginalized subjects (hooks, 1994, pp. 145-147; Andreotti, 2021, pp. 88-93). Help, thus understood, is not a reparative response to lack, but a space of possibility where an ethics of presence is enacted, and the transformative potential of education is cultivated.

Additionally, the relational dimension of help highlights the need for an educational presence capable of suspending judgment, embracing uncertainty, deeply listening, and inhabiting complexity. As Mortari (2006, p. 109) states, taking care of the other does not mean imposing oneself as a solution but safeguarding the question, the time, and the silence needed for the other to recognize themselves as a subject of value. From this perspective, a transformative pedagogy emerges—one that goes beyond the function of support to become a generative experience of mutual growth. Help, understood not as a technical response but as an intersubjective encounter, becomes a relational space in which both poles—educator and learner—are involved in a dialogical process of redefinition of self and educational role. In this sense, help is never unidirectional but entails a co-evolution in the understanding of the other, realized through authentic listening, suspension of judgment, and the willingness to question one's own certainties (Todd, 2015, pp. 65-67).

It is in this horizon that educational humility gains epistemic as well as ethical value—as a disposition to acknowledge the partiality of one's own perspective and to be transformed by the encounter with the other (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004, pp. 38-40). Empathy, far from being

reduced to an affective disposition, becomes a critical relational competence capable of sustaining educational practices oriented toward deep understanding of the other's life conditions and worldviews (Zembylas, 2012, pp. 114-117). Such a posture makes possible a pedagogy of help that does not merely support, but transforms—opening up pathways for recognition, renegotiation of meaning, and the shared construction of horizons of possibility.

This transformation is realized within what Mezirow (2003, p. 61) defined as transformative learning: a process through which individuals, when faced with dissonant perspectives and new understandings, restructure their interpretive frameworks. Educational help, therefore, is not an accessory act, but the beating heart of a pedagogical process that inhabits vulnerability, welcomes difference, and generates reciprocity.

2. Care as a Style of Help: Between Intentionality and Presence.

At the heart of the helping relationship lies the experience of care, understood not only as operative attention to the other's needs, but as an intentional attitude and responsible presence within the time of the other (Noddings, 1984, pp. 6-7; Mortari, 2006, pp. 89-90). Educational care does not end with the functional action of "doing something for the other," but is configured as a relational disposition that involves authentic presence, attentive listening, and the suspension of judgment. It is rooted in an ethos of "being-there"—a discreet yet constant presence—that offers a space in which the other's subjectivity may emerge in its irreducible singularity. In this sense, care becomes a generative context of possibility, rather than a place of diagnosis or repair. It is not aimed at filling a presumed lack, but at enabling the emergence of latent potential, often overlooked by normative or standardized approaches (Ricoeur, 1990, p. 202; Mortari, 2006, pp. 77-78).

From this perspective, educational help does not take the form of a technical or corrective intervention, but rather that of a phenomenologically grounded gesture: an action nourished by intentionality, categorical suspension, and intersubjective attention. As Duccio Demetrio (2003, pp. 42-43) points out, welcoming the other means renouncing the attempt to interpret them through pre-established grids or deficit-based models that risk obscuring their uniqueness. Care, therefore, is never neutral nor objectifying: it is structured as a reflective practice that interrogates its own epistemological premises and opens itself to the unpredictability of encounter.

In this regard, the phenomenological paradigm offers a fertile interpretative horizon to understand the educational relationship as a space of co-emergence of meaning. Care is not something applied to the other, but a movement that happens with the other, in a reciprocal play of recognition and co-construction. It is, as Adriana Cavarero (1997, pp. 32-33) reminds us, a practice of relational narration, in which the subject can come to speech not to be defined, but to exist in relation.

Such a stance invites us to rethink education as a deeply ethical experience, where care is not configured as the "repair" of what is lacking, but as an accompaniment that makes visible what is in potential. Care, then, does not precede the other with categories that describe them, but follows and supports them in the very act of becoming a person (Nussbaum, 2011, pp. 25-27).

A pedagogy of care necessarily entails the suspension of educational automatisms—that is, those preconfigured and proceduralized responses that risk reducing the educational encounter to a sequence of standardized actions. It requires a displacement of perspective: from operational efficiency to the quality of presence, from control to listening, from performance to relationship. In this sense, care becomes an intentional act that breaks with institutional routine in order to question the deeper meaning of education in its ethical-existential dimension (Mortari, 2015, pp. 42-45).

This ethical lens does not limit itself to a mere "attention to the other," but translates into the capacity to perceive and value what is often neglected in school or institutional contexts: the unspoken, the implicit, silences, and invisible vulnerabilities. It is here that care reveals itself as both a political and pedagogical gesture, capable of recentring concrete lives, individual stories, and non-normative needs. As Vanessa Roghi (2021, p. 14) observes, to educate also means "to make history with the lives of others," opening a space in which subjects can be recognized beyond the labels that define them or the paths that confine them.

In the horizon of phenomenological pedagogy, this educational posture takes on a deeply intentional and reflective character. To welcome the other in their irreducible alterity means relinquishing any form of categorical simplification, allowing the meaning of experience to emerge from the lived relationship (van Manen, 1990, pp. 12-13). The educator, in this sense, is not one who intervenes to correct, but one who inhabits the complexity of educational experience with openness and responsibility, aware that every gesture can generate meaning—or, conversely, produce exclusion.

Suspending automatism, therefore, does not mean abandoning professional competence, but rather reconfiguring it within a hermeneutic perspective, capable of welcoming the indeterminacy of the real and the uniqueness of the other as constitutive elements of pedagogical action. In this light, professional competence is not measured solely in terms of operational effectiveness, but in the educator's ability to remain with complexity, to inhabit uncertainty as a generative space of meaning. Donald A. Schön (1983, pp. 49-51) refers to this as "reflective practice," a key dimension of professional action, where experiential knowledge is interwoven with continuous self-reflection, and every educational situation is understood as unique, unrepeatable, and full of interpretive potential.

This perspective calls for a shift from a prescriptive logic to an interpretative one, where the normativity of protocols gives way to a situated ethics, capable of holding together rule and exception, structure and biography. As Massimo Baldacci (2012, pp. 75-77) emphasizes, pedagogical professionalism is expressed in the ability to mediate between technical-instrumental rationality and ethical-practical rationality, embracing the contingency of the educational encounter as a privileged site for negotiating meaning.

It is precisely in this liminal space—this "interstice between norm and singularity"—that care reveals itself in its radical pedagogical force: not as an emotional supplement, but as an epistemological and political principle. Care, in fact, makes visible what the institutional dispositif tends to obscure: fragile subjectivities, dissonant stories, non-linear trajectories. As Joan Tronto (1993, pp. 105-108) argues, care is always a situated, relational, and responsible

act, which calls upon the educator to attend not only to the concrete needs of the other, but also to the conditions that enable their recognition and voice.

In this direction, a pedagogy of care takes on a critical function: it deconstructs the idea of neutrality in educational action and reveals the often-invisible dimensions of power that permeate daily school practices. Philippe Meirieu (2007, pp. 51-54) invites us, in this regard, to think of education as a continuous balance between the desire for protection and the need for emancipation, where care neither infantilizes nor restrains, but accompanies and enables subjects to exist in their relational autonomy.

To educate with care, then, is to take on the responsibility of a practice that does not settle for reproducing models, but exposes itself to the question posed by the other, allowing itself to be transformed by their appeal.

3. Vulnerability as an epistemic resource: narrative, reflexivity, and reciprocity.

Authentic help is rooted in a condition of shared vulnerability, which is not merely exposure to limitation, but rather an opening to relationship and reciprocal learning. In this perspective, vulnerability is not an obstacle to educational action but instead constitutes an epistemic and transformative resource (Butler, 2006, p. 29; Cavarero, 2010, pp. 32-35). Accepting one's own partiality as an educator—recognizing oneself as incomplete, exposed, and constantly in becoming—makes it possible to inhabit the helping relationship not from a position of superiority but through a dialogical and symmetrical posture, where even the helper allows themselves to be questioned and changed.

This theoretical and practical turning point aligns with the framework of contemporary self-education pedagogy, in which narrative and reflexivity take on a central role as tools for understanding and co-constructing the meaning of educational experience. In this view, the subject is not seen as a passive recipient of educational action, but as a narrating and reflective agent, capable of critically reclaiming their lived experience and reorienting it toward transformation (Formenti & West, 2014, pp. 17-18).

Narration, far from being a mere descriptive or memorial act, functions as a hermeneutic device through which individuals construct and reconstruct their identity in relation to others and to the context. Telling one's story thus becomes a formative and generative act, allowing the subject to give form to the discontinuities of experience and to project it into a future-oriented dimension (Delory-Momberger, 2015, pp. 56-58). In this sense, self-narration fosters a dialogical movement between past, present, and future, promoting a conscious subjectivity open to change.

Reflexivity, in turn, is not limited to a metacognitive function but increasingly represents an ethical-political practice of education. It supports the development of the capacity to critically question the conditions of one's actions and the structures that support them (Mezirow, 2012, p. 81; Andreotti, 2016, pp. 185-186). Within this framework, self-education takes the form of a dynamic process in which learning also means transforming one's frameworks of meaning, following a logic of transformative learning realized through the interaction of critical reflection and biographical narration.

These self-formative practices are not oriented toward individualistic introspection, but toward the recognition of one's relational, cultural, and institutional embeddedness. As Ciaramicoli (2020, pp. 94-96) notes, self-narration in educational contexts can be understood as an act of resistance against the fragmentation and standardization of learning pathways—a gesture that brings the uniqueness of experience and the complexity of subjectivity back to the center.

Ultimately, contemporary self-education pedagogy values narrative and reflexivity as practices of care and responsibility that contribute to shaping a dialogical, conscious, and other-oriented subjectivity. It offers an educational framework that unites epistemic and ethical dimensions, where learning occurs not only *for* the other but *with* the other, within a community of meaning.

When integrated with narrative practices, the helping relationship becomes a transformative device enabling the emergence and reworking of lived experience. In this context, telling one's story and listening to others' stories are not merely communicative modes but are truly pedagogical acts—capable of generating new meaning and promoting symbolic restructuring processes of identity (Delory-Momberger, 2015, pp. 64-65; Formenti, 2021, pp. 102-103). Narration, as enacted within educational relationships, thus assumes a generative value: it reveals what is implicit, redefines the threads of experience, and opens up new possibilities for subjective understanding and transformation.

The formative value of narrative lies in its ability to shape experience while promoting reflective distancing and emotional reintegration. As Pineau (2013, p. 122) emphasizes, it is in the dialogical dynamic of narration that a shift in meaning is produced—a decentering that allows the subject to observe their own story from new angles, making it possible to perceive oneself and one's actions differently. Within the helping relationship, this process translates into a respectful and co-constructed accompaniment, in which the educator or professional does not interpret but welcomes, does not direct but facilitates, creating the conditions for authentic and transformative self-reflection (Ciaramicoli, 2020, pp. 97-99).

In this sense, narration is not merely a tool of the educational relationship but its constitutive modality, as it enables the construction of shared meaning and the re-signification of lived experience within a relational framework oriented toward care and mutual recognition.

4. Educational temporalities and the *Kairos* of help: beyond the chronology of intervention.

In the dominant paradigm of educational efficiency, help is often conceived as an immediate response, a prompt intervention, a "quick fix" to be applied within a measurable and linear timeframe. However, a pedagogy of help that aims to be transformative must deconstruct the chronology of urgency and restore centrality to a qualitative, dense, and relational temporality. It is not about acting "quickly," but about inhabiting the other's time—tuning into rhythms, silences, and pauses that elude educational standardization. In contemporary educational contexts, authentic help is not reducible to a technical performance or a predetermined intervention; rather, it takes the form of a situated act that demands the capacity to recognize *kairos*, the opportune qualitative moment—a time that calls for an ethical and

relational response (Cambi, 2014, pp. 84-85). *Kairos* cannot be programmed or reduced to chronological time (*chronos*); it represents a meaningful interruption in the flow of the everyday, requiring the educator to be attentively and responsively present. This moment arises within the relationship as an unrepeatable opportunity to foster development, understanding, or transformation, and demands an educational posture grounded in listening and in the willingness to suspend control to welcome the unexpected (Mortari, 2017, pp. 42-46).

Within the pedagogy of care, this attention to lived time unfolds as the capacity to grasp the experiential density of the encounter with the other. Mortari (2017), drawing on a phenomenological vision of care, emphasizes that education requires temporal wisdom—a kind of knowing that is exercised in the ability to *inhabit* the time of the relationship, not merely to manage it. Care, from this perspective, does not occur through codified actions but emerges in sensitive practice, capable of detecting need at the moment it appears—often implicitly and non-verbally.

Likewise, Nussbaum (2013) underscores the importance of an ethical education that cultivates empathetic imagination and the ability to interpret human situations in their affective and contextual complexity. The educator must therefore develop a moral competence that enables them to respond not only to what is expected but also to what is possible, at the right time. In this sense, *kairos* is linked to a vision of education as a reflective and embodied practice, grounded in a responsibility enacted in lived time, without guarantees of control or predictability.

Attending to *kairos* also entails revising educational planning logics by fostering flexible models oriented toward contingency and capable of integrating pedagogical thinking with an ethical vision of action. As Biesta (2014) argues, education cannot be entirely planned because it involves openness to the unexpected and the immeasurable. Recognizing the opportune moment thus becomes an act of pedagogical discernment, where action is based on situated judgment rather than universal rules.

This conception requires a change in posture: learning to wait, to dwell within complexity without succumbing to the urge for control, and recognizing that every educational journey has its own unique temporality—irreducible to charts or deadlines. Educational help, as a relational gesture, is embedded in an intersubjective temporality, where the value of the intervention is not measured by its immediate outcomes, but by the fertile slowness of transformation.

In contemporary pedagogical thought, the time of formation is not conceived as a linear and continuous flow but as a complex weaving of interruptions, pauses, and returns that make the internalization and transformation of experience possible. This vision finds its epistemological grounding in the concept of discontinuous time developed by Bachelard (1932/2000, pp. 23-27), according to which knowledge is not built cumulatively but through fractures, crises, and qualitative leaps. In education, this perspective has been further elaborated by several scholars who highlight the importance of formative thresholds, liminal moments, and reflective re-elaboration phases as constitutive elements of the learning process (Mortari, 2017; Corsi, 2013, pp. 57-60).

In this horizon, the educator does not merely transmit content but becomes a *guardian of the other's time*—one who recognizes and protects the individual rhythms of learning. This implies a temporal competence that goes beyond mere instructional management: it is a situated knowledge that calls for the suspension of the urgency of efficiency in order to accommodate singular temporalities, often marked by hesitations, returns, and slow re-elaborations (Pellerey, 2014, pp. 9-12).

Being guardians of others' time therefore means modulating educational action based on an ethical availability to listen and to accompany. This availability is not passive but intentional: it translates into practices attentive to the quality of experience and the depth of lived reality. As Mortari (2017, pp. 77-79) notes, education is a process of care founded on welcoming the other in their becoming.

Furthermore, contemporary phenomenological pedagogy emphasizes how authentic formation occurs in moments of resonance and echo—in which knowledge or lived experience re-emerges over time, transformed by interiorization and subjective elaboration (Caronia, 2020, pp. 12-14). These moments cannot be imposed or predicted but must be recognized and valued by an educator capable of maintaining an open gaze and a reflective presence.

At the institutional level, this also requires a critical reflection on the management of school and training time, often governed by performative and productivity-based logics. Rethinking the temporality of educational help means overcoming an instrumental view of time—as a mere neutral container of educational activities—and recognizing it instead as a constitutive element of the formative experience. From this perspective, time becomes a pedagogical resource to be intentionally shaped, capable of affecting the quality of educational relationships and the emergence of meaning. As Mortari (2017, pp. 124-126) stresses, educating demands the ability to construct temporalities of care—spaces that can slow down, suspend the urgency of efficiency, and allow for deep listening, reflection, and resonance. Authentic help, in fact, is only possible within a welcoming temporality that does not force the other's rhythms but accompanies them with respect and discretion.

In this light, the dilation of educational time is not a delay in achieving goals but a generative condition that allows for the maturation of thought, emotional elaboration, and the possibility of a transformative encounter. The pedagogy of waiting, as proposed by Corsi (2013, pp. 49-51), highlights the need to create contexts that can value pauses, silences, and the long durations of learning as productive moments rather than voids to be filled. Time, therefore, is not just the frame of educational action, but part of its very substance—a "living matter," to use an evocative image from Caronia (2020, p. 9)—through which meaning is shaped and processes of personal and relational growth unfold.

This framework resonates with recent studies on slow pedagogy, which promote an educational approach focused on depth rather than speed, on the quality of experience rather than its quantification. As Berg and Seeber (2016, pp. 30-33) state, truly transformative education requires extended timeframes, environments capable of holding uncertainty, and of welcoming the complexity of lived experience—resisting the standardization and acceleration typical of performance-driven models.

Recognizing the pedagogical value of time, then, means restoring centrality to the experiential dimension of learning and promoting education as a dialogical, ethical, and existential process.

5. Conclusion. Educating through Help: Towards an Ethics of Transformative Co-existence

The reflection developed in this work highlights how help, far from being a mere instrumental intervention or an accessory function of educational action, should be recognised as a constitutive dimension of pedagogy understood in an ethical-relational sense. From this perspective, help is not a technical response to a predefined need but a primary form of responsible presence, rooted in the encounter with the other and oriented towards their flourishing. It thus assumes the traits of a foundational category of educational praxis, as an expression of care exercised in the tension between alterity and reciprocity, between accompaniment and respect for autonomy (Mortari, 2017, pp. 83-86; Benasayag & Schmit, 2013, p. 63).

In the current context, marked by increasing emphasis on standardisation, accountability, and the measurement of educational effectiveness, the need to re-centre the ethical core of pedagogical action becomes urgent—a core that is oriented not towards performance but towards meaning. As Biesta (2013, p. 3) underlines, an authentic pedagogy must ask not only what works, but what is the right thing to do in view of the other's growth as a free and responsible subject. Rethinking help in this way means relocating educational action within a dialogic framework, capable of valuing relationship, deep listening, and openness to the unpredictable.

Help, conceived as an intentional educational gesture, requires the ability to stay alongside the other without pretence of control, embracing their vulnerabilities as generative spaces for transformation. In this sense, the pedagogy of care is not mere affective sensitivity but an exercise of epistemic and ethical responsibility that restores dignity to the educational experience in its irreducible and situated character (Tronto, 2013, pp. xv-xvii; Caronia, 2020, pp. 47-49). Only within this horizon can help be thought of as a transformative praxis capable of influencing formative processes without reducing them to performance or quantifiable results.

The pedagogy of help, understood as a relational and transformative epistemology, challenges traditional educational logics based on reparative or adaptive models. Instead, it proposes a paradigm centred on activating unexpressed potential and recognising differences as generative value. In this view, educability is not a quality to be measured but a possibility constructed in relationship through practices of recognition, accompaniment, and co-construction of meaning (Canevaro, 2013, pp. 14-16; Cacciamani, 2016, p. 36).

The educational act, therefore, is not limited to responding to an individual need, but constitutes a generative space in which the other can reclaim their voice, exercise agency, and imagine alternative worlds beyond the confines of dominant narratives (Meirieu, 2013, pp. 17-19). In this sense, help lies at the intersection of care and justice: it is a practice that challenges structures of exclusion, deconstructs asymmetries of educational power, and

restores visibility and epistemic citizenship to marginalised subjects (Fricker, 2007, pp. 1-3; Trinchero, 2019, pp. 85-87).

To help, then, is not only an ethical act, but also a political gesture: it means intervening in the normalising dispositifs that regulate access to knowledge and discourse, redefining who has the right to be heard, represented, and valued. As Bozalek and Zembylas (2017, pp. 64-66) suggest, a critical pedagogy of help requires a rethinking of the material and symbolic conditions of the educational encounter so that it may become a space of possibility, pluralisation of identities, and redistribution of discursive power.

Within this framework, help is not a sporadic response to discomfort but an intentional praxis of openness and reflexivity, capable of reconstructing the horizon of the possible in terms of justice, participation, and transformation. Operationally, this implies the need to design spaces and times that are not merely functional but habitable and transformable, capable of supporting vulnerability without crystallising it. Authentic help—not paternalistic, not directive, not performative—inhabits the threshold between knowledge and not-knowing, between what is and what is not yet, between structure and life. It is in this liminal space that the essence of education as a generative intersubjective experience is played out, founded on an ethical alliance that recognises the other not as a bearer of lack but as a fully human interlocutor.

In light of the above, educating through help means adopting a pedagogical posture that is deeply human and relational, capable of recognising and welcoming fragility not as a deficit to be corrected, but as a constitutive condition of the human experience, from which the meaning of education can emerge (Mortari, 2017, pp. 91-94; Zani, 2020, p. 58). This is a pedagogy that rejects all forms of welfarism or control and instead orients itself towards respectful accompaniment, able to support without invading, to guide without prescribing, to open spaces of speech without colonising meaning (Zembylas, 2018, pp. 57-59).

Educational help, from this perspective, is not a functional response to a lack, but a generative gesture that restores agency and dignity, promoting the shared construction of paths of meaning. A truly inclusive pedagogy is therefore based on dialogic co-responsibility, transformative listening, and the creation of contexts in which subjectivities can flourish in the plurality of their lived experiences (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017, pp. 68-71; Dallari, 2021, p. 49).

In this horizon, the educator does not act as a guide who precedes, but as a presence who accompanies—one who knows how to dwell in the complexity of the formative process without seeking prescriptive shortcuts. This is the ethical-political essence of a pedagogy of help: not to fill a lack, but to generate possibilities. Not to normalise, but to liberate. Not to adapt, but to transform. In an age when the risk is educating for conformity, authentic help becomes a subversive gesture, capable of restoring voice to those silenced, horizon to those marginalised, and future to those forgotten.

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