Our Social Kids project
di Sonia Boldrini, Silvia Piva e Mariangela Spelta
IC "Don Gnocchi", San Colombano al Lambro (MI)

Introduction

In the winter of the school year 2017-2018 we participated in the course "Firewall: young people ready to surf" organised by the Scuola di Robotica di Genova. The aim of the course was the "promotion of the responsible use of the internet and new media, tools that are increasingly widespread but not always used with an adequate knowledge of the effects of simple and daily actions such as sharing information or personal images online". The project was mainly aimed at secondary school teachers of first and second degree and provided training from several points of view: technical, legal, sociological, psychological. The decision to attend this course came from the observation that over the years had led us to pay attention to the extent to which the Internet and the use of social applications were beginning to affect children's behaviour and to the increasing frequency of bullying and cyberbullying in the primary school age group.

At the end of the course, they were required to write a project to be carried out with their pupils. We therefore had to adapt the activities to our pupils, who were then in the first year of primary school. The challenge was to simplify the concepts and activities so that they would be within the reach of children between the ages of six and ten.

This gave rise to the idea of the *Social Kids* project, which started in the spring of class one, in 2018, and will end in June 2022 with the completion of class five of the same pupils.

CHILDREN'S PATH

Emotions

The project started with watching two animated films: "The Hunchback of Notre Dame" and "Beauty and the Beast", through which the children began to reflect on recognising their own and other people's emotions. The aim was to recognise them in order to learn to understand people's emotional states and to assess states of well-being and/or discomfort.

After watching each of the films, the children focused on facial expressions, which they then imitated and linked to personal events. The emotions examined were joy, sadness, fear and anger. In a second step, the children mimed the identified emotions, thus perceiving their details with a physical and thus more personal approach.

At the beginning of class two, the photographic material and the drawings were taken in order to go over the reflections made and, if necessary, enrich them. Two groups of reflections were distinguished: what causes certain emotions and the direct consequences, i.e. the most obvious features.

The contents were reworked by creating dialogues between imaginary characters and were then staged with puppets. In this phase, the children were able to go outside themselves and relate the same experiences to others, thus giving a more comprehensive meaning to each emotion and taking a further step towards the ability to mentalise others.

The course materials were collected in an e-book developed by the children themselves, who for the first time were able to approach an online application.

The Network Concept

At the end of the first tear, each child was asked to write a message to a classmate.

Then the children sat around a large white board, each holding their own note. The first child was given a long piece of string and asked to fix his or her message on it and to throw the ball of string to a random classmate. Gradually each child did the same, holding a point of the long string near the edge of the card. In this way, a kind of net was constructed, on which all the messages were fixed.

The children were then told that this was one of the possible representations of the Internet, through which it is possible to stay in touch with friends and communicate. One of the first comments was that some of the messages were personal and therefore should not be on the same string as the others, because they could be "taken" by someone who was not the recipient. This is significant that children are able to grasp complex issues such as *privacy.*

From a pedagogical point of view, in the case of a class group that is forcibly maintained over a period of five years, the attempt to overlap the digital social network with the physical one is interesting. The possibility of getting to know each other face-to-face at first and then, over time, of creating and maintaining the relationship even virtually, makes it possible to manage sociality beyond space and time.

This group of children had an advantage over the commercial logic that governs the world of social networks, because through the activities of the *Social Kids* project, which will also be described in the following paragraphs, they were given the opportunity to play in advance and create real relationships that could then come to life in the digital world, while guaranteeing the authenticity of their personal identities.

Data collection

At the beginning of year three, the children were given a questionnaire to collect information about their personal use of the Internet, devices and social networks.

Google Workspace

At the beginning of the third grade, the children started to use the virtual classroom with what was then G-Suite for Education, recently renamed Google Workspace.

The first stumbling block, however, was the handing over and management of *passwords*. In the common stereotype, children so young are not able to keep such personal data confidential. We believe, however, that it is not so much the importance of discretion that can be explained to children as the care of what is very personal and therefore cannot be delegated to others, except to trusted persons such as parents (who had obviously been informed).

We therefore chose to use the gesture of holding water in the mouth: with the children we practised "taking" the password, symbolically putting it in the mouth and closing it as if it were full of water. At the beginning, the password was common to all the accounts in order to simplify the management of the accesses made at the same time during the lessons: despite this, the children never revealed it to anyone, not even to the head teacher, to whose request they responded with the "water in the mouth" gesture.

The first activities proposed were related to the enrolment in virtual classes of certain subjects. The children then learned quite quickly how to move around in the G-Suite and in particular to complete some simple activities on Documents and Forms.

Children in Remote Learning

In the course of the weeks and then months, while the other classes and schools were organising themselves with messaging apps because the teachers had not yet been trained, the class A 3 was becoming more and more familiar with the various applications of the G-Suite and the Remote Learning (RL) was not only regular, but functional to a didactic that responded to the objectives that had again been declined for that extraordinary period of the COVID pandemic.

The children began to experience that on the Net they could access a lot of information and that not all of it was within their reach; it was necessary to provide them with a series of materials from which to choose. During the RL the children maintained the relationships woven in the previous years and experienced that the school was no longer just a place to learn, indeed it was not a place at all, but an opportunity to relate with classmates and teachers, in short, a community of people who share a path: the formative one of each. Even at a distance.

From a relational point of view, distance learning made it possible to learn to recognise, even behind a screen, those emotions and states of mind that the children had learned to distinguish in previous years. It also made explicit the need to establish real relationships, without which virtual ones had no meaning. This was the reflection that the children brought back from the first lockdown and that they still remember and use as a warning when relationships are at their most tense.

But above all, through distance learning, the children were able to experience the Internet as an opportunity to meet and exchange, and how it can be a place where positive social experiences are possible, arising from the construction of relationships in which everyone brings their own identity: places where real identity can correspond to digital identity.

Bullism e cyberbulliying

In the course of the *Social Kids* project, the children were given several moments to reflect on these themes. At the beginning of class four, the starting point was Stephen Chbosky's 2017 film *Wonder*.

The children repeatedly pointed out that human beings are both similar and different, that despite their personal characteristics, they have traits in common, such as weaknesses or needs. These reflections are close to what Morin hopes for when he indicates the teaching of the human condition as one of the seven fundamental skills for future education (Morin, 2001).

Similar reflection activities were proposed during the last two years of school. Towards the middle of the fourth year, the children were shown a number of films of various kinds.

In this case, too, the focus was deliberately maintained on the strength of the group, on sharing with the adults of reference and welcoming the different as other than me but similar to me.

At the beginning of class five, the Disney animated film *Luca* 2021 directed by Enrico Casarosa was shown.

The story can be read as a metaphor for the desire to live in a world different from one's own, in which, however, one's own identity is not accepted and one therefore finds oneself in the position of constructing a different identity. This metaphor recalls the problem of digital identity, which the use of social networks has generated.

Meetings with the Postal Police

The interventions carried out with the Postal Police (Carabinieri) of San Colombano al Lambro as part of the project over the years were initially aimed at tackling lighter issues related to legality; over time the relationship of trust grew and it was possible to explore more delicate issues.

The children shared experiences outside the school context concerning the use of social networks. Some recounted episodes of hating that had occurred during online video games; others told of their inability to stop playing video games, thus entering into the theme of new forms of gambling; others still shared states of frustration regarding mistreatment suffered by other peers.

Conclusion of the students' course

The Internet is a place where digital natives learn to search, critically evaluate and use contents: being a user, however, does not only mean being a passive user. If the Internet is today, more than ever, the main container of knowledge, it is necessary that the new generations become capable of creating quality content, which therefore goes beyond the mere production of images and videos. Media Education must therefore not be a tool to support teaching, but to support the formation of man and citizen, who has a precise digital identity and who exercises his skills on the Web.

THE PROJECT FOR THE FAMILIES

Families are therefore not to be considered just collateral agencies to Media Education, but rather must be fully involved from the moment children enter the school system.

It was therefore particularly important to accompany parents in a process of making them aware of their use within an intentionally educational process.

All this took shape in the *Social Kids* project, starting with the first meeting with parents, which took place at the beginning of the second class. During the evening, the first data on the use of the Internet and social networks in the family were collected.

The evening was a first opportunity to reflect on how parents' choices influence those of their children.

Having gone beyond the fundamental concept of the need to undertake media education, families were invited to reflect on the dynamics that are unleashed in pre-adolescent groups within social networks, which are as similar as they are dangerous, both because of the total absence of adult control and, even more so, because of the way in which the very young manage their digital identity. Children and young people do not know how to distinguish between the real and the virtual: the two worlds overlap because what is experienced in the virtual world does not remain in the virtual world, but has direct consequences in the real world. What young people need to develop is the coherence of their own identity in the two different contexts.

Although this may seem a more direct route to a group of pre-teen families, it is worthwhile for parents to undertake this kind of reflection as early as primary school (if not earlier), because it is from daily practices that children acquire norms and attitudes that become intrinsic and natural.

In January 2020, in the middle of the third grade, we met the parents again.

The intervention was carried out by the psychologist who works with our schools, Dr. Federica Minoia accompanied the parents in their reflection, using statistical data to show the situation of young people with regard to the dynamics that are established outside and inside social networks.

The meeting with the parents ended with the proposal of a handbook for adults who are about to undertake an educational path for their children in the use of the Internet and social networks.

Meetings with the Postal Police

At the resumption of school after the lockdown, we proposed to the families a meeting with the Postal Police (Carabinieri) of San Colombano al Lambro. The evening was aimed at reflecting on some episodes of bullying, cyberbullying and violence that have actually happened and have been in the news in more or less recent times.

Almost at the end of the last school year the families met again, this time with a proposal from us for a more productive activity for them on the subject of bullying. The parents were divided into groups during this meeting. Each group was presented with three stories told from a different point of view: the bully, the victim, the follower.

Guiding questions were proposed to help the parents in their reflection. In this way, the families were made aware that everyone can experience everyday situations that conceal the dynamics of bullying.

Before concluding the project, parents will be offered two final meetings. The first one will be dedicated to a reflection on real and digital identity. A final meeting, common to parents and children, will be devoted to sharing the paths taken and, above all, to presenting the works created by the pupils over the years. Above all, however, it will be another opportunity for the children to become aware that an educational project exists for them.