Fostering democratic competences through reading: literature at school as a training ground for empathy

Promuovere le competenze democratiche attraverso la lettura: la letteratura a scuola come "palestra di empatia"

Nicoletta Chieregato

PhD student in Pedagogical Sciences | University of Bologna | nicoletta.chieregato@unibo.it

ABSTRACT

Competences for a democratic citizenship have been a topic of debate in recent years (Council of Europe, 2018; Italian Law 92, 2019; Unesco, 2015) and the role of education in promoting them is considered crucial. This research aims to investigate whether and how a specific democratic competence – empathy – can be fostered in formal educational contexts, thanks to literary fiction reading experiences. Starting from the phenomenological interpretation of empathy (Boella, 2006, 2018; Stein 2014; Zahavi, 2011, 2014) and the scientific evidence – which highlights elements of literary fiction reading able to support the empathic process (Cohen, 2001; Hakemulder, 2000, 2004; Keen, 2006; Kidd & Castano, 2013, 2017) – an empirical research was designed, to understand whether reading experiences in schools can be training grounds for empathy and whether there are factors facilitating (or hindering) this process. A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed. Written texts of students (N=356) – looking at the relationship they established with fictional characters – were collected in 3 different schools (lower and upper secondary schools) in North/Central Italy, during the academic years 2020-21 and 2021-22, and were analysed with the use of a code-book. The data showed that literary fiction reading experiences can be opportunities for empathic competence training, but they also point out that this is not predictable, linear or automatic. "Narrative empathy" (Keen, 2006) requires effort, time, spaces for critical and reflective discussion (both intimate and with others) and texts capable of portraying the richness and complexity of human experiences. The mediation of the teacher is called into question repeatedly and the importance of specific disciplinary, pedagogical and reflexive competences – that are to be developed and unceasingly nurtured – emerges.

Keywords: democracy, empathy, literature, secondary schools, teachers' competences

CENTRO
PER IL LIBRO
E LA LETTURA

1. Introduction

In recent years, reflections on the competences for democratic citizenship have been fuelled by indications of a political nature at an international and national level (Council of Europe, 2018; Italian Law 92/2019; Unesco, 2015).

The role of education is considered crucial, and with specific reference to its formal contexts, it is important to ask ourselves what the directions of intervention are that might support schools in being sites of democracy. The conceivability of a "curriculum of civic and ethical-social education" (Baldacci, 2020; Bertin, 1968) is today the focus of numerous studies. The research presented here fits into this field of study, with the aim of empirically investigating *whether* and *how* a specific competence considered vital for democratic purposes – empathy – can be intentionally promoted *by* and *in* schools. In detail, we will analyse whether this can also happen via literary fiction reading experiences.

2. Democracy, empathy, narrative empathy

Two preliminary questions defined the research framework and guided it, defining the interpretative categories through which to read the observed phenomena: what is meant by the assertion that empathy is a democratic competence (what meaning of empathy is being referred to)? What elements of the literary fiction reading experience can help develop *that* type of competence?

With regard to the first question, reflection on the meaning of democracy may help to clarify how, in the face of the multiplicity and breadth of meanings attributed to the term 'empathy' today, we can identify elements that make it relevant to the promotion of a democratic stance.

If democracy is understood to be a mental attitude and a form of life (Dewey, 1916), it is conceived to be inhabited and nourished by subjects who – in a framework of openness, reciprocity and respect (Bertolini, 2003) – are able to exercise critical and dialogical thinking and understand how others form their own opinions, beliefs and desires. This is indeed how collective decisions can be legitimized by everyone, not because they satisfy all the instances at stake (or because they cancel out the differences in identity and beliefs), but because they contemplate – in the journey leading to their formulation – the understanding and analysis of the impacts they will have on others' lives (Habermas, 1996; Morrell, 2010; Rawls, 1982).

When genuine democracy is "a matter of mutual respect" (Bertolini, 2003, p. 564) and in order for this to be achieved, the right – for everyone – to express their thoughts must be matched by the willingness – of others – to listen.

We refer to a form of listening that promotes access to another individual's field of experience, without presuming to know her/him through one's own mental repertoire, values, cultural and personal references, and the lenses of one's own experience. A listening that does not translate into thoughtless attitudes of emotional contagion, compassion or the loss of self-boundaries. A listening that corresponds only to one's own reaction to the other's experience, without understanding the original cause of that emotion. It does not simply mean taking note of the fact that there are opinions that differ from one's own, either. Rather, it is a kind of listening that allows for a true and profound understanding that requires the "capacity for constantly expanding the range and accuracy of one's perception of meanings, […] to [being able to get] a broader point of view and perceive things of which one would otherwise be ignorant" (Dewey, 1916, p. 129). To broaden one's view also means, to some extent, to transform it, accepting and contemplating more elements in the decision-making process. This means entering into others' experiences, according to the principles of ethical reciprocity.

It is based on these considerations that the phenomenological interpretation of empathy (Stein, 2014; Zahavi, 2011; Zahavi et al., 2012, 2014) seems particularly relevant. Phenomenologically understood, it is a process – with different connotations for different subjects and influenced by context, as well as by personal contingencies (Boella, 2018) – that equate to being able to feel and understand – in a conscious and voluntary way, not automatically nor spontaneously – the thoughts and emotions that inform others' opinions and intentions, experiencing them "as if I were" the other. It is an interweaving of movements that Stein (2014) describes as realizing the existence of an extraneous consciousness and being able to experience it from within, in a constant and never definitively resolved dialectic of belonging ("she/he is similar to me") and extraneousness ("she/he is other than me"). It is a process that primarily requires the placing of well-established reference patterns and apparent certainties in parentheses, so that it becomes possible to recognize potential interpretations of reality beyond one's own (Caronia, 2011). "Feeling the other" (Boella, 2006) may lead to an extension of the network of personal references (Boella, 2018) and may contribute – albeit contradictory opinions – to humanizing and respecting the other, not reducing her/him to a mere opponent to be removed or defeated.

From a phenomenological and democratic perspective, empathy is subjective, procedural, context-specific, and cannot be considered a skill that can be acquired equally and definitively, but rather a competence that can be "trained" and practiced.

In this sense – referring back to the second of the opening questions – literary fiction can represent a "form of cognitive-emotional apprenticeship" (Contini, 2011, p. 186), a potential "training ground".

There is extensive scientific literature that points out that stories have the ability to draw us closer to realities different from our own and lead to a deeper understanding of ourselves and others (Bruner, 1988, 1991; Mar & Oatley, 2008; Wolf, 2009) and that literary fiction, in particular, can "expand the perceptions of who we are, of who we can be" (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 115), taking people who read into a "laboratory of human possibilities" (Hakemulder, 2000, p. 21).

In the theoretical framework of a transactional approach to reading (Rosenblatt, 1978) – which sees the reader as a co-protagonist of the process of signification of the work – the evidence of empirical research highlights some elements of literary fiction reading experiences that can help to develop empathic competences. Indeed, reading might deactivate automatic reasoning mode (*defamiliarization*: Shklovsky, 1965; *foregrounding*: Miall & Kuiken, 1994; Hakemulder, 2000, 2004, 2020, 2022; *literariness*: Keen, 2006; Kidd & Castano, 2013, 2017) hence open spaces for alternatives, activate processes of a "willing suspension of disbelief" (Rosenblatt, 1978), elicit perspective taking (*identification*: Cohen, 2001; Cohen et. al, 2019) and stimulate critical, reflective processing. This may allow the reader to experience "the literary other" and enrich her/his point of view with new sensibilities. With this in mind, Keen talks about "narrative empathy", defining it as "the understanding of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition" (Keen, 2014, p. 521).

Some narratives – and, in particular, some types of texts – may be able to broaden our gaze and raise questions, bring up doubts, and question our positions. They may open us up to a wider spectrum of possibilities that are nuanced, complex, contradictory and ambivalent, in which we do not necessarily recognize ourselves, but which we perceive as possible, legitimate and human.

But is it possible for narrative empathy to be achieved? This question led the empirical phase of this study.

2. Method: design, participants, instruments, data collection and analysis procedures

Based on the considerations above, an empirical research design was developed with the aim of understanding whether literary reading experiences in schools could be democratic "empathy training grounds" and whether there are factors that facilitate or hinder this process.

A qualitative phenomenological approach was employed, since the goal was to gather useful elements for the understanding of a process, the empathic one, which is complex, stratified, strongly dynamic and is unique to each individual.

The narratives of students about their school reading experiences and, in particular, those related to their relationship with the characters were collected and analysed.

The decision to focus on the age group 12-16 (i.e., the entire cycle of lower secondary school, and the first two years of upper secondary school) was driven by the peculiar – almost unique – characteristics of this phase of life, which is characterized by moving away from the self (from the infantile self), multiple identification (experimenting with different identities thanks to the expansion of the field of experience beyond the family perimeter and the questioning of values, objectives and world visions), intra-subjective and inter-subjective negotiation, and integration of these different requests (Crone, 2012; Erikson, 1999). These relocation processes are also the basis of empathy.

The data collection involved three schools over a period of two academic years (2020-21 and 2021-22): two lower secondary schools ("Fassi" in Carpi, and "Alighieri" in Rimini) and one upper secondary school ("Cambi Serrani" in Falconara Marittima). Convenience criteria were used for the identification of the schools – starting with the availability expressed by schools that we had been in contact with in the past – so the respondent group cannot be considered representative.

In view of the access restrictions to school sites imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic (which prevented direct observation and interviews), we chose to ask students to produce a written short text about a book they had read during the academic year, starting from the following outline:

> How would you describe the relationship you established with the character(s)? Was there anything that helped and/or hindered you in understanding her/his/their thoughts and emotions? What kind of emotions and/or reflections did getting to know the character/s elicit? If you wish, you can add your own comments about the book and your reading experience.

The 356 texts produced (N=356) were collected from the participating students without any personal data and each of them was given a unique code[1]. To collect useful data about the reading experience contexts (objectives, text selection criteria, reading methods, reading instructions, reading/writing tasks, evaluation criteria), the documentation made available by the schools was analysed and, where appropriate, the information was supplemented by written requests to teachers or short semi-structured interviews with them.

In total, four reading experiences were analysed: the "Writing and Reading Workshop" (WRW) and the projects "Piccola Biblioteca per un Mondo Migliore/Small Library for a Better World" (PBMM), "Progetto Scuole Il Castoro/Il Castoro School Project" (PSC) and "Letteratura ed empatia/Literature and Empathy" (LE). All of the analysed experiences included reading at least one book in its entirety and a space dedicated to analysis of and reflection about the characters. In the WRW, these activities were structured (supported by the use of comprehension strategies and annotations); in the PBMM project, activities aimed at model-character analysis were proposed; in the PSC and LE projects, identification and deep listening processes were stimulated respectively.

Tab. 1 provides a summary of the participants involved and the type of data collected.

---

1   For example, "20_21M1-2M-5": 20_21 is the information about the school year, M1 is the code assigned to the school, 2M is the code assigned to the class, and 5 is the random sequence number assigned to the student.

Table 1. Participants, type of reading experience, number of texts collected, number of interviews

School Year	School	Class code	Type of reading experience	No. texts	Teacher ID	No. interviews
20-21	Fassi	1M	Writing & Reading Workshop (WRW)	23	DP	1
		2M		22		
		3M		19	JPR	1
		1K		15	FB	1
		2K		20		
		1I		18	SL	-
		6		117	4	3
	Alighieri	2M	Piccola Biblioteca per un Mondo Migliore (PBMM)	21	SC	-
		2N		21	CM	-
		2O		16	VL	-
		3J		15	FF	-
		4		73	4	-
TTL 20-21		10		190	8	3
21-22	Fassi	2M	Writing & Reading Workshop (WRW)	21	DP	1
		3M		17		
		2		38	1	1
	Alighieri	3M	Progetto Scuole Il Castoro (PSC)	22	SC	1
		3K		18	OM	-
		3N		21	CM	1
		3P		16	LR	-
		3O		15	VL	-
		5		92	5	2
	Cambi Serrani	1M	Letteratura ed Empatia (LE)	20	SO	1
		2J		16		
		2		36	1	1
TTL 21-22		9		166	7	4
TOTAL		19		356	11* (*undup)	7

Text analysis was guided by the following questions: what are the acts of discovery and approach towards the others that students experienced during their school reading experiences? How did they "experience the literary other" (if they experienced it)? What factors supported or hindered their access to the other's field of experience?

The explicit meaning of the texts was analysed and coded with the support of a codebook. In the phenomenological epistemological framework, the coding activity was understood as an act of interpretation and signification of data by researchers (Caronia, 2011). It did not set itself the goal of guaranteeing "truth" and objectivity to the results presented, but rather that of reporting on the research process in a timely manner and ensuring – via the explanation of the criteria used – the credibility and scientific rigor of the analysis, as well as promoting the exercise of reflection (Silverman, 2002; Sorzio, 2007). The multi-subject coding process allowed for the production – through a process of discursive agreement (Cornish et al., 2013) – of a shared interpretation of the data and achievement of a more informed, nuanced, complex analysis of the data (Saldaña, 2009).

Codes were identified both deductively – starting from the theoretical framework illustrated in the first section of this paper – and inductively, based on unique elements in the texts (Boyatzis, 1998; Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Saldaña, 2009).

The use of Excel made it possible to count the frequency with which each code was detected (Huberman & Miles, 1994). The codes were then grouped into three categories:

1. "Process" category. The codes included in this category are linked to the phenomenological and democratic interpretation of empathy, meant as a process involving the ability to suspend one's beliefs and certainties and to doubt the meanings "automatically" attributed to the observed reality (DEP code, DEP- code when "lack of suspension of beliefs and certainties" was detected); to approach others consciously and voluntarily by adopting their point of view (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008) and to understand which are the interpretive categories, the thoughts and emotions informing their opinions and behaviours (Cohen, 2001; Cohen et al., 2019) (IDPT code, IDPT- in case of failed identification). This should not lead to the thought that one can *fully* understand otherness – irreducible in itself – but that it can help to broaden the range of possible meanings of experience (Boella, 2006) (POS code). Other types of cognitive and emotional processes have also been included in this category (mind reading: code ToM; inference by analogy: code IA), although conceptually distinct from empathy in the phenomenological and democratic perspective;

2. "Reader's experience" category, which groups the codes providing information about how sharing similar experiences with the character has facilitated the reader's identification process (RISP code) and how, on the other hand, the lack of common references with the protagonists may have facilitated (DIEXP+ code) or prevented (DIEXP– code) the empathic process;

3. "Text and context" category, which includes the codes related to elements of the reading experience that have supported (or hindered) the empathic process: "text in favour of empathy" (TXT+ code), "text hindering empathy" (TXT– code), "reading aloud" (LAV code), "inner dialogues" in favour of or hindering empathy (DI and DI– codes, respectively), "external dialogues" in favour of or hindering empathy (DE and DE– codes, respectively), and "time" (TE code).

3. Data analysis and discussion

3.1 The other and I: signs of the empathic process

The analysis of the texts allowed to identify some of the emotional and cognitive movements made by readers when meeting with the "literary other".

Table 2 shows the count and percentage (calculated on the number of total texts) of each code in the 'process' category.

Table 2. "Process" category: code occurrences

	Mind reading, Acknowledging the other's mental state	Inferring by analogy	De-familiarization/ epoché	Judgement	Identification/ cognitive & emotional perspective taking	Failed identification	New perspectives, increased awareness
Texts	ToM	IA	DEP	DEP-	IDPT	IDPT-	POS
356	100	103	8	80	34	20	7
	28,1%	28,9%	2,2%	22,5%	9,6%	5,6%	2,0%

As can be seen from the table, the identification process with the other was explicitly reported in multiple narratives (IDPT=34[2]).

---

2   The 7 occurrences of the POS code are a sub-set of the IDPT code occurrences.

For example, in the text below the account of what happened during reading is articulated and goes through several stages. The writer recounts the experience of "feeling the thoughts and emotions of the character" and understanding how they drive her behaviour and the way she establishes relationships with others (IDPT). However, there is also a temporary loss of the boundaries between the self and the character, followed by a reprocessing of the experience that leads to a broadening of the reader's perspective on the issue (in this case, of depression) (POS). There is also evidence of disagreement (DEP-):

> When Anna talks about how she feels, I was able "to hear" her thoughts and emotions... I enjoyed perceiving how she was and how her emotions influenced her behaviour and the way she communicated with other people... Sometimes, I see and think like the character, as if for a few moments I forget who I am and because the character itself... With Anna, for example, even though I didn't justify how she pushed Silvia away when she tried to connect with her, I was able to understand that she was still very hurt by the loss of her sister and therefore couldn't let new people into her life. I changed my opinion on so many things... I thought that only people who are always alone could fall into depression, but I realized it's not like that (20_21M1-2M-7).

Judgment – combined with the process of inferring by analogy with one's own experience (IA; "what *I* would have done") and perspective taking – can also be found in this text:

> Jacob is strong and brave. He never gives up... I was transported into his thoughts, and I could "sense" his actions and emotions. Some of his choices were difficult to understand, though. While reading the book, I asked myself many times what I would have done, but I also tried to feel and see things from his point of view, especially when his choices seemed a bit strange to me, since it was something I would have never done (21_22M1-2M-16).

The student here refers to an assessment of the situation based on her/his interpretive categories and values and tells us that she/he has tried to read the circumstances through *her/his* own experience. However, she/he also clearly states that – precisely when the character's actions did not match her/his own references – she/he made an effort to immerse herself/himself into the character's thoughts, actions and emotions.

In these examples, the readers show – at the same time – their disagreement *and* their intention to go beyond simply realizing that there are people who think and feel differently from them. The desire to understand more closely what is going on and what the character's motivations are (by entering *into* the protagonist's thoughts) can be detected. This does not necessarily shift the readers' opinions in the direction of agreement with the character, but they are able to put themselves "beside the characters", to follow them, and listen to them. From a democratic perspective, this can help conceive the other as a subject with opinions worthy of space, dignity and respect, thus paving the way for non-violent management of dissent.

What we can gather from the students' texts is the intertwining of different movements, and this calls for the need to consider the interaction and reciprocity of the different emotional and cognitive responses. As Table 3 shows, the different processes may be present in non-isolated form and may contribute to the generation of empathic responses.

Table 3. "Process" category: code co-occurrences

	ToM	IA	DEP	DEP-	IDPT	IDPT-	POS
ToM	-	31	4	30	7	8	3
IA	31	-	2	41	16	7	3
DEP	4	2	-	5	3	-	3
DEP-	30	41	5	-	13	7	3
IDPT	7	16	3	13	-	-	7
IDPT-	8	7	-	7	-	-	-
POS	3	3	3	3	7	-	-

For example, shifting the focus of attention from oneself to others and understanding their mental state can be a first step in the empathic process. This is what Stein (2014) argues when she states that the initial condition for the empathic experience to be achieved is that one acknowledges the foreign consciousness and that the experience of the other emerges. "The subject who discovers the other moves away from herself/himself, realizes that she/he is not at the centre of the world, and that her/his own perspective is only one of many perspectives", Boella maintains (2018, p. 125).

The passage below is an example of how students recognized a 'different' perspective from their own and were able to attribute thoughts and emotions to the characters:

> I understood that he is angry because he has a broken family…: his father suddenly abandoned both him and his mother; his mother is unable to communicate with him and to answer his questions (21_22S1-2J-2).

From the words the students wrote, it is not always possible to understand whether finding out about the perspective, motivations, and intentions of the characters (ToM=100) was the starting point for approaching otherness or if it was merely an acknowledgment that the other exists.

In some texts, such as the following one, it is clear that the fact that the reader was able to identify the character's thoughts and emotions (that she/he recognizes as different from her/his own) was what allowed her/him to subsequently examine the motivations that led the character to behave in a certain way:

> While reading the book I tried to focus on the character's thoughts and emotions. In those circumstances in which I would have acted differently, I thought both 'why did she do that, what are the compelling reasons, how does this relate to her experience?' and 'what would I have changed?' (20_21M1-3M-9).

If readers do not stop at "cold mind reading", additional processes may occur. In defining empathy in a democratic way, we ruled out that giving meaning to the experience of others through one's own interpretative categories and socio-cultural and value references (Inference by Analogy; IA) can be considered part of the empathic response: projecting oneself onto others does not mean entering their field of experience.

Interestingly, what emerges from the students' texts, however, is how this process may not be an obstacle to genuine knowledge of otherness, but can instead be a facilitator of the empathic process, which helps readers understand the character and also become aware of their own gaze, allowing them to get to know themselves better:

> I thought several times what I would have done in that situation: it helped me to understand better the characters' point of view, but above all my own point of view (20_21M1-2M-1).

Thus, inference by analogy can be a functional passage to entering the text and connecting with the characters, and it may be useful in stimulating it via targeted reading instructions[3].

But it can also be an element of rigidity and transform into a form of "reader *vs*. character" dialectic, as in the following example:

> I *always* thought about what I would have done in similar circumstances... I harshly judged the character, because the things he did were totally crazy in my opinion (20_21M1-2K-16).

In this excerpt, as in the next one, inference by analogy becomes a precursor of judgment: in the face of unfamiliar situations, the reader may not be able to take a different perspective from her/his own, thus applying her/his own evaluation frameworks (DEP-):

> Many times... I imagined myself being in that place, at that time, and I found myself figuring out what I would have done. I often agreed with Cameron, but sometimes I didn't... And when I did not agree, his behaviour irritated me a lot (20_21M1-2K-9).

Judgements sometimes "have a silver lining", though. Indeed, there are cases – such as the next one – where assessing through our own interpretive filters and applying our own categories helps to establish a distance between the character and ourselves and rethink the identifying experience (recognizing ourselves as "different from the other"):

> he book made me enter the lives of the main characters; I saw things from their perspective... Not judging them would have been too difficult, especially because we talk about very important matters [...] I didn't justify them, but I...understood *why* they lived their lives like that (20_21M2-2O-12).

The writer here refers to the possibility of identifying herself/himself with the characters ("I saw things from their perspective"), but also at the same time differentiating the self from the character ("I didn't justify").

Other texts show that judging is sometimes the first step of a more complex process that requires time and effort: in the face of something that "floors us", suspending our more natural and automatic beliefs and interpretations (DEP) may not happen immediately, as this student recounts:

> I did not identify with them immediately because I had to dig into their stories to really understand them. At the beginning, I judged the characters a lot, especially the main one. As I went on with the reading, I did that less and less frequently, until I got to understand the reason why they acted that way (20_21M1-3M-12).

As highlighted also by cognitive psychology literature (Evans, 2008; Evans & Stanovich, 2013), reflexive responses at a more abstract level may take time and effort to be elaborated. For this reason, reading entire texts (and not just excerpts) – combined with the teacher's guidance[4] – could significantly support this process.

---

3 See, for example, some of the WRW stimuli called "mirror questions": "What would you have done/said if you were in the character's shoes?", "Do(n't) you agree with the character? Why?"
4 To help readers enter the character's field of experience while confirming the difference between themselves and the character, a number of guiding questions can be adopted, such as, for example: What is the character's view of the world? What are her/his thoughts? What do you (not) have in common with the character? Other suggestions may be oriented toward reflection on the character's evolution, changes, and/or the narrative structure of the text, and may support the reader in gaining awareness of the functions attributed to each portion of the story and how it evolves.

The suspension of judgment – a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for moving toward the genuine discovery of otherness – is a conscious and voluntary act performed by the reader, who chooses to put her/his certainties and beliefs on hold. In certain circumstances it may be prompted by the 'diversity' of the characters and stories told (if they do not correspond to the reader's experience or expectations), or by paradoxical and/or enigmatic situations.

In the following examples, there are situations of discontinuity with regard to the (direct or indirect) experience of the reader and/or with regard to their consolidated references. Such fractures seem to stimulate readers to pause in the story, to question what they perceive as obvious:

> I must admit that I initially thought that the main character's reaction was wrong and not in line with what we are taught, i.e., "refer to an adult when you're in trouble". However, if she had reacted in the most "natural" way, I would have never seriously questioned my ability to behave like that in such a situation (20_21M2-2N-18).

The reference here is to the so-called "natural attitude", which we do not usually question. In this case, the reader quotes the "good practice" of addressing an adult in the event of serious and potentially prejudicial circumstances (the case she/he refers to is that of a person who is the victim of a stalker). If the protagonist had not violated this rule, the reader would not have seen "what we are taught" from a different perspective and would not have reflected on her/his own ability to adhere to this "style of responsibility".

She/he thus shifts from an attitude of judgment based on her/his own value references and beliefs to that of suspension of her/his certainties, thus creating a "space for alternatives" (Caronia, 2011).

The next example also refers to a "situation of normality", and the writer points out that the type of story narrated leads to questioning the concept of 'normality' (Shklovsky, 1965) and to consider the choices that subjects make as less obvious:

> I was touched by how his naivety is described. The concept of 'normality' is also tackled: what does 'normal' mean? Normal compared to what? For example, it's normal to turn the light on when you wake up, but that wasn't normal to Zero, since the light turned on by itself in 'his world' (21_22M2-3P-1).

Finally, it is important to point out that in the student's texts, narratives of not being able to connect with the characters also emerged explicitly (IDPT-=20). For example, the words a student uses to describe this (failed) process are:

> At the beginning, it was easy to perceive his feelings and thoughts since they were predictable, based on clear rules he had been taught; later on, once he settled, it was hard for me to understand him, because my thoughts were different from his, as *our* own ideas are influenced by *our* emotions. Although I tried to put myself in the character's shoes, I could not understand what he was going through (21_22M2-3P-3).

In this text, it is evident that the character initially acts according to linear, predictable patterns, so that it is more accessible and intelligible for the reader. However, as the story progresses, the protagonist's behaviour changes and becomes more "human and complex" (the term 'settled' refers to the fact that the boy is accustomed to life in the "real world," made up of relationships). The sphere of feelings comes into play and it is at this point that the reader – failing to distance herself/himself from her/his 'filters' and interpretive categories ("our own ideas are influenced by our emotions") – expresses difficulty in understanding it.

Thus, if reading literary fiction makes it possible (but not to be taken for granted or automatic) to experience the world "as if" we were the other, it becomes educationally crucial to understand what the elements that favour (or hinder) that possibility might be.

3.2 Facilitators and obstacles of the empathic process

Some indications of the possible factors supporting the narrative empathy process have already emerged from the analysis carried out so far. In particular, it has been shown that the activity of teacher mediation can be important when it is aimed at:

– helping readers to evolve and advance in the knowledge of the other and of themselves: ensuring that acknowledging the other's thoughts and emotions is only the first (and not the only) step of a wider process; so that inferring thoughts and emotions of the other by analogy with one's own experience can facilitate understanding of the character; so that we can move from involuntary identification with the character to more conscious and reflective attitudes; so that judgment evolves, making it an opportunity to reflect on oneself and establish distance between the self and the character, thus finding the boundaries separating from the literary other;
– identifying texts with characteristics that can open up to "new normalities" and deactivate processes of automatic understanding and signification, thus fostering authentic connection with the emotions and thoughts of the characters. It is also fundamental to ensure adequate reading time.

Further elements emerged from the analysis of the students' texts, where two macro-categories of facilitators/obstacles could be identified: those related to the personal experience of the reader and those more specifically related to the characteristics of the text and/or the context and the reading *setting*.

Figure 1 shows the occurrences of each code, the "reader's experience" category and the "text and context" one: the bars on the left indicate the "positive occurrences" (facilitators), and those on the right indicate the "negative" ones (obstacles).
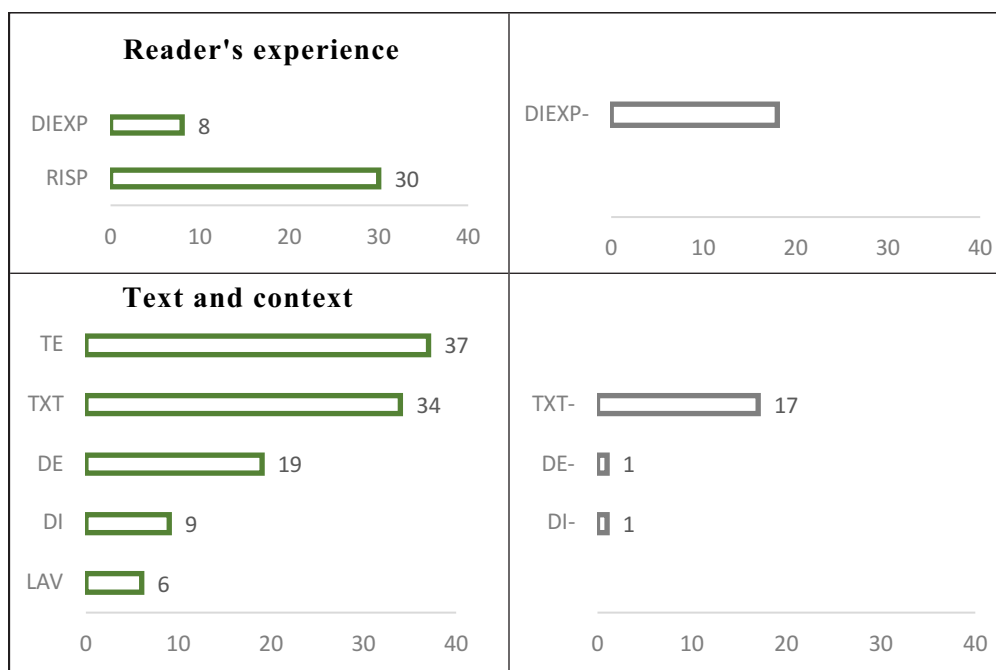

Figure 1: "Reader's experience" and "Text and context" categories: code occurrences

As for the "reader's experience" category, the analysis shows how the perception of feeling similar to a certain character apparently favoured, in some readers, the signification of the experience through the character's eyes. The mirroring experience (RISP) was explicitly found in 30 texts, including, for example, the following one:

> I could understand her emotions and I felt very present in the story: since I've been through the same experience, I could 'confirm' and feel what was happening to her (21_22S1-1M-5).

In the next example, the writer also states that when the character looks like her/him, the answers are more "easily accessible", allowing scripts and/or patterns to be activated and reducing (or even cancelling) the effort to understand the otherness. At the same time, the text introduces another important topic: in the absence of similarity or familiarity, the effort to connect with the character could become a "mechanical exercise" and might lead to a cold and external position in relation to the text, potentially making the reader lose the pleasure of reading:

> A lot depends on the book: sometimes I find the answers by myself, because they are easily accessible, especially when the character is very similar to me. If the character does not resemble me, then it's up to the author to give me more information and details, to help me understand … even if getting to know the character might then turn out to be a 'mechanical exercise' (20_21M1-2M-5).

In addition to the risk of excessive intellectualization, some of the students' texts explicitly point out that the lack of sharing of similar experiences (DIEXP-=18) may be an obstacle to the identification process:

> I think I cannot fully understand the situations and identify with the character, since I've never experienced something like that (20_21M2-2N-17).

What is the risk of a very close (if not overlapping) relationship between the experience of the reader and that of the fictional character, though?

First, there might be no *real* understanding of otherness, but rather an automatic and unreflective projection of one's own sense and thinking onto the other.

Secondly – and perhaps even more important from a democratic perspective – it can be very reductive to limit ourselves to the knowledge and understanding of those who are similar to us.

How, then, can readers not just sit back and read stories that are easy for them to understand and – at the same time – not feel too far away from stories that do not match their experiences?

On one hand, the lack of shared or similar experiences can be addressed with a specific commitment of the reader, supported by the teacher and shared with other students, as this excerpt shows:

> Anna, the main character, is dealing with her sister's death: at first, her thoughts are difficult to understand, since not everyone has been through something like that, but we managed to get inside her mind and to listen to her thoughts by delving deeper into her story and every single detail (20_21M1-1M-22).

Having (and granting) time for "delving deeper into the story and every single detail" seems to help readers overcome the initial hurdle.

Getting readers used to reflecting on stories that are distant from their own – progressively accompanying them through narratives in which the contact points with one's experience become increasingly distant and feeble – can help turn the lack of similarity into an opportunity, as the following example shows. The

reader explains that because she/he had not been through the character's same kind of experience, she/he "was forced to understand the main character's reaction" (DIEXP+):

> I could understand what they felt even though it had never happened to me [...] I understood their reactions. In 'Pink Lady', for example, where the story is about a bereavement, I was *forced* to understand the main character's tragic reaction: since I've never experienced the loss of a person, I have no idea how to deal with such overwhelming pain (20_21M1-1M-15).

The teacher's support may therefore be important in helping readers to form their own views and enable them to reach out to significant elements, even in texts deemed too distant from their own tastes and personal history. Distancing readers from their best-known reality and encouraging them to ask questions and reflect stimulates openness to differences. This may be a gradual approach to the objective, made up of small – but continuous – steps: the fact that empathy grows in difference does not exclude that similarity can be what hooks the reader and the starting point of a journey that can then expand into territories far from their own experience and what is already known.

Within the "text and context" category, one of the elements most frequently mentioned as favouring the shift of attention from oneself to others and identification was the time factor (TE=37). In addition to what has already been said about the time taken to shift from judgmental attitudes (DEP-) to more open and welcoming dispositions towards the others' point of view, students' texts reveal other interesting points. Such as, for example, those on valuable (or necessary) time to understand characters that do not reveal themselves completely and/or immediately: it takes time to get to know them in depth, going beyond the first (sometimes superficial) impression and understanding their evolution, as this student explains:

> My opinion about the character changed during the reading, both because he changed and because the way I looked at him changed. Indeed, new information might be reported during the story, and this can make you better understand the way he is [...]. Together with the teacher and my classmates, we think of questions that can help us understand the characters more and more deeply, beyond the surface, even the most absurd ones (20_21M1-1M-5).

The reference to the characteristics of characters – who are complex and not immediately understandable – introduces the text as another factor that the readers have identified as both a facilitator (TXT+=34) and an obstacle to the empathic process (TXT-=17).

In some cases, readers made explicit reference to the unpredictability and presence of traits of ambivalence of the characters as elements that – by requiring specific effort – led to the understanding of the thoughts and motivations of the protagonists, such as in this case:

> The book is really well written, and you get to see the world as the characters see it…There's a character who is being a tough guy and then, all of a sudden, he feels alone and sad, and that is quite strange: this made me want to understand the reason behind his choices, to get to know his thoughts and what was going through his head (20_21M1-3M-14).

In other cases, there are references to characteristics of the text, to choices or narrative devices (for example, a poem or the presence of a "secondary voice") that, by emerging from the background and placing themselves in the foreground, arouse particular attention in the reader, enabling comprehension and re-elaboration strategies:

> A poem was included in the book and that made the reading more enjoyable for me. After the poem, the book took on a completely new flavour and I understood the characters' actions (20_21M1-3M-12).

> Thanks to the secondary voice, that of Zero's 'conscience', I understood many of the emotions he felt (21_22M2-3M-2).

Writing style is also an important element: detailed, accurate, meaningful and clear descriptions of thoughts and emotions promote the readers' engagement and support their ability to connect in an in-depth way with characters:

> The thing that helped me most was the way the author expressed the main character's thoughts: such as in a sincere and frank way... At the beginning, the book is very descriptive... but then there are passages that – being more introspective – make you really understand what the protagonist is thinking and feeling (20_21M1-2M-22).

In some texts, readers refer to the truth and authenticity of the writing. When these are missing, when there is no plausibility to the plot and/or characters, the text may become an obstacle to the identification process, as shown in the following example:

> The protagonist is not really described for what she is, but only for what she is in relation to her disability, as if her only important characteristic was her disability and how she behaves in relation to it. I could have identified more if they had described her personality (20_21M2-3J-7).

Limiting the description of the characters to some aspects and making them look like the only important features might "distort" the characters, making them appear not credible and distant from the people who read about them.

Thus, literariness emerges, meant as the ability to portray a complex and multidimensional view of reality, not simplified and with stereotypical traits (Keen, 2006; Kidd & Castano, 2013, 2017). However, there are other characteristics of the texts (for example, the use of complicated terms and metaphors, or – as in the example below – the excess of polyphony) that can result in difficulties in experiencing the character:

> It was very difficult to understand who was speaking and to follow the rhythm of the story: too many characters and too many points of view, there are many difficult passages... I could not identify with the character (21_22S1-1M-3).

These aspects call for reflection on the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotskij, 1980), that is, on the importance of meeting the reader in a space accessible to her/him and accompany her/him to increasing difficulty, reducing the risk of demotivation due to excessively frustrating readings.

A further element that emerged in support of the empathic process was the possibility for readers to talk to each other, to seek meaning and to compare their experience with their peers, as well as with their teachers (DE=19).

Students' texts show how sharing one's thoughts, feelings, and reflections with others has been an opportunity to reflect and gather significant elements about the characters, to suspend judgment and to take different perspectives, as in the following excerpt:

> My classmates and I reflected a lot [on the father's actions], together with the teacher's help ... We made different assumptions about the father's behaviour, and that helped us to understand better his decisions (20_21M1-1M-9).

For this to happen, it is important that the experience of sharing in the classroom does not turn into an excuse to convey specific interpretations of the text (either implicitly or explicitly identified by the

teacher, or imposed by a few students), but rather into a real opportunity to co-build knowledge in a democratic way, starting from genuine questions, which open up to multiple meanings, instead of providing only one possible direction. Otherwise, the potential of dialogue and discussion could be undermined (DE-), as the following passage seems to suggest:

> I believe that a book like this should be read calmly and alone, so as not to be too influenced by the ideas of others (20_21M2-3J-10).

In students' texts, the opportunity of sharing one's points of view and co-creating meaning has often proved to be associated with the practice of reading aloud (LAV=6). However, beyond being a chance to stand and think together, there are additional elements underlining its usefulness in tuning into the story and its characters. For example, the following excerpt clearly refers to the possibility that reading aloud offers to experience reading in a "live", active and involved way:

> The way the teacher read made us get into character (20_21M1-1M-20).

In addition to the exchange of opinions and dialogues with fellow students and teachers, some students point out that even the "inner dialogues" (DI=9) – meant as circumstances when the reader listens to her/his own inner voice, creates connections between the text and the self, and reprocesses thoughts, emotions and reflections prompted by the reading – may help to gain access to the other's field of experience. These processes can be sometimes linked to writing activities requested by the teacher. In the following example, we can see how consciously getting in touch with personal propositions, emotions and reflections stimulated by the reading fostered the reader's involvement and connection with the character:

> What helps me most to get into the character are the notes I write (particularly the ones about how I feel)... [While writing], I understood what situation my character was in and I also tried to understand my feelings (20_21M1-1M-18).

However, it is important that this does not transform into (or be perceived solely as) a 'task' to be endured. If so, the risk is to negatively affect the reader's enjoyment and engagement and distance her/him from the story (DI-), as this reader reported:

> In my opinion, it is better to let yourself be carried away by the story instead of constantly asking yourself questions. Well, some reflections are ok, but reading a story by asking yourself so many questions kind of spoils the reading (20_21M1-1I-1).

To sum up, the analysis so far highlighted some of the features of texts and the reading context that deserve to be carefully considered. Specifically:

– the relevance of "narrative time" (the time frame within which the story takes place) and "reading time" (the time available to read): these factors that may help the reader "gradually enter" into contact with the characters, and be touched by their stories;
– the importance of choosing texts that offer a complex (not stereotypical) perspective of the world. Literary characteristics must always be considered in close relation to students' reading skills and the adults' willingness to support the reading experiences, so that it is not unfulfilling, but is instead stimulating;
– the enrichment that can result from bringing together and sharing the emotions and reflections of readers, thereby generating new meanings concerning otherness and the world. This should not, however, be interpreted automatically and a-critically: such opportunities arise in contexts where adult

mediation results in a guarantee of the respect and participation of all students, without leading them towards pre-defined meanings;
– the role that reading aloud can play in making reading experiences engaging and rewarding;
– the usefulness of stimulating "inner dialogue" in order to bring out – through suggestions and stimuli that do not seem like an exercise, but really prompt reflection – the reader's inner voice and allow it to enter in relation to the text and in connection with the characters.

4. Limitations

The data collection phase was strongly impacted by the restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic emergency and students' reading experiences could only be described through their written texts. The choices they freely made when writing their texts, their ability (as well as their habit) to put into words what they experienced as they read, the narrow focus of the question outline (not related to different experiences and limited to one text, which sometimes – as in the case of projects involving the adoption of a single text for the whole class – was not freely chosen), or the limited awareness of some of the processes experienced may all have influenced (arguably reduced) the variety and complexity of the experiences described in their texts, thus the study's ability to grasp the widest possible range of elements and processes.

The richness and breadth of the data was also influenced by the characteristics of the school contexts. Although diversified in terms of location and socio-economic-cultural profile, all participating schools are located in North/Central Italy, in areas that are not at risk of social marginalization and have a strong interest in and commitment to the research topic.

5. Conclusions

The research sought to investigate whether experiences of literary fiction reading at school might foster democratic attitudes and foster empathy, providing opportunities to meet, discover, and listen to the other, while respecting her/him as well.

The data collected showed that this *is possible*, but it also shows that it is by no means self-evident, nor linear or automatic. What emerges is the great variability and subjectivity of readers' experiences: the collected texts tell of different processes (and unpredictable outcomes) for each of them, linked to the context and unique relationship they establish with stories. The data also points out that narrative empathy requires openness, willingness and time.

In order for this process to be encouraged and supported, the importance of teacher mediation has repeatedly emerged. Mediation at a disciplinary level, but also at a pedagogical one, which is necessary to understand and interpret students' needs, to be able to stand beside *each* reader – supporting and accompanying him/her on the path of self-knowledge and of discovery of a complex, unpredictable, sometimes distant "literary other" – and to ensure space for authentic, critical and reflective dialogue about the texts.

Last but not least, the commitment required by teachers to cultivate a reflective competence, called into question by any educational action that does not stop at planned and measurable objectives and aims to promote mental attitudes and habits (Baldacci, 2020).

The significance of the study may therefore lie in the possibility of bringing to the attention of education professionals crucial factors for the training of empathic competences in schools and in establishing a working *framework* that is far from fixed, comprehensive, and definitive, which – indeed – always needs to return *to* school settings, and to be critically assessed and problematized. It also identifies some possible courses of action in the area of initial and ongoing teachers training.

References

Baldacci, M. (2020). *Un curriculo di educazione etico-sociale. Proposte per una scuola democratica*. Carocci.

Bertin, G.M. (1968). *Educazione alla ragione*. Armando.

Bertolini, P. (2003). Educazione e politica. La gioiosa fatica di pensare. In A. Erbetta (Ed.), *Senso della politica e fatica di pensare. Atti del Convegno «Educazione e politica»* (pp. 559-573). Clueb.

Boella, L. (2006). *Sentire l'altro. Conoscere e praticare l'empatia*. Raffaello Cortina.

Boella, L. (2018). *Empatie. L'esperienza empatica nella società del conflitto*. Raffaello Cortina.

Boyatzis, R. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Sage.

Bruner, J. (1988). *La mente a più dimensioni*. Laterza.

Bruner, J. (1991). La costruzione narrativa della "realtà". In M. Ammaniti, & D. N. Stern (Eds.), *Rappresentazioni e narrazioni* (pp. 17-38). Laterza.

Caronia, L. (2011). *Fenomenologia dell'educazione*. FrancoAngeli.

Cohen, J. (2001). Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences with Media Characters. *Mass Communication & Society*, *4*(3), 245-264. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327825MCS0403_01

Cohen, J., Appel, M., & Slater, M. D. (2019). Media, Identity, and the Self. In M. B. Oliver, A.A. Raney, & J. Bryant (Eds.). *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research* (4th Edition) (pp. 179-194). Routledge.

Contini, M. (2011). *La comunicazione intersoggettiva fra solitudini e globalizzazione*. ETS.

Cornish, F., Gillespie, A., & Zittoun, T. (2013). Collaborative Analysis of Qualitative Data. In U. Flick (Ed.), *Handbook of qualitative data analysis* (pp. 79-93). Sage.

Crabtree, B., & Miller, W. (1999). A template approach to text analysis: Developing and using codebooks. In B. Crabtree, & W. Miller (Eds.), *Doing qualitative research* (pp. 163-177). Sage.

Crone, E. (2012). *Nella testa degli adolescenti: i nostri ragazzi spiegati attraverso lo studio del loro cervello*. Urra.

Council of Europe (2018). *Reference Framework for Democratic Culture. Volume 1, 2 and 3.* Council of Europe Publishing, Strasburg.

Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education*. Macmillan.

Erikson, E. H. (1999). *I cicli della vita. Continuità e mutamenti*. Armando, Roma.

Evans, J. (2008). Dual-Processing Accounts of Reasoning, Judgment, and Social Cognition. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *59*, 255-278. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.59.103006.093629

Evans, J., & Stanovich, K.E. (2013). Dual-Process Theories of Higher Cognition: Advancing the Debate. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *8*(3), 223-241. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691612460685

Gallagher, S., & Zahavi, D. (2008). *The Phenomenological Mind: An Introduction to Philosophy of Mind and Cognitive Science*. Routledge.

Habermas, J. (1996). *Fatti e norme. Contributi a una teoria discorsiva del diritto e della democrazia*. Guerini e Associati.

Hakemulder, F. (2000). *The moral laboratory. Experiments examining the effects of reading literature on social perception and moral self-concept*. John Benjamins.

Hakemulder, F. (2004). Foregrounding and Its Effect on Readers' Perception. *Discourse Processes*, *38*(2), 193–218. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326950dp3802_3

Hakemulder, F. (2020). Finding Meaning Through Literature. *Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies*, *31*(1), 91-110. https://doi.org/10.33675/ANGL/2020/1/8

Hakemulder, F. (2022). Empirical Pedagogical Stylistics: Reader Response Research in the Classroom. In S. Zyngier, & G. Watson (Eds.). *Pedagogical Stylistics in the 21st Century* (pp. 209-231). Palgrave Macmillan, London. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-83609-2_9

Huberman, A. M., & Miles, M. B. (1994). Data management and analysis methods. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 428–444). Sage.

Italian Law n.92 Introduzione dell'insegnamento scolastico dell'educazione civica (del 20 agosto 2019), GU Serie Generale n.195. https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2019/08/21/19G00105/sg

Keen, S. (2006). A Theory of Narrative Empathy. *Narrative*, *14*(3), 207-236. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20107388

Keen, S. (2014). Narrative Empathy. In P. Hühn, J.C. Meister, J. Pier, & W. Schmid (Eds.), *Handbook of Narratology* (pp. 521-530), De Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110316469

Kidd, D., & Castano, E. (2013). Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind. *Science*, *342*(6156), 377-380. DOI: 10.1126/science.1239918

Kidd, D., & Castano, E. (2017). Different stories: How levels of familiarity with literary and genre fiction relate to mentalizing. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, *11*(4), 474-486. https://doi.org/10.1037/aca0000069

Mar, R.A., & Oatley, K. (2008). The Function of Fiction is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *3*(3), 173-192. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6924.2008.00073.x

Miall, D., & Kuiken, D. (1994). Foregrounding: Defamiliarization, and affect: Response to literary stories. *Poetics*, *22*(5), 389-407. https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-422X(94)00011-5

Morrell, M. (2010). *Empathy and Democracy*. The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Nussbaum, M. (1999). *Coltivare l'umanità*. Carocci.

Rawls, J. (1982). *Una teoria della giustizia*. Feltrinelli.

Rosenblatt, L. (1978). *The Reader, the Text, the Poem. The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work*. Southern Illinois University Press.

Saldaña, J. (2009). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Sage.

Shklovsky, V. (1965). Art as Technique. In L.T. Lemon, & M.J. Reis (Eds.), *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (pp. 3-24). University of Nebraska Press.

Silverman, D. (2002). *Come fare ricerca qualitativa*. Carocci.

Sorzio, P. (2007). *La ricerca qualitativa in educazione*. Carocci.

Stein, E. (2014). *Il problema dell'empatia*. Edizioni Studium.

Unesco (2015). *Global Citizenship Education. Topics and Learning Objectives*. https://unesdoc.unesco.org/-ark:/48223/pf0000232993.

Vygotskij, L.S. (1980). *Il processo cognitivo*. Bollati Boringhieri.

Wolf, M. (2009). *Proust e il calamaro. Storia e scienza del cervello che legge*. Vita e Pensiero.

Zahavi, D. (2011). Empathy and direct social perception: a phenomenological proposal. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, *2*(3), 541–558.
https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-011-0070-3

Zahavi, D., & Overgaard, S. (2012). Empathy without isomorphism: a phenomenological account. In J. Decety (Ed.), *Empathy: form bench to bedside* (pp. 3-20). MIT Press.

Zahavi, D. (2014). Empathy and Other-Directed Intentionality. *Topoi. An International Review of Philosophy*, *33*(1), 129-142. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-013-9197-4