Clowning: its effects on self-image and interpersonal relationships in nursery schools

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1. Introduction: Why clowning can become a training tool: symbolic and metaphoric significance

We must not be surprised that, after many years of silence and oblivion, the clown is back on the scene and with renewed vigor.

In an era of “enlightened” mankind (to evoke a concept dear to Fellini), where the strength and the pride of “blind haughty intelligence” dominate in many areas of the human condition, the clown has reappeared with his “absence of sense” along with his humbleness to enable us to accept our modesty and daily failings.

For many years now the clown has moved outside the circus itself to reach the streets and squares of the world and into places our civilization often struggles to reach.

Clowning is essentially based on certain fundamental elements: corporeity, play, the awareness of our frailties, exaltation of diversity, humbleness and self-mockery.

The body of the clown is a body “recognized”, trained to express the full range of human emotions and it may be described as both “emotional” and “hyperemotional”.

Artists such as Rouault, Toulouse Lautrec, Seurat and Picasso have given life to galleries of clowns whose bodies display a full range of emotions and feelings. At times the exalt the clown’s agility, beauty and lightness, at others the pain of defeat and the shame of poverty.

Psychodynamic, cognitive and social theories have made the human body one of the foundations of knowledge, self-image, self-esteem, communication and the expression of emotions. Here are mentioned only a few of the many authors from various fields who have written about the meanings and development of the corporeal image. One point on which all the authors agree is that the body represents not only the fundamental instrument of knowledge but also “our calling card” in interpersonal communication (Boadella, Liss, 1986).

The clown’s body is essentially a body “de-shamed” in the strictest sense of the term because the key to the artistic work of the clown is that he plays on his own faults, which are first and foremost physical, then moral, in order to gradually overcome shame.

Through practice one learns to recognize the feelings of being weighed down and awkward to finally free oneself of both through the comic working out of one’s own faults.

Clowning differs from other gymnastic activities because, through the free and creative expression of movement, it aims at raising the awareness of one’s transience and fragility.

The body of the clown is what Galiberti defines as “naïve”, in the sense of “native”, “original”, “natural” and “free”.

To consider the body in its ingenuousness means getting to know it in its original condition, freed from the equivalence in which every code is expressed in line with its inner mechanisms providing their output. This means restoring it to its “native” form, to its “nature”… (Galimberti, 1983, p.115)

Through clowning, the body becomes a friend, also and precisely for his funny aesthetic imperfections and defects. This is a long process that requires good teachers and the constant support of psychologists. “Discover the clown in you”, which is the motto of many seminars on the subject, is no trivial matter because one’s own clown represents those small parts which are fragile, lie in shadow, and are those we do not know, those we hide or those of which we are ashamed.

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Initially, the process involves doing simple exercises in order to rediscover that space which as adults, is often filled with worry and bound by the searching gaze of others and to rediscover how to play together in order to experiment with all our senses as we did back in our childhood.

Gesture education lies at the heart of clowning. However, this does not only mean learning techniques which make gestures more fluid and expressive, but also, and above all, to arrive at gestures which are both conscious and rich in implicit emotive meaning.

Rigidity of the body and lack of expressivity are symptoms of internal rigidities that are difficult to overcome in that they are bound by intra-psychic processes, of which often the subject is not even aware.

Clowning, therefore, in a Jungian acceptation, aims to develop the “kinesthetic” or sixth sense, through which the body becomes a trained vehicle of emotions and knowledge of oneself and others.

Gesture education provides for a subtle working on the exhibition of unpleasant and comical body parts; the study of facial expressions, and an increasingly deeper awareness of macro and micro movements and their communicative meaning.

Clowning proposes itself, therefore, as a new tool of “self-awareness” which springs forth from the body to spread quickly to the many parts of self-perception.

The comical and ungraceful body of the clown provides, in fact, a means to better accept frustration and unconsciously rework the concept of frailty and, again, the shame deriving being “unmasked” that can be felt very strongly in some periods of one’s life: during adolescence, sickness, old age. That is in all those situations in which the body is forcefully exposed and sees the eyes of others as critical and pitiless. (See Battacchi)

Some authors have analyzed the deeper aspects of the clown character, seeing it as a metaphor of the “Es”, in a Freudian sense, or of the shadow, from a Jungian perspective (Fallini, 1970; 1999; Starobinski, 1984; Fo, 1987; Galante Garrone, 1980; Moretti, 1998; Farneti; 2004). In this case, the clown has the job of awakening the infant and “roguish” parts of the self, and precisely for their characteristics they are often disquieting and difficult to accept.

“Mirroring”, with the help of a good clown can, in our view, be used to great effect in education where it is necessary to reduce the demands of an idealized megalomaniac ego or where there are highly competitive situations.

2. Clowning in schools

In schools, with few exceptions, the dominant values are: control and self-control, seriousness (risus abundat in ore stultorum!), rationality and logic (at the expense of divergent thinking and creativity), verbal language, the burden of homework (like training to bear suffering: duty first, pleasure later). Finally, little importance is given to happiness: children are often told “You must be obedient, good, conscientious and serious,” but rarely, “Do what it takes to be happy.”

Judging by the joy that holidays bring, if we asked school children to associate the word “school” with other words, we can be almost certain that very few would say “fun”, “novelty” or “curiosity”. We rather fear the word “school” evokes words like “duty”, “boredom” or “constraint” ... etc.

Bringing the figure of the clown into a school of this kind would appear to most as heretical. Teachers are often heard saying, “Stop clowning around, school is a serious matter …” (Farneti, 2010, pp.50-57), but we feel it is important to make the school environment somewhat more enjoyable and above all one which is more aware of the importance of emotive intelligence. Man is not only “sapiens” but also “ludens” (Huizinga, 1955) and “ridens” (Berger) and it has been apparent for some time now that the roots of creativity and freedom of thought lie in play (Winnicott 1987).

Given such premises, we wish to recall the basic principles of clowning methodology which make the clown, in our opinion, an excellent teacher for both school children and teachers. From a purely technical point of view, clowning methodology possesses many principles from other disciplines.

a. Like psycho-motorial education, it is in fact based on listening, perception, trust, the study of proxemics, turn-taking in dialogue and the inseparable mind-body unity. At the same time, however, it helps to develop self-mockery and discourage the turning on others with sarcastic aggressiveness, as it is geared towards the systematic study of one’s flaws, beginning from posture and ending with character traits;

b. Like art education it encourages the creative use of all materials and objects available in the environment around them, after having trained pupils to attentively observe all that is around them;
c. It gives great importance to music as a vital form of emotional expression and requires pupils to learn to read music and play an instrument, be it traditional or made using everyday objects such as a shower hose which can make for an original trumpet or a panel saw a magnificent violin;

d. from a psychological point of view, finally, clowning allows a gradual raising of awareness of one’s own faults and fears, by reinforcing the positive identity above all in those subjects who demonstrate shyness or fear when judged by others

Continued emphasis on the need to experience falls and failure, both in a physical sense (learning to fall and pretending to fall) and metaphorically, prevents pupils from feeling shame related to making mistakes and to the severe criticism of others.

Shame is an important emotion, both in a negative and positive sense: it is important that it exists but it is equally important that it does not become so exaggerated as to inhibit freedom and initiative. (Battacchi, Codispoti, 1992; Battacchi, 2002) In school shame is often the cause of pathological anxiety, learning, interpersonal and performance difficulties: finding adequate means to overcome it thus becomes very important. Clowning, thanks to group work, allows individuals to deal with not only their own flaws but also with those of others, reinforcing the idea that everyone has something to be ashamed of.

Play, moreover, is the primary means of transmitting content and as it is known that it is from play that creative processes are born during developmental age. Play puts on hold the dimension of time and brings the player into the “realm of the possible”.

In games of make-believe and, in particular in symbolic play, one falls into an “imperfect” time (once upon a time… let’s pretend I’m …mummy or daddy… ) in which the causal relations of reality no longer exist (Huizinga, 1939; Winnicott 1987).

The theater, and in particular clown theater, is the scene for a game in which the players, be they adults, teenagers or children, can develop libertarian themes, whose fundamental topic is the components of the self.

In this way, creativity aside, interactive skills are developed and power relations overturned in a temporary alliance between players. For this, education paths involving both pupils and teachers simultaneously would be desirable.

We know that creative thinking has to be taught but schools do not always provide the opportunity to do so because the freedom it requires is often confused with insubordination. The divergent pupil can scare as a result of his unpredictability, his lack of attitude in following established educational paths due to his greater ability to freely express his emotions.

This fear often stems from the insecurity of teachers, who it see as a risk to abandon themselves together with their pupils in order to discover the new and the unforeseeable.

Greater flexibility and the discovery of new forms of communication can make the classroom climate more conducive to developing the potential of individuals and help teachers to listen before putting forward ideas in their aim to “e-ducate” (literally meaning bring out) rather than “inform” (as to put in).

Particularly in infant and primary school, finally, it is important that adults, who are used to communicating mainly through verbal language with little “emotional coloring” rediscover the power of non-verbal messages more suited to children’s understanding.

In our culture, emotions often scare, are denied or hidden because they seem to escape the control of our thinking and the adult feels compelled to maintain excessive control in order to prevent his inner child being exposed to others. We know, however, that the inability to express (or express correctly) emotions can have serious health repercussions facilitating the emergence of a vast range of psycho-somatic symptoms.

The clown embodies the misfit adult that resides in our awkward and fearful unconscious, who learns to laugh at and cry for himself because he is not a child and, in his profound wisdom, knows how to put into play his inner child-self.

His ostentatious stupidity turns into emotional intelligence and becomes a very important educational tool.

André Casaca, in a recent conference in Cape Verde (Mindelo, 15-17 July 2009), explained how a clownish attitude, precisely through its apparent stupidity, may resolve difficult situations in the classroom, by reversing the normal pattern of things. For example, if pupils are not listening to what the teacher is saying, he can turn toward the door and, with great seriousness, speak and explain the lesson to the door itself. In a short while the class will become quiet and the surprise for such unusual, unexpected and seemingly stupid behavior enables clarification and recovery of teacher-student interaction. This is how the stupidity of the clown, through self-mockery, turns into emotional intelligence, which can become therapeutic if it enables identifications and projections on the part of the spectator.
3. Problem Statement and Purpose of Study

Clowning has been used extensively in hospitals in order to improve the quality of life of young patients. Nevertheless, we believe that other educational fields might benefit from clowning. In the schooling system it could lead to profitable results, in particular in:
- supporting teachers in developing better relationships with pupils;
- contributing to the psychological development of children;
- facilitating emotional intelligence (both personal and social): self-awareness and the ability to react positively to failures and frustrations;
- increasing optimism and facilitating relationships with others, through empathy and communication skills (Gardner, 91; Goleman, 96).

4. Methodology (6-month training course with clowns, magicians and musicians):

The training courses held in school, based on clowning techniques, provide the theory, where teachers are briefed on the principles of the art of clowning and the practice in which trainees engage, together with the clowns, in physical exercise involving communication games and expression of emotions. A psychologist is present throughout the entire course.

The training program of this study included:
1. Adjective Check List tests delivered to attendees prior to and on completion of the training period;
2. 3 focus group sessions with psychologists (held at the beginning, middle and end of the module);
3. Video footage (recorded during the clowning sessions) was used during the focus group sessions to provide teachers with feedback through “post-action” discussion and joint analysis of “lessons”.
4. Compilation of a logbook to keep a record of any entertaining episodes occurring.

The Sample: The trainee (experimental) group was made up of teachers from two nursery schools in northern Italy. The course group consisted of 21 teachers, all female, between the ages of 23 and 44 (average age 31). The control group was made up of 20 teachers between the ages of 25 and 40 (average age 34) from another nursery school.

The ACL tests for this group were also given prior to and on completion of the training period. Furthermore, it was ascertained that in the meantime no participants were involved in any other training activities

Results: We show here the comparison between the means obtained in the first and second test in the scales in which significant differences were found.

Significant differences were found in scale 3 of the A.C.L tests between the first and the last session: Nurturance, Intraception (the understanding of others), Abasement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nurturance (Nur Scale)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mean 1</td>
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<td>9.90476</td>
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<tr>
<th>Intraception (Int. Scale)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mean 1</td>
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<td>9.429</td>
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Here we summarize as well the means for the IC scale (Instinctive Child) because, although no statistically significant differences were found, the Mean of the scores was significantly raised, indicating an interesting trend, in line with the assumptions formulated.

**Abasement (Aba. Scale)**

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<tr>
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<th>Mean 1</th>
<th>Dev. Stan. 1</th>
<th>Diff.</th>
<th>Diff. Dev. Stand.</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean 1</td>
<td>1.095</td>
<td>3.064</td>
<td>-2.05</td>
<td>4.985</td>
<td>3.282</td>
<td>.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean 2</td>
<td>-2.476</td>
<td>5.39</td>
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**Adapted child**

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean 1</th>
<th>Dev. Stan. 1</th>
<th>Diff.</th>
<th>Diff. Dev. Stand.</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean 1</td>
<td>-0.238</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>-1.05</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>-2.06</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean 2</td>
<td>-1.109</td>
<td>3.5</td>
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The control group there were no significant differences between the first and second test.

### 6. Conclusions

Some scales seem to prove the hypothesis that clowning acts on both the personal and the relational sphere. The scales that indicate the need to protect and help others (NURTURANCE) and the understanding of others (INTRACEPTION) show a significant increase in the selection of positive adjectives.

Data confirmed the positive effects of clowning on self-image. Teachers affirm that their “Nurturance” and “intraception” skills improved after the 6-month training period. Furthermore, they acknowledged an enhancement of their self-esteem.

Clowning, as mentioned above, aims to reduce arrogance and presumptuousness through self-mockery and bring into play the infantile aspects and the positive change in the choice of adjectives seems to demonstrate a greater awareness on the part of teachers. Moreover, this seems to constitute a contribution to the capacity of self-evaluation.

Moreover, during the focus group sessions, they emphasized the positive effects of the exercises proposed by the clowns, in terms of a reduction in tension and improvements in communication among themselves and between teacher and pupil.

The logbook, on the contrary, caused some difficulties for the teachers, since they managed to report only a few episodes related to pupils and not to themselves.

The scale referred to as “Abasement” (ABA), or rather the need to feel humiliated, expresses feelings of inferiority, sense of guilt and shortcomings in social relations. The increase in negative adjectives would seem to contradict what we called “the philosophy of the clown”, based on humility, acceptance of failure, learning to feel small and incapable by ridiculing one’s own flaws, but it is possible that the awareness of one’s shortcomings could lead to...
better understanding of the negative behaviors that arise in everyday life and, consequently, greater concern for the needs of others.

The two scales Instinctive Child and Adapted Child appear therefore to indicate a greater ability to express the inner child that Jung called the “rogue” or the “shadow” that is the parts displaying disobedience and not submissive towards adults, but they are themselves also cheerful and playful.

On the one hand, then, clowning seems to solicit positive emotions towards others, on the other autonomy, the desire to transgress and instinct. However, we must emphasize that the A.C.L. is an instrument that aims to assess how the subject perceives himself and not “how he is” in reality.

Therefore, the results obtained by this research show the changes that subjects believe happened to them and not objective changes.

New research that we conducted on other samples (teachers and students on training courses) confirm the results of this initial research despite the effects of some important variables which should be underlined, such as: course duration, types of exercises adopted, evaluation measures of eventual changes and the expectations of course members.

The changes revealed with the A.C.L., for example, concern a far higher number on the scale when the course lasts over a period of months, while if the course is short (30 hours) changes are less marked.

We can therefore conclude that clowning offers many opportunities in the training field, even though it is necessary to achieve an even clearer and well-defined methodology in order to identify its effects.

References