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Sustainability Practices in Working Contexts: Supervision, Collective Narrative, Generative Humour, and Professional Respect

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Abstract: Research literature and field experience reveal that jobs in social education—just like other jobs with a high interpersonal involvement—feature a high risk of job burnout. By necessity, work organizations in social education have developed a definite set of practices to support their workers and provide occasions for mutual support. Here we analyze four of these practices—supervision, collective narrative, generative humour, and professional respect—and suggest ways in which organizations in other sectors may consider importing them to increase their own organizational sustainability. We also present an analysis of workers’ second-level skills (such as narrative skills, reflexive skills, team working skills) that are related to sustainability practices: on the one hand they allow the individual worker to effectively take part and contribute, on the other hand their development is stimulated by such participation. Organizational sustainability is in fact to be considered a positive collaboration between individuals and organization, rather than a one-way, top-down condition. Increases in sustainability may result from cascading effects triggered by management decisions as well as by workers’ individual and collective actions.

Keywords: organizational sustainability; education; social work practices; skills; supervision; narrative; humour; respect



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1. Introduction

The concept of sustainability became known on a global level in 1987, through the “Our Common Future” report by the World Commission on Environment and Development [1] and was since shaped by several political, social and academic influences over time. For organizations, the call to sustainability meant from the very beginning that they had to simultaneously ensure the effective achievement of organizational objectives, reduce ecological impact, and improve social and human welfare. One influential framework for thinking and assessing sustainability was the Triple Bottom Line referring to three aspects: social, environmental (or ecological) and financial [2–4]. Over time, the idea of “corporate sustainability” took shape. Initiatives of corporate sustainability varied in their concern for either the natural environment, or the social environment, or an integration between the two, all entwined with the business models adopted as well as with moral issues and tensions. Much attention was devoted by researchers and companies to strongly business-oriented issues such as business model innovation [5], increasing job demands [6], organizational learning [4], inter-organizational partnerships [7], innovation and creativity [8], and more. An important shift was the increasing attention to *inner* features and practices of companies, such organizational culture [9]. Today, organizations increasingly claim to have become more sustainable and to have contributed to global sustainable development. At the same time, we see a rising focus on “Sustainable Human

Resource Management (HRM)” [10–14]. Meta-analyses have demonstrated that the purpose of Sustainable HRM has been changing over the years [13], and several aspects of the organization are recognized as related to Sustainable HRM, such as recruitment and selection, performance appraisal, compensation, training and development, HR flow [14], organizational culture [9] or even dialogue [15]. Within this focus on HRM, particular attention was devoted to the issue of job burnout and to practices aimed at preventing it [6,16,17]. In this paper we contribute to such literature by pointing out a definite set of practices long developed by working organizations in social education in order to support their workers and to provide occasions for mutual support. Our aim is to emphasize these sustainability practices that are confined in social education organizations (with a long and successful story therein) and propose them for evaluation in other sectors and kinds of organizations.

One important remark needs to be done concerning the use of the term ‘social education’—‘education’ for brevity—in this paper. In many countries, ‘education’ is a term associated to teachers and schools. In a few other countries such as Italy—the background context of this paper—the meaning of ‘educator’ is somehow closer to the idea of a ‘social worker’, but some publications have proposed the useful international name of ‘social educator’ [18,19]. ‘Professional educators’ in these countries are professionals who are able to promote the well-being and development of a broad spectrum of individuals and groups. They are employed in public and private organizations that provide social services in tight convention with the State, Region, municipality or other public institutions. The reflections contained in this paper are grounded on those social education organizations, where employees are social educators and other operators.

Research literature and field experience reveal that jobs in social education—just like other jobs with a high interpersonal involvement—feature a high risk of job burnout. In fact, an intense customer-worker interaction is shared among professional categories such as call center operators, bank employees, police officers, cabin attendants and nurses [20]. Doctors, nurses, and therapists, for example, are involved in a kind of relationship that involves patient support, high interpersonal costs, or emotional questions. ‘Emotional demand’ is defined as the need for emotional effort caused by contact with people in need, as well as by the confrontation with many aspects of human life—such as illness, poverty, death, discomfort. Another interesting concept that applies to the mentioned professional categories is emotional labour, introduced by sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild [21]. Emotional labour is that part of the working role that consists in aligning with the emotions and display rules expected by the organization. In fact, within organizations, especially in professions with high emotional demand, there are standards of behavior that indicate not only the emotions that are allowed, those that are not allowed and those that are appropriate to different situations, but also the ways in which these emotions should be expressed. Emotional labour is, for Hochschild, an activity that implies inducing or suppressing a feeling in order to sustain an exterior expression that produces a mental state (e.g., feeling of being protected in a safe place) in others. For Hochschild, emotional work is characterized by three distinctive elements: (1) it involves face-to-face or vocal contact with the public; (2) it requires the worker to produce an emotional state in another person; (3) it allows the employer, through training and supervision, a certain degree of control over the emotional activity of workers. Hochschild distinguishes two modes of emotional work: one profound, the other superficial. In the first—called ‘deep acting’—emotions are consciously modified towards the desired configuration; deep acting ends up transforming the emotions of the worker in depth and is associated with stress and reduction and increased sense of personal fulfillment. ‘Surface acting’, on the contrary, produces an emotional manifestation which is not felt as one’s own. The worker simply feigns appropriate emotion. It concerns the management of behavior, rather than emotion, which is regulated, implemented through an accurate presentation of verbal and non-verbal signs. Surface acting is associated with increased stress, emotional exhaustion, depression and a sense of inauthenticity. Workers who provide personal services cannot reasonably be

assumed to be in a good mood all the time, rather they may sometimes be bored or seized with negative emotions such as anger, fear or disappointment. The likely discrepancy between the social image and work reality that these workers experience in relating with the outside world and with their own ideas and values is as endemic as it is exhausting. The *emotional dissonance* produced by emotional work—that is, “the fact of not being able to feel what one should”—involves “feeling false and hypocritical, determining in the long time the alienation from one’s emotions and the negative consequences” [20].

Professions characterized by high emotional intensity, emotional demand, emotional work, emotional dissonance and work-related stress are also ground for another phenomenon that is known and feared precisely in the educational field: job burnout [22]. In social and health contexts where the goal of the work activity is the care, help, and rehabilitation of patients, a prolonged imbalance between investments and results, between requests and resources leads operators to emotional detachment and intolerance towards users. Those are the first symptoms of job burnout, which consists, according to the systematization of Christina Maslach [23], in a specific chronic stress syndrome characterized by (1) emotional exhaustion, (2) depersonalization, and (3) reduced sense of professional achievement. The first component, which is individual, consists in the person’s feeling that they have consumed all their psychological energies. The second, more inter-personal, consists of an exasperated detachment in the relationship with users which is expressed in treating others as objects rather than as people. The third represents the self-evaluation component. These effects are amplified by the fact that burnout is “contagious” (crossover burnout).

To decrease job burnout risk, some HR approaches try to act on organizational factors such as job demand and lack of support with an expectation of solving the problem. However, the intrinsic condition of permanent problematicity and emotional load prevails over organizational factors in causing burnout. Therefore, even cutting-edge interventions should be interpreted in a compensatory and never decisive sense. In other words, prevention interventions should be configured in a compensatory manner, since the nature of the work cannot be changed [20]. It is here that sustainability practices become essential.

Pedagogist Vanna Iori has written beautiful and wise pages on the emotional life of social workers and on burnout: “To understand how much social and educational workers are subjected to profound emotional wear, just think that, from the 1950 s to today, in a crescendo of quantity and intensity, there was no social issue that did not directly involve them ‘in the trenches’: from health to educational services, from drug addiction to disabilities, from the prison system to immigration”, our translation [24]. Being social and educational workers requires “exposing oneself to the emotional discomforts deriving from the repeated and engaging contact with suffering, from the prolongation of professional emotional tension even in the personal dimension, from the uncertain boundary between work and private life” (*Ibidem*). For all this emotional complexity and risk of stress and burnout, work organizations in social education have developed a definite set of practices to support their workers and provide occasions for mutual support. In what follows we analyze four of these practices—*supervision*, *collective narrative*, *generative humour*, and *professional respect*—and suggest ways in which organizations in other sectors may consider importing them to increase their own sustainability. We also present an analysis of workers’ second-level skills (such as narrative skills, reflexive skills, team working skills) that are related to sustainability practices: on the one hand they allow the individual worker to effectively take part and contribute, on the other hand their development is stimulated by such participation. Sustainability is in fact to be considered a positive collaboration between individuals and organization, rather than a one-way, top-down condition. Increases in sustainability may result from cascading effects triggered by management decisions as well as by workers’ individual and collective actions.

2. Supervision

Supervision and reflective practice are forms of professional accompaniment that can safeguard against the risk of burnout and protect workers from the danger of depersonalization [25]. In social education, supervision identifies a very specific practice that is carried out in a group by periodic meetings with a supervisor. The group may or may not coincide with a team or *équipe* (there are supervisions gathering together social educators from different services or even organizations). The history of any team, *équipe* or organization will run through different 'supervision eras' with different supervisors. Change of supervisor may come from various intra-group, institutional, economic, philosophical or interpersonal considerations, but what is important is that supervision is an ongoing, never ending process, an integral part of social educational work. Therefore, supervision differs from other practices such as mentoring: it is not individual, it is not time limited, and it is 'life long', not reserved to junior professionals.

"Supervision is a place for speaking and listening [aimed at] reworking the experience of educational work and the associated emotional loads, with the help of a figure called the supervisor", our translation [26]. It is important to state that the supervisor is not at all intended as an encyclopedic expert capable of giving answers and providing solutions to all problems; he or she is rather the one who guarantees the educational team a space and time to explore their own difficulties and identify the most appropriate solutions. The supervisor is not the source of the operator's learning, but rather the means that facilitates personal and direct confrontation with a reality, which becomes the primary source of knowledge and experience: the operator learns not from the supervisor but from experience [27]. Supervision should in fact favor "reflexivity" in action, that is, the "reworking process" of professional experience [28]. Such communicated, shared reflexivity, across different contexts and subjects, makes the supervision setting a 'device' for transforming actions, a fundamental resource for the operator to find a space and stimuli for experience processing. In supervision, a kind of 'theory of practice and practice of theory' is realized.

Belardi and Wallnöfer distinguish the supervision of social professions from professional counseling on the one hand and psychotherapy on the other. The ideal supervision processes move (oscillate) continuously between the two poles of professional advice and personal experience, in order to optimize the professional situation. If they remain too anchored in professional counseling, learning processes do not occur. If, on the other hand, they remain too tied to personal experience, the level of professionalism can be re-enacted [29]. According to the object considered, we can also distinguish different types of supervision. There are supervisions centered on case management (heterocentered) whose object is above all the technique and methodology of the intervention (methodological supervision). There are supervisions centered on the intrapsychic aspects that distinguish the operator and which affect his way of dealing with users (self-centered). There are supervisions which aim to deepen the two previous aspects. Finally, there are supervisions that have as their object the dynamics of interaction within the working group. We also distinguish two well-differentiated levels: the "technical-operative" and the "personal" one. The first is aimed at instrumental and methodological learning of any kind. It finds a formative application of choice in the phase in which the operator, who has already completed the essential theoretical knowledge and has carried out an exemplified and guided practical apprenticeship, begins to carry out the professional activity independently and supervises the results and doubts of his work. At the personal level, instead, the supervisor "becomes an instrument at the service of a process of re-elaboration and renewal of another person. This form of activity requires awareness and mastery of both the emotional and functional relational implications of the subjectivity of those who work" [30]. The supervisor is often thought to be "external" to the team and to the institutional context in which the group operates, so that he or she can offer an "off-screen space" where the operators can be fully free in the re-elaboration of their own experience. Instead, 'technical supervision' could usefully be carried out by a 'homologous operator' in terms of competence and field of

intervention, to convey a style that is congruent with the theoretical approach of the service and homogeneous from an operational point of view.

What is the payback of supervision? Through supervision, educators can discuss their work in order to learn from recent experience, and to monitor their own activities. But supervision often takes place in a group setting in which other operators or the team also participate: here, the group and its way of reacting can also represent an important resource for dealing with the difficulties of concrete intervention. The outcome of supervision is a concrete, intentional, contracted and negotiated product that unites and empowers all the subjects, despite the diversity of their roles and functions. The consequence of a setting that emphasizes the 'reflexivity' of the operator is the attribution to the supervision of a meaning of 'research' potential. The moment of re-reading and reflection on one's professional work, required by supervision and enriched by constant comparison with the elaborations produced in theory, is also a valuable opportunity for verification, consolidation, modification of the professional actions of the services. Supervision is an indispensable tool to make educational intervention more qualified and effective; it allows educators to "see from above", to "observe from another angle", to discover more aspects of the same problematic reality, understand the causes and stimulate the search for a solution. It offers them the opportunity to reflect on their work more objectively, but also to find support and guidance in *impasse* situations. During supervision, in fact, the educator can also focus on the methods and strategies he or she is using, highlight the concrete or potential difficulties encountered up to that moment, and discuss the appropriateness of his or her own intervention. Supervision is thus a privileged moment for the evaluation of educational processes and events: the objects, facts and elements that constitute educational processes and events are the "text of a careful pedagogical semiosis" [31]. Effective supervision should help educators gain greater confidence in their own ability to work and interact; any uncertainties, doubts and anxieties that may accompany educational work should be addressed and overcome in the relationship with the supervisor and with the group. Therefore supervision—an ongoing research on the meaning of educational action—can help transform the uncertainty and weakness of educational work into potentiality. Supervision also has the function of narrative accompaniment to the stories of growth and professional identification of socio-educational operators: it is functional to an operation of research and construction of meaning by the operators with respect to their working situation [32].

Can supervision be somehow transferred to other work contexts different from social educational ones? Since there are many approaches and techniques, to think about the transferability of supervision to other contexts it is useful to recall some basic criteria that should be met by supervision for it to be a tool for change and professional growth. The criteria—outcome of a comparative synthesis of several studies [33]—are the following: supervision cannot be imposed; the supervisor must enjoy the trust of the group of operators involved in the supervision; the theoretical approach and the subject of supervision must be explicit; there must be consistency between the approach used at work (including organizational culture) and that used for supervision; supervision must have a defined and recognized setting; it is good not to confuse supervision with psychotherapeutic intervention. While the purpose of the former is above all a change linked to learning and knowledge (training purpose), the purpose of the latter is a change linked to one's personality and well-being (therapeutic purpose).

Why can supervision be considered a sustainability practice? First of all, the negative relationship between supervision and job burnout is well established in the literature [34]. For influential Italian pedagogist Iori, our translation [24] the cause of burnout are not feelings, but rather "the impossibility of processing them" and "the lack, in the working structures, of spaces and times that allow operators to express the experiences and meanings related to the daily assumption of a part of the suffering of the subjects with whom they enter into a relationship". The censorship of emotions derives, for Iori, from a neutral and impersonal model of professionalism, inherited and internalized by the operators and determining the functioning of the team: the behavior of the operators is rationalized

by the professional discourse and 'designed' to converge on the 'purpose of care', on the objectives of service and on the individual objectives of individual users. The whole team is called to work in harmony and coordination. A side effect is, at times, the closure of spaces for re-elaboration of emotional work and all its implications. As we have seen, supervision is also a strong empowering practice of other essential factors of corporate sustainability, such as organizational learning [4] and dialogue [15]. By engaging periodic supervision groups can become accustomed with dialogue and *de facto* become "reflexive communities of learners", a key element of sustainable systems.

3. Collective Narrative

Numerous writings are regularly used in social educational work: individualized reports and projects, service charter, verification tools, observations contained in logbooks and journals are just some of the containers of communications transmitted in educational workplaces, to which informal tools need to be added, included for example by messages and information conveyed by social networks. Writing is often presented as a technical response to be used to manage a relational situation [35].

Professional writings are not sorted out in literary categories and are not inscribed in the field of fiction, but rather of function, that is to say, useful and effective tools for the exercise of the profession. They respond to several objectives: synthesize a set of information; describe the complexity of a situation; prepare a decision; establish and prepare the phases of a project, of a professional intervention; leave a trace of the action to ensure continuity; communicate unexpected results and effects; account for the evolution of a situation in view of new choices. Yet, producing a professional writing is always a complex cognitive activity, involving reasoning, an argumentation that develops on facts, information transmitted, reflections, projects, contents, technical tools, messages.

In social education, professional writings create a place—around 'objective' knowledge—for the stories of the subjects and the responsibility of the author. These writings thus open, by definition, an issue of positioning. Producing professional writings invites us to question ourselves on the relationship between the text and its author, on the characteristics of the production and on the relationship with the recipient [36]. Therefore, professional writings do not try to produce a discourse of truth about others, but write sensitive and less stereotyped texts, which leave everyone a space, does not eliminate the responsibility of the writer. This complexity is evoked by the following questions: what if someone talked about my story? What if someone wrote about me? [37].

And there is more. Writing, in the professional field, is to place an act [37]. What is expected of an act? That it intervenes in reality and that, in some way, modifies it. In educational work, the act of writing introduces an elaboration, an opening towards 'closed' or 'unprecedented' situations and, in a flexible way, proposes a credible transformation of reality. The act of writing constitutes an indispensable dimension of the educational intervention: it is an integral part of it. Educational writing is not in fact limited to the objectifying function, but rather proposes itself as a sensitive and subjectively rich significant act. Constructing a story is to stage human action by trying to make it intelligible to oneself and to make intelligible to others a succession of events that, considered in isolation, would mean nothing. Educational work exists in the world of saying and words, so the power to signify one's work allows not only to find the conditions to manifest it but, through words, it acquires existence and meaning.

Can collective narrative be transferred to non-educational contexts? Narration, in oral or written form, can offer a valuable tool for identifying the meanings of experience and helping the person to recognize their own identity. People need new words, a story that allows them to give a different meaning to their experience. The narrative challenge concerns the possibility, or impossibility, of telling one's own story and professionalism, of telling each other—individually and collectively—with sufficient coherence.

A valuable learning methodology is *Collective Writing*, pushing participants to explore, discuss and help with learning capabilities [38,39]. *Collective Writing* has its roots in don

Lorenzo Milani's work with peasant kids in Barbiana (Italy) in the 1960s, and it was used to compose important documents such as the famous *Letter to a Teacher (Lettera a una professoressa)*. Collective Writing in the school of Barbiana was seen as an act of love pouring from the desire for truth, and as a crucial path to social awareness and advocacy. After don Milani's work, Collective Writing was internationally adopted, developed and experimented in several school orders and contexts, in connection with collaborative learning approaches. Collective Writing is an effective means for team reflection, creativity, and communication, as it also assumes one or more receivers, real or imagined.

Up to this point we have been focusing on written texts, but oral narratives are important as well, and a number of other languages (e.g., iconic, plastic) can be used.

Stories of the profession represent essential spaces for reflection. They are places of transmission of knowledge, but also places of construction of knowledge, of comparison between experiences and knowledge [40]. The story introduces a principle of coherence and continuity in the representation of life, a principle that is at the origin of the feeling of appropriation of oneself over time and of recognition of the subjective forms of identity, according to which an individual elaborates the sense of her or his experience. Stories can specify concepts, verify hypotheses, perform analyses. They can make explicit sense of the actions exercised in the context of a professional activity. The story of action shapes a present experiential knowledge, to which the subject still has to attribute a meaning. The narrative organization of experiences allows us to interpret this knowledge retrospectively, thus assigning it a communicable meaning. Language allows one's work activity to become intelligible to the extent that it is reformulated in a discourse. From the moment workers say what they do, their activity becomes available, and available to others. Professional saying, then, is undoubtedly constituted by transmitting to others certain information on the reference universe, and also by dealing with others, that is to say, by trying to influence the protagonists of the intervention and transform the interlocutory context.

Professional discourses have a broad, open and multidisciplinary nature. Talking does not only mean mastering the internal structure of words and their meaning, but expressing an interaction with contexts, and in this sense, speech is an element that contributes to building the identity of the speaking subjects. Talking about one's work means recognizing and naming a certain area of exercise of professional activities and, through this, attributing specific professional identities to certain groups, questioning the meaning that professionals grant to their practice and their interactions, attributing legitimacy—sometimes—also to those who cannot routinely participate in such speeches.

Narrative practices are useful for repositioning organizational cultures and are a vehicle for the values that circulate. A group has its own specific culture when it has shared a narrative for a certain period of time that is composed of basic assumptions, given by behaviors, perceptions, thoughts and feelings. The challenge is to be able to combine the scope of analyses, opportunities for reflection and the possibility of understanding phenomena, starting from concrete and profound experiences.

Why can collective narrative be considered a sustainability practice? As we have seen, narrative practice has a number of benefits related to sustainability. It is a powerful means to learning and knowledge sharing, both processes being crucial to corporate sustainability [3,4,41,42]. Also, we need to take into account that a stressful element for employees is the feeling of being unheard, which is very frequent in workplaces [43]. Narrative initiatives and situations can be among the best ways to encourage employee voice, capture the concerns and issues, but also ideas and resources, and get to know all workers better, by also instantiating a dialogue among them [15]. Narrative can also be a way to enhance community, identity and company belongingness.

4. Generative Humour

Research on educational work rarely pursues the humour trail [44]. It is undisputed that being in contact with people in difficulty, who live in conditions of marginalization, in situations of discomfort, deviance, cultural deprivation and who are sometimes the

bearers of recriminatory instances, can make the work of the operators tiring. Furthermore, the confrontation with a “powerful culture of guilt” [45] is very pressing and this type of work is rarely associated with humour and laughter. However, sharing laughter can act as a social glue and facilitate engagement and relationships. Laughing together attenuates power differences, reduces social distance, strengthens the helping process and advances the therapeutic relationship. Work suffering (leading for example to job burnout), the loss of professional references and the decrease in autonomy in the exercise of one’s role are some of the indicators that testify the fatigue present in the world of social and educational professions [46]. In such contexts, humour proceeds with a double movement between distance and implication, in constant tension between putting distance on the one hand and engagement on the other, between experiencing emotionally demanding situations and the possibility of co-constructing meanings. In the complex conciliation that aims to develop the professional need for autonomous profiles for the exercise of an activity together with the need for regulation by means of coded norms, humour can play an important role in helping operators to cope with difficult and paradoxical, unresolved aspects of their work.

Humour appears as a multifaceted and multiform phenomenon, for which there is no complete and shared definition [47]. Humour is often considered simply an informal way of approaching, useful for communicating lightly, pleasant and fun, in short, not a serious matter. As proof of this, many contributions can be identified in the literature that recall the need to overcome simplification [48–50], with an effort aimed at allowing rather a thoughtful reflection on the topic. Easy to recognize, but complex to define, humour has qualities and characteristics that engage scholars from different disciplines, in distant eras and in dissimilar cultural contexts [51,52]. It is therefore a complex phenomenon that incorporates cognitive, emotional, behavioral, physiological and social aspects [47].

What is the payback of humour? Empirical evidence suggests that humour plays an adaptive function in multiple life situations and is frequently associated with positive emotions. The dominant idea remains that humour and laughter can positively support a person in difficulty, be it is psychological or physical [44]. Many hypotheses have been proposed regarding the salutary effects of humour and in particular of laughter. The physiological effects of laughter appear to be similar to those of exercise, including reduction of muscle tension, heart rate and respiratory rate, followed by a relaxation effect. However, despite numerous studies, it is still unclear whether these effects have long-term consequences. Socially, laughing provides people with a common experience and represents something intimate, it establishes complicity (although this particular reading of humour is certainly subject to wide cultural differences).

The important role played by humour in human communication is also attested in the famous conversations carried out by Gregory Bateson with an interdisciplinary group of colleagues at the Macy Foundation in 1952. Among the numerous reflections, it is important to recall the distinction between voluntary laughter and involuntary laughter. On the other hand, Bateson argues: “I think the reassuring aspects of laughter are clear, that is the in-group statements, the declarations of belonging to the group implicit when two individuals laugh or smile” [53]. L. Kubie adds: “laughter is in itself a language and like all languages, it can say many things” [54]. Its meanings never manifest themselves in a pure state and differences can exist at the conscious and/or unconscious levels of psychological functions, an aspect that makes the phenomenon of laughter complex.

The usefulness of humour in psychotherapy has long been recognized [55–57]. Humour can facilitate reformulation or repositioning between interacting subjects (Gale, 1991). L. Kubie [54], convinced that humour can be potentially useful for therapy, also warns against possible risks. Humour is inadequate when used to mock or minimize the patient’s concerns; when it is used to divert attention from an emotionally dangerous problem and lead the conversation on less threatening topics; when it is irrelevant to therapeutic purposes, but it gratifies the therapist. The latter position is also supported by Mulkey [58], who sees the use of humour as a method of inaction and avoidance with the consequent risk of blurring a precious opportunity for change.

Back to the work of social educators, a research conducted by A.-F. Joris presents different functions of humour [59]. Among others, there are: “facilitating the relationship”, namely establishing a more fluid and relaxed relationship between people who are oppressed by their difficulties and operators who aim to relieve pressure and relieve tension; “distance” through a process of redefining the problematic situation and identifying latent or divergent elements that favor the reorganization of meaning; “rebalancing the relationship” which, starting from different professional status, repositions itself as an alliance earned with the complicity of laughter.

If in the helping relationship professional social educators have the task of strengthening the subject’s capacity for initiative “to reach a new way of seeing things, a new understanding of oneself, a greater awareness of internal and external conditioning” [33], humour certainly does not eliminate problems, but in addition to allowing the relationship to be oxygenated, it allows opening a space of reality.

If we share the thought of van Wormer & Boes [60], who argue that social service workers need humour more than the users they meet, it is also important to observe the role of humour in the work of workers. It is undisputed that social work is stressful work [61] and that the sharing of comic jokes, as well as the humorous register can help social workers to cope with situations of psychophysical exhaustion. When used selectively, sensitively and wisely, humour can be seen together with other mechanisms as a positive method for dealing with stress and fatigue.

Humour can thus be really generative. But this is not always the case. We know from the theories developed regarding burnout that situations of extreme stress can lead the operator to act in a cynical and hostile way with the user, to the point of perceiving him or her as an impersonal object. Situations of work malaise can also be highlighted through what is called “gallows humour”, which takes its name from the type of jokes relating to death row inmates or hopeless victims and is often generated by the victims themselves [62]. ‘Black’ and ‘macabre’, derogatory and cynical humour expressed by social educators is manifested through forms of verbal abuse, disrespect for the discomfort and pain of others and the dehumanization of users. This negative humour “exists, persists and is justified as a way of coping with stress, fatigue and emotional difficulties” [63]. That is, practitioners recognize that such comments can conflict with professional ethics, but justify them as necessary to release emotions and be able to control their feelings of discomfort. One of the debated questions in relation to black humour is whether it reflects a reduced or increased sensitivity to external circumstances. In this regard, Sullivan, who attributes to macabre humour the function of self-protection and management of uncomfortable or contemptuous thoughts about people in need, believes that he cannot ignore the immoral quality of this coping mechanism [64]. However, mere social disapproval of such behavior would not be effective, and on the other hand, would have the effect of increasing stress in those operators who aim to improve their professional intervention. In his view, it is important to offer practitioners opportunities to identify and deal with discriminatory attitudes and behaviors (*Ivi*, p. 46). In summary, if, as is probable, macabre humour continues to be perceived and used as a tool to reduce stress, its negative power must be recognized and understood.

Is humour important in all working contexts? Quite a few researches have been conducted in order to study communication methods and humour. The beneficial impact in working contexts has been highlighted. Of course, in Western culture, work is typically associated with something serious, heavy and therefore far from fun and pleasure. As B. Plester states, “the concept of fun at work seems to be in antithesis with the Protestant work ethic” [65]. In fact, for some time research has been suggesting that, if not encouraged, humour would favor a relaxed and less stressful climate with an impact on work productivity. Better relationships, teamwork, creative thinking and problem solving skills would seem to be related to work environments where comedy is present [51].

In work organizations, fun and laughter play an important role both in fostering engagement, involvement and identification or as an expression of disengagement and

disinvestment in organizational life. In this direction, the promotion of fun activities aimed at employees can become a business management strategy. Several researches conducted in the workplace show how humour can support collaboration and cohesion within teams [66], make work more enjoyable and reduce stress and tension.

Some studies emphasize the role played by humour in processes of co-construction of norms and expectations governing activities and relationships by novice and experienced workers [67]. In organizational contexts characterized by changes and uncertainty due to the entry of newcomers, humour can intervene in the processes of negotiation of meanings. In fact, humour is not only effective for undermining a vision of the world, but also for showing different and new ones.

The theoretical model of organizational sensemaking [68] emphasizes that humour is not a short-term individualistic strategy, but an interactive process useful for selecting, managing, reproducing and reifying interpretations, common backgrounds or shared stories of working life. The definition of sensemaking can simply be traced back to attributing meaning [67]. The creation of meaning is a generic expression that refers to processes of interpretation and that is to the production by which individuals and groups interpret and reflect on phenomena [69]. However, the creation of meaning emerges intersubjectively in the collective and chaotic situations that threaten the acquired meanings and engage the members of a group in the task of redefining.

Attention should be paid to everyday speeches that are not limited to reflecting organizational structures, but which are dynamic processes of building the cultural identity of a group. In particular, it becomes interesting to consider humour as a component of discursive practices throughout the workplace. Studies conducted by Holmes point out that the culture of a workplace is constantly altered through conversations and actions; it develops and is gradually modified by large and small acts, in a regular and continuous social interaction [70]. Each group creates its own particular combination through the resources available and within the parameters acceptable in that workplace.

Humour is part of every culture and shapes the meaning of events, situations and activities. In particular, humour often appears in work narratives (see previous section). Through “narratives, practitioners can emphasize their members’ differences or resistance to a social structure, while at other times they strengthen the power structure and unity in a group”, our translation [71]. With the possibility of highlighting ambiguities and contradictions, humour can serve as a tool to bring out and affirm identity interpretations and positions. Weick argues that identity maintenance is a basic concern in the creation of meaning [68], and also suggests that sensemaking is all the more necessary in moments of tension, paradox and ambiguity.

A long tradition associates humour with creativity. “During a creative process, people go through a series of stages that involve humour in different ways. The experience and the manifestation of humour become part of the entire creative process” [72]. In work contexts, humour produces a constructive climate in interactions, raises tensions, makes discussions lively, generates creative solutions and divergent thinking. Studies therefore reveal how humour not only contributes to the construction of a good relational climate in the workplace (the creative use of relational humour), but could also stimulate intellectual activity to achieve work objectives (use of humour for improve the working climate).

It is interesting in this regard to emphasize that the use of humour aimed at generating new ideas and stimulating intellectual progress is closely associated with what is identified as “transformative” leadership [73]. Although a direct relationship between leadership style and types of humour cannot be said to exist, the ways in which leaders use and encourage the use of humour in the workplace testifies that it is a strategic resource. and precious. Leaders can choose to use it if they recognize its transformational potential to integrate with transactional capability. It is therefore possible to use humour to encourage creativity, innovation and innovative thinking, but also effectively, to achieve predefined goals, emphasize rules, roles and responsibility.

However, when the work environment is insecure, more ambiguous and less predictable, professional identity is also threatened and “humour is often tied to the parts of the work identity that are in danger” [67]. Faced with difficult, chaotic and threatening working conditions, humour appears to be a useful support in professions characterized by ever-increasing complexity.

Why can humour at work be considered a sustainability practice? This section has pointed out so many ways in which humour can help improving working conditions: by helping operators to cope with difficult and paradoxical, unresolved aspects of their work; by establishing a more fluid and relaxed relationship between people (by balancing closeness and distance); by allowing the exploration of meanings and new understandings; by offering support in stress and fatigue; by improving relationships, teamwork, creative thinking and problem solving skills; by building the cultural identity of a group; and by protecting parts of the work identity. Humour is also a powerful way to meaning-making; it can intervene in the processes of negotiation of meanings. In fact, humour is not only effective for undermining a vision of the world, but also for showing different and new ones. So despite its undeniable risks (oversimplification, degeneration to disrespect, cynism and hostility) professional humour is undoubtedly an important ingredient of work sustainability.

5. Professional Respect

Reciprocal respect coming from undisputed fundamental esteem is a crucial element of sustainability in social educational contexts. When respected by responsables and colleagues, a professional educator is a much stronger agent of change and accompaniment. With the constant support of colleagues and leaders, the freedom from judgement and blame, and the safety of acting in full dignity, educators will perform their best to the benefit of the persons in education, whatever situations and stories they bring with them.

Respect is sometimes misconceived—especially when related to education—as submissiveness, silence, ability to suffer. On the contrary, we should start from a more active, proactive, productive vision of respect. The word comes from Latin *respectus*, from the verb *respicere* ‘look back at, regard’, from *re-* ‘back’ + *specere* ‘look at’ pp. 121–141 in [74]. We can therefore say that respect is knowing how to look, knowing how to look around. Respect means noticing other people, and being aware of the fact that we are not alone. But respect is not just looking: it is re-looking or looking back, pausing, retracing one’s steps, focusing attention better, repairing a hasty oversight. Respect also becomes knowing how to look at the details, noticing people next to us, their needs, their value, the effects our behavior has on them. Respect is also the realization that some people are marginalized, abused, excluded. Respecting is therefore an extremely active, involved, competent attitude. It is therefore truly paradoxical that respect is also seen as passive submissiveness, as if it meant accepting everything, letting others do what they want, withdrawing. Ultimately individualism. Respecting means acting while knowing that you are not alone. Respect properly understood cannot be requested or forced: it is a choice, despite the Mafia-like idea of “respect” as something imposed, under the blackmail of punishment and retaliation. We don’t have to respect everything, but we respect by following our highest quality, reason. Respect is not tolerance: we “tolerate” what is negative in itself, we tolerate more than accepting something that is in itself inevitable or that does not depend on us. Respect, on the other hand, is a positive orientation. Finally, respect, in the sense of noticing others, is also a positive and vital act towards oneself: it is getting out of a loneliness that can sometimes even lead to extreme and self-destructive actions. Respect is therefore an active and careful gesture of noticing, reviewing, focusing on the other and acting accordingly.

What can an organization do in order to promote respect? The issue leads to individual action (acting in the name of fairness, sometimes against the tide), then to setting an example and accompanying (working alongside the colleague as a ‘tutor’), but also to facilitating and mediating encounters (building bridges), to analyzing practices together to see better (by reviewing critical episodes, roles, rules, leaving the point of view of the

individual) and finally to action on the context which requires someone really being in charge of a project planning [74].

A definitely fundamental element is that of a “good example”. However, there are also many direct interventions that can support the development of a respectful attitude. To get some ideas in this regard, we can draw inspiration from the idea of tutoring as it was set up by Jerome Bruner [75] in the study of children’s learning. In fact, tutoring is a type of relationship that is established between two subjects, one of which is more competent than the other. There is not necessarily a distinction of formal roles or of power between the two, but there is a disparity of competence. Perhaps respect education can take the very effective and physiological form of respect tutoring among peers. Therefore, not with formal roles but with a “consciously sustained contagion” between people. Through this tutoring it is perhaps possible to modify the communication in a non-injunctive way; inform (ignorance and unconsciousness, in addition to being a first form of disrespect, are also the basis for further disrespectful behavior); accustom people to notice and report non-respectful behaviors, while avoiding legalism. For tutoring to take place, there must be a shared activity between the two relational partners, a meaningful and participatory activity for both: they have to “do something together” in which both participate and are interested. A problem to be solved is essential: the two partners must be engaged in an activity that is not routine with a foregone solution, but the solution is to be found together.

Another possibility is to break down the barriers of non-encounter by creating opportunities for listening, dialogue, mutual knowledge. Situations of respect are never one-way but require reciprocity. This is why the road to respect is not a solitary one: there must be a meeting of glances, and the gestures must be reciprocal. Above all we need to go beyond stereotypes and prejudices, and to do this we need to get to know each other, spend time together, share a space, dissolve the hardening and entanglement of non-respectful behaviors in the relationship. “Dialogue between . . . ”, juniors and seniors, men and women or different gender identities, people of different cultures, parents and non-parents, people of different organizational affiliation. It is these situations, if properly created and set up, that constitute a powerful push towards respect—the truest one—which passes through understanding and empathy.

The situated learning approach [76,77] teaches that in any context anything can count from an educational point of view. Material objects greatly influence learning. Methods of analysis are needed in order to understand “what a place is made of”, how learning can work within it. Through shared analysis it is possible to change. The first step to change is, in fact, to see more clearly, to see together, and to see a large number of details and how these are related to each other. How many things do we not see in our practice? Analysis, in addition to reinforcing the idea of a situated action, also gives us many ideas on what to look at in our experience to learn from our experience, and also to find ways to change and improve.

The situated learning approach also states that it is through participation that the person learns and internalizes the way of working: roles, rules, community, objects. It is by participating that learning takes place. The person who internalizes becomes the reproducer of the culture he has learned. However, externalization is also possible: it consists in bringing something new, inserting it into the context which is a complex system. How, for example, does a new technology impact the whole system of action? It upsets the roles a bit, changes the rules of operation, everything is influenced. New artifacts, new ways of using them, trigger innovation processes. This is the innovation that a subject (individual or group) can bring to the context in which it participates: ideas, a new working method, modification of the way of dividing tasks. In addition to internalizing, the person externalises in the sense that she or he adds something original to the context. Of course, contexts often spontaneously maintain their equilibrium, incorporate and dampen innovation because they are structured. This is why “open innovation” [78] is necessary: people need to be engaged in moments of shared analysis, to look at everyone together, and

then to listen to innovations and individuals to see where they could be inserted and what their effects would be, if they can actually modify and improve the way of working [79].

The final level of analysis is organizational culture. We have seen that learning is social participation, participation in shared action systems. According to Edgar Schein [80,81] organizational culture is made up of several intricate layers. In order to change the situations of disrespect it is necessary to change the organizational culture from several points of attack, including rewards and punishments, establishing ways to reward virtue, or rather by linking rewards and punishments to the rate of respect, starting from critical incidents from the point of view of the “learning organization”.

Why can respect be considered a sustainability practice? Recent researches suggest that respectfulness is a pillar of sustainable careers [82,83]: it is the necessary attitude accompanying (sustainable) strategic HRM practices. Respectful employer–employee relations are expressed, for example, in reciprocal listening, in appropriate language, in taking into account and valuing all identities and all points of view. Other important signs of respect are flexible working practices, equality practices, and high-quality jobs. “Sustainable career management, as a specific domain of HRM, brings respect, openness and continuity into the management of employees’ careers by balancing short-term and long-term needs, focusing on employability and work ability, following an inclusive approach, tailoring to individuals’ needs and providing career support” [82]. Respect is also related the very possibility of organizational learning [4] and dialogue [15], two factors—as we have seen—enabling corporate sustainability.

6. Second-Level Skills Related to Sustainability Practices

The preceding sections have described several practices that increase the sustainability of work contexts, especially educational ones that are particularly demanding. Now let us briefly point out the relationship between those ‘sustainability practices’ and employee’s skills such as narrative skills, reflexive skills, team working skills. On the one hand such skills will allow the individual worker to effectively take part and contribute, on the other hand their development will be stimulated by such participation. It is thus important that these skills are taken into account in selection and recruitment, and even more in employees’ personal development plans.

The curiosity and research attitude typical of supervision not only generates ‘personalized’ learning but is itself ‘action’ with a strong transformative value. Being under supervision requires and develops the ability to re-elaborate which, taking root in concrete daily practice, constantly calls into question also a clarification of the worker’s theoretical reference systems, as well as the use and comparison with those developed by the various subjects involved [84]. The social educator who brings to supervision some fragments of an interview, a meeting, a helping relationship, or the operator who proposes to question an educational project, must have already carried out an initial elaboration of what has happened. Having to tell others about their experience, they begin a process of “reflection” and systematization of the events and the emotions they arouse. Workers under supervision are called to formulate a clear and realistic “training contract”, overcoming the simple passive attitude and establishing a relationship of positive reciprocity with the supervisor and with the company [85]. To do this, workers need recognize their training needs and translate them into a request for supervision (just as it is important for the supervisor to explain their training offer, their professional skills and the theoretical orientations that inspire their work). Only at that point is it possible to build a training contract that responsibly involves all actors, recognizing their professional specificities. Workers are involved in negotiating and agreeing, with the company to which they belong and the supervisors, the different possible objects and the centering of the intervention [86]. In other words, workers are themselves called upon to supervise investments in supervision with intentionality, cultivating the fiduciary dimensions at stake. The peculiarity of supervision lies exactly in this relationship between three subjects, between the three roles: an operator with skills, knowledge, resources, an operator who has learning and growth needs, and a company

who is interested in well being and effectiveness at work. A relationship of reciprocity and exchange, multidirectional, in which needs do not all reside on one side and capacity on the other, but are in constant contact and need to be elaborated. For the supervisor it is a question of conducting a consciously oriented and finalized process; the social educator will gradually appropriate the meanings and attributions that the training relationship contains and expresses.

Putting professional knowledge into words has always been a difficult matter for education professionals. It is a question of bringing out “the depth of the activity”, whose everyday life combined with unpredictability make it difficult to detect specific competence. In the spaces and times of the activities in which ‘almost nothing’ seems to happen, what to tell? How, and above all, why? What about a job that is difficult to define, whose spontaneity makes it almost evanescent? How to describe the gestures of the educational relationship that take place in ordinary time and in familiar places? Between the positivist and prescriptive temptation and that of the intransmissibility and the ineffable, is there room for an intelligibility of educational activity? Education professionals employ diversified techniques to account for their practices and trying to answer these questions means reflecting on the role that storytelling plays in professional practice. Verbalizing one’s work presupposes a reflective posture on action, a reference to knowledge and its operating dimension, an awareness of techniques. This is not a simple operation. In fact it generates attitudes of uncertainty or even defense in operators. Whatever the position of educators towards writing, it is clear that their professional standing is at stake. Being the author of your own writing commits the educator to choose the register to use to talk about the lives of others. Participating in the writing of someone’s story, more than a decryption operation, implies acceptance by the other. The relationship that is established aims to ‘do something together’, establish an action plan, evaluate opportunities and successes, strengthen trust. Even more so if, as we have seen above, professional writings are increasingly being recognized as accompanying practices: they are no longer considered the ‘property’ of operators.

Social educators in relationship with people are continually exposed to situations of suffering and also subjected to their own powerlessness in the face of some questions, to the misunderstandings that arise from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, from the worlds of representations. In fact, on the whole, the operators use humor to regulate anxiety, frustration and even shock. Laughing in the face of some hardship adversity unmask, provides hope and reassures social workers about their mental health and rationality. For the exercise of humor in social work, some authors [87] recognize certain personal attitudes as necessary: observation (of oneself, of others and of the surrounding environment), the ability to understand the links and references relating to cultures, as well as creative skills combined with originality and incongruity. The ability to create humor consists in knowing how to grasp in an original way the links existing between living beings, objects or ideas [88]. The opportunity to compose representations of reality opens up a different space and this openness strengthens the user’s self-esteem. Humor is a tool to be used to restore balance.

Finally, individuals need some skills in order to be (or be liable to become more) respectful. They also need skills to pose themselves as tutors of others. Respect-enabling skills certainly include politeness, empathy, language mastery, intercultural awareness. Tutoring is generated by very specific and competent actions. First of all, the tutor knows how to motivate, in fact the risk is that less experienced respecters, knowing they do not know how to do, are easily discouraged. The tutor has the role of engaging, motivating, and also supporting motivation throughout the course of the action. The tutor then reduces the degrees of freedom, creating fixed points and creating a space for action for the less experienced subjects. Total freedom can only be managed by those in their “current development zone”, while those in the “proximal development zone” need someone to reduce the degrees of freedom or they will not be able to structure the action. The tutor must also act for the maintenance of the direction: complex tasks are composed of largely

independent parts, the maintenance of the direction consists in continuously showing the tutee that what one does is connected with the final result. The tutor's role is therefore a continuous coming and going between the final goal, intermediate objectives and single task. Another task of the tutor is highlighting the salient and crucial aspects: one of the problems of inexperienced subjects is the inability to distinguish what is relevant and what is not in the action with respect to the task. Then there is the responsibility of controlling frustration: the tutor encourages, helps in containing anxiety, supports positive emotions and reassures negative emotions. Last but not least, the tutor performs modeling action, setting an example: the tutee, observing the actions performed by the tutor, can understand many things, be convinced of the feasibility, imitate. The tutor does not take the scene but acts in parallel.

According to Pati, "Human life is comparable to a great river which, if at the beginning of its path it finds reason for being in the gushing of a spring and in the spontaneous spreading of water, it slowly digs its bed, gradually widening and settling its bed. In this process, the river needs external help: its banks must be strengthened periodically, its bed must be dredged and freed from obstacles from time to time, its waters where possible or necessary must be made navigable. So it is for man", our translation [89]. This metaphor points out some fundamental ingredients about an educational action. First of all, it focuses on the person, the river, and intervenes by focusing on it, leaving everything else as a background. Secondly, it approaches the person, the river, with a development perspective, that is, in a way that is exclusively functional to his good, to the improvement of his conditions. Thirdly, it approaches with an awareness of the moment, that is, of what comes before and what comes after, looking at that moment in the context of the entire life span, and recognizing in this moment both regularities (aspects that are widely shared, appearing in certain phases or conditions of life) and uniqueness (the peculiar way in which this specific river runs through this moment). Finally, educational action approaches with a perspective of care, that is, in a balance between too much and too little, providing precisely the support that is needed, nothing else and no more, so that the river continues its free course.

7. Conclusions

In the last section we have described employees' skills such as narrative skills, reflexive skills, team working skills and other skills and attitudes that are connected to the sustainability practices presented in the foregoing sections. On the one hand, these skills allow the individual worker to effectively take part and contribute, on the other hand their development is stimulated by the participation in sustainability practices. We propose these skills as potentially crucial (and to be made explicit and taken into account in selection, recruitment, and personal development plans) for more sustainable organizations, as sustainability cannot be a one-way, top-down condition: increases in sustainability may result from cascading effects triggered by management decisions as well as by workers' individual and collective actions. Sustainability is thus the hoped for result of a positive collaboration between individuals and organization.

As we have seen, organizations in various sectors may consider importing supervision, collective narrative, generative humour, professional respect and perhaps other sustainability practices that educational entities adopt and refine in order to face particularly difficult and stressful work conditions. These practices are protective against job burnout, and empower essential factors of corporate sustainability: organizational learning, dialogue, relationships, community, identity and belonging.

Supervision allows the exploration of personal meanings and emotions related to work, and establishes a level of communication that can strengthen relationships and boost collaboration. By engaging periodic supervision, groups can also become "reflexive communities of learners".

Collective narrative creates deep reflection, learning and sharing, while making employees feel heard. Narrative practices are useful for repositioning organizational cultures

and are a vehicle for the values that circulate. They liberate the value of the experience tacit knowledge of workers.

Generative humour has many functions that correlate positively with sustainability and negatively with job burnout: it helps workers cope with unresolved aspects of their work, with stress and fatigue, facilitates relationships, allows the exploration and negotiation of meanings.

Finally, professional respect is core to sustainable careers and to a healthy work environment. It is also related the very possibility of organizational learning and dialogue. It involves several levels from individual action to tutoring, to bridge building to company-wide strategies and leadership.

With this paper we have tried to emphasize these sustainability practices that are confined in social education organizations (with a long and successful story therein) and propose them for evaluation in other sectors and kinds of organizations.

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