Learning from Childhood:

Children Tell us who they are through Online Dialogical Interaction
1. PHILOSOPHY OF CHILDHOOD AND PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN

You cannot theorize about a subject if you have not the chance to know that subject. The easiest way to know the subjects of your research is to give them the chance to express themselves. Philosophy of childhood has as its subject of interest childhood. Thus it is important that its theorization starts from the knowledge of childhood. Children cannot be known if they have not the possibility to show who they are: it is necessary to design activities for children so that they provide us with the matter for our theorization of childhood.

This interdependence of Philosophy of Childhood and Philosophy for Children is well documented in The Ring of Gyges, written by Gareth Matthews.1 There Matthews used classic philosophical texts to stimulate the critical skills of elementary school children. I have elaborated a project for students from 8 through 12 years of age, based upon classic philosophy. The following examination of Matthews’ methodology, will play an important role to stress the similarities and differences between my work and his activities with children who discuss ancient philosophy.

The first methodology that Matthews illustrates to do philosophy with children is based on the reading of a passage from Plato’s Republic2 and its subsequent discussion with the students. The passage quoted by Matthews narrates of an earthquake which creates a crater. The shepherd Gyges goes down into the crater and he sees a bronze horse and, inside it, a corpse which was wearing only a ring. He took the ring. Later Gyges realized that when he turned the setting of the ring towards himself he became invisible. When he turned the setting outwards he became visible again. When he discovered this amazing property of the ring, Gyges decided to become one of the messengers who reports to the king. Once he was there he seduced the wife of the king, he killed the king and he took his throne. Matthews read in class also Plato’s comment on Gyges’ choices:3 no one really wants to be good. We only act justly for the fear of suffering the consequences of injustice but, if we could act unjustly without suffering any harm from it, we would surely choose this option.

As Matthews notices, a lesson plan based upon this part of Plato’s philosophy would have not been difficult to put together.4 It would have been focused on the consequences of indulging in

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
every appetite. If everyone had the possibility of making this choice, the benefits of doing whatever you want would be soon neutralized by the losses suffered as a consequence of the negative actions of the others. Since the multitude can easily overpower the individual, it is not difficult to understand that the option proposed by Glaucon in the *Republic* can be more advantageous: justice has to be a compromise between the joys given by doing whatever you want with no limits and the negative consequences created by the same right shared by the whole community. Matthews chooses not to propose this line of reasoning to the children; he also does not discuss with them whether this position is tenable because he wants to offer them the possibility to “develop their own lesson plan on the spot.” To make the discussion start, Matthews asked the children what they would have done if they had had the ring of Gyges. Would they have used the ring to steal whatever they wanted? Matthews reports the reply of a girl, that he chooses to call “Anna:”

Sure, most of us would do some bad things...things we wouldn't have done otherwise; but then, with a magic ring like that, some of us would also do some good things we might not otherwise do...It could be fun to do something nice for someone who wouldn't be able to find out who had done the good deed.

As Matthews observes, Anna’s comment questions very effectively the assumption that human beings are motivated exclusively by egoistic desires. Matthews emphasizes that such a deep reflection on human motivation has not been elaborated by any of the many university students with whom he has discussed the Ring of Gyges. A boy, named by Matthews “Adam,” is puzzled about the functioning of the ring. He wonders whether the ring makes invisible only the person who wears it. In this case, if this person chooses to steal a TV set while she is invisible, the TV set will remain visible and a floating TV set would certainly look suspicious. Adam’s observation stimulates a reflection on the practical consequences of possessing a ring which renders invisible. This reflection highlights possible weaknesses of Plato’s thought experiment, which were not apparent before having taken into consideration its details.

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
The first methodology that Matthews has used to do philosophy with children consists in the discussion of a classic text in philosophy, which could be understood by young students. Matthews thought about a lesson plan but he decided not to use it because he wanted to let the children free to express their opinions, interacting with the other students in the classroom. Matthews provided guidance to the children, making the conversation start with an interesting question, but then he left the students free to develop their arguments. He elaborated activities for children which made the ideas of the children emerge. These ideas, such as Anna’s and Adam’s thoughts on invisibility, have been commented by Matthews, emphasizing their originality and intellectual depth. This is Philosophy of Childhood. It is philosophy which has as its subject childhood. Of course, no reflection can be elaborated on an unknown subject. For the subject of childhood to be knowledgeable we need activities studied for the expression of childhood.

The second method used by Matthews to do philosophy with children is the elaboration of a story, inspired by a philosophical passage, which will be discussed with the students. The story that we are going to take into consideration is inspired by the fourth Book of Plato’s Republic: it is a conversation between Anna and her father on the “parts of yourself.” Anna recalls the celebrations for Thanksgiving, and the permission to eat as many brownies as you want, which accompanies that festivity. Since the Thanksgiving dinner was very large, after having enjoyed two brownies, she felt that if she had eaten more of them she would have been sick. Nonetheless, even if a part of her was trying to prevent her from being sick, another part of her wanted to eat more. Anna’s father comments this situation saying that there is a “greedy part of you that always wants to eat more brownies, and a reasonable part that tells you when to stop.” Anna replies that her friend Tony had the same idea but she does not agree with Tony and her father: according to her there are no different parts in us, we only have different desires, which can be in conflict. Tony challenged this last point because he thinks that every desire starts from you so it is not possible that you have contrasting desires, such as eating more dessert and not eating it, because it would be like saying that you can sit and move at the same time. Parts of you can move and be still at the same time but you as a whole cannot do that. Anna is not intimidated by Toni’s idea: she notices that when you are sitting in a school bus, all of you is sitting still with respect to the seat and, at the same time, all of you is moving with respect to the ground because the schools bus is moving. Unfortunately, Toni

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15 Gareth B. Matthews, *art. cit.*, p. 3.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
had a comment on this thought, too. For him, when you are sitting in a bus which is moving,

you can’t, all of you, be both moving and also sitting still with respect to the same thing. So you can’t, all of you, be both moving and also sitting still with respect to the ground, say. Similarly, with respect to the last brownie sitting on the plate in front of you, you can’t, all of you, both want it and not want it. But part of you can want it and another part not want it. 21

Matthews explains that he invented the analogy of the person sitting still on the moving bus to replace the analogy used by Plato. Plato used the image of a perfectly spinning top to illustrate the idea that something can be both move and be at rest at the same time. In fact, if we could see a top which spins perfectly in place, we could state that it is “moving with respect to its outer surface, but it would be at rest with respect to its axis.”22 Matthews thought that the spinning top was an analogy too complex to be grasped by the children but they revealed a quite sophisticated reflective capacity, emphasizing that a human being can never be completely at rest because, even when she is sitting, her heart has to beat if she is alive.23 Moreover, the children found Plato’s idea that “every self has different parts...immediately plausible, even natural:”24 Alex identified the parts as reason and appetite, in perfect correspondence with the Platonic definition of them. The demonstration that Alex was not merely reporting notions that he previously heard came from his capacity of elaborating his own special terminology to distinguish reason from appetite: “There is a wiser one...and a wanting one; the wanting one wants something and the wiser one says ‘No.’”25

Furthermore, the students stressed that the competing desires could be more than two and that a conflict could take place between two good desires or two bad ones. This latter idea is a very good criticism of a traditional way of seeing a contrast between desires as a mere fight of reason with appetite.26 Another good observation made by the students is that there are different messages which come to the brain, and the brain has to select the message which will inform a decision. This last reflection helped Matthews to realize that the students had dealt with a problem which he considered crucial in the discussion about the parts of the self, the problem of responsibility. In fact, one of the students, following the discussion about the different inputs which are received by our brain, emphasizes that “You don’t do anything unless the mind agrees to it.”27 This comment demonstrates that it is clear to the student that there is me beyond any kind of part.28

21 Gareth B. Matthews, art. cit., p. 7. My emphasis.
22 Gareth B. Matthews, art. cit., p. 8.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Gareth B. Matthews, art. cit., p. 9.
27 Gareth B. Matthews, art. cit., p. 10.
28 Ibid.
Matthews ends his research stressing that

*the virtue of patience in doing philosophy with children is crucial. Again and again I find that, if one can only wait expectantly a little longer, somebody will come up with the question or comment or bit of reasoning that will break the logjam and produce a much more interesting discussion than would have resulted if one had fallen back to the lecture mode that seems so natural to us college teachers.*

This invitation to let children free to express themselves is emphasized by the exhortation to create the opportunity for children “to learn from themselves, that is, from their own reflections, and from each other…We should give them a chance. If we do, both we and they will be richly rewarded.”

The second method that Matthews utilizes to do philosophy with children is based upon the invention of a story, focused on an excerpt of a text of classic philosophy. This story is the starting point of the philosophical reflection of the students. Again, as with the first method employed by Matthews, centred on the direct discussion of a text of classic philosophy via an initial question, philosophy *of* childhood and philosophy *for* children are interlaced. Matthews elaborates educational material *for* children, giving them the chance to demonstrate their ability as thinkers. The results of the application of philosophy *for* children ground the existence and progress of philosophy *of* childhood.

**II. DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE 21st CENTURY**

The work of Matthews that we have analyzed was published in 2000. That same year, Brown and Lauder published their theories about collective intelligence. According to them, to achieve social progress in the twenty-first century, it is crucial to extend the boundaries of what is considered intelligence: there is not only a logical or mathematical intelligence but also an emotional and personal intelligence. These last aspects of the human intellect are crucial in critical thinking and for the recognition of the need of the others to solve complex problems. The development of a culture of reflective solidarity is decisive in a society urging its citizens, workers and leaders, to face unexpected challenges:

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solve problems, to think critically and systematically about the social and material worlds, and the ability to apply new skills and techniques, to empathize and to have the personal skills needed to communicate and live alongside others. Above all, in a society characterized by risk and insecurity, it means being able to imagine and assess alternative futures. 33

The ability to reflect together with others and to see them as allies to solve efficaciously a problem is at the core of “collective intelligence”: 34

In post-industrial societies it is the collective intelligence of families, communities, business enterprises and society at large which will determine the quality of life and economic competitiveness. Here, then, collective intelligence can be defined as empowerment through the development and pooling of intelligence often to resolve common problems. It is inspired by a spirit of cooperation rather than a Darwinian survival of the fittest. 35

Contemporary societies call on us to live with insecurity. To cope with such a problematic scenario it is necessary to learn to rely on a range of perspectives that can highlight various facets of the same problem. Our society requires not only that we recognize our individual competence but also that we exercise this competence in a collaborative environment. Individual competence as synonym of competition for the prevalence of one point of view over the others is anachronistic. The solutions to the complex problems that contemporary society presents need the synergic work of diverse minds. The development of collective intelligence is stimulated by the development of the “art of conversation” 36 which allows collective intelligence to express itself giving voice to all members of society. 37

Matthews, as Brown and Lauder, emphasized the necessity to learn from the thinking of the others, as it was done by the children who were discussing philosophy in his classrooms. This exposition to different points of view is crucial to develop the capacity to adapt rapidly to the diverse challenges of the twenty-first century. Socio-economic and environmental problems require the ability to react promptly to the unexpected. This capacity is natural in the child who “represents the emergent, the interruption of established forms, the possibility of bringing something new into a human world….on the verge of transformation.” 38 In a century characterized by unpredictability, the talent of the children to consider a situation using a novel perspective has not to be merely appreciated. Its cultivation has to be a primary goal.

37 Ibid.
III. CHILDREN TELL US ABOUT THEMSELVES INTERACTING WITH THE OTHERS

The respect of the reasoning capacities of the children, the encouragement of their creative originality and the nourishment of diversity as a resource rather than a problem constitute the core of a project, based on learning units, that I have elaborated for students from 8 through 12 years of age. As I said in the first section of this work, my project benefits from both the methods employed by Matthews to do philosophy with children and, at the same time, overcomes them. To understand better what this means I am going to use one of the units which are part of the project:

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<th>OBJECTION TO THE FIRST DEFINITION OF JUSTICE</th>
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<td><strong>If a sane man lends weapons to a friend and then asks for them back when he is out of his mind, the friend should not return them</strong></td>
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Here Plato wants us to understand that giving back what one has received is not always the best decision to take. Do you agree or disagree? Think about this situation: your best friend steals the wallet of his older brother to buy a videogame. You find the wallet and you realize what is happening: should you give the wallet back to your friend so that he is free to waste his brother’s money or would it be better for your friend if you give the wallet back to his older brother?

In the units there are quotations taken from Plato’s dialogues. The quotations appear in boldface to be recognizable. In the first methodology used by Matthews, the Platonic excerpts shared with the class were longer. In these units, the children are the protagonists of a learning path in which the Platonic text is only a part. A fundamental moment of the learning process of the students is their acquisition of the capacity of transferring what learned through the work on the units to their everyday life. So, the examples taken from the everyday life of the children which appear in every unit serve a double scope: they help the students to understand better Plato’s words and they help them to connect the new concepts analyzed with their reality. These examples can be associated with the second methodology employed by Matthews, in which stories were invented to clarify the meaning of a philosophical passage. The questions presented in the units will make the dialogical interaction among the students start. This also happened with the first method utilized by Matthews but in the learning units the questions, as well as Plato’s text and the examples, become one of the components of a pattern, Plato-example taken from the everyday life of the children-followed by questions, specifically designed to provide guidance to the students in the acquisition of the routine of thinking critically. The content of the units changes to move the student’s critical
skills forward. The routine introduced in this way is not a routine of massification but it is a routine that aids diversification, encouraging the students to express themselves freely.

I want to suspend for a moment the discussion on the methodology used to develop the project to focus on the role played by Platonic philosophy in it. I am aware of the fact that the choice of Plato’s thinking can be controversial. The explanation of the reasons why the attribution to Plato of an elitarian mentality does not respect what he expresses in the dialogues exceeds the scopes of the present work. Nonetheless, I want to point at the fact that Plato stated clearly that:

education is not what some people declare it to be, namely putting knowledge into souls that lack it, like putting sight into blind eyes… the power to learn is present in everyone’s soul… education… isn’t the craft of putting sight into the soul. Education takes for granted that sight is there but that it isn’t turned the right way or looking where it ought to look, and it tries to redirect it appropriately. 39

In this excerpt Plato mentions the soul. The Platonic notion of soul is very different from our contemporary idea of it. The analysis of this topic is not necessary to grasp Plato’s message; for its understanding is sufficient that we reason in terms of self instead of soul, as Matthews did. 40 What Plato is saying is that everyone is capable of learning because everyone’s self possesses this power. The power to learn for Plato is the power given to every human being by her rational faculty. Reason is the turning point in the process of learning. Thus educators have to make sure that the students are looking in the right direction, the direction of the truth which results from the proper exercise of the reasoning skills of the individuals. 41 The respect of rationality as the most important feature of the human being constitutes the centre of Plato’s Philosophy. 42 This respect is at the core of the project that I have elaborated. The project is designed to stimulate the reasoning ability of children, sharpening their critical skills. In the units the examples and the questions are devised to make the students reflect on the process of decision making, on the possibility that the decisions made can be more fully informed by reasons, and on the nature of these reasons, too. Moreover, the students are invited to reflect on the facts and variations of perspective indispensable to solving problems efficaciously.

All these activities are conceived to make children exercise their reasoning talent, developing in this way a better awareness of their nature of rational beings. The children are

39 Republic, VII 518 b-d. My emphasis.
40 Gareth B. Matthews, art. cit., p. 8.
41 Plato, in the lines quoted from Republic, VII 518 b-d, states that there is only one direction that our rational sight has to take into consideration in the process of learning: it is the direction of the truth apprehended thanks to the correct exercise of our rational capacities. Nonetheless, Plato is not saying that exists only one possible way to look in the right direction. Plato’s thought and indoctrination are antithetical. But this facet of his philosophy is not the subject of this work.
42 The detailed explanation of this statement is the subject of a research which is not part of this piece.
encouraged to express this nature freely. They will not have to report the point of view of their teachers as the right one and they will not have to accept one particular solution to a problem to obtain a good grade. They will be stimulated to be themselves. The respect of the right of the students to display their rational potential in its full extent is at the base of the project. This is rendered explicit in the first introductory unit of the project. In this unit the students are invited to contribute to the online discussion with no fear of being judged, by their peers or teachers:

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<td>Plato was a philosopher, a person who thinks that there are many things that we can discover about the world and our life as human beings by reflecting on our experience and discussing our ideas. Plato was born in 429 B.C.E (yes, more than 2,400 years ago!). He thought that the best way to learn is to discuss ideas, comparing your point of view with that of other people. This is why his ideas are expressed in dialogues between Socrates, who was his teacher, and other people that he will meet as he pursues knowledge. We are going to discuss some parts of Plato’s book recording these dialogues called <em>The Republic</em>.</td>
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You are going to be part of this exciting discussion! In order to enjoy it we have to remember that we are not speaking in a classroom, so the other people in our class can’t check the expressions on our faces, or the tone of our voices, to understand the content of our words or to agree or disagree with us. So, try to be very clear so that other people can understand your comments. It is not necessary that you write a whole page, even three or four lines is enough. But don’t forget, we want to learn from you, so give us all the information we will need to ask questions or explain why we think differently from you. And don’t worry or be nervous because you think that your comment might be considered stupid. Everyone has something interesting to add.

In the unit of the project quoted above it is asked to the students to be as clear as possible, to ease the online collaboration which cannot benefit from facial expressions or changes in the tone of the voices, which are helpful to render more understandable face-to-face interactions. Technology will be used to overcome the boundaries of the classrooms, where the majority of the students already know each other. Students who attend schools in under-resourced and more privileged communities will be connected. The students will be able to contribute to the online discussion writing brief comments, comparable to margin notes. These short contributions are less intimidating than longer forum posts and they encourage the reflection on what has already been
written. To increase the participation of students with low literacy skills, the textual annotation will be enhanced by audio and video communication. Students will be able to record voice notes, and to take webcam photos and videos, to show how they have used their creativity in responding to the challenges presented by the philosophical scenarios.

The students will work on the issues raised in the units relying on an extended community which interacts online. In this way they will live the importance of collective intelligence and they will experience the precious resource that different points of view are to make complex decisions. The activities of the project will reinforce the right of the students to become themselves, developing their rational potential as critical thinkers; moreover, the students will be exposed to the importance of responsibility, mentioned by Matthews analyzing the parts of the self. If you participate in the online conversation, and you do not respect the right of the others to be themselves, you will be exposed to the criticism of the whole community. Thus, even if the project guarantees the free expression of the thoughts of the students, they will be responsible for the boundaries created by their lack of respect of the others.

The students will work on the units of the project one day of the week for one hour. Twenty minutes will be dedicated to vocabulary development: crucial terms of the unit will be discussed with the help of the teachers; during the remaining thirty minutes the students will analyze the units online. If they run into difficulties, they can talk with their teachers about the thoughts they want to express in order to find the right way to deliver their message. Nonetheless, the role of the teachers is limited to that of a neutral medium between the thinking of the student and its expression. The teachers will not direct the student’s ideas towards their preference and they will not suggest one critical option as the best one.

The goal of the project is not only to improve the children’s critical abilities in a collaborative environment, but also to transfer these skills to their everyday lives. For this reason, the teachers will ask the students to think about examples, taken from their everyday life experiences, of the concepts emerged from the units. The second hour of weekly activity on the project will give the students the chance to write down their ideas, replying again to the questions proposed in the unit. This task is subsequent to twenty minutes of repetition of the vocabulary learned the day of the online activity on the unit. The students’ compositions will not be graded. In this way they will know that they can express their opinions freely, without being judged by their

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43 For the capacity of children born in low socioeconomic status (SES) to compensate for linguistic problems related to their environment see Perkins, Finegood and Swain, Poverty and Language Development: Roles of Parenting and Stress, «Innovations in Clinical Neuroscience», vol. 10, no.4, 2013, pp. 13-14. For the importance of school in this process of compensation see Perkins, Finegood and Swain, art. cit., p. 16.

44 A more detailed description of the technology utilized in the project is not the subject of this piece and is available from the author.
teachers and without being worried that their parents will see an assignment with a low grade. Together with the processes shown in the units, this component will be helpful to design the sequencing of the units to maximize responsiveness to the needs of students’ development.

The order of the units is flexible to follow the critical necessities of the students. This is a methodological choice, consistent with the core of the project, which aims at making the students realize their value as thinking creatures. This comprehension comes together with the recognition that this value is unveiled through the help of the others. To become yourself you need the help of the others; nonetheless, collective intelligence does not mean flattening of differences. The distinction between yourself and the others is not problematic in itself. It becomes a barrier only whether you are unable to envisage yourself with the others. To overcome this obstacle children must have the freedom to express who they are together with the others, as Matthews emphasized.

The weekly activities, online and in class, are designed to let the children free to express themselves as rational beings. This is not a project in which students have merely to absorb a content offered by the teachers as the right solution. In this project the content is created by the students through a dialogical interaction in which students and teachers are on the same level. This kind of interaction between teachers and students has been advocated by Freire:

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student with student-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. 45

The formation of a child who is aware of her potential as thinker requires that the adults accept the wonders that her mind will create. Adults have to be ready to be surprised by children. Matthews, while he was doing philosophy with children, demonstrated to enjoy the surprise caused by the talent of his students. The full development of the capacities of the students as critical thinkers calls for the will of the adults to be questioned. In the project that I have elaborated both the teachers and the researchers have to be ready to accept this challenge since it will be asked to the students to criticize the dialogical method at the base of the project, as this learning unit shows:

The first Book of Plato’s Republic ends with Thrasymachus’ intervention. Plato portrays him as a very impatient person...

While we were speaking, Thrasymachus had tried many times to take over the discussion but was restrained by those sitting near him, who wanted to hear our argument to the end. When we paused after what I’d just said, however, he couldn’t keep quiet any longer. He coiled himself up like a wild beast about to spring, and he hurled himself at us as if to tear up to pieces.

Polemarchus and I were frightened and flustered and he roared into our midst: What nonsense have you been talking, Socrates? Why do you act like idiots by giving way to one another? If you truly want to know what justice is, DON’T JUST ASK QUESTIONS AND THEN REFUTE THE ANSWERS simply to satisfy your competitiveness or love of honor. You know very well that it is EASIER TO ASK QUESTIONS THAN ANSWER THEM. GIVE AN ANSWER YOURSELF, and tell us what you say the just is. And don’t tell me that it’s the right, the beneficial, the profitable, the gainful, or the advantageous, but tell me clearly and exactly what you mean; for I won’t accept such nonsense from you.

Here Thrasymachus is criticizing Socrates’ method. What do you think about learning by talking with somebody else? What is the difference between Socrates TELLING what justice is and ASKING QUESTIONS to know what it is?

We are trying to learn utilizing the same method used by Socrates in the Republic, dialogue. Do you prefer this method of learning to simply listening to the teacher? Explain us what are the reasons which support your answer.

In this unit the students have to face a complex scenario. The example used to help them to understand the concepts discussed is, in this case, not only taken from their everyday life but it is something that they are living: the students have to criticize the dialogical activity in which they are involved. The results of the students’ analyses are unpredictable but, insofar as they are supported by good reasons and they are explained efficaciously, they have to be accepted. I am eager to learn from the students. A good demonstration of the necessity of a change in the project would prove that I have succeeded in my primary goal: the creation of a learning environment which gives children the opportunity to discover who they are, stimulating them to express their rational nature freely. To attain this goal, the material designed for children requires the collaboration of different
disciplines: philosophy, education and technology are all necessary in the development of my project. The results obtained with the use of the learning units will give us the chance to discuss childhood knowing what it is. We will learn to value childhood as the precious human resource that it is, instead of considering incomplete the individuals who are telling us who they are, only because they are not adults.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


