

Children's and Young Adult literature and classical rhetoric: Connections and opportunities for Civic Educationⁱ

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Abstract

This paper presents a research intervention with a qualitative approach conducted in Italian secondary schools as part of a broader interdisciplinary Research Project of National Interest, entitled *PROgymnasmata for Citizenship, Inclusion, and Valid Education*. A revisitation of the *progymnasmata*, or rhetorical exercises used in ancient Greco-Roman schools, inspired the project. *Progymnasmata* contributed to a person's overall development and democratic coexistence by teaching them words. Recent research confirms the *progymnasmata*'s propaedeutic role in citizenship development. Similarly, discussion on the themes of certain "radical" contemporary children's literature might unleash its transformative political potential in public life. The participants, students aged 17 to 19, worked on selected picture books and graphic novels along with ancient texts addressing the themes of "walls" and "migrants/refugees". The significant responses gathered in our exploratory study show the opportunity created by the use of juvenile literature within the revised *progymnasmata* pedagogical framework, in which controversial topics were discussed and argued following a template to guide the composition process and finally read aloud.

Questo articolo presenta un intervento di ricerca con approccio qualitativo condotto in un istituto tecnico e in due licei italiani nell'ambito del PRIN *PROgymnasmata for Citizenship, Inclusion, and Valid Education*. Il progetto è stato ispirato dalla rivisitazione dei *progymnasmata*, esercizi retorici utilizzati nelle antiche scuole greco-romane che, attraverso l'educazione alla parola, contribuivano allo sviluppo complessivo della persona e alla convivenza democratica. Recenti ricerche confermano il ruolo propedeutico dei *progymnasmata* nello sviluppo delle competenze di cittadinanza. Analogamente, la discussione critica sui temi di una certa letteratura contemporanea "radicale" può liberarne il potenziale politico trasformativo. I partecipanti, studenti dai 17 ai 19

ⁱ This paper expands and revises a presentation titled "Picturebooks Pro Cive Contemporary Narratives and Progymnasmata on the 'Walls' and 'Migrants/Refugees' Themes" delivered at the 27th Biennial International Research Society for Children's Literature (IRSCL) Conference "Borders, Migration, and Liminality in Children's Literature," on June 21 to 25, 2025, at Salamanca.

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anni, hanno lavorato su albi illustrati e graphic novel selezionati e proposti in combinazione con testi antichi e testi che declinano i temi dei “muri” e dei “migranti/rifugiati”. Le risposte significative raccolte mostrano le opportunità create dall’uso della letteratura giovanile all’interno del quadro pedagogico aggiornato dei *progymnasmata*, in cui sono stati discussi temi controversi, e la propria posizione argomentata seguendo una struttura e infine declamata.

Keywords: children’s and YA literature; history of education; classical rhetoric; civic education

Parole chiave: letteratura per l’infanzia e giovani adulti; storia dell’educazione; retorica classica; educazione civica

1. Words that form: Reading practices for citizenship education

This paper describes a research intervention involving 17-year-old adolescents, along with a few 18- and 19-year-olds, conducted at an Industrial Technical Institute for higher education and at a Human and Social Sciences Lyceum in Chieti and at a high school for languages in Palermo. The intervention focused on cross-curricular civic education teaching. It was part of a broader interdisciplinary Research Project of National Interest (PRIN), entitled *PROgymnasmata for Citizenship, Inclusion, and Valid Education*, funded by the Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR). Our research intervention in schools concentrated on reading and using *progymnasmata*, which are basic exercises for teaching rhetoric that were used in Greek schools starting in the 5th century BC. These exercises were later supported by four handbooks from the Roman Empire (Theon, Hermogenes, Aphthonius, and Nicholas of Myra) and collections of exercises by Libanius and Severus of Alexandria. In the Roman world, these were provided alongside a detailed study of the key elements of Quintilian's *firma faciltas dicendi* in his *Institutio oratoria*. For the ancient world, *progymnasmatic* teaching is based on the reference to the etymological meaning of the term, becoming an authentic 'gym', understood as education to the word and to civic development. Through graduated practical exercises on some types of texts deemed to be fundamental for learning to write fluently and hone their oration skills, students become familiar with different thought structures and forms of discourse, thus reinforcing their cultural baggage with a view to oratory contests and their future intellectual and civic responsibilities.

In this sense, *progymnasmata* represent a kind of tool kit, an imaginative, linguistic, rhetorical, and communicative repertory contributing to a person's overall development, their *paideia*, and, in the Latin world, to their *humanitas*, understood—as Hanna Arendt (2011) explains—as “that human quality born only in *societas*.” (p. 225).

Such personal cultural and moral education also aims to respect and foster the development of other people's personalities: only those who feel this composite duty and concretely apply it in their existence may not only call themselves a man, but truly be one. The development of linguistic, argumentative and critical skills, the production of texts and oratory performance, therefore lead to the assumption of the public and political role of citizens. The aim is not only to develop writing, linguistic, and communication skills generally through a literary and narrative approach to various forms of discourse and writing genres (literature, poetry, historiography, tragedy, philosophy), but also to foster the students' reflection on topics promoting the discussion of social, anthropological, political, and legal concepts.

The project is driven by the results of international experiments (in France, Belgium, Sweden and USA) that have underlined the contribution of *Progymnasmata* to contemporary active education contexts and workshops in schools and universities (Chiron & Sans, 2020), promoting the soft skills associated with citizenship and global citizenship (UNESCO, 2015) education and related to the recent *Ministerial guidelines for civic education* (MIM, 2024): dialogical skills, argument supported by scientific research, respect for the interlocutor, critical decentralisation, independent thought on ethically relevant issues. Reading literature and being exposed to a complex use of language and narrative forms can help to stimulate these skills, borrowing from the depths and subtleties of classical models and contemporary texts – including children's literature – exemplifying the possibility to argument and discuss emerging planetary issues in a problematising and dialogical key, rejecting binarism or exclusive visions of identity and belonging. Some recent European programmes focus on the contribution of the study of humanities to the improvement of the quality of democratic coexistence (in particular, cluster 2 *Culture, Creativity and Inclusive society* of Horizon Europe 2021-2027), including the PNRR, as well as the PNR 2021-2027:

Humanities offer critical knowledge of textual, rhetorical and compositional structures of different languages, helping to develop “narrations” also in discourse and in the public imagination and effectively perform them [...] and can offer an inestimable pro-active contribution to the production and circulation of information freed of polluting and distorting factors. In this sense, they are an indispensable tool for improving the quality of discourse and the public imagination, in social and international communication, in information in all its forms, and for the growth of democracy. (National Research Programme - PNR 2021-2027, Cluster 1. Humanities, democracy and governance, p. 60)

In this direction, the choice of using children’s and young adult literature, gathering together a library of works to support our research intervention in schools, is driven first of all by the potential expressed by its “radical” dimension, closely analysed by international critique in its many aesthetic forms – from Francelia Butler (1973) to Kimberly Reynolds (2007), from Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) to Julia Mickenberg (2011) and on to Philip Nel’s 2019 *Manifesto* – and in its essential characteristics: not only the political nature of some thematic aspects linked to social, cultural and environmental transformations of our present, but also the adoption of open and challenging formal solutions combining the verbal and visual and questioning the reader, pushing them towards doubt, research, playing with points of view, fostering open speech and a more critical conscience of reality, where “serious” contents are inseparable from liberating and experimental aesthetic choices (Nel, 2019). Our research intervention in schools has also focused on the dialogical interaction between text and reader and between the readers of a community working together to build meaning (Rosenblatt, 1986): the possibility to say, negotiate and propose their own interpretation of the text exalts the situated and contextual nature of the reader’s response from a socio-constructivist perspective, fostering oration and democratically composing the heterogeneous mix of personal, cultural and social factors that aesthetic experience calls into question.

2. Two rhetorical exercises/*progymnasmata* and topic

We focused the workshop activities of our research intervention in schools on two rhetorical exercises/*progymnasmata*, the *Ethopoeia* and the type of *Thesis* denominated “practice” or “political,” and on a specific topic. In classical rhetoric, the *Ethopoeia* is the simulation of a discourse attributed to a historical or mythological character. Also called impersonation, the *Ethopoeia* requires one to put oneself in the place of another so as to both understand and express their feelings more vividly: “The *ethopoeia* aims to persuade the audience through the motion of feelings evoked thanks to the direct presentation of the speaking character captured in the vividness of their emotions” (Berardi, 2017, p. 157, auth. trans.). It is one of the final exercises performed before elaborating the *Thesis*, and, unlike this one, the *Ethopoeia* does not involve controversy or dispute (i.e., debating objections).

The *Thesis*, which is the last and most complex *progymnasmata*, involves treatise about community controversial topics, examined in broad terms, with no specific references to any of the possible circumstances, without mentioning details like “time” or “place”. The aim is to build a reasoned discourse (in the form of analysis and presentation) for reading aloud in assemblies with a view to persuading. The type of *Thesis* chosen for the research intervention is called “practical” in terms of its ethical and political content, with consequences for citizens’ community life and civic consciousness development.

In our research intervention, we introduced *Ethopoeia* as a rhetorical exercise preparatory to the writing of the final *Thesis*. Indeed, the *Thesis* may employ *Ethopoeia* to evoke empathetic participation from the audience. Starting from the selected *Thesis* “*If Walls Should Be Built*” – extrapolated from the corpus of the Greek rhetorician Libanius (Λιβάνιος, 4th century A.D.) – the topic on which the workshop activities focused is

“wall/walls” and “migrants/refugees”, in all its polysemic values, yet from a civic-political standpoint. Demonstrating the extraordinary discussion of this topic today, in contemporary philosophical and politological vocabulary a notion is taking hold that captures the materiality of the power relations within the global space, for which the French scholars Florine Ballif and Stéphane Rosière coined the term “teichopolitics” (from the Greek, *teichos* [τείχος], meaning the wall of the *polis*). In the words of the two authors, teichopolitics refers to “any policy of fencing [*cloisonnement*] of space, generally linked to a more or less founded concern of protecting a territory, therefore aiming to strengthen its control” (2009, p. 194, auth. trans.).

3. Picturebooks and graphic novels within the *progymnasmata* framework to develop

Throughout the research intervention, the students used a working library that brought together ancient (classic theses, including “*If walls must be built*”) and contemporary texts. We considered texts from various disciplinary perspectives that showed the wide variety of meanings underlying the topics “walls” and “migrants/refugees” in their anthropological, historical, philosophical, and political dimensions. The texts selected were expressed multimodally, conveyed through various media (printed books, e-books, etc.), and suitable for use by students with various levels of linguistic/communicative ability. This collection included picturebooks, graphic novels, and novels alongside book reviews, classic and contemporary anthology excerpts, historical and philosophical essays, the Italian Constitution, video interviews with historians extrapolated from television broadcasts, etc. (see Table 1).

Table 1
The working library's collection

Repubblica Italiana. (1948). <i>Costituzione della Repubblica Italiana</i> . (Gazzetta Ufficiale, 27 dicembre 1947, n. 310).	<p>The following excerpt serves as an example of how the Fundamental Principles of Italian Constitution were used to support the argument of “legal” and “just”:</p> <p>Universal solidarity based on caring for the most vulnerable is a principle shared by religions and laws. For example, our Constitution, in its fundamental values and principles, protects the individual, their dignity, and solidarity. In Article 2, in fact, we read that:</p> <p>“The Republic recognizes and guarantees the inviolable rights of man, both as an individual and in the social formations where his personality develops, and requires the fulfillment of the mandatory duties of political, economic, and social solidarity.”</p>
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[Critical literature]

Sferrazza Papa, E. C. (2020). *Le pietre e il potere. Una critica filosofica dei muri*. Milano: Mimesis.

This book offers a philosophical and political perspective regarding walls. It has been used, for example, to support a perspective contrary to that presented by the ancient rhetorician Libanius:

We will draw on arguments from historical sources and the reflections of Plato and Aristotle on this topic, adapting these arguments to our current situation....

Villari, E. (2023). *Le trappole di Tucidide. Assedio, guerra ed epidemia nell'Atene del V secolo a.C.* Gorizia: LEG Edizioni.

The text provides argumentative insights based on the detailed accounts of the historian Thucydides. It highlights a political paradox that still requires careful reflection today: the walls, which protected the Athenians from attack, simultaneously condemned the urban population to die from disease.

[Web article]

Focus. (8 novembre, 2019). *Storia La caduta del Muro di Berlino: caduta di un simbolo*.

Article about the fall of the Berlin Wall.

[Video]

Rai Play. (2019). *Passato e Presente Sparta e Atene*.

Professor Alessandro Barbero and Paolo Mieli discuss about two different models of political organization in the Greek polis, Sparta and Athens, offering arguments to support the thesis.

[Video]

Rai Play. (12/07/2017). *Superquark. Le mura medievali*.

Alberto Angela interviews Professor Alessandro Barbero on the walls of medieval cities, offering arguments to support the thesis.

[Video]

Rai Teche (10/2015). *Eugenio Montale e la sua posizione politica*.

In this video, the poet discusses his political commitment and defines his personal stance toward the fascist regime as “passive anti-fascism.”

[Video]

Rai Cultura. (12/2018). *Eugenio Montale si racconta Con letture dei propri versi*.

In this video, the focus is on the poem “Meriggiare pallido e assort”, in which Eugenio Montale offers evocative metaphorical images of the wall.

[Literature]

Schneider, P. (2019). *Il saltatore del muro*. Milano: La Nave di Teseo Editore.

A novel that tells the story of the Berlin Wall seen from the West.

[Interview]

Liberweb (n.d.). *L'Isola di Armin Greder*.

In this interview, the author Armin Greder affirmed, “My story now works in all languages. Xenophobia has become international, a globalization of fear and hate.”

This speech is used within a thesis.

[Children's and Young Adult Literature]

Balestrucci Fancellu, R., Luogo Comune (ill.) (2022). *La città del muro*. Roma: Sinnos.

Burgess, M., Cochran, J. (2021). *Disegnare sui muri*. Cornaredo (MI): ARKA.

D'Adamo, F. (2019). *Antigone sta nell'ultimo banco*. Milano: Giunti editore.

Greder, A. (2008). *L'isola. Una storia di tutti i giorni*. Roma: orecchio acerbo.

Smith, A., Paoletti, L. (ill.) (2011). *La storia di Antigone*. Torino: Gedi (Gruppo Editoriale).

Tan, S. (2008). *L'approdo*. Roma: Elliot (since 2021, © Latina: Tunué).

Wolf, G., Sirish, R., Indrapramit, R. (ill.) (2006). *Antigone di Sofocle*. Roma: Lapis.

Although the claim of using books to “develop empathy” should be approached with caution, because reading literature does not always result in a desire for change or action (Arizpe, 2021, p. 263), reflective use of high-quality children's and young adult literature has the potential to develop prosocial behaviour by encouraging readers to understand the feelings and experiences of others.

The use of picturebooks and graphic novels within the thoughtful and updated pedagogical framework of the *progymnasmata* may help develop citizenship by reinforcing basic civic skills, which play a crucial role in interpersonal and societal interactions. Although picturebooks are a narrative form that constitutes a segment of crossover literature, appealing to readers of all ages (Beckett, 2012), traditionally, these books have been regarded as a children's genre. Indeed, these formats are unfamiliar to Italian secondary schools and are completely absent from the curriculum, as confirmed by the teachers at the schools where we conducted our research intervention. Moreover, despite the interest in research examining adolescent readers and picturebooks in secondary school settings (see, for example, Clarke & Broders, 2022; Meixner & Scupp-Jorge, 2024; Senokossoff, 2013), such studies lack in Italy.

Therefore, investigating the transformative “political”¹ potential of picturebooks within the framework of the *progymnasmata* to support the development of basic civic skills for adolescent students contributes in an original way to the field. We hypothesised that some contemporary picturebooks can act as multimodal *ethopoëia*, in which words and illustrations encourage the reader to empathise with others and take on human and civic responsibilities. Therefore, we invested heavily in an explicit “careful process” (Short, 2017, p. 18) of selecting picturebooks and graphic novels, in which we recognised emotionally intense counter-narratives that challenge simplifications, avoided misrepresentation, and encouraged the deconstruction of cultural stereotypes.

4. The process of selecting picturebooks and graphic novels

To begin, we made an overview of highly visual formats (illustrated books, graphic novels, and picturebooks) and different genres/types that explore the polysemic values of “walls” and “migrants/refugees” published in Italy between 2004 and 2024. We identified the collection of children's and young adult books by investigating library catalogs, databases, academic journal reviews, and internet forums.² The investigation gathered over a hundred books, revealing two significant editorial trends over the last two decades, a periodization that is used in the present paper as a conceptual tool rather than a statistical finding.

The first trend corresponds to the period until 2007, during which we noticed a predominance of bilingual, multicultural, illustrated books, in which the illustrations serve an ancillary role, enhancing and augmenting the verbal text and helping to better understand stories from other cultures. This trend, in Italian children's publishing, seems to reflect the need to fill a publishing gap in response to the urgency of addressing the challenges posed by multiculturalism, particularly from Italian schools, which must manage a large number of migrant

students without the aid of theoretical or material resources. During this period, multicultural children's literature published by a few Italian publishers appears to consider/respond to research on the development of more equitable pedagogies for children living in host countries through knowledge and experience with diverse cultures (Carioli, 2020), the "window books," in Bishop's metaphor (1990):

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of a larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books (Bishop, 1990, p. ix).

The premise is that, by reading stories about many cultures and ethnic groups, children would learn to embrace and respect diversity. For children from migrant backgrounds and non-Western cultures, these books can fill the gap resulting from the lack of so-called "mirror books" (Bishop, 1990). Such narratives create a sense of the past that helps to locate themselves within history and culture and to construct a self-identity. From this perspective, multicultural children's literature can help to face the risk of "narrative emptiness", the lack of narratives.

This first trend is particularly evident in the bilingual series *I Mappamondi* by the publishing house *Sinnos*, and *Storiesconfinare*, by the publishing house *Carthusia*, which, with reference to the topic, have opened a privileged channel with schools.

The illustrated books published in the bilingual series *I Mappamondi* mainly contain personal stories, testimonies, autobiographies, and traditional tales.

They "explore the various cultures of the world through the personal experiences of their narrators and the narration of their daily lives"; their "characters have been identified as potentially able to build intercultural bridges"; they are "recommended for educational projects aiming at encounters and exchanges between cultures" (Mappamondi Archivi, Sinnos editrice, auth. trans.).

Similarly, the illustrated books published in the bilingual series *Storiesconfinare*, by the publishing house *Carthusia*,

collect stories from the oral tradition of distant countries. The aim is to introduce Italian children to different worlds and cultures and to convey to foreign children the importance of respecting their culture of origin. On one hand, the volumes are leafed through like a book, where the story is presented in two languages; on the other hand, the story is visualised through a single large image. Inside, the reader could find information and curiosities about the protagonist's country (*Storiesconfinare*, *Carthusia* edizioni, auth. trans.).

The other significant editorial trend in Italian children's publishing in the last twenty years corresponds to the period since 2008, during which, alongside bilingual, multicultural children's literature, we noticed a publication of picturebooks and graphic novels in which illustrations speak, take a position with respect to social living, and sometimes become acts of social denunciation.

2008 is a crucial year because, on the "walls" and "migrants/refugees" themes, two works are published that seem to mark a turning point in the Italian publishing scene: *L'approdo*, by Shaun Tan (Fig. 1), and *L'isola: Una storia di tutti i giorni*, by Armin Greder (Fig. 2). These pieces of art can engage readers in a dialogical confrontation through their aesthetic forms and verbal-visual rhetorical structures capable of problematising the themes in question.

This publishing trend reflects the intention to publish a book as a political act: at the centre is a worldview to be told and a challenge for the reader to change the world in everyday behaviours. This experimental approach, which we could call "committed," is particularly evident in so-called militant publishing.



Figure 1. *Illustrazioni tratte da Tan, S. (2021). L'approdo. © Latina: Tunué.*



Figure 2. *Illustrazione tratta da Greder, A. (2008). L'isola. Una storia di tutti i giorni. Roma: Orecchio acerbo.*

5. Qualitative analysis of the first collection for selecting the picturebooks and graphic novels

Subsequently, we conducted a qualitative analysis on the first collection of approximately one hundred books to select the picturebooks and graphic novels for our research intervention in schools. The topic was not the only criterion for selecting: a transformative political potential of public life we recognised in the selected books through their provocative narratives that encourage the assumption of multiple perspectives. The choice particularly privileged texts in which a potentially provoking narration can be found, able to encourage the assumption of points of view and the construction of persuasive arguments to support to stance taken, and the adoption of aesthetic forms and challenging, open verbal and visual rhetoric structures, fostering dialogical relations with the readers (Filograsso, 2021, 2023; Nel, 2019): certain "literary forms" and "figurative arts" become "places of experimentation and mobilisation of practices", "freeing from fear and therefore supporting social integration through proposals that are both aesthetic and political" (Extended annex of the PNR 2021-2027, p. 30).

The qualitative analysis was guided by some main questions:

- Does the picturebook/graphic novel present the themes "walls" and "migrants/refugees," emphasising their political and social implications?
- Does the picturebook/graphic novel adopt open and multi-perspective verbal and visual strategies?

- Does the verbal and visual narrative push the reader towards an empathic connection?

Finally, the picturebooks/graphic novels selected were as follows:

- In *L'isola. Una storia di tutti i giorni* ("The Island") (2008), by Armin Greder, before it is concrete materiality, the "wall" is that ancient human fear of "others," which turns into hostility, set against the ramparts of one's own isolation. Referring to this picturebook, Armin Greder defines the theme of the wall as "xenophobia," in universal terms, a globalisation of fear and hatred, in his words (see Table 1). As is very evident in the subtitle, "*An everyday story*", he addresses the theme as in a thesis, in general terms, without specific contextual details (nor time or place), with the aim to universalise the message. The author offers readers his arguments through visual and verbal rhetorical devices: the minimalism of words is counterbalanced by the expressive power of images, in which the drama of human tragedy is contrasted with caricatured irony. He "corrects" history, telling it without any sugar-coating and manifesting his own point of view on political issues that concern us as the human community.
- *L'approdo* ("The Arrival") (2008), by Shaun Tan, is a wordless picturebook, whose reading "can be a true practice of right and belonging to the international community, and therefore a precious means for an education to global citizenship" (Grilli & Terrusi, 2014, p. 67).

In *The Arrival*, the absence of any written description also plants the reader more firmly in the shoes of an immigrant character. There is no guidance as to how the images might be interpreted, and we must ourselves search for meaning and seek familiarity in a world where such things are either scarce or concealed. Words have a remarkable magnetic pull on our attention, and how we interpret attendant images: in their absence, an image can often have more conceptual space around it, and invite a more lingering attention from a reader who might otherwise reach for the nearest convenient caption, and let that rule their imagination (Tan, n. p.).

- *La città del muro* ("The City of the Wall"), by Roberta Balestrucci Fancellu with illustrations by Luogo Comune (2022), is a graphic novel inspired by the story of an actual escape that occurred in Berlin in 1979, divided by the wall to prevent the free movement of persons to West Germany. The protagonists of this story manage to fly over the wall in a hand-stitched hot air balloon. For those forced to live in the eastern part of the city, the wall represented an unapproachable barrier preventing them from reaching an ideal of freedom, the material dimension of a controlling, oppressive regime. Crossing it meant making the dream of a life worth living come true, at the cost of running the risk of losing their lives. The narration recreates the atmospheres surrounding the protagonists and the fear, anxiety, tension, and hope accompanying their escape. (The students had the opportunity to learn more through the resources made available in the working library. See Table 1).
- Adaptations of the tragedy *Antigone*, by Sophocles, whose protagonist is the "wall" of conflict between natural law and positive law; between divine laws and human laws; between individual conscience and community; between man and woman; and between maturity and youth: *Antigone di Sofocle*, by Wolf Gita and Rao Sirish, illustrated by Roy Indrapramit (2006); *La storia di Antigone*, by Ali Smith and illustrated by Laura Paoletti (2011); and *Antigone sta nell'ultimo banco*, a novel by Francesco D'Adamo (2019) – texts that allow a legend to resonate in the version of Sophocles's tragedy. The protagonist of this tragedy is the wall of conflict between natural law and positive law, between divine laws and human laws, between individual consciousness and community, between man and woman, and between maturity and youth. Polynices' remains are left beyond the solid walls of Thebes, leading to the death of Antigone herself, buried alive in a tomb by her uncle Creon, the King of Thebes. The obscuring interpersonal wall built between the king and his young niece tragically

delays his hearing of Tiresias, the blind soothsayer, and the choir of elders – the metaphor of wisdom, memory, and plurality – which, on one hand, describes the wonder before the prodigious technique used by man to dominate the world, while, on the other, confirming its fragility.

Keith Haring's biography, *Disegnare sui muri* ("Drawing on Walls") (2021), written by Matthew Burgess and illustrated by Josh Cochran. In this picturebook, the wall serves as a public arena for the democratic art form of murals, which extends beyond closed museums and art gallery displays to directly engage citizens. In the contemporary agora represented in this book, the wall gives voice to ideas that are not heard elsewhere; it is serving political and social struggles, and thus acquires the value of a custodian of memories, as in the case of the traces covered in artworks and graffiti of what was once the Berlin Wall, which have been conserved and recently restored to preserve them (the students had the opportunity to learn more through the resources made available in the working library. See Table 1).

6. The research intervention in schools

During our research intervention in schools, we engaged students in workshop activities as a whole class, in small groups, and individually for 12 hours per class, with one meeting per week or an alternative schedule based on requirements. Fifty-four students from three fourth-grade classes from various types of schools participated: a higher education institute, the Industrial Technical Institute (ITIS) in Chieti; a high school for humanities in Chieti; and a high school for languages in Palermo. The classes included students with special educational needs. The majority of students were 17 years old, with a small number being 18 and 19 years old.

We started the discussion on the "walls" and "migrants/refugees" utilising the previously mentioned thesis by Libanius titled *If Walls Should Be Built*. In his thesis, Libanius was fully in favour of building walls to protect cities, women, and wealth from war. We analysed the arguments on which Libanius developed his opinion – "*positio*" in Latin (Berardi, 2017) – including his refutation of possible objections. A text from the past, therefore, became a pre-text for triggering an inclusive discussion on a controversial topic.

As a final assignment, we invited students to compose an original thesis on the controversial topics in question: the "walls" and "migrants/refugees". Borrowing from the instructions of the ancient teachers, we created a special template to guide students through the composition process. The *progymnasmatic* handbooks explain how the production of a thesis follows a precise structure, which opens with a *Proemio*, followed directly by the central nucleus, i.e., the *Argument*, split into many argumentative places/points of development, able to guide the argument towards the position held as well as the argument of the objection, i.e., the "preliminary presentation of arguments that are contrary to the proposed thesis and their refutation" (Berardi, 2017, p. 176, auth. trans.). Finally, the *Epilogue*, which the ancient handbook suggests amplifying with exhortations and pathetic formulae (from "pathos"), stirred with emotions. We allowed everyone to express their opinions, thoughts, and ideas, and encouraged research – *in primis*, making recourse to the work library (see, Table 1) – to support or refute various points of view.

Finally, the students declaimed/read aloud their thesis in front of the entire class at the last meeting. We stimulated participation and emotional connection with books by sharing in-depth analysis of visual and word modes and reading. In class, the students had the opportunity to listen to our reading aloud. At home, students chose and read aloud excerpts from the work library and audiotaped their reading aloud. The expressive reading aloud was considered a central pedagogical device in our research intervention, in which we sought to recover emotional amplification, on which the ancient rhetoricians placed an exceptional emphasis. In fact, in antiquity, the most common form of reading was accompanied by synchronous declamation of the text; some claim this was

the only form of reading, with no endophasic (mental) reading existing. In any case, the ancient rhetoricians considered reading aloud a condition for learning the difficult art of argumentation, and they used it to facilitate a deeper connection with the text and as a means of persuasion.

As part of preparing for the elaboration of their final thesis, the students composed a text reflecting the characteristics of *ethopoeia*: we asked them to impersonate/adopt the perspective of one of the characters from the chosen picturebook or graphic novel and persuasively support their feelings and perspective with reasons aimed at inspiring empathic engagement from the audience. The *ethopoietic* text has become an essential component of the arguments presented in their final thesis.

Among the proposed picturebook or graphic novel, numerous students chose *L'isola* ("The Island") by Armin Greder (Figg. 3, 4). In the *ethopoietic* argument of this thesis, for example, the students impersonated the character who is shipwrecked on *The Island*:

How would you feel if one day you accidentally arrived on an island foreign to you, whose inhabitants immediately rejected you? That is what happened to me. I did not know what the term 'xenophobia' meant until that moment. Fear of the foreigner is typically what leads to the building of walls/barriers, both physical and mental (Fig. 5).

Interestingly, several students chose to give voice to the fisherman, the only character in the picturebook *The Island* not represented in the illustrations. The fisherman provides an alternative stance to the stranger's rejection, which is shared by all other islanders, but he, too, will be excluded from the island community.

Despite opposition from the other island people living there, the fisherman's character chooses to accept the 'new'. His perspective makes one consider how creating barriers, even if for false safety, is not always the best option. Instead of erecting barriers that separate us from the unknown, we should construct bridges that link us to it. For us, this is an opportunity for personal development and enrichment.

In this thesis, we examine the theme of the wall in our current context and defend our argument using the narrative of the events shown in the picturebook *The Island*. What does the wall represent? What's the story behind this? We will respond to these questions by identifying with the character of the fisherman.



Figure 3. Students chose *L'isola* ("The Island") by Armin Greder.

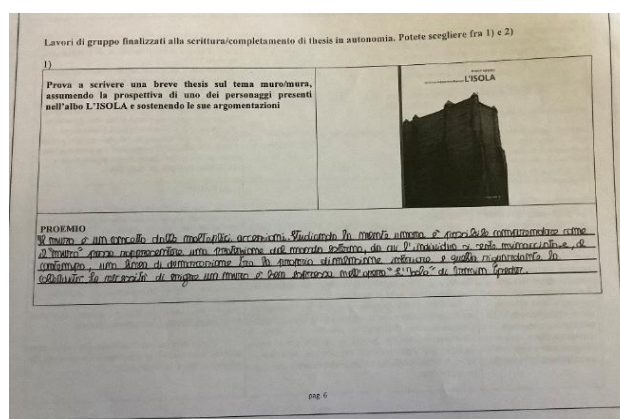


Figure 4. Page extracted from a thesis.

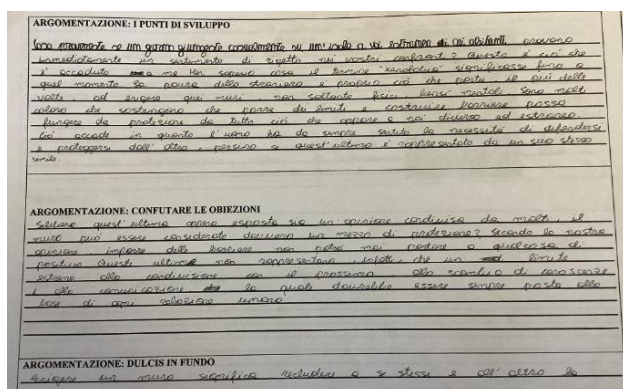


Figure 5. Page extracted from a thesis.

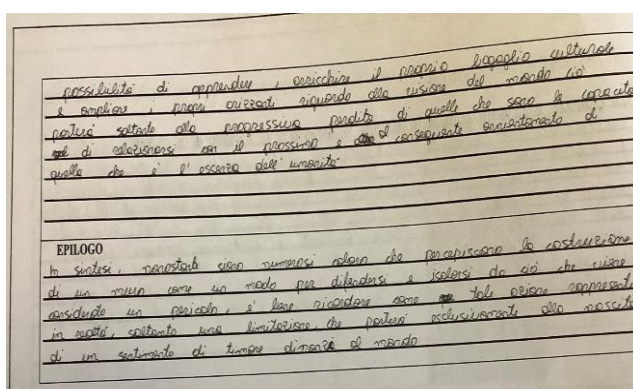


Figure 6. Page extracted from a thesis.

In addition to the final written theses, which the students declaimed/read aloud in the classroom and which we recorded on video, each student individually completed initial questionnaires before the activities began and a final summary questionnaire that prompted reflection on one's own experience to gather their personal perceptions. The questionnaires' anonymity was intended to foster more honest and in-depth thought, while the open-ended questions were intended to prompt more extensive responses based on the individual's perception of our research intervention. All student questionnaires were made at school, via smartphone.

The professors who attended the meetings acted mainly as "observer-narrators", with minimal interventions if requested by the students. The logbook was chosen as a qualitative research instrument for capturing ethnographic notes and subjective data through free narration.

The replies to the questionnaires and to the logbooks were collected using Google Forms. The anonymous open-ended questionnaires and logbook allowed us to learn about participants' opinions of our research intervention, how they processed the experience, and what significance they assigned to it, as well as to detect signs of change or higher awareness of basic civic skills, like in the case of this student:

Initially, I encountered communication difficulties with the person I was partnered with, not because we were antipathetic or otherwise, but because, over time, I became increasingly accustomed to working solely with my own ideas.

While writing the thesis, I understood how important it is to convince others of what I think, even through what I write. I also noticed, with great pleasure, that I can work with other people, something I considered almost impossible because I always believed that working alone would allow me to do what I was asked to do better.

Other excerpts from the answers (A.) to one of the questions (Q.) in the final questionnaire addressed to students show their personal perceptions about the opportunity to use picturebooks (A1.) as well as an intuitive reflection on different forms of reading stance, aesthetic, and efferent (A2.):

Q.: Did the selected readings help you develop your own perspective on the topic? If so, which readings in particular? Why? If not, why?

A1. Yes, in particular, *The Island*, a book I felt particularly connected to because I'm originally from an island. I noticed many references to behaviors I have personally experienced, rendering this reading especially engaging for me.

A2. The selected readings were very stimulating: they helped me develop a more precise understanding of the topic. In particular, I enjoyed the *The Island* album and the article in "Focus". I liked the first text because it addressed the issue from various perspectives, while the second provided more precise data and also discussed the history of the Berlin Wall.

The audio recordings of students reading aloud were collected via email. The answers to the question—Do you think that practicing, recording, and listening to your reading helped you improve your ability to engage your listeners and impart emotional intentionality to what you read? - shows that the vast majority of students appreciated this form of practice, which was new to them.

Below is an excerpt representing almost all of the responses:

Practicing reading aloud and listening to the recording helped me improve my emotional intentionality, slowing down my reading to emphasize and underline what I read.

Still regarding audio-recording reading aloud, a teacher's logbook is also interesting:

A student expressed her discomfort with sending a recording of her voice, given that she has some elocution problems. I tried to reassure her and make her aware that this type of practice could be useful for correcting and overcoming the problem. The students were concerned about whether their work would be graded; it is a conditioned reflex, derived (alas) from acquired mental habits.

7. Final thoughts

In conclusion, we believe that the significant responses gathered during our research intervention (some of which were in favour of building walls, as in Libanius' thesis) demonstrate how promising the proposal of picturebooks/graphic novels is for the development of civic skills in adolescent students. However, it is important to emphasise that these findings were achieved in a context of suspended judgement, within the thoughtful and comprehensive educational framework of the *progymnasmata*. This framework promotes openness to dialogue by encouraging questioning of civic issues from various perspectives and developing the ability to create persuasive arguments, all aspects that embody democracy. In this regard, a student wrote in the anonymous final questionnaire:

By listening to the arguments of others, I was able to empathize with their thoughts and with what my classmates really wanted to express. I think this exchange of opinions, which at a young age is limited to the school environment, is the educational foundation of a democratic country.

Individual and shared reading of children's and young adult literature, almost never considered an effective educational tool for acquiring citizenship skills in the Italian secondary school curriculum, played a range of functions:

- it questioned the readers, pushing them into a relationship with themselves and with others on civic issues that trigger debate;
- it stimulated the investigation of the forces that shape civic life and reflection on the way in which we live and how we hope to live together on all levels of (local and global) community life;
- it spotlighted different perspectives, mediated by emotionally intense counter-narratives able to empathetically engage the readers;
- it led them to assume and support their own point of view, connecting words to articulated reasoning and argument founded on the study of the many dimensions of the topic proposed.

Proposing a workshop of rhetorical exercises/*progymnasmata* supported by children's literature also overcame a notionist and normative approach to civic education.

Attention to and care for – oral and written – words that educate were practised in the class context, understood as a community of research, with one essential objective: to exercise democratic dialogue to facilitate and foster the exercise of citizenship skills. Words are at the centre of the personal exploration of reality: thinking means being able to face reality and its problems with curiosity, it means reviewing things and questioning what we know, finding new questions and seeking answers. This exercise cannot however be done alone: it is the community relationship that fuels the fertility of language, the possibility to discuss, assign and negotiate meanings. Reading and interpreting children's literature can become precious strategies for stimulating young people to "think politically", dealing with the inter-subjective dimension of human existence: learning to use words is essential, because thinking demands the ability to pronounce and communicate thought. These are the indispensable premises for "acting politically", Piero Bertolini explains, for a transformative "doing together", moving in the world in a fully responsible manner (2003, p. 159).

Notes

1. In this context, "political" is understood in its etymological sense as the art, science, or activities aimed at promoting coexistence/global citizenship.
2. Google Books, Liberweb Database, OPAC SBN, sites and catalogues of children's literature publishers, Italian Awards for the best children's books, Bologna Children's Book Fair site, Italian government sites on migrant literature, etc.

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Ilaria Filograsso, Stefania Carioli – *Children's and Young Adult literature and classical rhetoric: Connections and opportunities for Civic Education*

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