BUSINESS STORIES. COMMUNITY AND RELATIONSHIPS TO REALIZE YOUTH'S IMAGINATION

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ABSTRACT
The pandemic experience has taught us, more than other emergencies of our time, that long-term personal and professional plans can be undermined if not designed with a mindset capable of creating emotional value while realizing the imaginary, but above all, of changing course when necessary. The findings of Business Stories , an educational tool designed to strengthen the connections between nutrition, affectivity, and entrepreneurship, specifically reveal this fundamental mindset, especially in relation to those young people still unable to mobilize emotional, relational, and planning resources for the near future. This paper therefore discusses the findings of a recent ethnographic study conducted in the Itria Valley, Puglia, through a criterion of "doing business" in the post-pandemic scenario.

KEYWORDS
Zombification of the youthful soul; nutrition-affectiveness; spirit of initiative; criteria of the self-enterprise.

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1. Youth Maydays: New Symptoms and Restricted Needs

Deficits in recognition (Blatterer, 2007), *credibility*, and *mentalization* are probably the greatest and most serious shortcomings characterizing our society in this age of complexity.

The first social deficiency refers to a glaring inability of adults to recognize the world of young people and the very young in our country and their developmental needs, which are restricted and even unprecedented, especially in relation to and after the pandemic.

Indeed, six years after the first *lockdown*, the still-dominant adult-centric view has completely neglected to consider and involve children and adolescents in decisions that rightfully affect them, thus contributing to a passivity that for many of them has now transformed into a full-blown depressive drift.

Although specialist literature had warned of the risks of excessive closeness within families - unfortunately, even dysfunctional ones, for which various extra-family educational services activated at the request of professional social services or by decision of the Judicial Authorities were suspended at the time - and of a drastic thinning of social relationships in everyday life, schools and the healthcare system have in some ways contributed to weakening the existential resources of those who were just beginning to face life.

Like a highlighter that yellows what isn't working, Vertecchi (2020) was among the first to highlight the fragility of our social and educational systems and the hegemony of an adult "gaze" incapable of fully and genuinely assuming, and therefore of *mentalizing* (Midgley & Vrouva, 2012), the perspective of minors and young people, and therefore also incapable of recognizing and meeting their developmental needs during a decidedly traumatic period.

This deficit in mentalization, or the general loss of *mentalistic abilities* in those *adultescent* (Tierney, 2004) who no longer know how to dialogue, form alliances, but not as equals (Aime & Charmet, 2014; Parrello, 2018), instill unconditional trust and support and guide in difficulties, has conversely generated a credibility deficit in young people and the very young, making it increasingly difficult to be considered privileged interlocutors.

Thus, the educational relationship has become horizontal rather than vertical, regarding the roles and functions to be expressed at home and at school, and unionized (Charmet, (2005) when children believe they deserve everything without any effort, and in the worst cases they transform into *wise babies* (Ferenczi, 1932)

for those parents who have no idea how traumatic it is for the development of their identity to ask them for advice on issues they cannot resolve on their own, for example regarding a separation procedure, and which in reality do not concern them at all.

While previously the adult could then consider himself and in turn be considered credible, a "compass" to be consulted in the difficult navigations of life, now he remains as if in the background of their existences; indeed, in a certain sense he contributes to the expression and maintenance of a variegated symptomatology of which many adolescents and unfortunately an increasing number of children are merely *designated patients* (Bateson, 1976; Satir, 1970), that is, the carriers of dysfunctions generated within living and learning systems that are themselves dysfunctional from multiple points of view.

At school, for example, an adolescent with a strong *existential intelligence* (Gardner, 1983), now rightly concerned about the wars ravaging the planet and the global military escalation, can easily be mistaken and labeled as negative, depressed, and unsociable, while instead seeking answers to existential questions that would truly require shared reflection with responsive adults.

On this point, Donati (2011) distinguishes *reflection* from *reflexivity*: the former is a self-referential operation of a mind that returns to itself, the latter is always carried out by a mind that returns to itself, but in relation to an Alter that seeks in an attempt to converse, reflect, and understand.

However, when schools are solely polarized on disciplinary learning and fail to address the student's holistic perspective, when they are obsessively interested in achieving the best performance, as Uricchio (2026) recently argued, and when they confuse a specific way of *intelligere* the world with a disinterest in others, within a *bio-psycho-social framework* (Engel, 2007), they can contribute to chronically pathological distress experienced in relation to existential moments that are certainly critical, but which, upon closer inspection, would be *multiple forms of intelligence*.

Therefore, there was certainly no doubt that the complexity of the times we live in would generate signs of some distress in minors and young people, but neither has the pandemic prompted a treasured experience in an educational and didactic sense (Paparella, Limone & Cinnella, 2020).

This pedagogical blindness, if you like, has in the opposite direction favored the expression of those signals that have gradually become more widespread and long-lasting *maydays*, such as anxiety, emotional flattening, the absence of useful words to express one's emotions (alexithymia) and of a mature emotional *insight* and, in the opposite direction, the hyper-maturation of an *internal monologue* very similar to depressive ruminations (Romeo, 2021; 2022).

But it is probably the *planning block*, that visible and enduring collapse of initiative, that symptom we should reflect on most as an educational community, since the mental health of young people and the very young is promoted and protected first and foremost by helping them build a viable future where each can discover their talents while putting them at the service of others and the broader community.

Therefore, ethically driven by the importance of identifying each person's personal talents and guiding them with educational intention along the not inconsiderable path of building an independent life plan - a rediscovered self-enterprise, we might say - together with adults who serve as close guides, we have designed and created the "Business Stories" program, which we will discuss later after a brief exploration of the connections between *nutrition* and *affectivity*.

2. Nutrition and affectivity

In educational research, the connections between *nutrition*, *food*, *taste*, and *personal affectivity* have occupied a rather residual space, and indeed deserve further investigation and more adequate formalization, also given the interest these concepts assume in various scientific and non-scientific sectors.

When taste is emphasized as a flavor exclusively localized on the palate, or when objectivity is emphasized over the subjectivity of the individual and, therefore, over the cognitive, emotional, and relational aspects, which also come into play in nutrition, these connections and the possible directions for research-intervention fade into the background.

Unfortunately, scrolling through television channels reveals how today's food competitions, tastings, and recipes proposed by so many food bloggers trivialize the issues potentially at stake, in favor of promotional and sales strategies.

These competitions deny participants the opportunity for intentional reflection on their experience, on the senses involved, and on personal affectivity, which can lead to relationships with others, even on a professional level.

Recognizing, however, that a person's nutrition, food, taste, and affectivity are educable phenomena is a statement justified by evidence that has been extensively discussed elsewhere (Bochicchio, 2013).

To quote Quaglino (2013), in this contribution it is sufficient to remember that nutrition and food represent a cultural space and not just a sensorial experience; a space constructed by the person in his entirety and enjoyed and enriched by the person, where subjectivity and objectivity are called upon to re-establish new

balances and identity landings; taste and food are therefore expressions of individual and collective identities (Simone, 2013).

Consequently, when we say "good taste," the term does not only refer to the distinction between good and bad taste, but from this point of view we want to refer to the "person" of good taste, that is, a subject capable of enjoying life experiences in an emotional, cognitive, corporeal-sensory and relational sense, therefore in their plurality.

From a pedagogical perspective, teaching about nutrition, food, and taste is therefore focused on the individual, not the palate, and the goals are not evaluative, but rather aimed at protecting individuals from the pitfalls of "living by reflex," avoiding delegating choices and decisions that would affect them to others.

And this is even more true when considering the dangerous logic of *junk food*, which refers to unhealthy foods due to their very low nutritional value and high fat or sugar content (Seixas, 1984).

Recently, together with Barca and Negri (2025), we have explored the issue of *energy drink* (ED) consumption among adolescents in the province of Taranto, discovering that their overuse impacts not only learning but also emotional, sexual, and relational lives.

From a metabolic perspective, the study highlighted how EDs, characterized by a high content of simple sugars (such as glucose, sucrose, maltodextrin, ribose, and fructose), cause an immediate glycemic spike once ingested and a subsequent physiological insulin response (Naveh et al., 2024).

Furthermore, excessive consumption of psychostimulants such as caffeine can alter the sleep-wake cycle in adolescents, especially if consumed in the evening (Tahara et al., 2024).

It is also well proven that circadian rhythm disruptions significantly contribute to the onset of disorders such as increased adiposity and dysregulation of appetite hormones (Shimizu I et al., 2016).

The effects of EDs on the nervous system vary significantly in adolescents, as their neurodevelopment is still ongoing.

Indeed, during this period, a reorganization of neural circuits occurs that correlates brain structure with behaviors oriented toward the pursuit of rewards and emotions, to the detriment of rational decision-making (Konrad et al., 2013).

This imbalance is due to the early maturation of subcortical areas (limbic and reward systems) compared to the delayed maturation of prefrontal control areas (Ibid.).

Therefore, to conclude, the energizing and psychostimulant effects of EDs can, in the long term, alter brain function and metabolism more generally, facilitate the onset of sleep disorders, further increase the risk of cardiovascular disease, generate unpredictable erectile dysfunction, and negatively impact adolescents' academic performance.

This and other phenomena linked to so-called *unconscious consumption* (Negri, 2026), such as “mindless eating” linked to the automatic and distracted consumption of food, especially when in front of digital devices (Lemke et al., 2021), highlight on the one hand a widespread cultural deficit regarding the tendency to ignore its serious effects on health, and on the other the failure to explore the possible positive effects that the *affectivity-nutrition* link could foster if intentionally explored.

3. The pedagogical device "Business Stories. Convivialities and relationships to realize youth's imagination"

If we delve deeper into the connections between *nutrition*, *food*, *taste*, and *affectivity*, favoring a systemic and at the same time *ecological approach* (Bertalanffy, 1968; Bronfenbrenner, 1986) - the greatest epistemological breakthrough of the twentieth century - and also highlighting pleasure and knowledge beyond the traditional focus on flavor, taste is functional to the sustenance of the Self in the variety of oscillations between taste that defends and preserves and taste that builds and strengthens the identities of people and social communities (Bochicchio & Romeo, 2018).

Within the framework of such an identity project, *educating people about (good) taste* means strengthening in people of all ages both the ability to discern the choices that guide their purchasing and consumption behaviors of food products, and the ability to attribute values to food and taste experiences that can reawaken the senses, body, mind, emotions, and sociality from their anesthesia.

If we then design a device that *teaches (good) taste*, especially for those minors and young people whose difficulties we have described - those who are moving towards a true "zombification" if we consider the symbolic mortification of their life plans, but unfortunately also not metaphorically given the increase in suicide attempts after the pandemic (Romeo, 2024, 2025) - the connection between food and affectivity becomes more recognizable and educationally significant.

For these reasons, we developed a pedagogical tool, entitled *Business Stories: Community and Relationships to Realize Youth's Imagination*, which could, beyond spontaneity, "revive" that self-enterprise, that spirit of initiative, or entrepreneurial

competence, if we refer to the European framework of entrepreneurial skills EntreComp (Bacigalupo et al., 2016), currently dormant.

The Methodological Framework. The methodological framework of the pedagogical convivium consists of a typical *ethnographic research* situated within the *naturalistic-constructivist paradigm* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which recognizes that reality exists because it is constructed locally and by the individual. The relationship with knowledge is therefore subjective, and research results are created intersubjectively and are never entirely objective. The methodology is *interpretative-dialectical* and *qualitative* (Spradley, 1979). Ethnographic research on the experience of convivium has favored the *symbolic interactionist approach* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), focusing on the *individual-in-relationship*; in particular, on the experiences, perceptions, and meaning that individuals attribute to reality and their experiences, which subsequently influence their actions and behaviors. In particular, since the individual is an active subject who engages with the real world that he or she contributes to constructing, which he or she continually interprets and builds action on the basis of these operations (Piccardo & Benozzo, 1996, p. 34), we focused on the participants' business stories, the educational legacies inherited from their families, the internal and external saboteurs who slowed down their entrepreneurial and personal growth projects (Gazzillo, 2012), and finally on entrepreneurial turning points and, therefore, on the decisive moments in their lives, including their professional lives. Within this framework, *participant observation* is considered the most effective method for conducting ethnographic research aimed at analyzing the meanings of action (Blumer, 1969), as the researcher is interested in the objects, behaviors, rituals, artifacts, and emotions expressed by individuals confronted with specific events or situations, but above all in the meanings those objects, behaviors, rituals, artifacts, and emotions represent for the subjects involved (Piccardo & Benozzo, 1996, p. 39).

Hypothesis. In ethnographic research, it is not necessary to test hypotheses (Mead, 1934; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), since only those that emerge from the data collected by the researcher are permitted. However, since any research design can only be guided and supported by an initial idea, the presence of empirically testable hypotheses is unavoidable, even while admitting that their formulation, over the course of the experiment, may vary with the modification of assertions recognized as significant by the researchers. As clarified in the previous paragraphs, the hypotheses that guided this ethnographic research experience are therefore: 1) *there is a profound connection between education, nutrition, food, taste, and affectivity, which cannot be reduced to the mere consumption of food and drink, and which must be made explicit in the direction of a personal investment that is simultaneously sensorial, cognitive, emotional, relational, and business*; 2) *subjects are generally not fully aware of their own sensory channels and the internalized*

saboteurs that influence their perceptions and constructions of the world; 3) *it is essential to recognize and manage these beliefs, often heard and internalized within the family or alternatively learned through ingrainment* (Piasere, 2007) *in society, which can limit a person's growth along relational and/or professional lines*; 4) *only full emotional self-awareness would allow a person to think about and realize a truly satisfying life plan*; 5) finally, *it is likely that a shared understanding of "doing business" among entrepreneurs from different sectors, which especially and critically highlights the influences on decisions and actions inherited within the family, often unconsciously (for example, conveyed through "mythological" and essentially indisputable narratives such as not biting off more than one can chew, keeping a low profile, still only looking after one's own backyard) or culturally (how to think of solving problems without asking for help from others, therefore having grown up with parents who thought it was more useful to symbolically and not wash dirty laundry at home), could lead to the emergence of a minimal set of criteria useful for mobilizing in the future that youthful spirit of initiative currently blocked in the present*.

The location. The location for the experience was chosen to foster relationships between nature, the local area, and culture, ensure effective and intimate communication in a sufficiently private and comfortable environment, and foster an exchange of entrepreneurial experiences gained in the fields of hospitality, local food and wine, and the valorization of the region's artisanal heritage. The choice fell on a resort, Villa Ada, located in the Martina Franca countryside, in the heart of the Itria Valley (Puglia): a rural landscape characterized by trulli, historic farmhouses, vineyards, and olive groves, stretching across the hills of the southeastern Murgia. The resort is managed by Stefano Caputo, an expert in agri-food supply chains and cultures, catering, and tourism. He has shown particular sensitivity and interest in experimenting with the system, also to gain useful insights that can convey and convey the cultural value of the service offered to the public. The evocative power of the term "convivium" explains how the table, under specific conditions and with an educational purpose, has as its ultimate goal learning and not just consumption.

The sample. The selection of the sample had to reflect the initial hypothesis and, therefore, favor entrepreneurs with extensive experience, perhaps gained between the millennia, from whom young people could learn useful guidelines for starting their own businesses, and, if applicable, for professional development, in an era when such development is difficult. The subjects, who had previously expressed interest and curiosity about the program, but had purposely received little information about it, were ten, four of whom were young people between the ages of 25 and 35.

Analysis of the experience. The program consisted of five stages, each punctuated by a specific course, each designed to highlight local excellence and, at the same time, one specific theme at a time. This approach, designed by Paolo Miola, a coach with expertise in teamwork and team building training in the food and beverage sectors, revitalized the individual's sensorium as a whole, thus moving away from the current mindset of unconscious food consumption, and strengthened the connection between *nutrition, food, taste, affectivity, relationships,* and *self-enterprise*. The senior entrepreneurs and young participants in the gathering were encouraged to recount, in writing and verbally, their life and professional experiences through their senses, emotions, and mind. For these reasons, each course was punctuated by a reflective pause followed by social interaction.

The research team. The experience was led by a researcher with expertise in ethnography, an expert in video research in learning contexts, and a counselor specialized in sensory analysis. The kitchen and dining room staff provided essential support and collaboration.








Some moments of the reflective and narrative practices encouraged during the "Business Stories" device

Conclusioni

The *"Business Stories..."* device highlights how entrepreneurs tend to describe the birth of their entrepreneurial project as an exclusive act of self-determination, often emphasized by a heroic self-narrative such as: "I did it all by myself," "I believed in myself," or "I didn't depend on anyone."

This posture thus reveals a *mythical and self-absolving tendency* in one's personal narrative, *sub specie* entrepreneurial (Gottschall, 2014), which, however, risks putting the individual in the position of finding the causes of problems and failures to which they could certainly contribute only outside themselves, effectively reinforcing an *external locus of control* (Rotter, 1966).

Minimizing one's role in negative events can certainly reduce feelings of guilt, but it can often lead to lower self-efficacy.

However, listening in depth to these business stories, it becomes clear that real growth never occurs in solitary autonomy, not even thanks to favorable conditions, but within an *autonomous-dependent* state (Quaglino, 2013), that is, when the individual is able to invest in relationships.

Within a systemic-ecological vision, the business can therefore be understood as a relational organism.

Conversely, a business project that remains tied to an egoistic vision tends to ultimately lose productivity, creativity, and social impact, being evidently more oriented toward survival than generativity.

It is, after all, the same mechanism we observe in emotional relationships: the self-protective ego, the *minimal ego* said Lasch (2004), becomes excessively defensive and stops evolving psychodynamically.

From these observations, we conclude by drawing some criteria for youth entrepreneurship in the post-Covid context (2024-2026), which requires structured teaching that goes beyond the simple implementation of the entrepreneurial idea, focusing instead on resilience, sustainability, and digitalization.

The *European EntreComp* (Entrepreneurship Competence Framework) offers an excellent basis for defining these criteria, so it is possible to take inspiration from it while also introducing some original elements.

Strategic vision: The project idea must be able to create value that is not only economic, but also social or cultural. Young entrepreneurs are called upon to define the purpose of their business, responding to new needs that have emerged in the post-pandemic era, such as safeguarding mental health, community well-being, and restoring proximity, including by leveraging short production chains, production methods, and/or traditional recipes in line with the European Union's *Traditional Speciality Guaranteed* (TSG) label.

Sustainability and creativity: New businesses must integrate environmental (green) and digital sustainability from the outset. A key criterion is therefore the ability to solve environmental or social problems with technological solutions (circular economy apps, smart services, e-commerce, precision agriculture).

Critical thinking and adaptability: It is essential to evaluate the consequences of your business and adapt it based on the changing context, thus learning to manage uncertainty.

Relational Investment: It has been said that both self- and professional enterprise reveal their full potential when we recognize the contribution of others to our life experience and also take inspiration from it to improve it. This involves eschewing the false myth of "self-development" and consciously recognizing ourselves by

"mirroring" ourselves in others, in a projective game that allows us to identify similarities, but above all, to value and internalize traits of originality, ideas, and new approaches to being in the world. This is not a projective identification in the *kleinian* sense of the term, where defensive projections onto others concern aspects of the self or unaccepted impulses, but rather a skill through which it is always possible to achieve autonomy together with the other.

Sabotaging internal saboteurs and emotional maturity: It means discovering that the way we think we are in the world is actually the fruit of a symbolic and ancient educational sowing that finds its privileged nurturers in our parents and grandparents, the latter on both the maternal and paternal lines. Not metaphorically, we mean that each of our psyches is nothing more than a legacy, not always a good one, of family scripts traceable through memories, emblematic narratives, and attitudes that are not always shared. The ability to experience truly intimate and enriching relationships, even professional ones, to be satisfied with who we are, and to even feel psychologically grown, ultimately depends on the ability to accept in the present, regardless of possible childhood relational traumas, our dependence on the people we have known and know, and at the same time, our own autonomy.

The results of the "Business stories..." device, in line with the European EntreComp model, ultimately highlight this particular mindset, which should be taught especially to those young people who still appear incapable of mobilizing imaginative and planning resources for the future.

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