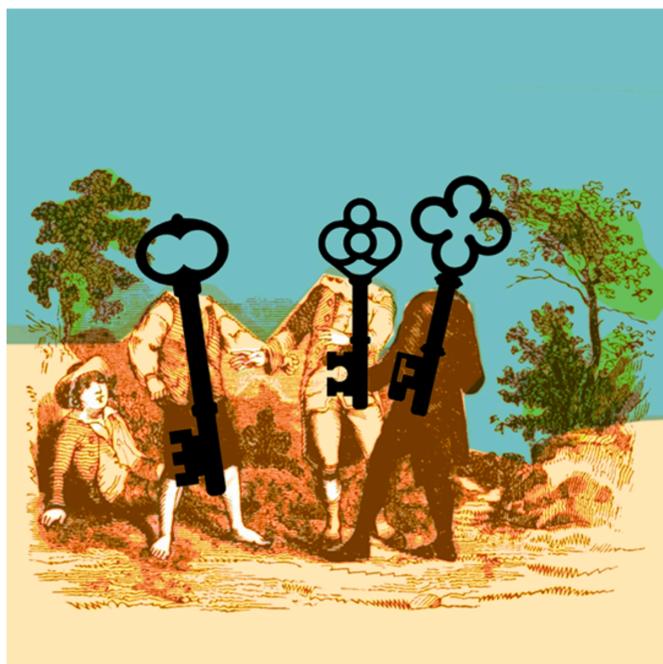




## My Story Is Mine Alone!

### Why It Is Important to Keep Private Boundaries in Mind



Laws protect the right to privacy, but "privacy" is also a cultural and situated concept. Protecting this right is thus not just a legal obligation but also a pivotal relational tool for building interpersonal trust. For this reason, confidentiality and sensitivity in respecting private areas of personal stories are crucial skills in creating an effective relationship with families and kids.

Professionals must be aware of the general legal framework ruling privacy issues of the country where they work. However, since the concepts of "privacy" and "private sphere" are culturally informed, one mustn't take for granted a shared understanding of their meaning, the forms and boundaries that privacy should take, and the practices to respect it. The key issues in this respect concern:

- The understanding of the need to "know" that adults and peers might express;
- The awareness that there might be different meanings attached to "privacy" by different actors;
- The balance between stereotypical stories (for example, the "abandoned" child or the "immigrants") and the concrete and unique life experience of each student;
- The agency of children and adolescents in being in control of their story; and
- The resources in the school and community context.

#### What and why do we (really) need to know?

Children entering a new school might be looked at with curiosity by their peers. At the same time, school staff perceives the importance of grasping their previous experiences to understand them better and use an appropriate and sensitive approach. However, developing awareness of early adverse experiences' role in a child's life does not mean that every teacher or professional at school should know the kids' detailed personal history. It is crucial to consider why we consider certain information necessary and how it can improve practice. For example, information about how students are experiencing the transition to a new school and understanding what helps them feel welcomed (or uneasy) or trust other people might help build a strong sense of support. On the other hand, sharing parts of a traumatic biography is not a pure transfer of information. It is an important and delicate moment in an educational relationship that makes sense if and when it has a meaning for the student rather than just a response to a teacher's need to fill informational gaps.

#### Knowing "everything" does not mean being able to act

Awareness of how early adverse experiences can affect human functioning is essential for teachers to frame children's behaviours and develop sensitivity to their needs. However, knowledge of a specific traumatic biography does not automatically lead to the development of an awareness of the problem and a capacity for case management. It can instead create a counterproductive effect, supporting prejudices and stereotypes.

Many children who live complex life paths have experienced being identified with their trauma. They have been labelled by others ("she's the adopted one") and lived the consequences of linear causal attributions—for example, identifying previous experiences of abuse as a cause for academic failures—that do not allow understanding and intervention. One must consider that a complex experience does not coincide with a traumatic event.

At the same time, children living adverse experiences might have scripts that correspond to social narratives they have built and told many times to judges, social workers, and doctors. They may use them to satisfy other people's information needs while avoiding placing too much emotional pressure on themselves. Rather than pushing them to use these scripts, it is important that schools open spaces where experiences can be shared according to personal choices and feelings, using different languages throughout everyday activities (play, visual mediators, music, theatre, and more).

#### Kids can make decisions about their privacy

Children may feel shame, anxiety, guilt, or rage when asked about things they cannot deal with yet or might need to protect their families from external judgment. This need for privacy and control of one's life can become critical in adolescence when the demand for independence from the adult world is fundamental. In such circumstances, the way of presenting oneself to the world becomes a particularly sensitive element. It is necessary to consider children's agency in every step of their development. For example, teachers and students must discuss and share what confidentiality can mean in a context where different people care for the child. Within this framework, if something that the child has told the teacher needs to be shared with others (parents, professionals), teachers can explain to them why it could be important and in which way this information can help the child. Unless there are reasons that force the teacher to reveal the information, it is also necessary to respect the student's will, support them in expressing their thoughts and needs, and involve them in choosing the time and the ways this information can be shared.

#### There might be different meanings of "privacy"

Sometimes, family members and caregivers never disclose vital parts of a child's story at school. This could be for several reasons: distrust of professionals due to previous negative experiences, fear of stigmatisation, expectation that in a new context, the child can "start again", etc.

Revealing something that might attract negative judgment or pity is not easy. Disclosure is not something that just happens. It can be seen as a relational, two-way process that results from feeling safe, being in a relationship of trust and being aware of the information's purpose. Therefore, creating a climate of collaboration and integration between the school, caregivers and child is vital. The aim is to constantly monitor the child's well-being in the school context. Therefore, the focus of the information exchange is not the personal story. It describes the child's current life at school, where biographical elements provide a general interpretative framework of behavioural signals. Open communication is essential to identify personalised support strategies, shape realistic expectations, and set shared goals within the child's reach. Sometimes, it's also important—especially with families or pupils with a migrant background—to take time to understand the cultural meanings connected to revealing parts of the family biography with the help of cultural mediators or critical actors in the child's network.

## Recommendations for teachers and school staff

#### • Take time

Use time from a pedagogical perspective: an authentic understanding of the story and the lived experience of a child is something that happens in the long run. Take time to build a trustworthy relationship grounded on the essential information. Let the child choose their appropriate time to share their story and feelings. Help their schoolmates to take time, too. Do not hesitate to interrupt intrusive investigations (even if moved by good intentions) that make the child react, withdraw, or express discomfort. You could say: "I don't think this is the right thing to ask at the moment. Everyone is free to decide if, when, and with whom to share their own story". Take time with the new student to ask them what can be helpful.

#### • Set up classroom activities about personal stories and boundaries

Besides addressing curiosity in everyday life at school, take the opportunity to work with the students on issues that are important for everyone and that support the group's functioning. For example, some activities give the opportunity to understand what it means to feel personal boundaries are not respected. Others could focus on showing someone that you care about them, or realising that closeness and care are not necessarily linked to knowing everything about someone, or looking at legitimate and appropriate responses. One example would be: "I prefer not talking about this now," an expression of personal needs rather than an action that disrupts the relationship.

#### • Let kids use their own languages

Loris Malaguzzi reminded us that the kids have "a hundred languages", but at school, they tend to be pushed to use only a few of them. Children might need time and opportunities to share pieces of their experiences in meaningful, personal ways. Make sure that there is space for expressing using different languages, involving the body, play, and arts in school curricular activities. Let children experience different roles and mediators of experience in a collaborative, caring environment.

#### • Reach out

Family, professional caregivers, key actors of the child's network are fundamental for better understanding the child's experience at school and their feelings about sharing their personal story. Take time for talking with them about the child's progress and for sharing questions and doubts, and involve others in the discussion (the student, other teachers, mediators...).