

# ENVIRONMENT, BODY, DISCOMFORT. EDUCATIONAL ACTIONS AND INCLUSION PRACTICES.

## AMBIENTE, CORPO, DISAGIO. AZIONI EDUCATIVE E PRATICHE DI INCLUSIONE.

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### Abstract

Within several neighbourhoods and areas in Campania, criminal phenomenology has caused living conditions characterized by violence, abandonment, neglect and deprivation. These dimensions neither represent exceptional events, nor they only refer to the external environment, to what is outside, but then they correspond to everyday experiences and are related to the internal environment. When these children live in other contexts, their knowledge structures and emotional world, developed within these scenarios, tend to embody their suffering in attitudes of violence, rejection, closure. Therefore, in an environment that has become an obstacle to their development, a great pedagogical challenge concerns the educability of everyone is at risk.

In molti quartieri e zone della Campania, la fenomenologia criminale ha generato condizioni di vita caratterizzate da violenza, abbandono, incuria, privazione. Tali dimensioni non rappresentano eventi eccezionali, né si riferiscono solo all'ambiente esterno, a ciò che è fuori, bensì sono esperienze quotidiane e relative all'ambiente interno. Quando questi bambini abitano contesti altri, le loro strutture di conoscenza e il loro mondo emozionale, formati all'interno di questi scenari, non possono che incarnare, le loro sofferenze, in atteggiamenti di violenza, rifiuto, chiusura. In questo ambiente, costituitosi ostacolo dello sviluppo, si gioca, pertanto, una grande sfida pedagogica relativa all'educabilità di tutti e di ciascuno.

### Keywords

Discomfort; environment; body/corporeality; inclusion.  
Disagio; ambiente; corpo/corporeità; inclusione.



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### 1. Introduction

Within several neighbourhoods and areas in Campania, criminal phenomenology has caused living conditions characterized by violence, abandonment, neglect and

deprivation. These dimensions neither represent exceptional events, nor they only refer to the external environment, to what is outside, but then they correspond to everyday experiences and are related to the internal environment and to what is inside the domestic walls, too. These experiences are absorbed by children and adolescents in their indecipherability. So, it happens that when these children inhabit other contexts, in particularly the school one, their knowledge structures and their emotional world, developed within these scenarios, can only express violence, rejection, closure and provocation.

In this environment, which is not a stimulus, a development facilitator is therefore at stake, but also an obstacle to it, since may be considered as a great pedagogical challenge concerning the educability of everyone (Frauenfelder, 1986).

## **2. The social environment as an obstacle to development and learning**

During the "childhood days" the child shapes his or her personal way of being in the world (Benjamin, 1973); in this process, the attunement between the intimate space, of his or her intrapsychic and spiritual world, and the space of the public, the external, is essential (Gennari, 1997). In deprived and marginalized contexts, place where I have been carrying out my educational and research work for about twenty years (Sabatano, 2015; 2019; 2022), the environment often represents an obstacle which generates to children and adolescents a difficulty on going through various stages of psychological, social, and cognitive development, which we may phenomenologically define as a difficulty in becoming a subject that "stems from a weak or maladaptive structuring of a vision of the world and of self-in-the-world-with-others [author's traduction]" (Bertolini, Caronia, 1993, pp. 12-13). The creation of a personal worldview is not an individual process, intimately experienced and produced by the subject in solitude, but rather a social process of intersubjective negotiation of meanings of the world, which the subject operates with others making agreements about the meaning and values that the world has for those who live in a community (Bertolini, 1990). Therefore, a child who grows up in an underworld, violent, socially and culturally deprived context develops a partial worldview because his/her experience is limited to the kind of reality he shares with almost all significant people (friends, parents, sisters, brothers, relatives).

From a pedagogical point of view, the possibility for a child to think differently of himself, to imagine his future not as irreversibly and deterministically connected to a family destiny, but as an autonomous project of well-being and self-fulfillment is strictly linked to the quality of opportunities that school and educational contexts at the territorial level express (Cottini, 2017; Caldin & Righini, 2017). With the introduction of Special Educational Needs (SEN) in the school setting, it was imagined

that we wanted to give right of citizenship to conditions of social disadvantage, deprivation (Ianes, 2013); in fact, the implementation of truly inclusive pathways is clearly not connected to just identifying a special need and drafting a Personalized Didactic Plan but is a complex pathway. This process strongly recalls the need to train inclusive teacher not only but also educators, parents and social service workers) in inclusive acting as competent (Pellerey, 2004, Aiello, Sibilio, 2017), allowing them to escape causal paradigms that lead to thinking that a specific existing condition will determine a certain type of development in the future.

Thinking about a child or adolescent, labelling him or her as "at risk" or "mal-adjusted" or "delinquent" generates relational patterns, expectations and evaluations that confirm this interpretation, and that sustain a peculiar child's self-image that will contribute to build a negative identity<sup>1</sup>.

Maladaptive behavior should be read as an original and specific expressive choice of a subject who express his difficulty to live in an environment that is not congenial to his development. In educational settings, particularly schools, it is crucial, therefore, that educators and teachers focus attention not so much on the problem behavior as on the motivation that sustains those who act it out and that is connected to the worldview made in the experience of their living environment. Therefore, the inclusive perspective calls for the need to value the existential difficulty that leads a child or an adolescent to engage in certain problematic or antisocial actions and, above all, to support him or her in interpreting his or her difficulties, in establishing connections between choices and motivations, in telling his or her story in order to tell himself or herself, to listen to himself or herself, even before being listened to be guided or educated.

In the process of searching for the self, for one's own worldview, the body plays a central role, being fundamentally a lived body and, therefore, knowledgeable, because it is instilled with the experience of the self and the world (De Mennato, 2006).

### 3. From body-object to body-subject

The way we act is connected to perception, to the body's relationship with the environment (Wilson, 2002). Corporeality is, therefore, the crossroads of materiality and immateriality, of cultural and social meanings (Calabrò, 2013). Observation of

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<sup>1</sup> «The immanent and structural insecurity of educational action [...] requires a continuous control of the latent images that sustain it and of the forms and ways in which it relates to problematic situations and its recipients. In order to confront the challenge of a so-called "at-risk" situation, the reeducational intervention must guard against one of its possible inherent risks: that of unconsciously transforming itself into a place of stabilization of what it intended to avoid» (self-translation). P. Bertolini, L. Corona, op. cit., p. 16. R. Farnè, "Possibilità e limiti di una educazione «rischiosa»", *Il bambino incompiuto*, 2, 1992, pp. 11-24.

children's behaviors has led, over the years,<sup>2</sup> to highlight how they often express distress through a quality of bodily acting out in social relationships characterized by an alteration from the normal development of these dimensions. Corporeality becomes a communicative mediator, somehow translating the experiences of these children according to certain prevailing bodily expressions.

First of all, the body may be considered as an instrument of aggression when aggressive actions seems to be the most obvious and spontaneous way of expressing any kind of negative emotion. Pain, disappointment, fear are translated into violent gestures, because they are emotions that are as intense as they are difficult to decode because of their complexity, which find no other possibility of interpreting in children, except in the violent behaviors that constitute the language most familiar to them.

Secondly, the body may be assumed as an instrument of seduction. The latter becomes for some children a predominant or exclusive manner of relating, in particular with adults and, therefore, in this case, with educators; this approach seems to express the attempt to take control of the other, not through an authentic putting into play of the self, but by appealing to an adultized eros, which children learn in the promiscuity of their living conditions.

At last, the body as a tool of protection, that is as an armor placed to thwart any attempt to relate, to help, in an attitude of rejection that wants to send to the others the following message "you do not exist".

These different kinds of bodily expression are, in some cases, responses to experiences of abuse that children suffer both in an active form (beatings, injuries) and in an omissive form (neglect, abandonment). For that reason, several research studies show that conditions of psychological abuse, although not necessarily criminally sanctionable, such as "verbal abuse" (corresponding to repeated verbal violence directed at children) or constant exposure to family violence, produce effects that are just as severe and pervasive, compared to experiences of physical or sexual victimization<sup>3</sup>. Being a victim or repeatedly witnessing violence in the family context can

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<sup>2</sup> Reference is made to the experience carried out in the Phlegraean area of the Campania Region, from 2005 to the present within the framework of the Integra Project, which involved about 1900 children and adolescents from deprived and underworld environments for which reference is made to previous publications: F. Sabatano 2011; 2015; 2019; 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Concerning the relationship between child abuse and violence and neurotic or dissociative and memory deficits, see: C.P. Navalta, A. Polcari, D. M. Webster, A. Boghossian, M. H. Teicher, "Effects of childhood sexual abuse on neuropsychological and cognitive function of college females", *The Journal of Neuropsychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, 18(1), pp. 45-53, 2006; M. H. Teicher, J.A. Samson, A. Polcari and C.E. Mc Greenery, "Sticks stones and hurtful words: Relative effects of various forms of childhood maltreatment", *Am J Psychiatry*, 163, pp. 993-1000, 2006; M.H. Teicher, A. Tomoda, S.L. Andersen, "Neurobiological consequences of early stress and childhood maltreatment: Are results from human and animal studies comparable?" *Ann NY Acad Sci*, 1071, pp. 313-323, 2006.

activate mechanisms of removal or denial, in the former case, and of emotional distancing and affective and cognitive impoverishment, in the latter; the need to be confronted with parents' violent behaviors causes children, therefore, progressive damage in the growth process that can coincide with pathological phenomena such as: normalization of observed behaviors, internalization of experienced relational patterns, and identification mechanisms (Montecchi, 2005, pp. 116-117). Everyday violence cannot be adequately processed by the child who experiences it from the inside and, therefore, introduces it into a kind of "normality." Evidently, this living condition generates considerable discomfort expressed by children in different ways: in the area of behavior, through aggression, cruelty to animals, anti-social behaviors, acting-out, hyperactivity; in the emotional area, through the manifestation of states of anxiety, anger, depression and a low level of self-esteem; in the cognitive area, with poor school performance or difficulties in learning; in the physical area, with problems with falling asleep or sleeping disorders, but also with inadequate psychomotor development and psychosomatic symptoms (Montecchi, 2005, pp. 116-117).

We might say that children embody their sufferings, and this is expressed in several ways: firstly, in their attitude toward learning, when, for example, they pretend not to know how to read or write to avoid any relationship with the adult and thus shifting the focus from their emotional level to the cognitive one; secondly, in the lack of self-care, which expresses not only, and not so much, a lack of habit to the rituals of personal hygiene, but a lack of attention to themselves and their value as persons. The body should be, therefore, the background of every inclusive educational action and every teaching-learning process in the belief that a child does not have a body, but it is his or her body<sup>4</sup>. The *body*, therefore, is the *child*; the reappropriation, the recognition of one's identity passes through physicality, the taking care of oneself (Canevaro, 2002, p. 9), which constitutes an inescapable dimension for the effectiveness of the relationship since "self-care is not separable from the care of others, and it is an element that transforms being-alongside-another (in the physical proximity of bodies) into being-together in the meeting, making possible the relationship between subjects and the authentic educational relationship" [author's traduction] (Iori, 2002; p. 15).

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<sup>4</sup>«Having a body invokes a possession ("the body I have"), and thus the possibility of commerce and use, in a caring for one's own and others' bodies in the manner of objects that keeps the body at the level of a thing (what happens in fitness fads, for example). Being a body implies a greater awareness, a greater respect because that body (one's own or others') is an expression of the same existing human subject to whom it befits caring.» (self-translation). V. Iori, *Dal corpo-cosa al corpo-progetto*, in L. Balduzzi (a cura di), *Voci del corpo. Prospettive pedagogiche e didattiche*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze, p. 14. About the overcoming of soul-body dualism and the coincidence of self and body see: U. Galimberti, *Il corpo*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1983.

#### 4. Project's actions

The Integra Project consists of different levels of pedagogical actions which involve all educational subjects to achieve a systemic intervention. An educational approach focused on caring, in fact, can be accomplished only through the coherent and continuous contribution of different agencies and educational contexts.

A first level of action there is parenting support. Meetings with parents, monthly held, have a function of supporting the educational role, both on the side of involvement in the stages of the project, and on the side of family experiences and conscious management of the developmental stages of their children. The goal is to teach how to see children, that means to recognize their needs, dialoguing with the realities, made up of concrete episodes, daily difficulties that parents encounter, in a kind of joint search for interpretative meanings useful for offering coping and problem-solving strategies that do not resolve the parental function in the repressive-aggressive aspect.

In the area of parental support, a listening desk is active, entrusted to a psychotherapist, with the aim of ensuring the possibility, depending on specific and emerging needs, to access individual interviews for psychological support. This supportive action fills a gap in the territory's offer, since the most disadvantaged families, both Italian and foreign one, have great difficulty in accessing the services offered by Mental Health Centers, with the establishment and consolidation of situations of very high psychopathological risk.

A second level of action is that of educators' training. This is carried out monthly and is developed on topics related to pedagogy and developmental psychology. The training is intended not as an input of knowledge, but as a recognition and refinement by the subjects of their own knowledge and skills, pursuing, therefore, as formative objectives knowing themselves better from a personal and professional point of view, knowing in what I/others can help, knowing in what I/others can be helped.

The training framework follows, therefore, a reflective methodological approach (Shön, 1999) aimed at increasing the ability to analyse context, activities, organization, relationships, as well as the critical management of one's own knowledge and skills. The educator's body, as the communicative mediator through which the educational relationship is realized, becomes a privileged area of reflection, particularly with respect to the value of apparently weak messages, such as messages of listening and attention (Lumbelli, 2003) and to the intentionality of the educational gesture as a thought gesture, because it is the content of education. Through their bodies in relationship, operators can propose to children an alternative mode of relationship compared to their everyday life (not shouting, listening in silence, etc.). The proposed training is, therefore, oriented toward the maturation of a "competence to be there

understood as the educator's ability to be in the relationship starting from the self, from a self that is inevitably bodily; in fact, it is the sensitive presence of the Other in the professional everyday life that creates (or does not create) good practices of care" [authors' trad.] (Manuzzi, 2009, p. 15).

An additional level of action is aimed at children who are involved in learning support paths and workshop activities. Educational action aimed at making them aware that they are central character of their own education and their own constructive role in the development of knowledge. In this sense, learning support paths are marked not by a "welfarist" logic, which risks placing the educator in a "substitute" position *vis-à-vis* the child with respect to the fulfilment of study commitments, but by a participatory logic, in which the operator assumes the role of scaffolder (Bruner, 1976), since he/she is a facilitating guide of co-construction helper for their learning process. This choice originates from the belief that processes of education and cultural growth are nurtured by active participation within concrete experiences (Dewey, 1916). This approach requires that subjects, when guided and supported, should be personally involved and empowered with respect to the constructive actions they take, rather than simply assisted through forms of task facilitation that, instead, prove unproductive in terms of cognitive development.

The workshop activities are intended to foster children's creative expression of their abilities, imagination, emotions, and bodies, as places of knowledge and training that configure an educational environment full of "alternative" growth opportunities compared to school development paths.

## 5. Conclusions

Through the educational experiences proposed, children involved in the project gained new cognitive, social and emotional management tools. For example, they learnt to use the body to express emotions in a consistent manner with their feeling, as in the case of R. a teenager who, in times of pain, would isolate herself or destroy objects, whereas today, when experiences suffering, she expresses herself by crying: we could say that if at the beginning it was the body that used her, now it is her who uses the body and, through it, expresses her emotional experiences.

The children had, in addition, experimented with themselves, coming to self-discovery through their own skills by drawing, sewing, dancing, or cooking. Finally, they learnt to relate the body to the context, partly because the body itself helps to scan the moments of the day; for example, reception represents a moment of freedom, while study a moment of concentration in which one must sit; during snack time, on the other hand, one must respect turns, and then, again, the workshop activities allow a freedom of expression. This rituality, in addition to encouraging the

acquisition of behaviors, reduces anxiety and uncertainty, generating a feeling of well-being in children.

The creative recycling workshop, where children recycled waste materials to create new objects, represented an action with a strong educational impact, which can be summarized in one child's sentence, "nothing is irretrievable, so neither am I!". Another effectiveness experience, really appreciated by the children, was represented by the Cooking Workshop: "Talk as you eat" where the operators talk with the children about a country, its customs and traditions and then cook together with them. Therefore, knowledge take place through the experience of the child who, by cooking, feels like a protagonist of learning.

In addition, all children participate in health education pathway where action is taken on two different levels: on one hand, the medical-assistance pathway, thanks to which each child undergoes periodic and free specialist examinations; on the other hand, the educational pathway that also involves parents in internalizing self-care behaviors (hygiene, proper nutrition, prevention).

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