


## CHILDREN AND PRE-ADOLESCENTS IN SOCIAL DISADVANTAGE AND MARGINALITY CONDITIONS. TOWARDS NEW SPECIAL EDUCATION NEEDS AND ACTION CRITERIA

### *NIÑOS Y PREADOLESCENTES EN CONDICIONES DE DESVENTAJA SOCIAL Y MARGINALIDAD. HACIA NUEVOS CRITERIOS DE ACTUACIÓN Y NECESIDADES EDUCATIVAS ESPECIALES*

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**ABSTRACT: Introduction:** The study purpose is to offer some action criteria, useful for educators informal and non-formal contexts, to interact and relate more effectively with children and preadolescents in social disadvantage, fragility and marginality conditions, and thus achieve greater success. They live in an existential, family, relational, scholastic situation, etc. rather complex and therefore they require particular attention and special educational support to prevent social exclusion. This research is useful: on a theoretical level, to increase knowledge of minor special educational needs; on a methodological level, to enable educators to act more effectively in their work; on an operational level, to promote greater well-being in every educational context where a disadvantage minor life. **Methodology:** The research methodology uses, at the same time, a longitudinal participant observation in three residential educational communities (Lecce, Italy) for minors in social disadvantage and marginality condition and the systematic national and international literature review of the most relevant studies on the subject. **Results:** The study defines five special educational needs and four action criteria to promote life skills development in children and preadolescents characterized by social disadvantage, fragility, and marginality. **Conclusions:** The research shows that these minors have special educational needs, even without medical certification or disability. Their special education needs are growth needs, to be supported by the surrounding environment. The purpose of this study is also to invite pedagogical science to place itself more at the service of people's fragility and their needs.

**KEYWORDS:** social disadvantage; special educational needs; action criteria; social inclusion.

**RESUMEN: Introducción:** El propósito del estudio es ofrecer algunos criterios de actuación, útiles para los educadores en contextos formales y no formales, para interactuar y relacionarse más eficazmente con los niños y preadolescentes en condiciones de desventaja social, fragilidad y marginalidad, y así lograr un mayor éxito. Viven una situación existencial, familiar, relacional, escolar, etc., bastante compleja y, por tanto, requieren una atención particular y un apoyo educativo especial para evitar la exclusión social. Esta investigación es útil a nivel teórico, para aumentar el conocimiento de las necesidades educativas especiales de los menores; a nivel metodológico, para que los educadores puedan actuar con mayor eficacia en su trabajo; a nivel operativo, para promover un mayor bienestar en todos los contextos educativos donde vive un menor desfavorecido. **Metodología:** La metodología de la investigación utiliza, al mismo tiempo, una observación participante longitudinal en tres comunidades educativas residenciales (Lecce, Italia) para menores en condición de desventaja social y marginalidad y la revisión bibliográfica sistemática nacional e internacional de los estudios más relevantes sobre el tema. **Resultados:** El estudio define cinco necesidades educativas especiales y cuatro criterios de actuación para promover el desarrollo de habilidades para la vida en niños y preadolescentes caracterizados por la desventaja social, la fragilidad y la marginalidad. **Conclusiones:** La investigación muestra que estos menores tienen necesidades educativas especiales, aun sin certificación médica ni discapacidad. Sus necesidades educativas especiales son necesidades de crecimiento, que deben ser apoyadas por el entorno. El propósito de este estudio es también invitar a la ciencia pedagógica a ponerse más al servicio de la fragilidad de las personas y de sus necesidades.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** desventaja social; necesidades educativas especiales; criterios de actuación; inclusión social.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Marginality and social disadvantage represent a condition of fragility, prolonged over time, in which the person, due to a complex series of interconnected factors, is unable to fully use his/her<sup>1</sup> own resources and the opportunities offered by the life context, isolating himself or suffering marginality (Simone, 2020).

The focus of marginality in childhood today can be linked to the concept of educational poverty, socio-economic, linguistic and cultural disadvantages, vulnerability, inequality. It is poor not only the child without economic means, but also the one who does not have symbolic tools, adequate cultural stimuli (Paparella & Simone 2021), valid emotional resources capable of supporting him in his growth. For this reason, he is exposed to forms of psychological, educational, moral neglect.

The child and the pre-adolescent characterized by educational poverty come from rather atypical family experiences: conflict between parents, lack of valid educational models in

1. In this work, for practical reasons and in respect of gender difference, we write «child», «pre-adolescent», etc. also to indicate female subjects.

family, cultural disadvantage, parent's drug addictions, alcoholism, deviance and micro-criminality, emotional deprivation, even from maltreatment, violence and abuse.

The cultural disadvantage, the lack of valid emotional references, the economic, housing, health problems (Ringback, Weitoft, Hjern *et al.*, 2003) and the related risk to physical and mental health, the probability of being subjected to abuse and neglect, school difficulties, etc. are very critical factors, able to accumulate with each other. The children are predisposed to many discomforts and further potential risks (Botting, Rosato & Wood, 1998). All this affects child and pre-adolescent adaptation (Parke *et al.*, 2004), progressively weakens his/her self-esteem, the ability to react to difficulties, the ability to recognize emotions and learn to regulate them (Trevarthen, 1979).

The numerous risk factors require early, timely, intentional and organic educational actions. This is appropriate so that the child and the pre-adolescent escape the condition of disadvantage and marginality typical of the living environment.

The working methods and the educational action respect to disadvantaged minors are still poorly consolidated. Therefore, the opportunity to start this study is at least on three levels: on a theoretical level, to increase knowledge of minor special educational needs; on a methodological level, to enable educators to act more effectively in their work; on an operational level, to promote greater well-being in every educational contexts where a disadvantage minor lives.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The intervention methodology is qualitative.

To identify the special educational needs of disadvantaged minors and to hypothesize the criteria for educational action, it has been worked on two axes:

1. Longitudinal participant observation in residential educational centers for disadvantaged minors.
2. Systematic national and international literature review of the most relevant researches on the subject.

This methodological choice is motivated by the fact that theoretical study, in our opinion, demands development and evaluation in application contexts, on the side of educational work, in field experiences. The chosen field of observation is represented by three residential educational communities in Lecce area (Puglia, Italy). In these children houses, for fourteen years, the researcher has systematically carried out educational activities to minors involved, individualized educational planning activities, systematic observations, etc. meeting, relating and listening several dozen of them and their special needs. The participant observation, during the educational work, referred to further theoretical reflections and then to other empirical investigations, following a research path according to the circular scheme «theory-praxis-theory».

### 3. RESULTS

The special educational needs of the child and pre-adolescent social disadvantage and marginality, identified by us in this research after meeting, listening and working with them, are the following:

- Protection.
- Support to achieve scholastic success.
- Emotional stability.
- Self-regulation of behaviors and emotional reactions.
- Socialization and inclusion.

The vulnerable child and preadolescent, at risk of social exclusion, is certainly fragile because of the harshness of the living conditions of his family. But he is endowed with resilience, he requires care, valid educational models, protection tools, conditions of well-being, social redemption. The four criteria of educational action, set out below, can guide the work of educators in following some specific action paths offering to the minors important protective factors of prevention.

#### 3.1. FIRST CRITERION: PARTICIPATION

The disadvantage child needs to be placed «at the center»: the center of parent's attention, at the heart of the school's proposal, of the educator's care, of the peer group's consideration, of the social group's responsibilities.

Putting the child, in condition of social disadvantage, «at the center» requires a new type of adult gaze on him as an active protagonist of his living environment, able to make his expectations and needs heard.

The child and the pre-adolescent, in other words, require the right of free expression, of careful consideration, of lively participation. They don't suffer, but act in the world. They are able to intervene in the course of events, to express their opinion, voice, points of view, options and preferences.

Childcare services are also increasingly invited to take into more consideration the opinion of children in order to directly involve them in the decision-making processes (Lazzari, 2016, p. 23).

The principles and criteria of child participation, nowadays, are all to be built. The child, especially if he belongs to social disadvantage and marginality, must be helped to express himself, to co-construct meanings in his everyday life, to influence it and transform it.

As Savio (2019) states, when the ability to participate becomes typical of people and groups who live in a condition of cultural and social marginality, agency is returned to these subjects and becomes a precious empowerment opportunity. Participation even takes on an ethical-political dimension linked: on the one hand, to the recognition of the value of each person; on the other, to the creation of social conditions that allow the child to be effectively valued by having the possibility of expression and impact in the realities of which he is part.

### 3.2. SECOND CRITERION: THE GAME

Gaming activity represents, for the growing person, the central experience of his life, the place of free and autonomous expression of himself, the tool (as in the case of the symbolic game) to personalize reality with respect to his own wishes.

Starting from the studies of Huizinga, Callois, Piaget, Vygotskij, Winnicott, Bettelheim, etc. the game is recognized as the main source of human development. It was understood that this is not a simple moment of leisure and that it should not be considered through prejudices of the adult way: thanks to play, childhood lives, grows and learns.

Gaming activity allows the child and pre-adolescent to understand the surrounding world, himself, the nature of the relationship with the other, the structure of social roles and contributes to the development of the ability to adapt and manage reality.

The symbolic component, inherent in children gaming activity, is a symbol of the desire for relationality, to communicate with the rest of the world, but at the same time of the need to regain possession of oneself and one's «world» whenever desired.

Gaming gets used to comparing with others, learning from them and, at the same time, learning something about oneself because it predisposes to the negotiation of meanings and points of view.

The game allows to activate personal resources and also motivate the child and the vulnerable children and preadolescent, accompanying him in the acquisition of knowledge, action strategies and skills for social life.

Through the game with rules, the minor matures opportunities for self-regulation, acceptance and understanding of the functioning of his own behavior and social coexistence. In the game with rules, the child is subjected to a norm or rule that allows the relationship between real and unreal dimensions to be ordered and disciplined. All educational activities are offered to the child in a gaming form in the awareness that, in every game, «it is not so much a motor gesture that counts, but organizing an intention behind that movement» (Perucca, 1994).

### 3.3. THIRD CRITERION: THE CARE PRACTICE

Education is an important development opportunity for the child if it is considered, in a pedagogical way, as a place of care:

Taking care of certain relationships shapes our being according to what happens in them; taking care of certain ideas shapes our thinking according to what they cultivate; taking care of certain people generates a relational exchange that gives shape to our essence. (Mortari, 2017, p. 92)

Through systematic care practices addressed to the child in a condition of social disadvantage, he gradually learns to understand his place in the world, to recognize his role and that of educators, to adapt his behavior, to acquire a first social identity. To this end, games

with rules, symbolic games and dramatizations, team games, laboratory activities, empathic listening, etc. are useful to encourage him to tell about himself, to recognize and learn to manage his emotions.

If the whole «educational work can be read as taking care of the other so that the other learns to take care of himself» (Mortari, 2017), in the encounter with the adult, the child, also in conditions of marginality and social disadvantage, requires and obtains the most appropriate support for his development.

### 3.4. FOURTH CRITERION: THE EMOTIONS EDUCATION

Advances in neuroscience (Cannon, 1987; Le Doux, 1997) define emotions as something more than the simple encounter between stimulus and response. Emotions represent an articulated, multidimensional process, which affects body, thought, language, metacognition, psychic world and physiological reactions together.

This new conception of emotions, and of their evolutionary significance, guides educational practices to increase the educator's awareness of the minor's need to better manage their emotional reactions and to support their global well-being (Simone, 2019).

Emotional competence in childhood is learned from adult behavior, from indications always accompanied by emotional closeness and empathy as basic requirements for maturing the ability to trust others.

It is necessary to facilitate, in the growing subject, «the progressive awareness of his emotional experiences, the ability to recognize them, to communicate them to others and also to modify them» (Contini, 1992, p. 173).

In disadvantage children and preadolescent education, it is essential to promote activities such as collaborating, coming to the aid of peers, engaging in collaborative games, giving, developing empathy, overcoming obstacles, reconciling after conflicts as important opportunities to open up to confrontation with others.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

The minors educational needs with disadvantage and social marginality are in all respects «special» needs and therefore deserve «special» attention, even in the absence of medical certification of disability or deficit.

The special educational needs of these children are «growth needs» (Striano, 2010) that ask to be supported. The living environment can provide them with precise answers to develop their abilities and to promote a personal awareness of one's educational needs.

We are convinced that pedagogical research, nowadays, must place itself at the service of fragility, of people and their needs in order to: give answers to the educational needs that emerge in social contexts; support the processes of change and the participation and inclusion of vulnerable people.

Research at the service of fragility is a research at the service of needs, their identification and their satisfaction.

The educational action, intended for disadvantaged minors, aims to enrich their experiential background, the availability of tools and resources to act in the world, also to react to difficult living conditions by developing essential resilience skills. According to the criteria discussed above, we must offer some opportunities for growth, promoting the ability to act, to motivate, to help decide and choose, to become aware of one's own needs and also one's own abilities.

Educating for change, in this perspective, means urging the child to get out of the disadvantaged condition and look at reality through new eyes.

Well-being and social redemption are achieved through patient educational support work according to an ecological and systemic conception (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) of children development. It is necessary to promote a network work between the various educational agencies that acts on the child and on the relational context in which he lives (Marchesini, Monacelli & Molinari, 2019). The education of disadvantaged children is an important opportunity for the social group and institutions to exercise a shared educational responsibility. There are always multiple causes at the origin of the child's behavior. It is therefore essential to give life to system actions, to an educational intervention which, instead of intervening only on the individual, acts on the system of relationships and on the dynamics of the educational context, both school and family (Pagano & Sabatano, 2020). The family today must be made aware of its frailties, when they exist, to seek alliances and collaborations with other educational agencies. In fact, inclusion only arises where there are large networks of collaboration and comparison (De Anna, 2014).

We need to create ever closer synergies and alliances.

In this way, it is possible to promote the psychophysical well-being of children and young people, empowerment, autonomy, the ability to relate positively with others and with the environment. In educational contexts, experiences and relationships must aim at establishing a constructive bond with each other in the name of respect and solidarity, with the aim of harmonious growth in the social context.

Poverty in education, economics, relationships, culture, etc. are filled by offering opportunities to enrich the child's experiences, to practice new behaviors, to recognize and manage their emotions, to become active protagonists of their own life.

According to the criteria discussed here, active and participatory citizens can be educated, able to free themselves from educational poverty, from family stereotypy, from the risk of social exclusion in order to achieve well-being, quality of life, participation and inclusion.

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