

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IN CONTEXTS OF DEVIANCE AND SOCIAL MARGINALITY: A GOOD PRACTICE. SYSTEMIC APPROACH AND EDUCATING COMMUNITY

L'EDUCAZIONE INCLUSIVA NEI CONTESTI DI DEVIANZA E MARGINALITÀ SOCIALE: UNA BUONA PRATICA APPROCCIO SISTEMICO E COMUNITÀ EDUCANTE.

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ABSTRACT

This contribution offers a reflection on the complexities and challenges inherent in education within contexts of marginality and criminality, with a focus on the ecological and systemic approach as its theoretical-methodological framework. To this end, it discusses the experience of the Progetto Integra, active in Campania in areas with high rates of deviance and delinquency, as a potential model for constructing multidimensional educational networks. These networks would involve students, families, and communities in a collaborative fabric that includes and connects formal, non-formal, and informal education settings. Therefore, the objective is to identify possible elements that can be transferred to similar contexts as well as within the educational sphere.

Il contributo propone una riflessione sulle complessità e le sfide inerenti l'educazione in contesti di marginalità e criminalità, ponendo come focus teorico-metodologico l'approccio ecologico e sistemico. A tale scopo, si riferisce l'esperienza del Progetto *Integra*, operante in Campania in zone ad alto indice di devianza e di delinquenza, quale possibile modello per la costruzione di reti educative multidimensionali, che coinvolgano studenti, famiglie e comunità in un tessuto collaborativo che includa e connetta contesti di formazione formale, non formale e informale. L'obiettivo, pertanto, è quello di individuare possibili elementi di trasferibilità in contesti similari come anche in ambito scolastico.

KEYWORDS

Ecological Education, Deviance, Marginality
Educazione inclusiva, Devianza, Marginalità

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Introduction¹

The interest of Special Pedagogy, intrinsically dedicated to exploring the personal and contextual dimension of educational action, is fundamentally directed at constructing paths of emancipation and participation in social life for everyone (Aiello, 2023; Murdaca, Dainese, Maggiolini, 2021). The essence of special education lies in the aspiration for equity, offering all students opportunities for growth and learning. The inclusion paradigm emphasizes the need to perceive the other not as a means, but as an end in personalized planning (Striano et al, 2013). Hence, the necessity to adopt a multidisciplinary approach that allows for the examination and investigation of the iridescent and multiple aspects of "complex interacting scenarios [...] as a composed unit, that is, a unit whose identity is determined by the interaction of its components" (Sibilio, 2012, p. 27). Within these terms, the complexity characterizing the phenomenon of marginality requires the adoption of a perspective capable of grasping the multifactorial and dynamic nature within which the excluding outcomes of a phenomenon related to "individualization" processes occur, such that society, while it has made the individual "available" to actively participate in democratic life, has not provided the means to do so (Germani, 1991, p. 24).

In a current scenario characterized by precarity and insecurity (Bauman, 1999; Castel 2015; Giddens, 1991; Beck, 2000), the cost of marginality seems to fall entirely on the individual, who assumes and perceives the responsibility for this condition on themselves, failing to perceive themselves as part of a whole, as a member of a community, and consequently losing the sense of belonging even to the social institutions of reference. From an educational perspective, this complexity and multidimensionality of exclusion and disadvantage phenomena call for the intervention of the educating community, emphasizing the shared responsibility of the "territorial actors committed to ensuring the well-being and growth of girls and boys" (Save the Children, 2018). The educating community is called upon to promote and foster the implementation of all the necessary competencies for the realization of full educational and social inclusion in all its members. The role and function of the educating community find a challenging dimension in contexts characterized by marginality, even more so when this phenomenon is marked by a rooted nature, that is, linked to perspectives and horizons of marginality that characterize a given territory in which subjects have

^{1 1} The contribution, although written jointly by the authors, is attributed for introduction, paragraph 1 and conclusions to Carmen Lucia Moccia; for paragraph 2 to Fausta Sabatano

fewer and lower quality life opportunities (Pavone, 2009; Giaconi, 2016; Mura, 2018). These are environments where disadvantage, differently articulated in its subjective and systemic nature, opens up life scenarios imbued with problematicity that generate dimensions of exclusion and self-exclusion.

In such contexts of deprivation, criminal organizations become a concrete point of reference for communities, filling the "normative" and institutional voids present and offering adolescents a set of values, a sense of belonging that society has failed to give them. Indeed, disadvantage, by limiting the possibility of exercising one's agency (Aiello 2018, Bandura 1989), generates conflicting feelings of anger, disappointment, disillusionment that lead to the renunciation of active forms of social protagonism. In this void of values, relationships, perspectives, criminal organizations can, therefore, represent a catalyst in the construction of one's adult identity by offering, in some way, vicarious reinforcements (Bandura 1997, Sibilio 2018, Berthoz 2013) of an antisocial nature, which can favor the adoption of perspectives of criminal careers. For instance, consider young people attracted by the easy profits linked to drug use and trafficking or behaviors connected to the dynamics of recognition of roles and functions within clans.

Deviance, therefore, cannot be attributed to the deterministic outcome of a series of external inputs; in line with a phenomenological educational perspective, the meanings that the subject assigns to their actions become relevant, also in relation to the purposes, the "in order to" (Schultz 1960 in Bertolini, 1993) that guide the individual's project. It is essential, therefore, to understand how individual actions fit into a project context, within which behaviors are not simply determined by the conditions of the individual's existence, but by the subjective interpretation of these conditions (Bertolini, Caronia 1993). Deviance, as a complex phenomenon, is characterized by a circular etiology in which individual and social variables converge and interact, pushing educational action towards interventions characterized by transdisciplinary, multidisciplinary (Barone, 2010) and systemic approaches.

1. Beyond Marginality: An Ecological Approach to Change to Promote Inclusion

The considerations expressed so far seem to highlight the importance of an educational practice capable of generating stable and lasting change, acting on the personal worldview of "difficult children" (Bertolini, Caronia, 1993). In this sense, education opens up to a perspective capable of reading the planes of reality within which girls and boys construct their experiences and interpretations; it is, therefore, called upon to "propose a calibrated departure from thinking as usual, a

second-degree discourse focused on the active contribution and responsibility of each subject in the construction of their discourse on the world" (Bertolini, Caronia 1993, p. 73). Meaning must be analyzed within the dimensions in which it is acted upon; from an ecological perspective, it can be a key to access the different planes of experiences in which the latter come to light in the realm of educational action, not only in their objective properties "but also [in relation to] the way in which the person living in that environment subjectively experiences these properties. [...] [Indeed] very few of the external influences that have effects on behavior and human development can be described solely in terms of objective physical conditions and events (Bronfenbrenner 2005, p. 5). In the educational field, acting in contexts characterized by the presence of barriers that do not allow full cultural and social accessibility recalls the importance of framing such intervention within a paradigm of full inclusion in order to guarantee full participation of everyone and each one. This means that educational proposals must be distinguished in terms of experiential and cultural proximity to the reality that the subject lives so that they can place them in a "molar" dimension (Bronfenbrenner, 2001), that is, a dimension of meaning that allows them to increase their perspectives of self-determination (Deci, Ryan, 1985). Education, in this sense, becomes a process aimed at change understood as an autonomous process, which the subject arrives at by choosing new possibilities among those offered to them (Freire, 1975). The interest of such an educational projectuality is based on the need to address not only the objective shortcomings in a given territory but also the difficulties that they generate in the subject in grasping the invitations to act in the context (Gibson, 1979). The cultural dimension evidently plays a central role in the processes of attribution of meaning and in the mechanisms of legitimization to action in boys and girls; therefore, in the context of the educational and didactic relationship, it is essential to keep this aspect in mind in order not to foster prejudices, stereotypes, and labeling that can become "the real causes of deviance" (Tannenbaum, 1938). When an individual is labeled, this also affects the scripts with which they face reality, the strategies with which they deal with the experiences of their life. From the perspective of personalized intervention, it is therefore essential to recognize the coping strategies (Lazarus, Folkman, 1984) with which boys and girls face the complexity of developmental tasks and individual identification processes in their daily actions in difficult territories in order to be able to design educational paths and non-linear trajectories (Sibilio, 2015, 2023) capable of offering new dimensions of meaning and orientation to the future (Aiello et al 2023). This aspect leads to abandoning institutionalized guidance logics, which are exhausted in the episodic moment of transition linked to socially defined stages of growth, to invite the educating

community to "foster the maturation and development of the competencies necessary to be able to define or redefine autonomously [...] a life project and to support related choices" (MIM 2022). Within the Italian school system, with Ministerial Directive No. 27/2012, which introduced Special Educational Needs, the urgency of a radical change in the skills of teachers and educators emerged. They are called upon to develop innovative and cutting-edge teaching methodologies that promote the social and cultural orientation of students, as well as the planning of their life both inside and outside the school environment (Gaspari, 2014). This perspective excludes the medicalizing gaze on the phenomenon, discouraging the adoption of relational models a priori established by static and labeling protocols. The school, as a guide to the educating community (Iori, 2023), has the opportunity and the responsibility to direct educational practices towards a more inclusive approach, facilitating the construction of a more aware, collaborative, and welcoming community for everyone. BES thus become a "political category" (Ianes 2013) within which the realization of an action of personalization, in response to the needs of individuals, represents the necessary condition for the right to education of everyone and each one to be considered satisfied (UNESCO, 1994; Mura, 2016; De Anna, 2015; D'Alonzo, 2018). In particular, with respect to the third tier of BES, the greater degree of discretion in the teacher's assessment entails numerous difficulties, as such situations are not the subject of certification or formal diagnosis. They require, at the same time, systemic and networked care, through the design of teaching and educational strategies that include the active participation of families, teachers, and the territory. The recent events that took place in Caivano have stimulated critical reflection within the educational, political, and social system regarding the urgency of intervening in a coordinated and resolute manner in situations where it is essential to safeguard the rights of children and girls (UN, 1989). In this regard, the provisions outlined in Legislative Decree 121/23 represent a significant step towards strengthening the interaction between the educational system and local communities. This law has favored the creation of projects to be implemented within the framework of an extensive memorandum of understanding, through direct collaboration between the Ministry of Education and Merit and the Schools of the Caivano area. This initiative aims to promote synergy between educational institutions and the local socio-cultural context, with the aim of developing educational programs more closely aligned with the specific needs of the community. Legislative intervention, therefore, is part of a perspective of pedagogical innovation, with a strong emphasis on the personalization of the educational offer and the importance of the link between school and territory, highlighting the relevance of an ecosystemic and networked approach in the fight

against educational poverty and juvenile crime within which an active and participatory dialogue with the territory is realized. In this sense, the identification of good practices in contexts characterized by multiproblematicity, such as the one that will be presented below, may allow the isolation of theoretical and methodological elements that are transversal and, therefore, useful in supporting new realities or existing realities that are unable to have a significant impact in the territories.

2. In Dialogue with the Territory: The Experience of the *Progetto Integra*

Within the ecological perspective, human behavior is interpreted, as previously stated, as a form of adaptation of the subject to the environment and its distinctive phenomena. This leads to the abandonment of the idea of being able to establish a direct correlation between dependent and independent variables, emphasizing instead the need to focus on reciprocal interactions and the changes that system variables undergo over time. For example, when a child with pre-existing cognitive or physical difficulties grows up in a problematic family environment - situations such as the imprisonment of one or both parents or illiteracy - these individual difficulties are further exacerbated by the surrounding context. Considering that the behavior of the child is influenced by multiple causal factors, it becomes essential to implement system actions that adopt a holistic approach to the difficulties encountered, according to a theory of dialogic action (Freire, 1979) that emphasizes the importance of collaboration between subjects with different roles and functions, and therefore different responsibilities. The ecological perspective highlights how each community or territorial reality determines a particular situation that can be favorable or unfavorable for the development of the individual. The term "community" itself (from the Latin, *communis* = common good; *cum munia* = common duty) refers to joint responsibility and, therefore, to the rights and duties of all individuals for the collective good. Every community, therefore also the educational one, must be thought of as a system that contains multiple ecological levels: the microsystem, that is, the relational climate within the community; the mesosystem represented by the system of relationships of the minor (community/school/family/social services); the exosystem, made up of the system of relationships between the institutions that deal with the minor; the macrosystem, that is, the socio-cultural context in which the intervention takes place. The intrinsically systemic and reticular nature of educational action makes it necessary to design and outline new systems and paths in social work in contexts of discomfort and deviance, aimed at overcoming the fragmentation of

interventions, in a relational (Folgheraiter, 2006) and ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) perspective. In this context, intervention on the family, active involvement of schools, material and immaterial support provided by institutions and local entities, participation of local associations, and synergy with the health system (Murdaca et al. 2021) become crucial. The Progetto Integra was born in Pozzuoli in 2005 with the aim of containing processes that generate discomfort, deviance, and marginality through the construction of an educating community in which integrated training actions are produced and whose objective is also translated into promoting the construction of an autonomous life project. The intervention takes place in highly problematic neighborhoods of the Neapolitan territory, in particular, Quarto, Rione Traiano, Licola, Pianura, proposing extracurricular training projects aimed at children and adolescents living in contexts of violence and deprivation. These are territories where difficulties have lost their extraordinary character to fit into a customary scenario. The activity of continuous reflection and sharing on educational practices has led over the years to the identification of an "Integra method" intended, precisely in the etymological sense of the term method, as the path chosen to research, explore, observe, act on the educational relationship and the development of children and adolescents. Certainly, it is a path still under construction, but it expresses a particular point of view on the way of feeling, looking, thinking, and planning education. In this sense, it identifies some dimensions that, in combination with each other, can guarantee the effectiveness of educational action:

1. *Respecting and respecting*, which translates into identifying an institutional device, that is, a set of rules that guarantee the well-being of the actors of the educational relationship. For boys living in difficult contexts, it is essential to understand that, just as there are physical limits, there are also limits that "institutionalize," that is, that define the constraints and possibilities of being together. The structuring of regulatory apparatuses therefore constitutes a method and content of education, on the one hand, defining the possible ways of the educational relationship and of being together, on the other, representing an object of learning: when a child goes to school, or in any educational context, they learn not only the disciplines, but also the "institutions," that is, the normative apparatuses that characterize it. The definition of an institutional device follows, from an educational point of view, the negotiation and intersubjective construction of meanings connected to being together, to respect for oneself and others in the relationship.

2. *Reflecting on one's actions*, that is, having a critical and problematic attitude towards one's actions and also soliciting children to have this capacity. In particular, educators participate monthly in pedagogical and psychological training and carry out biweekly supervision with a psychotherapist who supports them in relation to the strong emotional involvement that characterizes work in these contexts.

3. *Thinking together*, which means giving priority to the child's history, thinking of him first of all in his family life and, consequently, involving parents in the educational path. To this end, the project lays the foundation of the pedagogical work on a pact with the children's families. These, to which no economic contribution is required, are obliged to participate in training meetings and individual interviews: during the year, the parent is allowed three absences, beyond which the child is removed from the project. This pact expresses the intention to discourage attitudes of delegation of the educational function and to work together so that the parent can participate in the child's journey and know its development.

4. *Thinking together*, that is, always keeping one's area of competence within a territorial network in mind and, therefore, not falling into the delusion of omnipotence that comes from thinking that one can solve the complex problems that boys present on one's own. This paper will focus exclusively on the dimension strictly related to the discourse on the social context and therefore on point 4, referring to previous publications for a deepening of the entire framework (Sabatano 2011, 2015, 2019, 2022). The method identifies in "thinking together" the possibility of not referring exclusively to oneself and one's educational action successes or failures. This systemic attitude is fundamental especially for the educator who, living the educational challenge with children every day, finds himself having to elaborate heavy defeats that, if attributed only to himself, risk demotivating him. It is a matter of enhancing and activating individual resources, avoiding replacing the action of others, a practice that would risk blocking, rather than facilitating, the functioning of the system. The articulation of the different levels of the social system, each of which requires the recognition of areas of autonomy and intervention, therefore becomes an indispensable conceptual scheme for making relationships and reciprocal influences effective. The construction of a territorial network is an enormously critical process, since educational action, intrinsically and naturally connoted in a transformative and emancipatory sense, clashes with a very rooted culture made of omertà attitudes, connivance, total irresponsibility or, worse, retaliation. Change is experienced as a threat to the status quo, both by parents, often unable to walk with their children along trajectories of transformation, and by institutions, in which mechanical and

partial interpretations of the problems and difficulties of children frequently crystallize, followed by inadequate responses or absolute silence. Reporting cases of mistreatment, abuse, and neglect implies the courage to get involved personally, facing the risk of becoming the target of threats or violence. As a result, educational action often takes place in a context of institutional void, characterized by insufficient responses from the entities involved. In these circumstances, widespread fear becomes the most effective weapon used by criminal and corrupt organizations to oppose legality and education understood as a means of social transformation. A constant commitment in these years of work in the field has led, despite these elements of strong criticality, to achieving some significant results, including the establishment of a series of agreements with the institutions of the territory (municipality, schools, ASL, University, associations) with which one works in constant relationship. In particular, with respect to the schools attended by the children participating in the project, the agreements provide: that the teachers share opportunities for training and discussion on the children's journey with the educators, psychologists, and pedagogists of the Progetto Integra; that the two entities collaborate in the personalized design of educational interventions of social inclusion and in supporting parenting through training moments aimed at generally improving the educational care of parents. Finally, the pedagogists and psychologists of the Progetto Integra are committed to mediating between families and the school institution in cases where it is expressly requested by the parents. The commitment is to thicken this network to counter the deresponsibilization that particularly characterizes local entities in the face of the educational emergency. If the creation of a territorial network has been and is extremely problematic, the concretization of the agreements taken is equally so. Working with social services and schools is, first of all, a job of identifying a common line of interpretation and action. The challenge of Integra is therefore played on a fundamentally cultural terrain: to contribute to building a common way of thinking and doing education in the territory; in this sense, pedagogical work is a work of mediation, negotiation of meanings, dialogue on pathways and socio-educational interventions, starting from the assumption that discrepancies in points of view are inevitable between these different interlocutors and, in some respects, can constitute, if they become the subject of confrontation, mutual enrichment. In 19 years of activity, the project has followed about 1900 children, of these only one, who has grown up, has committed crimes and died at 16 in an accident aboard a car he had stolen.

Conclusions

The reflections proposed highlight how in contexts of endemic marginality the urgency of equipping oneself with an integrated and systemic framework is primarily linked to the need for an educational approach consistent among all the territorial actors committed to proposing and designing spaces of inclusion inscribed in the principles of a democratic culture.

It is evident what and how many are the complexities connected to achieving such objectives, within contexts in which the pervasive and totalizing dimension of criminal countercultures is tangibly and intangibly expressed in the everyday reality of those who live in the territories. In this sense, the pivot on which the action of the educational community is based, namely shared responsibility, is no longer a given and acquired dimension on which to plan but becomes itself an objective to be achieved. It is necessary to build, as in the case of the Progetto Integra, a horizon of meaning in which the theories and the projectual and programmatic praxis and the identified methodological elements are in tune with the idea of education as a process of mutual learning, based on dialogue and collaboration (Freire, 1979) of the parties.

The need to orient educational action within a virtuous circularity between theories and practices constitutes a necessity in the face of the difficulty of designing and programming inclusive educational paths in contexts of deviance and marginality. The fundamental aspect of the Integra method is realized in allowing continuity between the different contexts of life of the child and the adolescent in a transdimensional perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), realizing a true pact with the territory within which thinking together is not configured as a mere declaration of intent but refers to the need for concrete and synergistic actions carried out starting from clarity regarding the roles and functions of each of the actors involved, avoiding resorting to "monadic" actions, which are ill-suited to the resolution of multiple difficulties that add up and combine with each other.

The goal is to increase awareness in children and their parents of being an integral part of a community, which shares common rules and cultural values, in which everyone can recognize the impact that their actions have on others. It becomes essential that personal goals are aligned with those of the community, to achieve goals that can only be realized through the collaboration of all (Johnson and Johnson, 2000; 2002; 2003).

In acting in terms of promoting interdependence (Deutsch, 1949; Lewin, 1935), it is essential to refer to the dynamics of belonging and identity on which relationships are based.

Adolescents can actively reject the norms, values, and expectations of society, and the choice of a negative identity (Erickson, 1968) can be a way to test limits, express frustrations, or even a way to protect themselves from perceived failures or manage insecurities. Discomfort or deviant behavior become communicative

gestures, requests for help that the community often does not recognize. It is therefore a matter of re-thinking an education capable of encouraging that dimension of community belonging particularly compromised by phenomena of marginality and deviance in which a ritual, value, and cultural dimension of illegality entails the identification of individuals and families with norms and antisocial models. The elements identified within the Progetto Integra can constitute a useful indication transversally, in which the proposed strategies can favor the overcoming of the separation between formal and non-formal environments in educational design and guarantee paths oriented towards the construction of an authentic, autonomous life project, aimed at individual and social well-being.

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