

## Decline of free play as a form of educational poverty

SIMONE DIGENNARO

Università degli Studi di Cassino e del Lazio Meridionale, ITALY  
Dipartimento di Scienze Umane, Sociali e della Salute

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### Abstract

The paper proposes a theoretical reflection on the link between the decline of free play among the children living in the modern societies and the educational poverty, that will be considered as a set of factors that prevent a person from learning and developing, completely, skills and talents, with negative impacts on the daily life. It is a polysemic term that indicates a link between material poverty, social exclusion, marginalization and lack of formal education, and, with a broader view, that encompasses different forms of social and cultural inequalities such school dropout, low level of quality of life, scarce opportunities to learn and play, absence of an adequate provision of cultural activities in the community, etc. The systematic observations on the habits of the children and the evidence that have been gathered provide a demonstration that the decline of the free play is negatively impacting the growth and the personal development of many children. We are witnessing today at the reduction of the time that children are allowed to play in a form that is independent, spontaneous and self-regulated. The lack of the fundamental steps that represent the basement for the correct personal growth is depriving them of those social skills that are crucial to assume a self-regulatory and independent attitude in their daily life. The negative effects of this phenomenon are impacting millions of children, preventing them to reach their full potential. Thus, there is an urgent need to stimulate a debate and develop the strategies that can mitigate the risks.

**Keywords:** Free play, educational poverty, children, strategy of mitigation

### Introduction

The paper seeks to provide a preliminary analysis of some of the anthropological and social changes that are interesting the habits of free movement and play among the children in Italy, by inserting it in the wider framework of the educational poverties. Thus, in the first part, the definitions concerning the two main themes – educational poverty and play – will be provided. The first theme, in accordance with the recent development in the scientific literature, is addressed with an open approach including not only the economic dimension and the formal educational paths, but also all the other social, cultural, and contextual variables that influence the personal development of a child. Similarly, the second theme, the play, will be referred to a more open and fluid definition with the proposal of a classification on three levels based on the level of self-government of the dynamics of play. Starting from this classification, it will be maintained how the reduction of a specific form of play – the so-call free play – is emerging, today, as a form of educational poverty that is rarely taken into consideration, with a consequent negative impact on the growth and the personal development of a large part of the Italian children. In the final part of the paper, suggestions on potential strategy of mitigation will be provided.

### Educational poverty and free play: a definition

Educational poverty is emerging, in the last ten years, as a strategic theme in the national and local strategy of social intervention in Italy (Battilocchi, 2020). It is a key topic in the agenda of many policy makers, especially in the policies that seek to address the social inequalities (Digennaro, 2020). By referring to a general definition, the educational poverty is determined by a set of factors that prevent a person from learning and developing, completely, skills and talents, with negative impact emerging also in the daily life (Font & Maguire-Jack, 2020). These limitations concern, also, the social skills that are the basement for a complete life and for the fulfilment of an adequate standard of life (Engle & Black, 2008; Lohmann & Ferger, 2014). With a broader view, the educational poverty determines a limitation of children's right to education along with a deprivation of their opportunities to achieve their full potential and succeed in a rapidly changing society. In this light, the educational poverty is shown not only at the level of formal education but also at the levels of all those dimensions of the daily routines that contribute to the individual social wellbeing. Therefore, it is a polysemic term that firstly indicates a link between material poverty, social exclusion, marginalization and lack of formal education, and, subsequently, with a broader view, it encompasses different forms of social and cultural inequalities such school dropout, low level of quality of life, scarce opportunities to learn and play, absence of an

adequate provision of cultural activities in the community, etc. (see Alivernini et al. 2017; Save the Children, 2017; Fondazione Zancan, 2012).

From the scientific literature, it is possible to draw a classification of the educational poverty based on four levels:

- Economic poverty, that refers to the lack of economic resources that give access to educational opportunities; educational poverty and economic poverty are mutually correlated (Evans, 2004; ): fewer educational opportunities determine a higher risk of economic poverty and other way around (OECD, 2015);
- Contextual Poverty, that refers to the context in which a person lives and that offers scarce educational opportunities; in this specific case, there is a lack of adequate educational structures and/or services;
- Pedagogic Poverty, that refers to the skills and competences of the teachers/educators that do not have the capacity and the know-how to provide educational opportunities to fulfil the needs of the individuals (Digennaro, 2020);
- Individual capabilities poverty, that refers to the lack and partial development of all those key personal skills that are needed to a complete personal development and that are fundamental to give an appropriate orientation to the personal life.

By referring to the last point, it is possible to identify and intersection with a phenomenon, that is clearly emerging today in Italy, not differently from what it is happening in many other countries in the World: the decline of free play among the children. Many Authors have offered a definition of play (Farnè, 2015; Gray, 2015; Bateson, 2006; Rovatti & Zoletto, 2005; Callois, 1994; Huizinga, 1970; Mead, 1966) that it is considered a social practice, a natural and fundamental issue for the development of the person. While playing, a child shows his ludic instinct, as part of a symbolic and metaphoric framework in which the individuals participate voluntarily, in an all-encompassing experience, under a system of rules, that is agreed and accepted. The play is a central part in the process of development of the self as well as a crucial step in the development of the social system. This definition can be further developed through a classification based on three levels, and with a focus on the level of self-government that are available during the play. The three levels are: free play, autonomous play and other-directed play (Digennaro, 2019). The free play represents the highest level possible of spontaneity and self-management: the child is in the full controls of all the parts of the game, he/she steers all the dynamics independently, in relation with all the participants, without any command from an external person. The free play generally happens in a flexible setting and under a framework of rules and social symbols that belongs to the social and communicative categories of the participants.

The autonomous play is featured for a lower level of freedom and for a finite setting, based on the opportunity that is given by an adult, as part of a context that is under his control and which provides a frame for the participants to freely play. Finally, the other-directed play is the most controlled form of play: the game has a goal-oriented function, and the child is put within a setting, an organisation and a set of rules that are defined *a priori* by the adult. The participants are induced to play under well-defined dynamics with the view to address specific goals/expectations.

Obviously, in the real life, the dynamics of the play are not always so clear and well defined, as in the above classification. However, the classification helps to provide the right attention to a specific aspect that influences the impact of the play on a child: the level of independence. And, with this in mind, it is possible to reflect on how the habits of play of the children are today changing exactly in the terms of the level of independence that they have at disposal. Focusing on a typical day of a child, today, it is easy to understand how the time for the free play is declining. More in general, the opportunity of autonomy and free discovery, without the presence of an adult, are rare, often annulled under the persistent control of the adults (Gray, 2015). There is a rooted idea that the play must have a specific function, it must serve for some specific purposes and, thus, it must be oriented by an adult toward specific goals. Clearly, we are witnessing to a change in the “command center” of the game: the child is less and less in the condition to play by following his/her interests and attitudes and more and more under the influence of the adults, oriented toward games and activities that are considered useful, under a utilitarian conception of the game. Under this circumstance, the play loses those characteristics of simplicity, spontaneity, gratuitousness, vagueness and unpredictability that are fundamental to activate the real educational and social power of the play (Digennaro, 2019; Borgogni & Digennaro, 2016).

Throughout this form of adultification of the play, a process similar to what Postman called the disappearance of childhood (1984) has been determined. The origin is different, but the effects are similar to those described by the Author: Postman argues, in fact, how the child, compared with what happened in the past, today gets in contact earlier with the information, the tool, the categories, etc. that belong to the adults. This snap forward, toward the adult life, opens the small “cocoon” in which the childhood is protect and that gives to the child the time to growth and develop the social competences that are needed for the adult life. In the modern forms of play, the categories of the adults such as the self-control, the deferred gratification, the hierarchical order, a system of rigid rules, the adult morality, etc. come into the game pretty soon. These categories reduce the free exploration of the child, which deals with frameworks of play that are defined by the adults in accordance with schemes that tend to reflect their own vision. Soon, the games - becoming of relevance for the adults, also with the surrogate forms of the videogames – are proposed without spontaneity, under a constant

surveillance and, often, with high level of competition. With the progressive reduction of the free play, negative effects are emerging for the growth and the development of the children. Peter Gray (2015, 2011) maintains, in this regard, that the higher level of anxiety, depression, sense of helplessness that are noticed among the children today are linked with the reduction of their level of autonomy in the play. Reductions that brings, also, higher level of narcissism along with a decline of the empathy (Gray, 2011). Similarly, Dewey (1949) had noticed that while playing there is a form of fluid social control based on rules that can be negotiated and accepted by the participants – especially when defined with a shared and participative approach. This aspect makes possible the development, in a socialized form, of those key skills that are fundamental for the adult life. When this negotiation phase is absent, with rules that are imposed by an external person, the concretization of social interactions among the children are limited, with negative consequences for their personal development.

The trend toward an adultification of the play is recognizable also in the primary school, during the first years of the schooling (Almon & Miller, 2001), where there is a larger use of the autonomous play and the other-directed play as part of the strategies that are adopted to teach (Digennaro, 2019). Several studies have demonstrated that an excessive use of this form of play in the primary school is linked with the enhancement of the case of aggressiveness and discomfort that are registered among the students (Rixon et al., 2019; Gray, 2015; Gillian, 2005). By enlarging the view, outside the school, there is a clear trend of reduction of the opportunities for the children to play without the influence of the adults; the places in which they can play in full autonomy in many communities are rare and where there is a place for the children, it is often designed without taking into consideration this specific aspect.

### **The decline of the free play as educational poverty**

The systematic observations on the habits of the children and the evidence that have been gathered so far tend to demonstrate that the decline of the free play is negatively impacting the growth and the personal development of many children. The lack of the fundamental steps that represent the basement for the correct personal growth is depriving the child of the social skills that are crucial to assume a self-regulatory and independent attitude in the daily life. As a consequence, there is a form of educational poverty (individual capabilities poverty), in some cases less clear if compared with the other form of educational poverties, that is impacting a generation of children, including also those that, apparently, are not suffering of any form deprivation and limitation. The time and the places in which the free play can happen have represented, for a long period of time, an opportunity for the children, a natural setting in which develop independently. In the modern societies this opportunity is rare and, paradoxically, less available among the wealthy families. And the persistence of this situation, combined with a scarce interest for this problem, is altering the childhood, with the influence of the adults that is having a long-lasting negative effect.

In order to further understand how this situation is, to all effects, an educational poverty, there is the need to add a further step forward in the argumentations with the view to make clearer how an educational poverty is closely linked with the decline of the free play. Only in the form of the free play – and, with smaller effects, in the form of the autonomous play – is possible for a child to develop the skills that are at the base of the capacity to take a decision, the capacity to understand and manage the emotions, the capacity to establish a positive relationship with the others (see Sokol et al., 2013). Playing without the influence of the adults, the child is in the situation in which can enter into the perspective of the others, can understand the differences, manage the friendships, test new forms of socialisation, etc. (Carle, 2013) And this is possible within a safe place, self-managed in terms of time and way of interaction with the other participants, away from the external influences that, even in an accidental way, could influence the truthfulness of the dynamics that occur while playing. Just only focusing on this specific aspect, it can be easily understood how the reduction – the absence in the worse cases- of this space of freedom, it is a big lack of opportunities for a child, as it deprives the child from a fundamental educational opportunity, that is crucial for the preparation of the following adult life and that cannot be replaced with forms of play that are controlled by the adults. On this specific aspect, Gray is clear with his association between the reduction of the opportunity to play freely with the difficulties that many children have today in their social interaction (Gray 2011, 2015). Taken into consideration under these terms, the decline of the free play is, without any doubt, an educational poverty. Therefore, there is an urgent need to tackle this issue and develop strategies of intervention aimed at mitigating the effects of this poverty.

### **Conclusion: a possible strategy of mitigation**

After a general description of the issue, there is now the necessity to start a reflection on a possible strategy of mitigation, with the confidence that this first proposal can be followed by an intense debate, further suggestions and proposals for new lines of investigation. The change of the perspective concerning the play in the modern society, and the reduction of the child's autonomy is linked with many social and cultural factors (see Borgogni & Digennaro, 2016). The recognition of the decline of free play as an educational poverty imposes reflections and actions tailored on the specific requirements of this problem. There is the need of a multidimensional approach that can be shortly introduced and described as follows:

- From the point of view of the research activities there is the need to further develop a reflection on the triad play-autonomy-educational poverty in order to better understand the connections and provide a more organic dimension to the theme; this is expected to foster a better understanding of the causes that are determining the decline of the free play and the effects of this decline;
- Linked with the previous point, there is the need to develop research tools that would allow to better analyse the phenomenon, also with a diachronic approach; the analysis developed by the Italian Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) on the daily habits of the population, in fact, offers only a partial description of the theme (with a view in the hours that the children spent for outdoor activities, for instance), thus, the necessity to strengthen this research activity; the development of research tools will offer a double advantage by helping the academic reflection as well as the definition of the political agendas;
- On an educational level, it is fundamental to recognize the fact that, in the modern society, the free play from being a cogent fact, a systematic part of the children's daily routines, is now an aspect that must be preserved and stimulated as part of a wider strategy of promotion of higher level of autonomy among the children; this can be achieved, for instance, with educational strategies that tend to reduce the excessive influence of the adults in the life of the children;
- In parallel, for what concerns the political agendas, the theme must find the right attention, not just a secondary aspect of the children's need – the play is often considered as minor aspect, compared with many other themes- but as a fundamental element that need to receive the right attention with the view to mitigate the negative effects and change the trends, with an enlargement of the opportunity for the children to play freely.

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