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## **A COMMON RESPONSIBILITY TO CONTRAST 'EDUCATIONAL POVERTY'.**

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### **Abstract**

The paper aims to describe the first findings of my actual research directed to deepen the different characteristics of the term "educational poverty", drawing a pedagogical perspective on it. Presentation gives importance to the dimensions of inquiry that explicit the characteristics of a collaborative 'educational community' [2] [3], where each member can have a strong role in activating educational opportunities for young generations.

At first the dissertation gives evidence to the main concepts to describe the phenomenon, especially reconstructing strategies and activities that make possible, in Italy and Europe, to contrast 'educational poverty' building a common educative responsibility between adult educators (parents, teachers and social workers) and offering qualitative educational experiences [15]. This theoretical framework includes an exploration of different dimensions of the topic, a broader definition of poverty in terms of possibilities and functioning [11] [12] and the pedagogical proposals, that, traditionally, have found solutions 'from the bottom' for poverty and social fragmentations [17] [18].

These concepts are reference points to generate an operative definition of 'educational poverty' and its multi-dimensional shape [10]. The paper considers this operationalization and the first findings of an 'holistic case study' [19] based on the educative project "Sulla buona strada" and its activities in a disadvantaged area of Genoa city (Italy). This is my actual field of study. The participants are parents, social workers, policy makers, teachers and school managers. Using in depth interviews and focus-group, the research wants to developed a situated and context-sensitive description of the term 'educational poverty' and the possible role of participants in contrasting it.

Reinforcing the importance to really understand a topic, starting from the concrete experience of people involved into the research, the paper tries to open some questions as: what are the policies that a territorial community address to young generations? What are the characteristics of schools? Are there free time and cultural activities to reinforce the impact of schools and to support parents in their role? Is it possible to improve them, activating the whole 'educational community' and realize a collaboration between adults (parents, teachers, policymakers...)? Can they collaborate and open perspectives to children who come from disadvantage backgrounds?

The paper aims to show how it is possible to engage the whole 'educational community' to organize strategies and activities to realize 'a high educational impact territory' and give opportunities to children and youngsters to really develop their personhood, despite difficult starting points.

Keywords: educational poverty; common responsibility.

## 40 INTRODUCTION

The paper aims to describe the first findings of my current research aimed to deepen the different characteristics of the term “educational poverty”, drawing a pedagogical perspective about it. The research is both explorative and empirical. The explorative side aims to conceptualize the phenomenon, the empirical implies an ethnographical inquiry on the educative project “Sulla Buona Strada”, in Genoa (Italy).

What does “educational poverty” mean? According to Save the Children [1], this topic deals with lack of educational opportunities in four areas: to know, to be, to live together and to do. At the end of 2016, Italian government approved an experimental provision to contrast this issue (n°280/2015 law): a three years fund, feed by bank foundations. The provision is enacted by a social entrepreneur, ‘Con I Bambini’, who launches calls for projects to improve collaborations between institutional stakeholders in the field of education and citizens. The objective is to reinforce a common responsibility between educators and develop ‘educational communities’ [2] [3]. ‘Educational community’ is a term to identify the totality of institutional actions and people who are involved in educating children at schools, in families, in cultural and free time activities: «Being educationally poor also means being denied the opportunity to know, to be, to live together and to do through sport, contact with nature, culture and beauty, and positive relationships with families and friends. The so-called ‘educational community’ plays a crucial role in preventing – or conversely reinforcing – educational poverty» [1].

## 41 CONCEPTUALIZATION

Can common responsibility and “educational community” be ideal solutions to contrast the phenomenon of “educational poverty”? To understand their impact, the paper presents the connection of these concepts with the conceptualization of the term “educational poverty” and the first results of the ongoing empirical research on the project “Sulla Buona Strada”.

The literature review depicts different meanings of the term “educational poverty”. The fund to contrast educational poverty is part of the Italian legislation, the result of proposals to promote children and adolescents’ rights (law 285/1997 and law 328/2000). At European level, the Lisbon Strategy [4] defines benchmarks to reduce this phenomenon. The economic research stresses the importance to promote better educational outcomes to reinforce the future employability [5]. Allmendiger et al. [6] and Lohmann and Ferger [7] emphasize the strengths of promoting educational outcomes throughout equal inclusive provisions in welfare systems. The psychological discourse takes into consideration the effects of poverty in broad terms: the concrete effects of poor incomes, poverty as social disadvantage, as individual condition and a factor of exclusion [8].

Stating these starting points, the lack of a specific pedagogical perspective on this phenomenon comes up. It means to consider educational experiences as instruments to contrast educational poverty as part of a multidimensional concept of poverty. A multidimensional definition of poverty implies «poor health and education, deprivation in knowledge and communication, inability to exercise human and political rights and the absence of dignity, confidence and self-respect» [9]. According with the World Bank, quoted by Botezat [10]: «poverty is not only a problem of low incomes; rather it is a multi-dimensional problem that includes low access to opportunities for developing human capital and to education». The multi-dimensional idea of poverty connects the topic with the “capability approach” [11] [12]. «The core characteristic of the capability approach is



its focus on what people are effectively able to do and to be; that is, on their capabilities. [...] Sen argues that our evaluations and policies should focus on what people are able to do and be, on the quality of their life, and on removing obstacles in their lives so that they have more freedom to live the kind of life that, upon reflection, they have reason to value» [13].

The multi-sided character of poverty justifies the necessity to involve different actors in projects to contrast it. This is the basis of a common responsibility and a sense of “educational community”. Vergani [14] considers responsibility an ethical choice to act in the modern sociological landscape. It can be the answer to social fragmentations, individualization, precarity, extreme flexibility and difficult connections between people. Responsibility, from a pedagogical perspective, means to face “educational poverty” offering qualitative educational experiences [15], to enlarge children’s perspectives and their opportunities for the future [16].

According to that, the institutional actors, as policymakers and school managers, can play a fundamental role to recognize the efforts for contrasting “educational poverty”. They can work with associations, cultural realities, private sector, experts, families and children. They are important to emphasize the sense of “community”, offering a set of possibilities to contrast the lack of opportunities to know, to be, to live together and to do, as the definition of the phenomenon states. The in-depth analysis of the terms common responsibility and “educational community” should include strategies and activities on the basis of pedagogical proposals, that, traditionally, have found solutions ‘from the bottom’ for poverty and social fragmentations [17] [18], to enhance the engagement of citizens (parents at first) in this common project of cultural and educational improvement.

These theoretical reference points (the capability approach; the concept of responsibility; the quality of educational experiences; the traditional solutions for poverty and social fragmentations) support the ideas of common responsibility and “educational community”. The empirical part of the research is fundamental to understand concretely these and the whole concept of “educational poverty”.

## 42 OPERATIONALIZATION: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND STRATEGIES

Moving from the study of the concepts of “common responsibility” and “educational community”, the paper presents an operationalization of them. This is part of a general approach to the topic of “educational poverty” and its multi-dimensional shape [10]. Doing that, the paper presents the first findings of a *holistic case study* [19] based on the educative project “Sulla buona strada” and its activities in a disadvantaged area of Genoa city (Italy): «if a single-case study only examined the global nature of an organization or of a program [...], a *holistic design* would have been used. [...] The holistic design is advantageous when [...] the relevant theory underlying the case study is mainly of a holistic nature» [19]. Enlightened by the theory on “educational poverty” described above, the operationalization tries to answer these questions: “What does “educational poverty” mean in this area and how is it possible to engage the whole “educational community” to contrast it?”; “Is the project promoting a common educative responsibility?”

To answer that, an empirical research is ongoing, using a case study, «as empirical method that: investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident. [...] You might pursue a *constructivist* approach in designing and conducting your case study – attempting to capture the perspectives of different participants and focusing on how their different meanings illuminate your topic of study» [19].

To really understand a topic, starting from the concrete experience of people involved, the research poses some questions about common responsibility and “educational community”: what are the policies that a territorial community address to young generations? What are the characteristics of schools? Are there free time and cultural activities to improve the impact of schools and to support parents in their educational role? Is it possible to enhance them, activating the whole “educational community” and building a collaboration between adults (parents, teachers, policymakers...)? Can they collaborate and open perspectives to children who come from disadvantage backgrounds? Does the project impact on the lives of family and children?

Data collection and interpretation use ethnographical sources, because it is important to investigate this case understanding the different meanings that came from different actors: «research takes place in everyday contexts, “in the field”; [...] data collection is – for the most part – relatively “unstructured”; [...] analysis of data involves interpretation of meanings, functions, and consequences of human actions and institutional practices» [20]. The main sources of data are: depth interviews; focus group; participant observations.

### **43 THE PROJECT: ACTIONS AND ACTORS**

The project “Sulla Buona strada” was born in 2016, funded by “Con I Bambini”.

It is settled in an area called “Valpocevera”, along the Polcevera river, in Genoa (Italy): it is a post-industrial settlement, where the growth and the closure of firms has caused the loss of the sense of community. It has been characterized by two main immigration movements: the first, from the South of Italy, in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and the recent one, from the Eastern Europe and South America. Nowadays, People who come from abroad are numerous in this area. Considering the rest of the city of Genoa, Valpocevera has an important growth rate. Internet connection is spread and people commonly use it.

These features motivate the project design: the main aims are to find solutions to connect people and allow to build a real common responsibility and “educational community”.

“Sulla Buona Strada” offers activities to youngsters and their families, reinforcing parents’ skills to support children’s future development and creating more cultural and leisure time activities in the area. It uses both a real and a virtual connection: a little truck goes around Valpocevera, offering free time activities to children; a group of experts goes around by the truck and helps people to find services and aids for their problems, presenting database and websites.

Another fundamental characteristic of the project is the kindergartens’ participation. It involves seven infant schools (*scuole dell’infanzia*) (for children between 3 and 5 years-old), which are considered important places to observe the territory and point out its limits and resources.

The project involves different actors:

- institutional stakeholders: a member of Genoa city’s school sector and school managers;
- teachers;
- social workers from the so-called “third sector”: educators who work for social inclusion, special needs educators; experts on early childhood education;
- workers of culture: actors of theatre for children, experts on children literature.

“Sulla buona strada” has eleven actions. (1) The truck: an electric van meets people and understand their needs, in terms of free time activities and support. (2) Data collection and disseminations of local opportunities and activities (services, events...). (3) Working groups at school that aim to plan individual supports for children. (4) Teacher support to improve school wellbeing. (5) Parents

support (for individuals or groups). (6) Training activities for teachers and social workers. (7) Thematic meetings, workshops and events between different actors of the project (teachers, parents, social workers). (8) Outdoor activities for children to better know the town. (9) Governance, coordination and communication, data management and administration. (10) Supervision/Monitoring. (11) Impact evaluation.

The actual stages of research are to define the context, considering the actors' perspectives. The participants are mainly policymakers, teachers, school managers and social workers. Later, it will be important to involve parents and citizens. Using in depth interviews and focus-group, the research aims to develop a situated and context-sensitive description of the term 'educational poverty' and the possible role of participants in contrasting it.

Considering the first findings of this research it is possible to say that this "educational community", to improve a common responsibility, needs:

- to move from a concept of schools as isolated systems, to the idea of schools as an "observatory" to read the territorial community and interact with other services and experts;
- to promote engagement between people, giving them voice, and transforming their implicit needs into practical questions to pose to educational services and institutional stakeholders;
- to find solutions for second-generation migrant children, to improve their abilities and to offer them concrete solutions for a satisfying future, despite their difficult starting point.

All the project activities aim to improve the connections between citizens and experts. Moving from schools, supporting teachers, it is possible to read their needs and their point of view on families' limits and resources. Direct connections with families, thanks to outdoor activities promoted by the small truck, can improve family's *expertise* and create a common responsibility and a valuable "educational community". Municipality's participation gives to this system an institutional reference and make possible a future development, in terms of cultural and financial support.

#### 44 FUTURE OUTCOMES

To better understand this project and to develop an inner point of view about specific activities to contrast "educational poverty", the research needs to reinforce these aspects:

- The citizens engagement in research design: can people be part of the research design and improve the sense of common responsibility and "educational community"?
- The comparison with other projects. This is the aim of another social entrepreneur, "Compagnia di San Paolo". It is creating work-tables between actors who are involved in projects to contrast "educational poverty".

Considering the "case-study" research's intent, the «goal will be to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalizations) and not to extrapolate probabilities (statistical generalizations). [...] The goal is to do a "generalizing" and not a "particularizing" analysis» (Lipset, Trow & Coleman, 1956, pp. 419-420 [19]). The research draws a picture of this project from an inner point of view and it will be important to consider other realities. The aim is to show how it is possible to engage the whole "educational community" to organize strategies and activities in order to realize "a high educational impact territory" and to give opportunities to children and youngsters to really develop their personhood, despite difficult starting points. If children and adolescents' rights become really important for public and city engagement, the social impact of this kind of projects can last. «We

need to rethink the city territory from educational needs, to make cities as educational places, to make them educational communities and high educational intensity territories» [21].

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