



Challenges to Fight Educational Poverty

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Abstract

Save the Children gave the definition of the so-called “educational poverty”, describing it as “a process of limitation of children’s right to education and deprivation of their opportunities to learn and develop the skills they will need to succeed in a rapidly changing society.” Contrasting child poverty and supporting the cultural and educational opportunities of children and adolescents is an indispensable commitment, an investment in the future and a goal to be pursued by all means. It is understood that the challenge is particularly demanding and requires not only adequate policies and sufficient funds but also a cultural revolution in the way of rethinking education system. The preparation of all the adults involved (educators, researchers, teachers, family members) and the interventions that they lead in formal and informal contexts, plays, in our opinion, a crucial role in the way of doing education. However, it is clear that the challenge is particularly demanding and it is not enough to produce exemplary initiatives with the funds that governments and private foundations make available. Based on our experience, we believe that the process to be implemented - in consideration of the complexity of the problem concerning social, cultural, pedagogical and psychological aspects - must have at its center a targeted preparation of adults (teachers, educators, family members, researchers) and a necessary re-examination of the way in which school is made and teachers teach. In our opinion, school must be able to link formal and informal context experiences, collaborating with universities and third sector institutions, orienting activities that now appear fragmented and not dialoguing.

Keywords: Educational Poverty; Science Education; Critical Thinking; Citizen Science; Educational Poverty: a grown problem

Introduction

What are the effects of social inequality? In an increasingly unequal world, the new generations certainly pay the highest price in terms of opportunities, especially in developing countries. On average, children born into poor families are 7 times less likely to finish school than their peers born into rich or affluent families. This is the alarm launched by Oxfam through a report published in September 2019 [1]. The report highlights a worrying picture in terms of inequality in access to training opportunities. A shocking situation that still affects millions of boys and girls all over the world today, depending on the income and wealth of the family they belong to. Inequalities are compounded by other inequalities in terms of gender, ethnicity, disability and geography forming a suffocating net of exclusion. In a poor rural area of Pakistan, girls

are three times more likely than poor boys to have never attended school. In India, the average number of years of education for girls from poorer families is zero, compared with 9.1 years for girls from richer families. The topic is not new in academic debate. However, this mini review stems from this reflection: why, in a context of increasing recognition of the problem, is there still a proliferation of resistance to changes? [2].

Inequality is not inevitable. It is the result of political choices. Educational inequalities are often driven by policies that encourage the commercialization of education and expand private provision of schooling through public-private partnerships, which increase stratification in education systems. The consequent conditions of fragility of the public system that derive from it, often make it diffi-

cult for less well-to-do students to seize opportunities, exploit their talent or understand what it is, create motivation and enhance the desire for redemption. If quality of the education remains accessible only to rich families, social mobility remains blocked: if a person is born poor, no matter how hard they work, they will remain poor. Furthermore, in this context, societies tend to ghettoize, as children of the rich will be separated from children of less rich families from an early age. A segregated schooling by class, wealth, ethnicity, gender, increases the range of social inequality. Instead, we think that public education, of good quality for all, can be a powerful engine for greater social equality. To achieve this, the way in which the educating community carries out its role in society must change radically. But as we have previously said, poverty and educational poverty do not concern only developing countries but also concern Europe and in particular Italy. According to the AROPE indicator of socioeconomic vulnerability, in 2016 26.4% of children aged 0-17 lived at risk of poverty or social exclusion in Europe, whereas this percentage was found to be 33.2% in our country. In both cases these rates are higher than those recorded for the overall population, which stand at 23.5% in 28-member Europe and 30% in Italy [3].

More than 26 million children in Europe are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. From the latest survey carried out in 2021 by the National Statistical Institute (ISTAT) it emerges that in Italy the level of absolute poverty has reached its highest point since 2005, thus nullifying the improvements recorded in a previous survey made in 2019. In Italy, 1 million and 346 thousand minors live in conditions of absolute poverty, 209 thousand more than the previous year. This means that in Italy 13.4% of children and young people find themselves in this condition, with 2 percentage points compared to the previous survey. The data shows that it is above all families with minor children who suffer the most serious consequences of the current socio-economic emergency: absolute poverty goes from 9.2% to 11.6%, after the improvement recorded in 2019. The situation becomes dramatic for large families with a percentage that reaches 20.7%, for those with at least five people. An economic hardship that often translates into an educational gap since economic poverty and educational poverty feed each other. The lack of cultural means and social networks reduces job opportunities. Economic constraints limit access to cultural and educational resources, constituting an objective obstacle for children and young people who come from disadvantaged families. Italy is the European country where, in 2020, the employment rate is lowest for those who left the education system early. In the South, just 23.3% of 18-24 year who dropped out of school and training ahead of time are employed and youth discomfort is particularly alarming in our city (Naples), in particular due to greater poverty and a very high rate of school dropout, and it is evident to us that educational poverty is largely hereditary.

There is a strong correlation between parents' low educational qualifications and the risk of early abandonment by their children. On average in OECD countries, in 42% of cases the children of those

who do not have a high school diploma do not graduate themselves. A share that in France stands at 37% and in Germany drops to 32%, while in Italy it reaches 64%. In regions where the share of adults with a high school diploma is lower, early school leavers are more frequent. In 2020 - the share of people aged between 24 and 64 with at least a high school diploma was 54.1% in our region (Campania) with one of the highest dropout rates. For this reason, breaking the link between the parents' educational qualifications and the children's educational level is a crucial challenge for us.

Our Commitment to Fight Educational Poverty

Our research group operates at the University of Naples and has been interacting for about 30 years with schools of all levels and with volunteer centers that intervene in the most disadvantaged areas of the city. Since 2018, the Group has been involved in two projects aimed at contrasting educational poverty in the area of Naples: the Caterina Project (in the center of the city) and the Educare Project (in the eastern suburbs of Naples) both financed by the Impresa Sociale con i Bambini an extensive national program to contrast educational poverty. Both projects have as their main objective the strengthening of the role of the educating community by triggering virtuous paths of individual and collective empowerment in the intervention areas, aimed at preventing the early exit from the educational system of minors at risk with a targeted involvement of families with support activities in the psychological, social and pedagogical fields. The programs of the two projects are characterized by a rich and varied educational offer, providing for the intervention of multiple educational figures from different areas of society with a specific involvement of neighborhood schools, Third Sector associations and Local Institution. The contribution of our Group is characterized by the recognition of the function that scientific, mathematical and technological education can play in the general cultural education of the citizen and this involves sharing in the educating community a non-traditional vision of teaching.

The places where our interventions take place are mainly school classrooms and the direct beneficiaries of our interventions are minors at risk. However, we believe that in order to be effective and to intervene in a systemic manner, one must not limit one's field of action. At the heart of our action there are education and the consequent educational responsibility that the whole community must assume. Our intervention in these projects is broad and transversal, as we aim at the enlarged construction of a varied educating community that shares the same strategies and educational values. The "open" school plays a central role in our specific intervention on a scientific education that aims in a transversal way at the development of scientific, mathematical and linguistic skills, with a focus on technologies that allow a strong interactivity and the involvement of children both individually and collectively. The school is for us the crossroad to engage all those involved: children, parents, teachers, educators, actors, artisans and psychologists.

The school becomes for us the territorial antenna to organize and give continuity to the interventions that in other experiences

sometimes appear fragmentary and poorly coordinated. And we are experiencing that in this way school is recognized as a resource of the territory capable of assuming responsibility for the overall development, not just cognitive, of children. This recognition of the value of school, increasingly discredited in our country, by family members seems to us to be one of the most interesting results of our project and gives us confidence in possible, albeit slow, improvements in the state of children in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Specifically, in our interventions with the parents of the pupils involved, we aim at extending the exploration of scientific phenomena to the home too, where children have the opportunity to experiment and revisit the experiences they had at school. Motivated by working with us researchers, parents can make a significant contribution to the study of their children at home by supporting reasoning and encouraging the development of critical thinking. Parents are involved in specific laboratories in which scientific activities give adults the opportunity to discover the enormous wealth of technical and scientific knowledge that allow us to live but which we are not able to communicate in the way that a misinterpreted accredited science would like. The approach and strategies we try to put in place to suggest how adult knowledge can help in the education of children have paid off. During the period of school closure due to the coronavirus emergency, parents played an unprecedented role by experimenting with activities such as observing floating with every day materials and mathematics in the kitchen on recipes and direct proportionality. Coordinating remotely with teachers and parents, we designed activities that were carried out and documented at home, also with videos made with smartphones and shared in remote meetings throughout the community.

A short video produced for our Ministry of Education is on our website www.les.unina.it. Concerning the teachers at the schools involved, we design and implement training courses for the entire teaching staff. We work with them to build vertical and interdisciplinary educational paths: we discuss and review the curriculum to update languages and actions, to trigger ecological and sustainable intervention practices in school communities. Our group is also involved in courses on science education for the preparation of future primary school teachers at the Suor Orsola Benincasa University. We thus have the opportunity to involve some university students in the ongoing activities, particularly with the elaboration of experimental theses that allow us to integrate reflections into practice. An active research activity that involves, with the work of experimental degree theses in reflective practice on our educational field actions [4].

Conclusion

We have learned a lot and are still learning in these experiences. One aspect that struck us concerns the relationship that deprived minors, establish in the community to which they belong. The problem concerns the quality of the relationship with other peers and with the adults who should help them. The haste and approximation with which they are labeled for having special needs with a priggish vision that would aim to help them sometimes confines them

to a marginalization that in fact excludes them from “normal” relationships. We seem to recognize that this attitude which places distance and ghettoizes uneasy children is sometimes more or less implicitly and unconsciously also present in educators and teachers [5-11]. We realize this when, trusting children at risk, they lower their defenses and simply seek affection and gratification and not to be recognized as the special ones who need to be helped. The activities carried out up to this point had been very well received, and whatever path we had taken would not have been decisive in relation to a problem of this magnitude.

We therefore sought practices and methods that could be in tune with our way of teaching. The didactic material collected so far is available on the Research Group website (www.les.unina.it) and in particular the photographic documentation of the activities carried out is also aimed at creating a bridge between the school, teachers, researchers, future teachers and pupils who, at home with their families, are invited to develop a cognitive review of their experiences. The results achieved so far are considered very promising by all those involved and in particular by families, as documented by numerous interviews and video analysis that emerged from several working groups.

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5. Ending Education and Child Poverty in Europe | Save the Children's Resource Centre. This report refers to analysis based on accredited statistical data and a rich reference bibliography to which we also refer in this mini review.
6. The at risk of poverty or social exclusion indicator is the headline indicator to monitor EU-2020 poverty target; it consists of three sub-indicators: at risk of poverty rate (i.e., income poverty), severe material deprivation, low work household intensity. People are considered to be AROPE (at risk of poverty or social exclusion) when they experience at least one of the forms of poverty measured by the three sub-indicators.
7. The WEB site “Laboratory for Science Education” which documents and disseminates the activities developed by our Action Research Group now brings together a community of practice of about 600 people including students, teachers, family members, educators and researchers.
8. C.a.t.e.r.i.Na | Laboratorio per l'Educazione alla Scienza (unina.it).
9. EduCare | Laboratorio per l'Educazione alla Scienza (unina.it).
10. Con i Bambini - English.
11. Il Canale YouTube del LES | Laboratorio per l'Educazione alla Scienza (unina.it). Il laboratorio scientifico a distanza. Un'esperienza che ci ha insegnato molto.



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