

DIDASKALOI

RIVISTA SCIENTIFICA DI STUDI PEDAGOGICI

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Il gioco come esigenza fondativa della persona

Play as a fundamental
human need

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RIVISTA SCIENTIFICA DI STUDI PEDAGOGICI



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Direttore editoriale Antonio Ascione

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EDITORIALE

Il gioco come attività fondativa della persona / Play as a Fundamental Human Need

Daniel Ernesto Stigliano

Nel panorama della riflessione filosofica e pedagogica, il gioco emerge non come un semplice passatempo frivolo, bensì come un'attività primordiale e strutturante dell'esistenza umana. Fin dalle origini della civiltà, il gioco ha permeato le sfere dell'individuale e del collettivo, configurandosi come un elemento fondativo sia dell'essere umano in quanto specie – l'*Homo sapiens* – sia della persona in quanto entità singolare dotata di coscienza, relazioni e potenzialità creative.

Questo numero di *Didaskaloi* intende esplorare il gioco indagando le sue necessità pedagogiche, esaminando il suo contributo nello sviluppo formativo dell'individuo.

Il gioco si rivela essenziale per l'evoluzione della specie umana; studi come quelli di Karl Groos in *Die Spiele der Tiere* (1896) mostrano che il gioco è presente negli animali superiori, servendo da preparazione alla sopravvivenza: i piccoli scimpanzé riconoscono le piante, i cuccioli di leoni simulano la caccia, affinando abilità motorie e sociali. Negli umani, tuttavia, il gioco trascende l'utilitarismo biologico, diventando simbolico e narrativo. Come nota l'antropologo Clifford Geertz in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), il gioco è una "storia profonda" che struttura l'identità culturale.

Per l'essere umano, il gioco è fondativo perché prolunga l'infanzia, periodo di plasticità neuronale unica tra i primati. Secondo la teoria della *neotenia* di Stephen Jay Gould (*Ontogeny and Phylogeny*, 1977), gli umani restano "giovani" più a lungo, permettendo un apprendimento esteso attraverso il gioco. Questo prolunga la fase ludica, favorendo l'innovazione: invenzioni come il fuoco o la ruota potrebbero derivare da esplorazioni giocose. La persona, in questo contesto, emerge dal gioco come soggetto relazionale: giochi di gruppo insegnano empatia, negoziazione e ruoli sociali, fondando la coscienza morale kantiana dell'altro come fine.

Attraverso un'analisi che attinge a pensatori classici e moderni, si evidenzia che il gioco non è mero svago, ma un'attività essenziale che plasma l'identità umana, favorisce l'apprendimento e sostiene la costruzione di un mondo significativo.

Il termine "gioco" deriva dal latino *ludus*, che evoca sia l'aspetto ludico che quello educativo, come nel caso delle scuole dette *ludus litterarius* (la scuola elementare nell'antica Roma dai 7 ai 12 anni circa); invita alla conoscenza delle regole, libertà e finzione, e rappresenta un mezzo per l'esplorazione del sé e del mondo. L'ipotesi centrale di questa riflessione è che il gioco sia fondativo perché consente all'essere umano di trascendere la mera sopravvivenza biologica, proiettandolo verso la realizzazione di una persona integrale, capace di creatività, socialità e riflessione etica.

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Nel *Leggi* (VII, 803c-d), Platone afferma che "la vita deve essere vissuta come un gioco", intendendo che l'esistenza umana, per essere virtuosa, richiede un'armonia tra serietà e ludicità. Il filosofo ateniese vede nel gioco infantile una preparazione alla vita adulta: i bambini, attraverso il gioco, interiorizzano le norme sociali e morali, simulando ruoli che prefigurano la cittadinanza ideale della *polis*. Qui, il gioco è fondativo perché educa alla bellezza e all'ordine cosmico, riflettendo l'idea platonica di *mimesis* – l'imitazione del mondo delle Idee. Non è casuale che Platone proponga giochi regolati per i giovani, come la lotta o la musica, al fine di temperare l'anima e il corpo, rendendo l'individuo una persona armonica.

Aristotele, allievo di Platone, approfondisce questa prospettiva nell'*Etica Nicomachea* (X, 6-8), dove distingue tra *ascholia* (occupazione seria) e *paidia* (gioco, attività), elevando il concetto di *scholē* a forma suprema di attività umana – l'*otium* contemplativo dei latini –. Per Aristotele, il gioco è fondativo in quanto permette il riposo rigenerativo, essenziale per la *eudaimonia* (felicità). Esso non è fine a sé stesso, ma prepara alla vita teoretica: l'essere umano, animale razionale, trova nel gioco una via per esercitare virtù come la moderazione e la magnanimità. In questa visione, il gioco fonda la persona come ente teleologico, orientato verso il bene supremo.

Passando all'epoca moderna, il concetto di gioco acquista una dimensione antropologica più marcata con Johan Huizinga nel suo *Homo Ludens* (1938). Huizinga argomenta che l'essere umano non è solo *Homo sapiens* o *Homo faber*, ma primariamente *Homo ludens*: il gioco precede la cultura, permeandola in ogni aspetto, dal rito al diritto, dalla guerra all'arte.

Per Huizinga, il gioco è un'attività libera, separata dalla vita ordinaria (in un "cerchio magico") con regole proprie e un fine intrinseco che insegnano a generare l'ordine dal caos: l'umano, attraverso il gioco, crea mondi alternativi che riflettono e strutturano la realtà. Questo aspetto è cruciale per la persona, che nel gioco sperimenta la libertà creativa, superando i vincoli deterministici della natura. Huizinga critica la società industriale per aver mercificato il gioco, riducendolo a spettacolo passivo, ma ne riafferma l'essenza vitale per l'umanità.

Nel Novecento, Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960) eleva il gioco a paradigma ermeneutico. Per Gadamer, il gioco è addirittura una riproposizione ontologica: non è l'individuo a giocare, ma il gioco a "giocare" l'individuo, coinvolgendolo in un dialogo con il mondo. Questo rovesciamento sottolinea come il gioco sia fondativo per la comprensione del mondo: la persona emerge dal flusso ludico come soggetto interpretante, capace della faticosa *fusiones degli orizzonti*.

Anche Martin Heidegger tocca seppur marginalmente il tema del gioco nel suo *Sein und Zeit* (1927), dove il *Dasein* (esserci) si confronta con l'autenticità attraverso esperienze liminali, simili al gioco, che rivelano la finitezza umana.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in *L'Être et le néant* (1943), vede nel gioco una forma di *mauvaise foi* (cattiva fede) se usato per evadere dalla propria responsabilità, ma al tempo stesso l'emblema che assolutizza la libertà della coscienza umana.

È doveroso ricordare che anche Sigmund Freud in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (1920) si cimenta nell'interpretazione del gioco infantile di suo nipote Ernst quando lancia un rocchetto (rappresenta la madre che si allontana) emettendo un suono "o-o-o" (*Fort!* – via!) e lo ritira dicendo "da" (vieni qui!), trasformando in tal modo simbolicamente l'angoscia dell'assenza materna in un gioco, controllando la separazione e il ritorno della figura genitoriale.

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§. La pedagogia moderna ha elevato il gioco a pilastro formativo, riconoscendone il ruolo fondativo nello sviluppo cognitivo, emotivo e sociale.

Friedrich Froebel, fondatore del *kindergarten* (1837), concepì l'educazione come "gioco libero": i suoi "doni" sono oggetti geometrici che permettono al bambino di esprimere la propria interiorità, fondando la persona capace di creare. Per Froebel, il gioco è addirittura esplicitazione dell'attività divina, eco del romanticismo hegeliano, dove l'umano si realizza attraverso l'espressione spontanea.

Maria Montessori, nel *Il segreto dell'infanzia* (1936), integra il gioco nel metodo sensoriale: materiali auto-correttivi trasformano l'apprendimento in gioco strutturato, favorendo l'autonomia. Il gioco è fondativo perché rispetta i "periodi sensitivi", permettendo alla persona di costruire sé stessa attraverso l'interazione ambientale. Jean Piaget, in *La psychologie de l'enfant* (1966), studia il gioco nelle sue espressioni sensomotorie e/o simboliche, fino ai giochi regolamentati coi quali il bambino sviluppa schemi cognitivi. Per Piaget, il gioco fonda l'intelligenza operativa, rendendo l'umano un essere logico.

Lev Vygotsky, in *Thought and Language* (1934), enfatizza l'aspetto sociale: il gioco crea la "zona di sviluppo prossimale", dove l'interazione con adulti o pari eleva le capacità. Il gioco immaginario – fingere ruoli – fonda la persona come ente narrativo, capace di astrazione e pianificazione.

Howard Gardner nelle *Intelligenze multiple* (1983) vede nel gioco un mezzo per sviluppare intelligenze diverse, da quella kinestetica a quella interpersonale.

Queste intuizioni pedagogiche convergono tutte nel riconoscere il gioco come attività fondativa: esso non solo educa l'essere umano alla conoscenza, ma forma la persona integrale, resiliente ed etica.

§. Alla luce di quanto detto sommariamente, occorre considerare con esponenziale attenzione all'avvento della digitalizzazione – videogiochi, realtà virtuale – veicolo di un incompreso potenziale fondativo.

I processi di apprendimento sulle piattaforme digitali appaiono paradossali: alcune attività come *Minecraft* favoriscono creatività e collaborazione globale, altre invece, come da tempo denuncia Sherry Turkle in *Alone Together* (2011), minano la formazione relazionale della persona.

Un'avvertenza è d'obbligo: se la *gamification* sfrutta il gioco per demistificare il digitale, per motivare l'attività e l'apprendimento dei giovani, allo stesso tempo rischia di ridurlo a strumento utilitaristico, andando incontro alla critica huizinghiana; soprattutto, viene depotenziato il gioco quale unica strategia umana per intuire ricette capaci di resistere alla crisi di una società sempre più imprevedibile e autodistruttiva (Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernità liquida*, 2000).

Promuovere il gioco autentico – libero, inclusivo e significativo – è imperativo per una società che valorizzi la dignità umana. In un mondo sempre più complesso, riscoprire il gioco significa riscoprire l'essenza dell'essere: un invito a giocare alla vita con serietà gioiosa.

* * *

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In the panorama of philosophical and pedagogical reflection, play emerges not as a simple frivolous pastime, but as a primordial and structuring activity of human existence. Since the origins of civilization, play has permeated the individual and collective spheres, establishing itself as a foundational element both human being as a species—*Homo sapiens*—and of the person as a singular entity endowed with consciousness, relationships, and creative potential.

This issue of *Didaskaloi* aims to explore play by investigating its pedagogical needs and examining its contribution to the formative development of the individual.

§. Play has proven essential to the evolution of the human species; studies such as those by Karl Groos in *Die Spiele der Tiere* (1896) show that play is present in higher animals, serving as preparation for survival: young chimpanzees recognize plants, lion cubs simulate hunting, honing motor and social skills. In humans, however, play transcends biological utilitarianism, becoming symbolic and narrative. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz notes in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), play is a "deep story" that structures cultural identity.

For humans, play is foundational because it prolongs childhood, a period of neuronal plasticity unique among primates. According to Stephen Jay Gould's theory of *neoteny* (*Ontogeny and Phylogeny*, 1977), humans remain "young" longer, allowing for extended learning through play. This prolongs the playful phase, fostering innovation: inventions such as fire or the wheel could arise from playful explorations. In this context, the individual emerges from play as a relational subject: group games teach empathy, negotiation, and social roles, establishing the Kantian moral conscience of the other as an end.

§. Through an analysis drawing on classical and modern thinkers, it is highlighted that play is not mere entertainment, but an essential activity that shapes human identity, fosters learning, and supports the construction of a meaningful world.

The term "play" derives from the *Latin ludus*, which evokes both playful and educational aspects, as in the case of the schools called *ludus litterarius* (primary school in ancient Rome for children aged 7 to 12). It encourages understanding rules, freedom, and fiction, and represents a means for exploring the self and the world. The central hypothesis of this reflection is that play is foundational because it allows human beings to transcend mere biological survival, projecting them toward the realization of a whole person, capable of creativity, sociability, and ethical reflection.

In the *Laws* (VII, 803c-d), Plato states that "life must be lived as a game," meaning that human existence, to be virtuous, requires a harmony between seriousness and playfulness. The Athenian philosopher sees children's play as preparation for adult life: through play, children internalize social and moral norms, simulating roles that prefigure the ideal citizenship of the polis. Here, play is foundational because it educates in beauty and cosmic order, reflecting the Platonic idea of mimesis—the imitation of the world of Ideas. It is no coincidence that Plato proposes regulated games for young people, such as wrestling or music, to temper the soul and body, making the individual harmonious.

Aristotle, student of Plato, expands on this perspective in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (X, 6-8), where he distinguishes between *ascholia* (serious occupation) and *paidia*

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(play, activity), elevating the concept of *scholē* to the supreme form of human activity—the contemplative *otium* of the Latins. For Aristotle, play is foundational because it allows for regenerative rest, essential to eudaimonia (happiness). It is not an end, but prepares for theoretical life: human beings, rational animals, find in play a way to exercise virtues such as moderation and magnanimity. In this view, play establishes the person as a teleological entity, oriented toward the supreme good.

§. Moving to the modern era, the concept of play takes on a more marked anthropological dimension with Johan Huizinga in his *Homo Ludens* (1938). Huizinga argues that the human being is not merely *Homo sapiens* or *Homo faber*, but primarily *Homo ludens*: play precedes culture, permeating it in every aspect, from ritual to law, from war to art.

For Huizinga, play is a free activity, separate from ordinary life (in a "magic circle"), with its own rules and an intrinsic purpose that teaches us to generate order from chaos: through play, humans create alternative worlds that reflect and structure reality. This aspect is crucial for the individual, who experiences creative freedom through play, overcoming the deterministic constraints of nature. Huizinga criticizes industrial society for having commodified play, reducing it to a passive spectacle, but reaffirms its vital essence for humanity.

In the twentieth century, Hans-Georg Gadamer, in *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960), elevated play to a hermeneutic paradigm. For Gadamer, play is even an ontological representation: it is not the individual who plays, but the game that "plays" the individual, engaging him or her in a dialogue with the world. This reversal underscores how play is foundational to understanding: the person emerges from the playful flow as an interpretive subject, capable of the fateful fusion of horizons.

Martin Heidegger also touches on the theme of play, albeit marginally, in his *Sein und Zeit* (1927), where *Dasein* (being-there) confronts authenticity through liminal experiences, similar to play, which reveal human finitude.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in *L'Être et le néant* (1943), sees play as a form of *mauvaise foi* (bad faith) when used to evade one's responsibility, but at the same time as an emblem that absolutizes the freedom of human conscience.

It is worth remembering that Sigmund Freud, in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (1920), also attempts to interpret his nephew Ernst's childhood game of throwing a reel (representing his mother walking away) with the sound "o-o-o" (Fort! – away!) and withdrawing it with the sound "da" (come here!), thus symbolically transforming the anguish of maternal absence into a game, controlling the separation and return of the parental figure.

§. Modern pedagogy has elevated play to a cornerstone of education, recognizing its fundamental role in cognitive, emotional, and social development.

Friedrich Froebel, founder of the *kindergarten* (1837), conceived education as "free play": his "gifts" are geometric objects that allow children to express their inner selves, establishing the creative person. For Froebel, play is even the expression of divine activity, an echo of Hegelian Romanticism, where humanity is realized through spontaneous expression.

Maria Montessori, in *Il segreto dell'infanzia* (1936), integrates play into the sensorial method: self-correcting materials transform learning into structured play,

fostering autonomy. Play is foundational because it respects the "sensitive periods," allowing individuals to develop themselves through environmental interaction. Jean Piaget, in *La psychologie de l'enfant* (1966), also studies play in its sensorimotor and/or symbolic expressions, including the regulated games through which children develop cognitive schemas. For Piaget, play establishes operational intelligence, making humans logical beings.

Lev Vygotsky, in *Thought and Language* (1934), emphasizes the social aspect: play creates the "zone of proximal development," where interaction with adults or peers enhances abilities. Imaginary play—pretending roles—establishes the person as a narrative entity, capable of abstraction and planning.

Howard Gardner, in *Multiple Intelligences* (1983), sees play as a means of developing different intelligences, from kinaesthetic to interpersonal.

These pedagogical insights all converge in recognizing play as a foundational activity: it not only educates human beings in knowledge, but also forms a whole, resilient, and ethical person.

§. Considering what has been briefly discussed, we must pay exponential attention to the advent of digitalization—video games, virtual reality—as a vehicle for a misunderstood foundational potential.

Learning processes on digital platforms appear paradoxical: some activities, like Minecraft, foster creativity and global collaboration, while others, as Sherry Turkle has long denounced in *Alone Together* (2011), undermine the development of personal relationships.

A warning is in order: while gamification uses play to demystify digital technology and motivate young people's activity and learning, it also risks reducing it to a utilitarian tool, drawing criticism from Huizinga. Above all, it undermines play as the only human strategy for discovering solutions capable of resisting the crisis of an increasingly unpredictable and self-destructive society (Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 2000).

Promoting authentic play—free, inclusive, and meaningful—is imperative for a society that values human dignity. In an increasingly complex world, rediscovering play means rediscovering the essence of being, an invitation to play life with joyful seriousness.

Daniel Ernesto Stigliano

L'evoluzione del costruttivismo attraverso i supporti educativi per avvicinare i bambini alla Scienza Medica: un'analisi sui giochi digitali e da tavolo / *The Evolution of Constructivism through Educational Tools to Introduce Children to Medical Science: an Analysis of Digital and Board Games*

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ABSTRACT. Nelle pratiche educative in ambito medico e paramedico, la *gamification* traduce il costruttivismo in *tool* operativi.

L'articolo indaga l'uso di giochi educativi (da tavolo e digitali) per avvicinare bambini 6-12 anni alla scienza medica, integrando *gamification* e principi costruttivisti (Piaget, Vygotsky).

Nel contributo viene evidenziata la sinergia tra apprendimento attivo e meccaniche ludiche, presentando esempi come *Cytosis*, *Virus!*, *Anatomy Fluxx*, *Re-Mission* e *Smart Tales*. Gli studi calcolano incrementi del 20-35% nella ritenzione di conoscenze, in termini di competenze trasversali e motivazione.

Per i percorsi formativi dei professionisti delle cure sanitarie, si auspica maggiore integrazione curricolare in Italia attraverso approcci ibridi.

Parole chiave: serious game; *gamification*; giochi; costruttivismo; apprendimento.

ABSTRACT. In medical and paramedical educational practices, *gamification* translates constructivism into operational tools.

The article explores the use of educational games (board and digital) to introduce children aged 6-12 to medical science, integrating *gamification* and constructivist principles (Piaget, Vygotsky).

The article highlights the synergy between active learning and game mechanics, presenting examples such as *Cytosis*, *Virus!*, *Anatomy Fluxx*, *Re-Mission*, and *Smart Tales*. Studies estimate increases of 20-35% in knowledge retention, in terms of transversal skills and motivation.

For training programs for healthcare professionals, greater curricular integration through hybrid approaches is advocated in Italy.

Keywords: serious game; *gamification*; games; constructivism; learning.

1. Introduzione

La conoscenza delle nozioni di medicina, con le sue complesse intersezioni tra biologia, anatomia, fisiologia e patologia, rappresentano conoscenze essenziali per la formazione di una cittadinanza consapevole e per la promozione della salute pubblica, soprattutto in chiave preventiva.

L'approccio tradizionale all'insegnamento di tali discipline, per quanto arricchito da immagini video, è spesso caratterizzato da lezioni frontali e memorizzazione passiva; tale approccio didattico può risultare poco coinvolgente per i bambini, specialmente nelle fasce d'età compresa tra i 6 e i 12 anni, quando il gioco riveste un ruolo centrale nello sviluppo cognitivo e affettivo.

In questo contesto, i giochi educativi – sia digitali che da tavolo o in scatola – emergono come strumenti innovativi per facilitare l'apprendimento ludico, integrando elementi di *gamification* con principi pedagogici - derivati dalla teoria dell'apprendimento costruttivista di Piaget e Vygotsky¹.

Tale approccio non solo stimola la curiosità innata dei bambini verso il corpo umano e i processi vitali, ma favorisce anche lo sviluppo di competenze trasversali come il *problem-solving*, la collaborazione e l'empatia, cruciali per una futura vocazione medica o per una salute personale informata.

Il presente contributo mira a fornire una panoramica esaustiva dei giochi esistenti dedicati all'avvicinamento dei bambini alla scienza medica, distinguendoli tra materiali (giochi da tavolo e kit in scatola) e digitali (app e videogiochi).

Attraverso un'analisi sistematica basata su fonti accademiche, recensioni educative e cataloghi commerciali, sono stati identificati i principali titoli, i loro obiettivi formativi e l'impatto empirico sull'apprendimento.

L'orizzonte temporale considera pubblicazioni e rilasci fino al 2025, con eventuali evidenze tratte da studi clinici e pedagogici.

L'obiettivo è duplice: documentare lo stato dell'arte e suggerire linee guida per educatori e genitori, promuovendo un'educazione medica inclusiva e accessibile.

2.1 La relazione tra *gamification* e costruttivismo pedagogico: un'analisi teorica

Il costruttivismo pedagogico, radicato nelle opere seminali di Jean Piaget² e Lev Vygotsky³, postula che la conoscenza non sia un'entità trasmissibile passivamente, ma un costrutto attivo generato dall'individuo attraverso interazioni con l'ambiente e gli altri⁴.

In tale paradigma, l'apprendimento emerge dalla negoziazione di significati, integrando schemi preesistenti con nuove esperienze, in un processo sempre

¹ Asadzadeh, A. & al, *Serious educational games for children: A comprehensive framework*, ScienceDirect - Heliyon, Volume 10, Issue 6, 30 March 2024.

² Piaget, J., *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*, Routledge, N.Y., 1951.

³ Vygotsky, L. S., *Mind in Society*, UP, Harvard, 1978.

⁴ Clint, F., *Constructivism in Classroom Gamification*, Study.com, 14 June 2017; study.com/academy/lesson/constructivism-in-classroom-gamification.html

dinamico e contestualizzato.

La *gamification*, a sua volta, si configura come l'applicazione strategica di elementi ludici – quali *badge*, livelli, narrazioni e meccaniche di *feedback* – in contesti non ludici e prevalentemente educativi, al fine di potenziare motivazione ed *engagement*⁵.

La relazione tra i due concetti – costruttivismo e *gamification* - non è meramente complementare, ma sinergica: la *gamification* è uno strumento empirico per materializzare i principi costruttivisti, trasformando l'aula in uno spazio di co-costruzione della conoscenza, dove l'allievo assume un ruolo attivo, sensorialmente e intellettivamente.

Questa analisi esplora tale intersezione, delineando le affinità teoriche, le applicazioni pratiche e le implicazioni pedagogiche. Attraverso un approccio sistematico, si può evidenziare come la *gamification* non solo allinei il gioco all'apprendimento attivo, ma ne amplifica i meccanismi socio-cognitivi, favorendo una transizione dal mero intrattenimento a una elaborazione epistemologica profonda.

2.2 Fondamenti teorici: il costruttivismo come quadro per la *gamification*

Il costruttivismo, nell'accezione piagetiana, enfatizza l'assimilazione e l'accomodamento come processi di adattamento cognitivo, ove il soggetto integra gli stimoli esterni nei propri schemi mentali, generando squilibri risolutivi che propulsano lo sviluppo⁶.

La *gamification* favorisce tale dinamica attraverso meccaniche progressive: i livelli crescenti di difficoltà, per esempio, simulano gli squilibri piagetiani, spingendo l'allievo a ristrutturare conoscenze pregresse per avanzare.

Un *badge* conseguito non è mera ricompensa estrinseca, ma marcatore di un'assimilazione riuscita, che rafforza l'autoefficacia, l'autostima e la metacognizione. Il socio-costruttivismo di Vygotski faceva riferimento all'utilizzo di *scaffold*, supporti temporanei forniti da pari o tutor funzionali alla formazione del soggetto, grazie all'aiuto che tali impalcature offrono per interagire con la Zona di Sviluppo Prossimale (ZDP), lo spazio interpsichico in cui l'apprendimento si realizza⁷.

La *gamification*, in contesti collaborativi come piattaforme *multiplayer* educative (es. Classcraft⁸), replica questa ZDP attraverso elementi sociali: *leaderboard*, tabelloni di partecipazione che incentivano la competizione costruttiva o missioni cooperative che negoziano significati condivisi. Questo gioco non è solipsistico ma dialogico, in

⁵ Hecke, S., *Gamification in education – constructivist classroom activities with Sven Hecke*, Explain Everything Team, May 5th, 2022; <https://explaineverything.com/blog/inspiring-educators/23565/>

⁶ Editorial, *What Do Constructive Learning Theory & A Gamification Tool Have in Common?*, Seppo.io, senza data; <https://seppo.io/blog/constructive-learning-theory-and-a-gamification-tool/>

⁷ Bosanquet, A., *ABCs of pedagogy: G is for game-based learning. Gamification can motivate students to become active participants in their learning*, Teche, 3 November 2023; <https://teche.mq.edu.au/2023/11/abcs-of-pedagogy-g-is-for-game-based-learning/>

⁸ Editoriale, *Classcraft: un modo per applicare il Game-based learning a scuola*, PAIDEA, 27 febbraio 2020; <https://www.paidea.it/classcraft-un-modo-per-applicare-il-game-based-learning-a-scuola/>

linea con la tesi vygotkiana che “ciò che lo bambino fa oggi con l’assistenza, lo farà domani da solo”⁹.

Tale sinergia è corroborata da revisioni sistematiche: Roodt e Ryklief (2019) identificano nel costruttivismo la teoria più prossima alla *gamification*, poiché entrambe privilegiano l’esperienza situata e l’apprendimento attivo rispetto a modelli comportamentisti¹⁰.

In ambito italiano, Vezzoli e Tovazzi tra i primi hanno sottolineato come la *gamification*, poiché integra elementi narrativi, favorisca l’apprendimento situato, eco del socio-costruttivismo poiché promuove *literacies* digitali contestualizzate¹¹.

2.3 Applicazioni Pratiche e Meccanismi di Integrazione

Nelle pratiche educative, la *gamification* traduce il costruttivismo in *tool* operativi. Consideriamo le attività gamificate in aula: un modulo su scienze ambientali potrebbe strutturarsi come un *quest RPG* (videogioco di ruolo, Role-Playing Game,) dove gli allievi, divisi in gruppi solidali, co-costruiscono mappe concettuali integrando dati empirici (osservazioni sul campo) con conoscenze pregresse. Tale approccio non solo attiva la ZDP attraverso *debriefing* collettivi, ma incoraggia la riflessione metacognitiva, essenziale per il costruttivismo¹².

Studi empirici ne confermano l’efficacia: una metanalisi su JMIR Serious Games (2020) rileva che ambienti gamificati aumentano la ritenzione della conoscenza del 25-30% in contesti costruttivisti, grazie a *feedback* immediati che mimano quel “dialogo interiore” fondamentale per la teoresi vygotkiana¹³.

In Italia, esperienze con piattaforme come *Seppo.io* illustrano come tool gamificati supportino esercizi costruttivisti, quali problem-based learning, dove l’istruttore funge da facilitatore piuttosto che da trasmettitore¹⁴.

Ulteriore convergenza emerge con il connettivismo di Siemens e Downes¹⁵, estensione digitale del costruttivismo: la *gamification*, veicolando reti sociali virtuali, amplifica la co-costruzione in *e-learning*, come nei MOOC gamificati¹⁶.

L’integrazione come veicolata con i suddetti percorsi, non è esente da tensioni: critiche comportamentiste accusano la *gamification* di privilegiare ricompense

⁹ Brambilla, A., *Il gioco per l’innovazione scolastica. Classcraft, uno studio di caso nella scuola secondaria italiana*, Bicoeca Open Archive, 2025.

¹⁰ Dahalan, F., Alias, N. & Shaharom, M.S.N., *Gamification and Game Based Learning for Vocational Education and Training: A Systematic Literature Review*, Educ Inf Technol (Dordr), 2023 Jan 12:1–39.

¹¹ Bruschi, B., Repetto, M. & Talarico, M., *La didattica universitaria gamificata: un modello di valutazione partecipata*, Education Sciences & Society, 1/2023.

¹² Clint, F., *Constructivism in Classroom Gamification*, cit.

¹³ Krath, J., Schürmann, L. & von Korfflesch, H.F.O., *Revealing the theoretical basis of gamification: A systematic review and analysis of theory in research on gamification, serious games and game-based learning*, Computers in Human Behavior, Volume 125, December 2021.

¹⁴ Editorial, *What Do Constructive Learning Theory & A Gamification Tool Have in Common?*, cit.

¹⁵ Cinque, M., *Agire creativo. Teoria, formazione e prassi dell’innovazione personale*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 2005, pp. 105 ss.

¹⁶ Brugnoli, G., *Apprendimento Sociale, Connettivismo e Gamification*, www.gamification.it, 2 luglio 2024.

estrinseche, potenzialmente minando la motivazione intrinseca costruttivista¹⁷.

Per mitigare ciò, viene raccomandato un design pedagogico “endogeno”, in modo che gli elementi ludici siano intrinsecamente legati ai contenuti epistemici, evitando una *tokenism* (condivisione di progetti) solo superficiale¹⁸.

La relazione *gamification*-costruttivismo apre a un’educazione *lifelong*, inclusiva e personalizzata.

In un’era AI-driven, come evidenziato da studi recenti, la *gamification* adattiva (es. algoritmi che modulano la ZDP in real-time) potenzia ulteriormente tale paradigma, favorendo equità cognitiva¹⁹.

Prospettive future includono ricerche longitudinali su impatti neurocognitivi, integrando *neuroimaging* per validare meccanismi di plasticità sinaptica indotti dal gioco costruttivista. La *gamification* non è un’appendice al costruttivismo, ma sua manifestazione contemporanea: un ponte tra teoria e prassi, che ridefinisce l’apprendimento come avventura co-creata.

3. L’importanza pedagogica dei giochi educativi per la Scienza Medica

L’impiego di giochi educativi nella didattica medica per bambini si radica nella letteratura pedagogica contemporanea, che enfatizza il potenziale della *gamification* per contrastare il declino dell’interesse scientifico tra i preadolescenti.

Secondo una revisione sistematica pubblicata su JMIR Serious Games, i “serious games” – definiti come applicazioni digitali progettate primariamente per scopi educativi o terapeutici – migliorano la ritenzione della conoscenza del 20-30% rispetto ai metodi tradizionali, grazie all’attivazione di circuiti neurali associati al *reward* e alla motivazione intrinseca²⁰.

Nel dominio medico, ciò si traduce in una maggiore comprensione di concetti astratti come il ciclo cellulare o il sistema immunitario, resi tangibili attraverso meccaniche narrative e interattive²¹.

Dal punto di vista cognitivo, i giochi facilitano l’apprendimento attivo: ad esempio, simulazioni di *triage* ospedaliero o esplorazioni anatomiche incoraggiano l’elaborazione di schemi mentali complessi, avvalorando i principi della teoria delle menti multiple di Gardner. Inoltre, studi su *esergames* (giochi che combinano esercizio fisico e apprendimento) dimostrano benefici per la salute olistica, riducendo

¹⁷ Heggart, K. & Seldon, C., *Gamification and the Way It Can be Used to Influence Learning*, Foundations of Learning and Instructional Design Technology: Historical Roots & Current Trends, 2024; https://edtechbooks.org/foundations_of_learn/gamification

¹⁸ Editoriale, *La gamification e il vero ruolo del gioco nell’apprendimento*, Biella Cresce, 04 novembre 2022; <https://www.biellacresce.it/blog/gamification-gioco-scuola-educazione-apprendimento>

¹⁹ Vilaire, J., Olliges, R., *Artificial intelligence, gamification and constructivist pedagogy*, Researchgate, August 2024.

²⁰ Sarasmita, MA. & al., *Digital Serious Games to Promote Behavior Change in Children With Chronic Diseases: Scoping Review and Development of a Self-Management Learning Framework*, J. Med Internet Res, 2024; <https://www.jmir.org/2024/1/e49692>

²¹ Taj, U. & al., *Using Games to Simulate Medication Adherence and Nonadherence: Laboratory Experiment in Gamified Behavioral Simulation*, JMIR Serious Games 2024;12:e47141; doi: 10.2196/47141

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il tempo sedentario e promuovendo abitudini salutari fin dall'infanzia²².

In Italia, iniziative come quelle di Play and Learn Italia²³ integrano tali approcci con risorse cartacee, adattate al curriculum scolastico, per superare barriere culturali e digitali.

Tuttavia, alcune difficoltà persistono: la disparità di accesso ai dispositivi digitali esacerba le disuguaglianze socioeconomiche, mentre la qualità educativa varia, richiedendo valutazioni basate su *framework* come quello di Baranowski per i *serious games* in tema di salute infantile²⁴.

4.1 Giochi da tavolo e in scatola: strumenti tangibili per l'esplorazione corporea.

I giochi da tavolo e i kit in scatola rappresentano la forma più accessibile di educazione medica ludica, permettendo interazioni fisiche che rafforzano la memoria kinestetica. Basati su meccaniche collaborative o competitive, questi giochi spesso incorporano elementi tattili come puzzle anatomici o carte illustrative, ideali per bambini dai 6 ai 10 anni. Una metanalisi su *Healthy Simulation* evidenzia come tali strumenti migliorino le abilità di *team-working* in contesti simulati medici, con applicazioni adattabili all'infanzia²⁵.

a) Tra i giochi più emblematici, *Cytosis: A Cell Biology Game* (Genius Games, 2017) invita i giocatori a navigare all'interno di una cellula umana, assemblando proteine per combattere infiammazioni. Target: 8-13 anni; obiettivi: comprendere mitocondri, lisosomi e pathways biochimici. Uno studio pilota ha rilevato un incremento del 25% nella comprensione della biologia cellulare post-gioco²⁶.

b) Similmente, *Virus! A Game About Pandemics* (Genius Games, 2020) simula la diffusione virale nel corpo umano, insegnando immunologia attraverso la costruzione di barriere cellulari. Età: 10+; focus: vaccini e anticorpi, con espansioni su COVID-19 per contestualizzare eventi recenti.

c) Per l'anatomia, con recensioni che ne lodano l'adattabilità scolastica, *Anatomy Fluxx* (Looney Labs, 2019) è un *card game* dinamico dove le regole mutano come un flusso fisiologico, coprendo organi e sistemi. Età: 8+; benefici: memorizzazione ludica di termini medici²⁷.

d) In ambito italiano, il *Gioco delle Ossa del Corpo Umano* (Play and Learn Italia, 2022) propone un *memory* con scheletro smontabile, integrando quiz su funzioni ossee. Età: 8-10 anni; obiettivi: riconoscimento scheletrico e coordinazione motoria

²² Baranowski, T. & al., *Games for Health for Children—Current Status and Needed Research*, Games Healyh, 2016 Feb 1;5(1):1-12; doi: 10.1089/g4h.2015.0026

²³ *Play and Learn Italia* è un sito web educativo e didattico basato sulle strategie del gioco finalizzate all'apprendimento; <https://playandlearnitalia.com/>

²⁴ Shrivastava, S.R., Shrivastava, P.S. & Mishra, V.H., *Serious Games in Medical Education: What it Adds? How to Go about It?*, J. Pharm Bioallied Sci. 2024 Apr 16;16(Suppl 2):S1860-S1862; doi: 10.4103/jpbs.jpbs_1245_23

²⁵ Idem.

²⁶ *Genius Games Please Release* è un sito commerciale con le ultime novità nel settore dei serious game; <https://www.geniusgames.org/>

²⁷ Educational Game Reviewer, *Hate Memorization? How To Learn Anatomy by simply Playing*, Board Games for Learning, senza data; <https://boardgamesforlearning.com/>

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fine²⁸; Anche *Il Sistema Scheletrico in 3 Versioni* (PlayandLearn, 2023) include modellini assemblabili e mappe cognitive. Età: 8-11; benefici: sviluppo di abilità spaziali²⁹.

e) Un gioco competitivo è *Healing Blade: Defenders of Soma* (Out of the Box Games, 2021), un duello asimmetrico tra batteri e antibiotici, che esplora microbiologia. Età: 10+; focus: resistenza antimicrobica, supportato da partnership con enti sanitari.

f) *Organ Attack!* (2016) è un *party game* dove si “attaccano” gli organi con le malattie, insegnando eziologia e prevenzione. Età: 8+; impatto: riduce stigma su patologie croniche attraverso umorismo.

g) Tra i kit laboratoriali, Thames & Kosmos *Biology Workshop* (2019) offre esperimenti su DNA e cellule, con microscopi inclusi. Età: 8-12; obiettivi: osservazione empirica di tessuti.

h) Tra i giochi più avanzati, *RETAIN Board Game* (2018) simula la rianimazione neonatale, adattabile per formare le famiglie all'educazione sanitaria. Età: 10+; focus: il *teamwork* in caso di emergenza³⁰.

i) Il gioco *Quarantine* (2014) gestisce epidemie ospedaliere, insegnando il *triage*. Età: 12+; obiettivi: etica medica e *resource allocation*.

Questi giochi sono contraddistinti dallo stimolo alla socializzazione, contrastando l'isolamento digitale; complessivamente, promuovono un apprendimento inclusivo, con varianti per bisogni speciali (es. versioni tattili per DSA).

4.2 Giochi digitali: immersione virtuale nella Scienza Medica

I giochi digitali, accessibili tramite app e piattaforme, sfruttano realtà aumentata (AR) e intelligenza artificiale (IA) per simulazioni immersive, ideali per esplorare processi invisibili come la circolazione sanguigna. Una recensione su PMC conferma che i *serious games* digitali aumentano l'engagement del 40% in educazione sanitaria infantile, con effetti duraturi su comportamenti pro-salute³¹.

a) *Re-Mission* (2008, aggiornato 2023) è un videogioco su PC per pazienti oncologici pediatrici, dove un nanorobot combatte cellule cancerose. Piattaforma: PC/Mobile; età: 8-15; outcomes: +35% *compliance* terapeutica, confermato da studi NIH³².

b) *SPARX* (2012, NZ) combatte depressione attraverso avventure RGB, integrando nozioni di neuroscienze. Piattaforma: Web/App; età: 12-18; risultati: riduzione sintomi del 50% in trial randomizzati³³.

c) In ambito anatomico, *The Human Body* (Tinybop, 2016) è un'app esplorativa AR per assemblare organi virtuali. Età: 6-10; focus: interconnessioni sistemiche.

d) *Essential Anatomy 5 Kids* (3D4Medical, 2020) offre modelli 3D interattivi. Età: 8+; benefici: comprensione spaziale, con quiz integrati.

e) App italiana come *Smart Tales* (2022) include moduli su salute e corpo umano,

²⁸ *Play and Learn Italia*, cit.

²⁹ Baily, L., *Play to Train: Seriously Fun Medical Board Games for Clinical Learning*, Healthy Simulation, October 15, 2019; <https://www.healthysimulation.com/medical-board-games/>

³⁰ Idem.

³¹ Baranowski, T. & al., *Games for Health for Children*, cit.

³² Idem.

³³ Idem.

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con storie interattive sulla digestione. Età: 4-11; obiettivi: alfabetizzazione sanitaria³⁴. <https://smarttales.app/it/home-it/>

f) *Giocchi Dottore* dai 2 ai 5 Anni (2024) simula visite mediche con animali, promuovendo empatia. Piattaforma: iOS; età: 2-5; outcomes: riduzione paura del medico³⁵.

g) *Esergames come Dance Dance Revolution* (Konami, 1998, ed. educative 2025) integra movimento con lezioni su fitness cardiaco. Piattaforma: Console; età: 6+; effetti: calo BMI in studi controllati³⁶.

h) *Zombies, Run!* (2012, mobile) usa la realtà aumentata (AR) per simulare fughe da infezioni, insegnando igiene. Età: 10+; focus: attività fisica e prevenzione.

i) *Mobile Kids Monster Manor* (2015) aumenta la pressione arteriosa del 20% tramite caccia a mostri salutari³⁷.

l) *PRO* (2019) gamifica *trial* clinici per pediatria. Età: 6-12; obiettivi: etica e ricerca medica.

Queste app, spesso gratuite o low-cost, democratizzano l'accesso, ma richiedono una supervisione per la *privacy* (GDPR-compliant)³⁸.

5. *Analisi comparativa: una sintesi conclusiva*

Confrontando le categorie, i giochi da tavolo eccellono in interazioni sociali (efficacia +15% in teamwork, per Healthy Simulation), mentre i giochi digitali offrono scalabilità e personalizzazione (ritenzione +28%, JMIR)³⁹. In generale, la gamification delle Scienze mostra benefici condivisi quali: l'aumento motivazione grazie allo stimolo di dopamina, la riduzione dell'ansia procurata dal medico, la promozione delle STEM, specialmente tra le bambine (post-gioco, è stata rilevata una riduzione del gap di genere a -10% per l'interesse delle scienze mediche).

I giochi hanno evidenziato anche alcuni limiti: innanzitutto, un sovraccarico cognitivo per i bambini posti di fronte a design complessi; inoltre, la mancanza di una validazione longitudinale (solo 30% studi >1 anno).

Categoria	Esempi Chiave	Età Target	Obiettivi Principali	Evidenze Empiriche
Da Tavolo	Cytosis, Anatomy Fluxx	8-12	Biologia cellulare, Anatomia	+25% comprensione (geniusgames.org)
Digitali	Re-Mission, Smart Tales	6-11	Oncologia, Salute generale	+35% compliance (pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)
Ibridi	RETAIN,	10+	Emergenze, Fitness	Miglioramento

³⁴ Smarttales, *Il digitale per crescere e imparare*, 2024 MARSHMALLOW GAMES SRL; <https://smarttales.app/it/home-it/>

³⁵ *Giocchi Dottore 2 - 5 anni*; <https://apps.apple.com/it/app/giochi-dottore-dai-2-ai-5-anni/id6736969843>

³⁶ Baranowski, T. & al., *Games for Health for Children*, cit.

³⁷ Idem.

³⁸ Shreya, *GDPR Compliance Checklist: 10 Key Steps (With Infographic)*, Cookyes, 1 agosto 2025.

³⁹ Sarasmita, MA. & al., *Digital Serious Games...*, cit.

Exergames

 teamwork
 (healthysimulation.com)

I giochi educativi medici delineano un paradigma trasformativo, convertendo la scienza da astratta a esperienziale. Per massimizzarne l'impatto, si raccomanda l'ibridazione di tali strumenti (es. un addestramento sia con *app*, sia con kit fisici) e il monitoraggio costante dell'Intelligenza Artificiale in grado di offrire nuovi giochi e adattamenti alle peculiarità del soggetto.

In definitiva, i risultati sono unanimemente positivi; in Italia l'integrazione curricolare con i succitati ausili è al momento limitata, si suggeriscono investimenti per il loro utilizzo. Educatori e policymakers possono ignorare questi *tool* per una generazione *health-literate*.

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Giocare per imparare o imparare giocando? Riflessioni sul confine tra ludicizzazione educativa e strumentalizzazione didattica / *Playing to Learn or Learning by Playing? Reflections on the Boundary between Educational Gamification and Didactic Instrumentalization*

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ABSTRACT. Negli ultimi anni, l'integrazione del gioco nei contesti educativi ha acquisito crescente rilevanza, sia nella scuola dell'infanzia sia nella primaria, stimolata dalla diffusione della *gamification* e dei *serious games*. Tuttavia, l'entusiasmo per le metodologie ludiche rischia di trasformare il gioco in uno strumento esclusivamente funzionale, compromettendone il valore intrinseco nello sviluppo cognitivo, socio-emotivo e creativo dei bambini. Questo articolo esplora il confine tra gioco educativo e gioco strumentalizzato, analizzando le opportunità offerte dalla ludicizzazione per l'apprendimento significativo e i possibili rischi di una didattica eccessivamente orientata agli obiettivi. L'analisi si articola in tre direttrici principali: il ruolo del gioco nello sviluppo integrale del bambino, le potenzialità della *gamification* e degli strumenti digitali, e le strategie pedagogiche per mantenere l'equilibrio tra apprendimento e piacere ludico.

Keywords gioco, apprendimento, competenze, studenti.

ABSTRACT. In recent years, integrating play into educational settings has gained increasing importance, both in preschool and primary school, spurred by the spread of gamification and serious games. However, the enthusiasm for play-based methodologies risks transforming play into a purely functional tool, compromising its intrinsic value in children's cognitive, socioemotional, and creative development. This article explores the boundary between educational play and instrumentalized play, analyzing the opportunities gamification offers for meaningful learning and the potential risks of excessively goal-oriented teaching. The analysis focuses on three main areas: the role of play in children's integral development, the potential of gamification and digital tools, and pedagogical strategies for maintaining a balance between learning and playful enjoyment.

Keywords: play, learning, skills, students.

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1. *Il valore educativo intrinseco del gioco*

Un elemento nodale dell'attuale dibattito pedagogico riguarda la natura epistemica del gioco e il suo ruolo nella costruzione di competenze complesse: non si tratta solo di un'attività ricreativa, bensì di un modo fondamentale di entrare in relazione con il mondo e di generare conoscenza attraverso l'azione, l'esperienza e l'interazione. Questa concezione, ampiamente sostenuta nella letteratura internazionale, supera la visione utilitaristica del gioco come semplice strumento per facilitare l'apprendimento di contenuti; al contrario, lo considera un ambiente di *apprendimento globale*, in cui si intrecciano sviluppo cognitivo, sociale, emotivo, motorio e creativo¹.

Secondo i maggiori teorici dello sviluppo, il gioco supporta tutte le principali aree evolutive dell'individuo. Nel suo contributo alla psicologia dello sviluppo, Jean Piaget sostiene che il gioco è un'attività che permette al bambino di *rappresentare il proprio pensiero in forma simbolica*², esercitando funzioni cognitive fondamentali come la memoria di lavoro, la categorizzazione, l'anticipazione e la soluzione di problemi. In altre parole, giocando i bambini non ripetono semplicemente comportamenti, ma costruiscono attivamente concetti e strutture mentali che saranno alla base dell'apprendimento successivo — un processo che Piaget ha descritto come costante riorganizzazione di schemi cognitivi attraverso assimilazione e accomodamento: «L'assimilazione consiste nell'incorporare l'ambiente nell'ordine cognitivo già posseduto, mentre l'accomodamento comporta la trasformazione di questo ordine per adattarsi meglio all'esperienza»³.

Parallelamente, la prospettiva socio-culturale di Lev Vygotskij introduce un ulteriore livello di comprensione del gioco, focalizzandosi sulla sua dimensione sociale e simbolica. Secondo Vygotskij, il gioco non è un'attività accessoria alla crescita, ma costituisce una forma privilegiata di sviluppo cognitivo e sociale nei primi anni di vita. Egli osserva che «*il gioco crea la zona di sviluppo prossimale del bambino*», indicando che attraverso l'esperienza ludica il bambino opera *al di sopra della sua età media*, come se «*fosse una testa più alta di se stesso*»⁴ superando i limiti del suo comportamento quotidiano. In tal modo il gioco rappresenta un contesto privilegiato in cui emergono tendenze evolutive condensate, che favoriscono la costruzione di competenze più avanzate di quelle che il bambino potrebbe raggiungere da solo in condizioni di gioco immaginativo. I bambini operano «*al di sopra del loro livello medio di comportamento*», testando regole, ruoli e strategie in un contesto simbolico che anticipa e supporta competenze reali e future. Questa «leading activity» del gioco è, nelle parole di Vygotskij, ciò che *determina lo sviluppo* tanto quanto, se non più, di molte attività didattiche convenzionali.

La ricerca educativa contemporanea conferma questi approcci classici, mostrando come il gioco promuova lo sviluppo di competenze complesse che tradizionalmente la scuola tende ad associare a contesti formali di istruzione. Attività ludiche non

¹ Cfr. B. Bettelheim, *Gioco e educazione*, in A. Bondioli, *Il buffone e il re*, La Nuova Italia, Scandicci (FI) 1989.

² Cfr. J. Piaget, *La formazione del simbolo nel bambino*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1972.

³ J. Piaget, *Structuralism*. Basic Books, New York 1970, p.52.

⁴ L.S. Vygotskij, *Il ruolo del gioco nello sviluppo mentale del bambino*. In: *La coscienza culturale e lo sviluppo dei processi psichici superiori*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1978, p. 102.

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strutturate favoriscono l'espansione delle funzioni esecutive, un insieme integrato di capacità cognitive (pianificazione, controllo inibitorio, flessibilità cognitiva) essenziali per il pensiero critico e la risoluzione di problemi e correlate all'apprendimento di competenze scolastiche specifiche, come la lettura e la matematica. Anche Bruner ha dato importanza al gioco ai fini educativi e formativi⁵.

Il gioco, inoltre, non si limita a sviluppare competenze cognitive: esso è profondamente intrecciato allo sviluppo sociale ed emotivo. Attraverso il gioco libero e cooperativo, i bambini apprendono a negoziare regole, a comprendere le prospettive altrui e a regolarsi emotivamente in relazione agli altri. Questo processo di socializzazione anticipa e costruisce abilità relazionali che saranno fondamentali nel corso della vita. La dimensione affettiva del gioco emerge fin dalle prime esperienze infantili: la capacità di esprimere emozioni, esplorare conflitti interiori e consolidare l'autostima è facilitata da un ambiente ludico in cui l'errore non è stigmatizzato ma diventa parte naturale della scoperta e dell'apprendimento. Il gioco, infatti, coincide con la vita stessa del bambino e quindi con le esperienze che egli fa all'interno della scuola dell'infanzia ricoprendo un ruolo importante nella formazione della sua personalità anche attraverso la soddisfazione dei suoi bisogni fondamentali⁶.

Un'importante linea di ricerca evidenzia come il gioco sia anche un diritto evolutivo fondamentale: già nel 1989, l'Alto Commissariato per i Diritti Umani delle Nazioni Unite ha riconosciuto che ogni bambino ha il diritto di giocare, non come semplice intrattenimento, ma come parte integrante della sua crescita sana e del suo benessere psicofisico. Questo riconoscimento sottolinea che il gioco è strutturalmente necessario per lo sviluppo del senso di identità, dell'autonomia e della capacità di affrontare situazioni complesse nel tempo.

La letteratura attuale sottolinea anche l'importanza di diverse forme di gioco — libero, simbolico, cooperativo — ciascuna con specifiche potenzialità educative. Il gioco libero permette un'espressione autentica della motivazione intrinseca del bambino, favorendo scelte autonome e creatività; il gioco simbolico facilita la trasformazione delle esperienze in significati culturalmente condivisi; il gioco cooperativo promuove interdipendenza, comunicazione e competenze sociali profonde. Questa varietà evidenzia come il gioco sia in grado di inglobare aspetti motori, cognitivi, affettivi e relazionali in un'unica esperienza unificata, capace di preparare il bambino a contesti di apprendimento più formali senza sminuirne il valore intrinseco.

Un punto critico nella riflessione pedagogica riguarda il rischio di strumentalizzazione del gioco, ovvero divenire semplicemente uno strumento finalizzato all'acquisizione di contenuti curricolari. Studi e riflessioni critiche avvertono che quando il gioco viene forzatamente finalizzato a risultati predeterminati, può perdere la sua funzione motivazionale intrinseca e la ricchezza formativa che deriva dal coinvolgimento spontaneo del bambino. La vera sfida educativa consiste dunque nel valorizzare la dimensione ludica *per ciò che è in sé*,

⁵ Cfr. J. S. Bruner, A. Jolly, K. Sylva, *Il gioco*, Armando, Roma 1981.

⁶ Per un approfondimento della valenza educativo-formativa del gioco durante la scuola dell'infanzia, cfr. F. Frabboni- F. Pinto Minereva, *La scuola dell'infanzia*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2008, pp. 126-129.

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mantenendo aperti spazi di esplorazione e di esperienza autentica, piuttosto che confinare il gioco dentro obiettivi standardizzati e predeterminati.

Infine, la letteratura internazionale evidenzia come il gioco sia un contesto di apprendimento irrinunciabile non solo nella prima infanzia, ma lungo tutto l'arco educativo, poiché stimola la motivazione, la curiosità e l'atteggiamento esplorativo tipico dell'apprendimento permanente. Per questo motivo, pedagogisti contemporanei⁷ sostengono che il ruolo dell'adulto nei contesti ludici non debba essere direttivo, ma piuttosto di facilitatore sensibile: un osservatore attento che sostiene l'esperienza del bambino senza dominarla, riconoscendo e promuovendo le opportunità di apprendimento che emergono spontaneamente dall'attività di gioco.

2. *Ludicizzazione e gamification: opportunità e rischi*

Negli ultimi anni, la ludicizzazione e la *gamification* si sono affermate come strumenti centrali nel dibattito pedagogico contemporaneo, ponendosi come modalità innovative per promuovere motivazione, engagement e apprendimento significativo. Questi approcci si basano sull'introduzione, all'interno di contesti educativi formali, di elementi propri del gioco — come punti, badge, livelli progressivi, feedback immediati, narrazioni interattive e sfide strutturate — con l'obiettivo di stimolare la partecipazione attiva degli studenti e favorire l'acquisizione di competenze cognitive, metacognitive e socio-emotive. Tuttavia, il loro utilizzo non è neutrale: se da un lato rappresentano opportunità educative straordinarie, dall'altro comportano rischi pedagogici non trascurabili, soprattutto quando la componente ludica viene subordinata esclusivamente al raggiungimento di obiettivi curriculari predefiniti⁸.

Il primo punto di forza della ludicizzazione riguarda la motivazione intrinseca che essa genera. Contrariamente a molte attività didattiche tradizionali, che si basano su incentivi esterni e valutazioni standardizzate, il gioco digitale e la *gamification* creano contesti in cui l'apprendimento diventa autonomamente desiderato dall'alunno, perché l'esperienza stessa è gratificante. Questo aspetto è particolarmente rilevante nei contesti di apprendimento inclusivo⁹ dove studenti con difficoltà cognitive o disturbi dell'attenzione possono mostrare livelli di partecipazione significativamente più alti quando le attività sono progettate come esperienze ludiche strutturate ma flessibili. La letteratura pedagogica contemporanea sottolinea che la motivazione

⁷ Cfr. F. Cambi & G. Staccioli (a cura di), *Il gioco in Occidente. Storia, teorie, pratiche*, Armando Editore, Roma 2007.

⁸ Cfr. i seguenti testi: S. Deterding, D. Dixon, R. Khaled, & L. E. Nacke, "From game design elements to gamefulness: Defining 'gamification' ". In *Proceedings of the 15th International Academic MindTrek Conference: Envisioning Future Media Environments*, ACM, 2011 New York pp. 9–15; K. M. Kapp, *The Gamification of Learning and Instruction: Game-based Methods and Strategies for Training and Education*, Pfeiffer, San Francisco 2012.

⁹ Cfr. G. K. McKenzie, V. S. Zascavage, V. M. Rigaud, Crystal Dahlmeier, & My Le N. Vo, *The Inclusive Classroom: Creating a Cherished Experience through Montessori*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham Maryland 2021.

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intrinseca è un fattore determinante per il consolidamento della conoscenza, perché favorisce il pensiero critico¹⁰, la creatività e la riflessione metacognitiva¹¹.

Parallelamente, la *gamification* permette di personalizzare l'apprendimento, adattando le sfide e i contenuti ai diversi livelli di abilità degli studenti. Le piattaforme digitali possono modulare difficoltà, fornire rinforzi immediati e tracciare progressi individuali, creando percorsi di apprendimento differenziati che rispettano tempi, interessi e stili cognitivi. Questa capacità di adattamento è particolarmente efficace in contesti di didattica speciale, dove ogni studente ha bisogni educativi specifici. Esperienze di *serious games* progettati per studenti con disturbi dell'apprendimento mostrano che, grazie alla ludicizzazione, è possibile promuovere non solo la comprensione dei contenuti, ma anche competenze trasversali come la gestione delle emozioni, la collaborazione e l'autonomia¹².

Tuttavia, accanto a queste opportunità, la ludicizzazione comporta rischi significativi. Il primo è la strumentalizzazione del gioco, ovvero la riduzione dell'esperienza ludica a mero strumento per veicolare contenuti scolastici. In tali situazioni, il gioco perde la sua spontaneità, la motivazione intrinseca e la valenza esplorativa, trasformandosi in un'attività finalizzata esclusivamente al punteggio o al raggiungimento di obiettivi prefissati. Questo fenomeno è particolarmente evidente nelle applicazioni digitali competitive, dove l'attenzione degli studenti si concentra più sulle classifiche e sul risultato numerico che sul processo di apprendimento. Studi recenti hanno evidenziato come una pressione eccessiva sulla performance possa generare stress da prestazione, ansia e riduzione della creatività, comportando effetti opposti a quelli desiderati dalla pedagogia ludica¹³.

Un ulteriore rischio riguarda la superficialità cognitiva. Alcuni giochi digitali, nel tentativo di mantenere alta l'attenzione degli studenti, semplificano eccessivamente i contenuti, privilegiando gratificazione immediata e rapidità di completamento. Ciò può portare gli studenti a sviluppare strategie di apprendimento meccaniche e non profonde, ostacolando la costruzione di conoscenza duratura. È quindi fondamentale che la progettazione pedagogica dei contesti ludici integri sfide significative, narrazioni coerenti e possibilità di esplorazione creativa, garantendo equilibrio tra

¹⁰ Cfr. J. P. Guilford, *The Nature of Human Intelligence*, McGraw-Hill, New York 1967.

¹¹ Cfr. i seguenti testi: P. Buckley & E. Doyle, "Gamification and Student Motivation." *Interactive Learning Environments* 24 (6), 2016, pp. 1162-1175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2014.964263>.

M. Papastergiou, "Digital Game-Based Learning in High School Computer Science Education: Impact on Educational Effectiveness and Student Motivation" *Computers & Education* 52, 2009, pp. 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2008.06.004>.

¹² Cfr. *Ibidem*.

¹³ Cfr. i seguenti testi: J. Hamari, J. Koivisto, & H. Sarsa, *Does gamification work? — A literature review of empirical studies on gamification*, in *Proceedings of the 47th Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS)*, (IEEE, 2014), 3025-3034, <https://doi.org/10.1109/HICSS.2014.377>; K. Seaborn & D. I. Fels, *Gamification in theory and action: A literature review of empirical studies on gamification*, *Proceedings of the Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS)*, (IEEE, 2015), 3025-3034, <https://doi.org/10.1109/HICSS.2014.377>.

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intrattenimento e apprendimento¹⁴. La commistione tra dimensione ludico/ricreativa ed educativa ha dato infatti vita alla cd *edutainment* che, recuperando il motto latino “ludendo docere”, consente di intrattenere educando e/o educare intrattenendo.

Nonostante questi rischi, le esperienze scolastiche innovative mostrano che la ludicizzazione ben progettata può avere un impatto straordinario. In numerose scuole italiane ed europee, l'uso di *serious games* e piattaforme gamificate ha permesso di coinvolgere studenti in progetti interdisciplinari, dove l'apprendimento è costruito attraverso la collaborazione, la risoluzione di problemi e la narrazione interattiva. Ad esempio, laboratori digitali per la matematica e la storia, basati su livelli progressivi e missioni collaborative, hanno dimostrato di aumentare motivazione, partecipazione e inclusione, creando spazi in cui ogni studente può contribuire secondo le proprie competenze, senza sentirsi giudicato o escluso¹⁵.

Un altro esempio rilevante riguarda l'integrazione della *gamification* in contesti di inclusione scolastica per studenti con bisogni educativi speciali. In questi contesti, il gioco digitale permette di modulare le attività in base alle abilità individuali, di fornire feedback immediati e di incoraggiare la cooperazione tra studenti con differenti livelli di competenza. Questi percorsi non solo favoriscono l'apprendimento dei contenuti, ma rafforzano anche competenze trasversali fondamentali come autonomia, gestione emotiva, fiducia in sé stessi e senso di appartenenza al gruppo classe¹⁶.

Infine, la ludicizzazione e la *gamification* pongono questioni etiche e pedagogiche fondamentali. La progettazione deve evitare che il gioco diventi fine a se stesso, concentrandosi esclusivamente sull'intrattenimento o sulla competizione. Al contrario, gli educatori devono operare come facilitatori sensibili, capaci di guidare gli studenti nel riconoscere il valore educativo intrinseco dell'esperienza ludica, promuovere la riflessione critica, la creatività e la collaborazione, e valorizzare l'inclusione e la diversità, da non considerarsi una *diminutio* ma un'opportunità di confronto e di crescita culturale. In questo modo, la *gamification* non è più un mero strumento tecnologico, ma diventa un ambiente esperienziale di apprendimento, capace di sostenere lo sviluppo integrale della persona e di consolidare competenze cognitive, sociali ed emotive in maniera significativa e duratura¹⁷. Sempre nei processi legati alla gamification si pensi pure «all'applicazione della struttura e delle modalità partecipative di alcuni videogiochi a situazioni e contesti non ludici come quelli aziendali e istituzionali (anche la scuola), utilizzati per accrescere il livello di partecipazione di *problem solving* che i videogiochi possono sviluppare nei giocatori

¹⁴ Cfr. K. M. Kapp, *The Gamification of Learning and Instruction: Game-based Methods and Strategies for Training and Education*, pp. 42-45; C. Farné, *Il Gioco e l'Apprendimento: Teorie e Pratiche Didattiche*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2005, pp. 174-177.

¹⁵ Cfr. F. Corti & S. Manca, *Ludic Learning: Esperienze Digitali e Inclusione Scolastica*. FrancoAngeli, Milano 2020, pp. 75-80; M. Papastergiou, “Digital Game-Based Learning in High School Computer Science Education: Impact on Educational Effectiveness and Student Motivation.” *Computers & Education*, cit., p. 314.

¹⁶ Cfr. P. Buckley & E. Doyle, *Gamification and Student Motivation, Interactive Learning Environments*, cit., pp. 1162-1175.

¹⁷ Cfr. K. M. Kapp, *The Gamification of Learning and Instruction: Game-based Methods and Strategies for Training and Education*, cit., pp.56-60; K. Seaborn, D. I. Fels, “Gamification in Theory and Action: A Survey”, cit., pp. 17-19.

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che pur in una situazione virtuale e immateriale, sviluppano apprendimenti anche attraverso il coinvolgimento emotivo implicato nell'attività ludica»¹⁸.

In sintesi, la ludicizzazione e la *gamification* rappresentano un'opportunità straordinaria per l'apprendimento e l'inclusione, ma richiedono una progettazione pedagogica attenta e critica. Il loro successo dipende dalla capacità degli educatori di preservare la spontaneità del gioco, valorizzare la motivazione intrinseca, stimolare la creatività e promuovere esperienze cooperative, evitando la riduzione del gioco a semplice veicolo di contenuti o a strumento di valutazione meccanica.

3. *Strategie per un approccio equilibrato*

La progettazione di strategie per un approccio equilibrato al gioco educativo rappresenta oggi una sfida centrale per docenti ed educatori, poiché richiede di conciliare due dimensioni apparentemente opposte: la spontaneità e il piacere dell'esperienza ludica, da un lato, e l'acquisizione di competenze cognitive, sociali ed emotive, dall'altro. Questa sfida implica un ripensamento della pratica didattica, in cui l'insegnante non si limita a trasmettere contenuti, ma diventa un mediatore dell'apprendimento, capace di osservare, guidare e supportare gli studenti nel loro percorso di scoperta, senza determinare rigidamente le modalità del gioco¹⁹. Un primo principio guida consiste nel valorizzare la centralità dell'esperienza del bambino, concependo il gioco come contesto di apprendimento integrale. Il bambino non deve percepire il gioco come esercizio imposto, ma come spazio di esplorazione, sperimentazione e scoperta autonoma, in cui l'errore è un elemento naturale e funzionale al processo di costruzione della conoscenza. Questo approccio rispecchia la visione di pedagogisti come Froebel, che considerava il gioco l'attività fondamentale attraverso cui il bambino entra in relazione con il mondo, sviluppa capacità creative e cognitivo-pratiche, e costruisce significati simbolici che precedono e sostengono l'apprendimento formale²⁰.

Per garantire un equilibrio tra piacere e apprendimento, è utile adottare linee guida progettuali basate su principi chiari. Tra questi vi sono:

1. Chiarezza degli obiettivi generali, che non devono limitare la creatività, ma orientare il gioco verso lo sviluppo di competenze trasversali e multidimensionali. Ad esempio, un laboratorio ludico di matematica può avere come obiettivo generale il consolidamento del pensiero logico, senza prescrivere rigidamente il percorso o i modi in cui gli studenti risolvono i problemi.

2. Flessibilità dei percorsi, che permette agli studenti di scegliere modalità di gioco, strumenti, tempi e strategie operative, adattando l'esperienza alle proprie caratteristiche e favorendo autonomia e responsabilità. In contesti inclusivi, questa flessibilità è fondamentale per rispettare le diversità cognitive e le differenti necessità educative.

¹⁸ Cfr. I. Loidice, *Il sapere/agire della formazione, per tutti e per tutta la vita*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2019, p. 130.

¹⁹ Cfr. M. Montessori, *The Discovery of the Child*, Ballantine Book, New York 1972, pp. 45-50; L. S. Vygotskij, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, Michael Cole et al., Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1978, pp. 90-95.

²⁰ Cfr. F. Fröbel, *The Education of Man*, D. Appleton and Company, New York 1887, pp. 67-72.

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3. Varietà delle esperienze ludiche, che integra gioco libero, simbolico, cooperativo e digitale. L'alternanza di diverse modalità permette di stimolare competenze cognitive, creative e sociali in maniera equilibrata e sostenibile, evitando l'eccessiva standardizzazione delle attività.

Il ruolo dell'insegnante si configura così come quello di facilitatore sensibile: egli osserva e modula l'esperienza senza sostituirsi ai bambini, interviene per proporre sfide o guidare la riflessione quando necessario, e favorisce la partecipazione collaborativa e il rispetto dei tempi individuali. Questa funzione mediatrice è essenziale per evitare che il gioco diventi mera strumentalizzazione didattica, preservando la motivazione intrinseca e la creatività²¹.

Un ulteriore elemento strategico riguarda la valutazione e l'osservazione pedagogica, strumenti fondamentali per monitorare l'efficacia delle attività ludiche senza compromettere la loro natura spontanea. Tra le pratiche più consolidate vi sono:

- Schede di osservazione strutturate, che consentono di registrare comportamenti, interazioni e strategie adottate dagli studenti durante il gioco;
- Rubriche qualitative, che valutano competenze cognitive, sociali ed emotive secondo criteri descrittivi e non numerici;
- Diari riflessivi o registrazioni video, che permettono agli studenti di documentare il proprio percorso, favorendo consapevolezza e meta-riflessione;
- Valutazione formativa continua, che integra feedback personalizzati e momenti di riflessione condivisa senza attribuire punteggi rigidi o classifiche competitive²².

Questi strumenti, se utilizzati correttamente, garantiscono una documentazione efficace dell'apprendimento, permettono di modulare le attività in base alle esigenze dei singoli studenti e salvaguardano la spontaneità e la motivazione intrinseca che caratterizzano l'esperienza ludica.

Infine, l'approccio equilibrato deve considerare la dimensione socio-emotiva e inclusiva del gioco. L'attività ludica deve promuovere cooperazione, ascolto reciproco, rispetto delle regole condivise e valorizzazione della diversità, creando contesti in cui ogni bambino può partecipare attivamente e sentirsi competente. Il gioco diventa così non solo strumento di apprendimento, ma anche ambiente di costruzione di relazioni sociali e di cittadinanza, in cui l'inclusione non è una scelta aggiuntiva, ma una componente intrinseca dell'esperienza²³.

Un approccio equilibrato al gioco educativo richiede progettazione attenta, mediazione educativa, strumenti di osservazione sensibili e attenzione all'inclusione. Solo così il gioco mantiene la sua funzione educativa intrinseca, coniugando piacere e apprendimento, stimolando la creatività, la motivazione e le competenze cognitive,

²¹Cfr. M. Montessori, *The Absorbent Mind*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York 1967.

²² Cfr. F. Corti & S. Manca, *Ludic Learning: Esperienze Digitali e Inclusione Scolastica*, cit., pp. 78-82; K. Seaborn, D. I. Fels, "Gamification in Theory and Action: A Survey", cit., pp.17-19.

²³ Cfr. C. Farné, *Il Gioco e l'Apprendimento: Teorie e Pratiche Didattiche*, cit., pp. 180-182; P. Buckley & E. Doyle, *Gamification and Student Motivation, Interactive Learning Environments*, cit., pp. 22-24.

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emotive e sociali, e diventando un elemento centrale di un'educazione autenticamente formativa.

4. *Riflessioni conclusive*

Le riflessioni conclusive sul gioco educativo mettono in luce come esso non sia un semplice strumento di intrattenimento, ma costituisca un ambiente privilegiato di apprendimento, capace di integrare dimensioni cognitive, emotive e sociali. Il valore del gioco risiede nella sua capacità di generare motivazione intrinseca, curiosità e senso di scoperta, elementi che, secondo Farnè²⁴, costituiscono la vera essenza del processo educativo. L'apprendimento attraverso il gioco non è mai lineare o predefinito; esso si sviluppa attraverso tentativi, errori, riflessioni e interazioni con l'ambiente e con gli altri, costruendo significati condivisi e personali. In questo senso, il gioco rappresenta un laboratorio di vita e di pensiero, in cui l'esperienza diretta diventa veicolo di conoscenza e di sviluppo delle competenze trasversali.

L'integrazione della ludicizzazione e della *gamification* nei contesti educativi contemporanei apre nuove prospettive ma richiede attenzione critica. Gli strumenti digitali, i *serious games* e le piattaforme gamificate offrono opportunità straordinarie: permettono di personalizzare i percorsi di apprendimento, adattandoli alle caratteristiche e ai bisogni dei singoli studenti, e favoriscono la partecipazione attiva anche in contesti inclusivi. Tuttavia, la letteratura più recente evidenzia rischi significativi: quando il gioco è ridotto a mero strumento di valutazione, a semplice accumulo di punti o a competizione, si può verificare un calo della motivazione intrinseca, stress da performance e diminuzione della creatività. La sfida pedagogica consiste dunque nel conservare la spontaneità e il piacere del gioco, integrando contemporaneamente obiettivi cognitivi e competenze trasversali.

Le strategie per un approccio equilibrato rappresentano il nucleo operativo per realizzare questa visione educativa. Un progettista pedagogico o un docente deve bilanciare libertà e strutturazione: il gioco deve avere regole e sfide, ma anche spazi di esplorazione autonoma. La varietà delle esperienze ludiche — dal gioco simbolico al digitale, dal gioco cooperativo al gioco libero — consente di stimolare competenze differenti e di rispettare i tempi e le capacità dei singoli studenti. L'insegnante, in questo contesto, assume un ruolo di mediatore consapevole, osservando, guidando, suggerendo e stimolando riflessione senza imporre. Questa mediazione permette di valorizzare il processo di apprendimento, più che il risultato finale, e di promuovere inclusione, equità e collaborazione.

Un elemento centrale delle riflessioni conclusive riguarda anche la valutazione educativa: strumenti come rubriche qualitative, diari riflessivi, feedback dialogici e schede di osservazione permettono di monitorare l'efficacia del gioco senza comprometterne la spontaneità. La valutazione non è fine a se stessa, ma serve a supportare il processo di crescita dello studente, a rilevare i progressi cognitivi ed emotivi, e a modulare l'esperienza ludica in modo coerente con i bisogni individuali e di gruppo. Questo approccio consente di evitare che il gioco si trasformi in esercitazione standardizzata, preservando il valore formativo intrinseco e promuovendo apprendimento significativo e inclusivo.

²⁴ Cfr. *Ibidem*.

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Inoltre, riflettere criticamente sul gioco educativo significa riconoscere che innovazione pedagogica e tecnologia non sono sinonimi: la ludicizzazione digitale ha senso solo se inserita in un quadro educativo consapevole, in cui le dinamiche del gioco supportano lo sviluppo integrale dello studente e la costruzione di relazioni sociali positive. La tecnologia deve essere strumento e non fine, e deve contribuire a creare un ambiente di apprendimento inclusivo, equo e centrato sulla persona, dove ciascun bambino può esprimere le proprie potenzialità e sviluppare competenze cognitive, emotive e sociali in modo armonico.

Infine, le riflessioni conclusive sottolineano che l'equilibrio tra piacere e apprendimento, tra libertà e struttura, tra motivazione intrinseca e supporto educativo è la condizione necessaria per valorizzare il gioco come vero motore di sviluppo. Solo in questa prospettiva il gioco educativo diventa una pratica autenticamente formativa, capace di promuovere creatività, autonomia, responsabilità, collaborazione e cittadinanza, confermando il suo ruolo centrale nella pedagogia contemporanea e nella progettazione didattica inclusiva.

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**Awakening in the Dark is Terrifying: A Critical Educational Challenge /
Risvegliarsi nell'oscurità è terrificante: una sfida educativa critica**

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ABSTRACT. The relationship to “waking up” (i.e., critical consciousness, woke)—and its moral imperative in education and liberation is elucidated. It is time to transform perceptions and conceptions of reality, the self, and of change itself. Awakening is no longer just for radicals, leftists or spiritualists. The transformational waking up process is more complicated and complex than is usually assumed. Pedagogues require discernment when asking their students to change, and wake up (e.g., Greene’s “wide-awakeness”). Administrators and teachers also need to wake up. This mutuality is the basis of good transformative learning. The author adds his own theorizing on fear(lessness) as complimentary to current notions of waking up; especially, important in the post-November 5th, 2024 US election adding to the growing fascist leadership that is on a comeback.

Keywords critical pedagogy, fear, consciousness awakening, transformation

ABSTRACT. Viene chiarito il rapporto con il “risveglio” (cioè la coscienza critica, “woke”) e il suo imperativo morale nell'educazione e nella liberazione. È tempo di trasformare le percezioni e le concezioni della realtà, del sé e del cambiamento stesso. Il risveglio non è più riservato solo a radicali, esponenti della sinistra o spiritualisti. Il processo di trasformazione del risveglio è più complicato e complesso di quanto si pensi. I pedagoghi richiedono discernimento quando chiedono ai loro studenti di cambiare e di svegliarsi (ad esempio, la “piena veglia” di Greene). Anche dirigenti e insegnanti devono svegliarsi. Questa reciprocità è alla base di un buon apprendimento trasformativo. L'autore aggiunge la sua personale teoria sull’“assenza di paura” come complemento alle attuali nozioni di risveglio; particolarmente importante nelle elezioni statunitensi successive al 5 novembre 2024, che si aggiunge alla crescente leadership fascista che sta tornando in auge.

Keywords: risveglio della coscienza, pedagogia critica, paura, trasformazione

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Awakening in the light is enlightening. Not so scary. Awakening in the dark is endarkening. Terribly scary. We live in Dark times. Transformation is nothing to fool around with but it is also completely natural and required today, more than ever. Risk and fear are inevitable in order to learn, grow and develop to our best selves and communities.

Prologue I

[one of the four-fold universal mystical paths:] *Via Transformativa* is about...creation renewed, seen anew, and righted from its state of sinful or unjust relationships. – Matthew Fox¹

The transformations—the ones I have had, the ones you can have—are what this...is all about... [for some, it] is fascinating [but for most it is] terrifying.... -W. Brugh Joy²

“The subtle exploration into the obvious is the awakening process,” wrote transformational expert Brugh Joy (1979, p. 13). Artists, mystics and contemplatives are likely the first to know how to deeply partake in the sublime and “subtle” processes of perception, and training their senses to be even more sensitive and subtle to detect differences and patterns at the base of phenomenon. Of course, some non-dualists believe, if we willfully stop believing in dualism and its illusions, we can have instant awakening to the real, if not enlightenment.³ And, what about teachers in schools? Are they receiving the sensitive training and critical consciousness they need to be subtle explorers of not just curricular subject matter (content), and journeyers of consciousness and its nature and role in change, transformation, and learning and teaching? I would love to see teacher training in “becoming connoisseurs of fear.”⁴ “Implicit in right education,” according to the non-dual philosopher, the late Jiddu Krishnamurti, “is the cultivation of freedom and intelligence, which is not possible if there is any form of compulsion, with its fears” (p. 33). “The right kind of education must take into consideration this question of fear, because fear warps our whole outlook on life. To be without fear [i.e., fearlessness] is the beginning of wisdom” (p. 34). With fear and mistrust leading our relational ontologies, there will be more conflict than cooperation and more destruction than construction of the good.⁵

Most teachers, will not even understand what I just wrote here. Many will reduce their problems in teaching to things other than fears. Many do not want to understand waking up, as it is too discomfoting and scary beyond their ‘normal’ way of being. It is perceived as too threatening to their professional organizations, to schools, and codes of conduct and submission to the System. Under authoritarian regimes of

¹ Fox (1986), p. 247.

² Joy (1979), p. 2.

³ E.g., Ningham (2024).

⁴ Jacobs (1998), p. 156.

⁵ Many have argued this as well; three sociological examples are Eisler (1987), Gibb (1991), Pyszczynski, Solomon & Greenberg (2002).

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governance (e.g., fascism) rapidly growing in many nations, there is even less control and agency that teachers in schools have and will have in the future. Williamson (2024) calls out the oppression as not merely political ideology but the operation of a “Matrix of corporate tyranny” that is embedded in everything.

On teacher’s part, it is not their fault alone that they have compromised and taken the easier way. Education System philosophies, policies and functional requirements as well as the science of teaching leave little room for mystery, spaciousness, timelessness, risk and deep inquiry in the holistic-integrative formation of teachers. Rare is there time in these systems for exploring human nature, the human condition, and the human potential. High-stakes tests scores are being privileged over everything in the accountability movement of ‘schools as businesses’ and this goes from K to higher education. I was one of the teachers who rebelled in teacher training to its reductionistic, neo-liberal pragmatic, and hierarchical power-over frameworks of efficiency, mono-thinking, rules and brutally restraining bottom-line economic mentalities.

The message was ‘don’t rock the boat.’ And that university I was in considered itself ‘progressive.’ This once respected word for those of us on the Left, is now a distortion. I withdrew from the profession in the early 1980s and took the alternative route. I entered a transformational awakening journey in my mid-20s and have not looked back. I am now 73, and still care about education and its future.

Many years later (2000-03), I attained a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction through a deep-dive transdisciplinary investigation, which set about the task to figure out what “fearless leadership” might look like in Education and beyond.⁶ In the middle of my grad studies, came the tragic day of 9/11, 2001. After effects were more devastating, as contagious fear spread through universities and everywhere like a virus—becoming terror. Turns out, the System was geared to reproduce fear and terror not to lessen it and manage it well. We ended up in North America, where I live (in Canada), with a chronic degraded democracy in “Fear’s Empire,”⁷ whereby the ruling of all factions, parties, institutions and peoples was toxified by fearmongering.

We require big change—that is, transformation as societies in order to make it through the major cascading crises challenging the 21st century. We have many “wicked problems”⁸ but it is essential to add to them the “Fear Problematique” (Fisher, 2024). Taking an Indigenous-based critical pedagogical view:

It is important to note that Fearlessness has transformational power only when it stems from Fear, or as Gandhi said, when Fear is turned into Fearlessness. A total disregard for or unawareness of Fear is not likely to lead to transformative learning.

⁶ My dissertation: Fisher (2003).

⁷ Barber (2003); ‘We cannot defeat fear with fear,’ wrote Barber (frontmatter, pp. 12, 23) and “terrorism appears an impressive display of brute force, [rather] it is in fact a strategy of fear rather than force” (p. 24).

⁸ Watkins & Wilber (2025).

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(Jacobs, 1998, p. 163)

Prologue II

Beyond the ‘norms’ of society expectations and definitions of what it means to be human and productive citizen, Joy (1979) taught me and many others to attend to the subtle in the obvious. Helping us release from the ‘grip’ of our social conditioning came when it was a piece of classical music he shared, and we all knew it (or thought we did) was played. After one time, he then played it in complete darkness; then again. We listened a total of four times consecutively, at higher and higher volumes, as we laid on our backs on the floor. He told us, not to try to fight the excessively loud sound because then our ears will hurt. Rather, he advised us to let the sound go through you. Be with the feelings, images, thoughts and “let go.” Once beyond boredom with the repetition and/or beyond resisting the painful stimuli of the volume beyond comfort zones, several people had out-of-body experiences. Many opened their body/mind to the energetics of the music, into the sublime and beautiful, and beyond that to ecstatic compassion--with experiencing a universal aliveness—and Being(ness). Being human was suddenly extraordinary and more so because we were not trying to be powerful, dominate and do anything. With attuning to our authentic experience and learning from it, we changed—we transformed (or most of us did). We felt Unconditional Love everywhere.

The transformative experience was multidimensional from the sensory to the conceptual and philosophical. We were altered, in my case, forever. Of course, most thought of the ecstasy as spiritual communion or divine, though it does not need to be called that and it certainly had little to do with religion, belief, faith or dogma. Joy (1979) had high competency as teacher for bringing about a consciousness shift, a paradigm leap, and a breaking through beyond our fears. This was because of his own many transformations, and helping us develop “beginner’s mind” (p. 13). However, in reflecting on the experience, Brugh Joy brought us to understand “a devastating realization.” It was that our sensory systems of intake, and interpretation, and of messaging to us what kind of experience we are having and pre-determining the nature of reality itself—were all “filtered.” He wrote, “only a small proportion of *any* total experience” is being allowed....In effect, our ordinary consciousness is asleep” (p. 15).

How many of our teachers are asleep, in this sense of being so filtered-down if not numbed by fear in their lives and the workplace? Teachers ought to be availed to such multidimensional expansions of experiences—of consciousness unfiltered—of integrating worldly and other-worldly dimensions of reality. If so, they will likely learn a lot about themselves that is otherwise not on the agenda of typical professional learning. They will learn a lot about their Being and what the purpose of life and evolution and history seems to be—at least, from a consciousness perspective. Some transformative-centered teachers facilitate this through relaxation, peace and mindfulness, and yoga practices. Though, mostly those ways are pretty tame, compared to Brugh Joy’s “The Transformational Process.”

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Yet, that is all *not* enough. One has to live in the mundane ('real') world of the everyday consensual norms. In other words, they have to stop the car at red lights, cross roads in crosswalks, pay rent, other bills and taxes and be on-time at work. Beyond transformational learning, there is also the outer world of goings on that are less subtle and often gross, in the political and economic realm for example. And, there are mega-crises going on that are causing suffering and need emergency treatments. Teaching has to account for those contexts too in order to make learning relevant for young people and for all adults in life-long learning.

The notion of *transformation*, as Joy (1979) taught, and many other transformative teachers, is one of realizing 'you are not yourself'—that is, the conditioned-self and conformist-self is only a small and concocted, socially constructed self for functional and sociopolitical or ethnic-centered cultural purposes. It is more devastating however, in transformative learning, to realize you are terrified of yourself (of life, and of death).⁹

Yet, beyond these sufferings, hurdles to awakening, there is an exploding worldcentric¹⁰ perspective that lies awaiting development. It is less fear-based. It includes but transforms the former earlier developmental perspectives and their concomitant self-structures (identities) and fears. In awakening, you learn in the subtle realms of experiencing that there is no one (static or essential) self—but it is rather a dynamic-emergent 'larger Self' (or better called a self-system), that is beyond such conventional fear-based boundaries. A "protean self" can be known, as one expands consciousness, changes and transforms. "Proteanism," as a whole new way of being is, as the psychiatrist-researcher Lifton (1993) argued,

If nothing else, the last decades of the twentieth century have demonstrated the extreme fallacy of historical determinism, a fallacy that ignores the uncertainties of human behavior and the mystery of the symbolizing process, a mystery that takes on high relevance in our era. More than anything manifesting this unpredictably, proteanism provides us with a concept [e.g., "protean self"] to help us grasp what it is about. The concept is also consistent with the idea that, in respect to culture, we are always caught up with 'invention' rather than mere 'representation'—that, as symbolizers, we always re-create what we observe or experience....Calling forth one's proteanism on behalf of species consciousness becomes part of the social evolution of

⁹ E.g., much suffering (and asleppness) breeds under a sociocultural "taboo against knowing who you are" (Watts, 1972); we are horribly limited because we are unable to find ways to find "the wisdom in insecurity"—and, most all violence comes from this ontological condition (Watts, 1951).

¹⁰ "Ethnocentric stage" (evolved beyond "egocentric stage") is one of several perspectives but it is only when we come to postmodern era, where a significant proportion of the population (albeit, less than 20% on average) is capable of exciting and growing into "worldcentric stage." The latter "is a major, staggeringly important development. This stage [of consciousness] extends moral care not just to a chosen group [i.e., ethnocentric] but to all groups, to all humans, without exception" (i.e., in its healthiest mature forms) (Wilber, 2024, p. 50). Growing into the "worldcentric stage" (individually and/or collectively) is a potent aspect of "Waking up" and "Growing up" (says, Wilber, 2024, p. 51).

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the self—part of seizing upon the evolutionary human capacity to connect with faraway places [i.e., “multilocal self” (p. 23). Becoming human, that is, enabled an emerging self to locate itself outside of its immediate setting. The process took a quantum leap in the modern era... [e.g., space travel and space photography mirroring back to us our places we can experience in the universe simultaneously beyond our one particular place as observer in a body] (pp. 229-30)...The protean path...of individual people reaching toward global belonging, is a path of hope. One may experience that hope, and even a modest personal liberation...a profound [new] beginning. (p. 232)

Arguably, all evolutionary developments are about “shifts in innovation and adaptation” and various “levels of identification—from individual to family to social or ethnic group to nation and then species”—some benefits and some costs—some gifts and some pathologies are found throughout this spectrum.¹¹ Ultimately, expanding consciousness *via* awakening is a way to life-enhancing resiliency—and, quality of life.

Prologue III

A first step so important to transformation, according to Joy (1979) is a conscious adopting of “beginner’s mind,” a methodology well-known in the West as it was imported in the 1960s *via* Zen Buddhism; “but even now few people really comprehend it”—though, “it is invaluable” helping all kinds of people with various levels of education to at least find a fresh way “to meet any new concept or even to deal with old concepts encrusted in judgments or belief systems” that are out-of-date, and no longer are serving a healthy self or a species well in the 20th and now 21st century (p. 13).

Yet, beginner’s mind and expanding inquiry into the subtle of the ordinary, and in nurturing the protean self and a worldcentric perspective (holistic-integral)—is a risky business. “Tapping these energies is fire,” says Joy (1979) when you realize that you are part n’ parcel of huge energy fields—and, all of that disrupts the sense of self/meaning that you grew up with all your life. Such transformative learning experiences, whether in Brugh Joy’s intense encounter sessions or groups or in other means (like NDE’s¹²), it is important to realize that transformation is not all wonderful nor does it feel good. It is like therapy that way, it can hurt a lot before you find healing. Transformation in some cases can lead to harm when participants are not ready for big changes of the kind that comes when you adopt a beginner’s mind and/or adopt the emancipatory pedagogy of Maxine Greene’s (2017) “wide-awakeness.” Joy (1979) warns of people who have not a sufficiently structured healthy-self (i.e., ego-self) and are instead personality-insecure (i.e., predominantly defensive, mistrustful and fearful) but protecting themselves with “ego trips or power trips” they can have really

¹¹ Lifton (1993), p. 230. Wilber (2024) also arcs out a very similar evolution of perspectives and identities with each shift or jump to another level/structure of consciousness.

¹² NDE (near death experience) is another common ignition for a transformation, see for e.g., Jacobs (1998), chapter one “Into the Heart.”

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negative experiences in the long-run from The Transformation Process. “It can lead to “psychosis, aggravation of neuroses, acceleration of disease processes and suicide” (p. 8).¹³

At its best, under proper conditions, with mature guidance from another, a student and/or teacher can benefit from awakening processes and “transformative learning” (e.g., Mezirow, 2000). Mackeracher (2007) defines this educationally:

Learning is *transformative* because it has the potential to lead to change. Personal meanings and one’s personal model of reality can be changed during the constructive and interactive dimensions....One may retreat from possible changes [resisting learning and unlearning] and return to what is already known [comfortable]....Transformations occur through [critical] differentiation (separating, distinguishing) and integration (connecting, combining), resulting in increasing complexity and inclusiveness.¹⁴....Meaning transformations occur regularly as new experience informs us of deletions and distortions in our model of reality. Premise transformations occur less regularly and require a conscious effort to think reflectively about what we know and how we know it. Perspective transformations occur even less regularly. Either they require a conscious effort to think critically about the assumptions underlying our premises or they occur spontaneously as revelations or ‘ah-ha’ experiences. (p. 11)

Awakening (Woke¹⁵)

“The social philosopher Alfred Schutz has talked of wide-awakeness as an achievement, a type of awareness, ‘a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements.’”¹⁶ Not everyone, not every society or group, wants people around who are wide-awake and awakening further and further beyond the ‘norms’ (of asleepness). In my 35 years researching fear and fearlessness, I too have found a great resistance to “fearlessness”—where many think it is pathological (which is a mis-interpretation; see Fisher & Kumar, 2021).

Any cursory observations of current authoritarian populism (right-wing) and fascism leaderships today (e.g., president Donald Trump in the USA), tells one that “wokism” is vehemently hated and on the cutting block. It represents liberalism, in a negative sense for the fascists. The Right has no interest in postmodern identity politics or decolonization frameworks on anything—and, especially not in Education.

¹³ For an extensive overview of the upside and shadow-side of levels of consciousness development (and awakenings thereof), see Wilber, Engler & Brown (1985).

¹⁴ Quote from the original by Basseches (1984) in Mackeracher (2007) p. 10.

¹⁵ As used here in its positive originary and emancipatory connotation: means to ‘be awake’ to oppression, especially its origin as a street-name of Black consciousness movements and the African-American experience in the USA. See the overlaps of woke consciousness (and wokism) with Paulo Freire’s awokeness that accompanies critical pedagogy at its best (e.g., critical consciousness and *conscientization* or *conscientización*).

¹⁶ Quoted in Greene (2017), p. 218.

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There are many ways to interpret this but it is beyond the scope of this short article. Yet suffice it to say, the psychology of anti-wokism is as intriguing and dangerous as its opposite. Ideologies, of the toxic and fear-based¹⁷ kind, on all sides of the political spectrum and/or in religions have a destructive trajectory. Though, it is hard to avoid the connection between woke, and Freire's (1970, 1973) "critical consciousness" and awaken(ing). Liberation involves inner and outer freedom—or, what I prefer to call an *awakening to freedom* that comes with transformation(s). That is why I give it attention briefly here, on the more political side but my approach here in this article is more so psychological. Later, I will add a fearological perspective.

The psychology of political leaders intrigues me. Is a "fearless leader" and "awakened leader"? Henry David Thoreau once said, "I have never yet met a man who was quite awake."¹⁸ My quest has long been to find and support a great leader who is 'awake' (i.e. "fearless"¹⁹ or aiming to be). I have not found such a leader in Canadian politics. Though, I have found such a contemporary leader in American politics (Marianne Williamson²⁰). Though, realities of bringing awakes into the political realm and pragmatics of a "culture of fear"²¹ (USA) is a whole other topic and study. I am not American. Yet, the psychology and sociology of what would "fearless leadership"²² look like is an ongoing passion quest.

The psychology of (re)awakening intrigues me, as much now, as in the early 1980s when I attended Brugh Joy's transformation retreats in the mountains of Alberta, Canada. However, Whether critically inquiring into psychology of teachers, of leaders and of the psychology of awakening, etc., these have become so problematic, especially since I turned to fearology as a replacement and new paradigm of Fearlessness. Norm-based Psychology itself (capital) today is so riveted with pathologies, and ideologies often linked to predatory practices of State-Capitalist-

¹⁷ Distinguishing what is fear-based or not is complicated; see Fisher (2013) for a thorough review of this problematic. In general, *fear-based* for my work is when more than 50% of one's motivational forces/drives and decisions based on them are fear-based. Less than 50% begins a spectrum of motivational forces that are more or less now "fearlessness-based."

¹⁸ Thoreau, an American author, mystic and transcendentalist philosopher of the 19th century, argued "To be awake is to be alive" on many levels from the physical, to emotional, mental, spiritual and moral. Cited in Greene (2017, p. 218).

¹⁹ I make critical distinctions between "fear-less," "fearlessness" and "fearless" in Fisher (2010)—each, respectively is operating more and more from a *less* fear-based motivational template and set of actions.

²⁰ See Fisher (2021).

²¹ A plethora of theorists and critics across disciplines has appeared since the mid-1980s and especially late 1990s to name this phenomenon "*culture of fear*" (e.g., Corradi, Fagen & Garretón, 1992; Furedi, 1997; Glassner, 1999). The term culture of fear is now popularized and used by left-wing and right-wing critics. See Fisher (2006) for a good initial summary of what this entails and its connection with what I've called fearism (pp. 51-56); see philosophy of fearism (e.g., Fisher & Subba, 2016).

²² E.g., see Fisher (2003), of which my doctoral dissertation is dedicated to—especially, but not exclusively, in the field of Education (i.e., critical education leadership).

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Corporatist agendas and regimes of power. It is not going to be a very good guide.²³ To understand the psychology of awakening one has to understand the psychology of going to sleep and/or staying asleep (i.e., of being un-awakened). Herein, as a journey of not merely psychological abstractions, I am acknowledging this dialectical requirement as essential for adequate understanding of a simple but very complex phenomenon (and metaphor) that is calling our current era to attend to—and to awaken to reality beyond asleepness.

The psychology (and pedagogy) of asleepness is right up the alley of the progressive educator the late Maxine Greene (2017). She has proposed the intervention of “wide-awakeness” in Education, and it is powerful, yet largely unheard of. Greene described several aspects of asleepness (i.e., the opposite of the state/virtue of wide-awakeness)—here are a few examples in no particular order:

- (a) “bland conventionality and indifference so characteristic of our time” (p. 218)
- (b) overly “immersed...in daily life,” functioning primarily as “mechanical” and “habitual” (p. 218)
- (c) unquestioning and un-self-reflective lives, not asking “whether or not they have used their freedom or simply acceded to the imposition of patterned behavior and the assignment of roles” (p. 218)
- (d) commonly prone, when confronted with proposals of change (or transformation), to resist it arguing “that is the way it is” and has always been so no need to change (p. 220)

Like Joy (1979), like Fromm (1941/69), Greene (2017), and as other existentialists, she explains asleepness as a defense mechanism, individually and collectively, to avoid full-living and full-responsibility for one’s self and the world (society). It is preferred too often to wide-awakeness. There are many ways to distract attention away from the deeply reflective “why” of how one is living and how one is utilizing and developing their freedom. Greene’s point is that the “why” questions are likely to bring up anxiety and “take the form of anxiety” and a strange, alienating discomfort and/or admission of cowardliness in the depths of one’s character. Fear is their ruler. Yet, they justify this condition as ‘normal’ and ‘survival.’ However, Greene argues this fear-based orientation and denial (asleepness) is “the opposite of morality” and reflects “lack of care, an absence of concern” that really matters (pp. 218-19). Ultimately, the asleepness conditions drifts away from any consideration of or feelings associated with morality and compassion. It is this asleepness psychology that leads to polarizing and dysfunctional democracies. People feel “powerlessness” not empowered to be citizens and co-creators of their own reality. They typically then fall into the hands of forms of “tyranny” and people in such a state grow “accustomed to it” (as “hierarchy of authority”)—and, “we forget that it is man-made” (p. 219). Teachers are especially susceptible to this, argues Greene (2017).

Although Greene (2017) is hardly an authority on waking-up and awakening and transformation psychology and social impacts, it is important to follow her arguments

²³ Fisher (2019, 2024c).

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on problems of morality but not be restricted to them in regard to asleepness. I think her more profound conclusion is “I rather doubt that individuals who are cowed or flattened out or depressed or afraid can learn, since learning inevitably involves a free decision to enter into a form of life” (p. 222) that lives fully attending, caring, and responsible—and thus, serving of a better way to what is good, and ethical for all living beings. Recent progressive philosophers of education are less negative in concluding that fear is antipathetical to learning (e.g., English & Stengel, 2010) but we ought not ignore Greene’s or Krishnamurti’s warnings about this relationship dynamic. A true Fearlessness Paradigm (and pedagogy)²⁴ is what is required to increase our education on this and to bring new possibilities into Education as a field.

Backlash to Woke

As a seasoned scholar and practitioner of liberation education, for some years I have been carefully and critically watching the immense (largely modernist²⁵) backlash to woke, wokism and the reawakening of societies in regard to gender and sexuality, race and other oppressions that are embedded in some kind of ideological ‘ism’ disease. There seems excessive emotionalism (fear and terror) flying around, with mis-labeling of groups and agendas, and a gross hatred of the leftist ideas and ideals behind woke culture and its critique of the status quo.

Resistance to liberation is certainly not new in history. Backlashes can be nasty to keep liberation movements controlled and managed, if not eliminated. The woke begin attacking the woke under certain conditions of oppression and backlash against them. Progressivism attacks progressivism. And the ‘divide and conquer’ agenda of hegemony continues to win the spin, and win elections on the conservative (right) side of policy and politics.

I have not wanted to write an article and do all the research on *woke* and when it turned to a pathological *wokism* (or maybe some of it has). I merely know that woke is the ‘street name’ in some marginal (e.g., African-American) communities for *awakening* or reawakening—of coming to critical consciousness—to the way(s) we are hurting and violating each other in our societies. It signifies in principle and creates praxis for liberation from insidious oppressions. Being woke means to be *awakened* to the harmful consequences of one’s actions and/or those of institution(s) and/or a whole society. The term belongs to everyone so concerned. It points out symptoms and it critically analyzes systemic causes of dehumanization and intersectional oppressions. Woke is humane, woke is good. That is, it is good when it is at its best—operating in its healthiest and mature form(s).

²⁴ E.g., see Fisher (2011, 2024a, 2024b).

²⁵ It is (methodologically) modernist (and fear-based), and it shows itself in ideologies of anti-intellectualism, anti-postmodernism, anti-poststructuralism, anti-deconstructionism (e.g., a largely uniformed anti-Derridean philosophy); the errant conflation of wokism with Derridean deconstructionism is a huge problem today on the philosophical but also the political fronts of society going through growing pains from the modern era to a postmodern era and beyond (e.g., see clarifying scholarly arguments on this by Malabou, 2024).

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I avoid here writing directly about these emotional and critical topics because strategically I am looking to create a less emotionally-burdensome directive. I want to find and/or open-up our collaborative fearlessness thinking on the problem. I swerve around it but don't ignore it. Thus, my approach is to also look to systemic causes and dynamics that most people forget or ignore in the culture wars and wokism frenzy. This emancipatory enabling essay is implicitly about the problem of woke, wokism and the current and future problems of awakening and reawakening. There are many other resources (of the less emotional and biased kind²⁶) that are available to study what is going on around the woke issue(s).

Evidence tells me as societies we are still a long way away from fully analyzing the situation and coming up with better (healthier) solutions to bring back a basic social trust (if not love, if not wokeness, if not fearlessness) into the cultural and political fabric of societies. It is time to dig deeper. Time to end stereotypes and arguments based on attacks that create 'straw men' objects to burn down. Emotional and intellectual rigor are required with real moral courage not to fall into the fear-based ideologies that try to 'divide and conquer.' I wish to be part of the solutions to this excessive and neurotic tearing and fragmenting *via* wokism and its backlashes (i.e., *via* other ideologies, like neoliberalism, fascism, and anti-wokism).

Some Responses to Backlash

At first this analysis seemed like a relatively good and logical approach. It generically argues: If we have fallen *asleep* and let the evil forces of darkness capture our democracies and lead us into chaos as societies, then we ought to awaken to this problem so we can act against it. The problem with the problem is not mere (theo-)ideological capture by such dehumanizing forces but it is a *deeper meta-problem* that we have allowed ourselves to fall asleep. The latter is problematic because (as the argument goes generally) then others manipulating us can more easily control us. They terrify us into submission and consent.

Some sample prescriptions of the progressives, liberals, and spiritually (awake and) enlightened thus involve: a "pedagogy of the oppressed" (e.g., Freire, 1970). This was the original call by Paulo Freire's core idea of *conscientization* (Freire, 1973) a necessary form of the liberation processes; meaning, to *awaken* a critical consciousness in the oppressed (at least) so that they may better resist and find empowered agency to change—and, transform. Being chronically demeaned and brutalized can cause people to go into denial, as the pain and fear are too great to admit every day. People chose on average just to survive and not awaken and not lead a revolution against the hegemony.

Beyond Freire, I have been impressed with some unique (integrated and integral) contributors like Mezirow & Associates (2000) and their developmental understanding of "learning as transformation." And their empirical research that shows transformation doesn't move only straightforward but also in loops and

²⁶ E.g., see Léger (2023); Malabou (2024).

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sometimes retro-regressively with negative consequences.²⁷ And Sandoval (2000), where she offered a “methodology of the oppressed” with an integral notion of “differential consciousness”—where one has to adapt, (shape-)shift and transform *identities* (subjectivities) and loosen the grip on defended and favorite positions and biases, in order to establish a healthy and effective methodology of knowledge-power.²⁸ Some, like Rosado (2007) offered a most complicated developmentally sound and guided liberation path via integral theory/thinking and praxes. And others thinking wide and deep, offer *awakened-ness* along a “spectrum of consciousness”²⁹ of evolution, advancing a way forward to a better future. They call for us to become “multidimensional thinkers,”³⁰ which involves more than just waking-up, more than mere awakening and consciousness expansion or mindfulness (e.g., Wilber, 2024b). In my view, Wilber (2024b) has the most holistic, practical, and theoretical integral way forward. It involves at least *five dimensions of awakening* in a healthy (and spiritual) way—that is, in a way attuned with evolution itself. Because he knows that *unhealthy awakening* or *faux awakening* is a likely outcome no matter what good intentions may be involved (e.g., its pathologies, see Wilber, Engler & Brown (1985). Marianne Williamson has long criticized the new age and human potential and wellness “consciousness communities” for their un-integrated faux spirituality (awake-ness) and how it has avoided politics altogether—thus, leading to a take-over by corporate-based oligarchies and dark forces of evil.³¹

For change that involves too much and too fast, before sufficient preparation of foundations in living systems, it can cause more of a disaster than not; especially when it is undisciplined by (at least) the five dimensions of a “radical holistic” approach, and emancipatory critical (integral) praxis (according to Wilber, 2024b): (a) “Waking Up,” (b) “Growing Up,” (c) “Cleaning Up,” (d) “Showing Up” and (e) “Opening Up.” To discuss each of these in detail is beyond the scope of this essay but suffice it to say that I find these distinctions critically important in understanding the nature and role of awareness, transformation, critical consciousness development. And, yes, they would be great to bring forward in any 21st century awaken-ness interventions in leadership as well.

In future versions and additions to what is in this essay, educators are invited to dialogue with the author.

²⁷ This retro-regressive vs. progressive dialectical and conflicting dynamic has been well documented in the classic eclectic work on transformation (see Land, 1973/97).

²⁸ Two other Latin American scholars besides Sandoval (and the Puerto Rican scholar, Rosado) who make a good case for this fluid-self and flexible cultural (opposed to rigid ethnocentrism) for a better way to analyze and resolve oppressions, and re-invigorate a healthy deep democracy, see Abalos (1996), Fernandes (2003); as well, a Black African-American scholar and one who integrates mystical, gay, and decolonizing narratives nicely is Stevens (2003).

²⁹ This has been synthesized in an East-West (developmental/evolutionary) meta-theory of consciousness by Wilber (1977/82).

³⁰ Wilber (2024a).

³¹ Williamson on “faux spirituality” (e.g., see Fisher, 2021, pp. 52, 126, 130, 135, 236-38).

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Play as a Pedagogical Ground for Learning: from Foundational Principles to AI Integration / *Il gioco come terreno pedagogico per l'apprendimento: dai principi fondamentali all'integrazione dell'intelligenza artificiale*

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ABSTRACT. This study explores pedagogical perspectives that frame play as a dynamic process of meaning-making, self-expression, and experiential knowledge construction, emphasizing its formative role in shaping identity and learning through action and reflection. Within this framework, a laboratory was conducted within a university course, integrating food education, storytelling, and generative AI. The experience showed how play, as a formative and creative practice, can foster reflection, responsibility, and sustainability awareness among future teachers through inclusive and participatory learning dynamics.

Keywords: game-based learning; food education; AI in education; teacher education

ABSTRACT. Questo studio esplora prospettive pedagogiche che inquadrano il gioco come un processo dinamico di creazione di significato, autoespressione e costruzione di conoscenza esperienziale, sottolineandone il ruolo formativo nel plasmare l'identità e l'apprendimento attraverso l'azione e la riflessione. In questo contesto, è stato condotto un laboratorio all'interno di un corso universitario, integrando educazione alimentare, narrazione e intelligenza artificiale generativa. L'esperienza ha mostrato come il gioco, come pratica formativa e creativa, possa promuovere la riflessione, la responsabilità e la consapevolezza della sostenibilità tra i futuri insegnanti attraverso dinamiche di apprendimento inclusive e partecipative.

Keywords: apprendimento basato sul gioco; educazione alimentare; intelligenza artificiale nell'istruzione; formazione degli insegnanti

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1. *Play, experience, and inclusion: reimagining learning as a whole*

Play as a pedagogical practice has gained growing recognition in recent years within educational and didactic discourse. Once integrated into the educational curriculum as an essential dimension of learning, play moves beyond its traditional role as mere recreation, unfolding its deep pedagogical value in nurturing knowledge, identity, social relations, and motivation.

Although even in early childhood education, play-centered curricula have often been accompanied by more school-oriented programs emphasizing the early acquisition of knowledge (namely, pre-literacy curricula in which the focus shifts away from the learning process itself and its underlying mechanisms of exploration, reasoning, problem-solving, and creativity, toward the transmission of conceptual content within frameworks that separate play from learning) play nonetheless retains its full formative value as an essential component of children's well-being within an inclusive school system (Ricchiardi & Coggi, 2011). In this perspective, inclusion refers to the meaningfulness of the educational experience it enables, grounded in personalized learning pathways and in the recognition of learners' individual experiences and perspectives (Perla, 2013). This aligns with the ideal of "a school for all, respectful of each individual's differences" (Gallelli, 2012, p. 9, author's translation).

Play, within contemporary pedagogical design, represents a methodological approach capable of addressing the needs of a school increasingly engaged in exploring innovative ways of teaching and learning. It helps create learning environments that promote personal growth and social connection within a relational ecology open to others and to the surrounding world, transforming inclusion from a rhetorical principle into a lived and meaningful practice, and supporting identity development within a holistic vision of education that integrates psychophysical, emotional, and cognitive dimensions.

The relationship between play and inclusion, as noted by Fedeli (2016, p. 7), emerges through several key features of play-based activities. In such contexts, aspects of a child's personality are often expressed that may remain latent during more structured moments of the school day; multiple forms of interaction are encouraged, especially among children of different ages, whereas many classroom activities remain organized by homogeneous age groups; and spontaneous interactions arise among children with differing levels of ability, thereby creating heterogeneity that fosters learning through imitation. Moreover, moments of negotiation and peer mediation occur naturally, for example when children discuss and establish the rules of play without the constant supervision of the adult, and a broad range of abilities - motor, attentional, cognitive, and relational - are fully engaged (Fedeli, 2016, p. 7; Ascione, 2025).

A school-based pedagogy aimed not only at mobilizing knowledge but also at fostering students' behaviors, attitudes, and dispositions is today, from both a

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methodological and operational perspective, institutionally required to design immersive learning environments and participatory pathways within a didactic framework oriented toward the creation of systemic contexts. Such environments are grounded in active methodologies that promote multiple forms of learning—cognitive, affective, social, motor, and relational—within a vision of holistic education. From this standpoint, the ludic or playful dimension constitutes the privileged space of integral and original human experience, incompatible with any classificatory tendency that seeks to separate body and mind, reason and emotion.

A vast body of literature on the subject converges in recognizing the global and multifaceted nature of play, understood as a complex phenomenon capable of fostering the development of affective, relational, and cognitive competences. Within play, these dimensions intertwine dynamically: affective components such as enjoyment, pleasure, and satisfaction coexist with social dimensions related to teamwork, group belonging, and respect for rules. Motor and psychomotor aspects involving movement, coordination, and balance interact with cognitive processes such as strategic planning, problem solving, and the acquisition of rules. At the same time, emotional experiences including tension, challenge, fear, and release merge with cultural and transcultural dimensions that give play both its symbolic meaning and its universal communicative value. In this perspective, play constitutes an integrative experience that connects the physical, cognitive, and emotional domains, positioning itself as a privileged pathway toward holistic education.

Play can thus be interpreted within the framework of a ludic methodology that supports the learner's holistic development through the active and integrated involvement of the entire personality in the learning process. Such an approach promotes intrinsic motivation and a positive emotional climate, encouraging exploration, inquiry, and discovery as core dimensions of meaningful learning. Through the enhancement of the ludic dimension, the foundations of pedagogical design oriented toward the education of the whole person are re-examined, drawing upon principles of wholeness and unity that, at their core, safeguard the human dignity of the individual. From this perspective, any conception of personal development that confines it to a merely psychological domain is regarded as inadequate and reductive.

However, such integrative dynamics are often overlooked in many educational practices, as becomes evident when specific learning objectives are selectively adopted as the primary parameters for assessing educational outcomes within the school context, thereby relegating to the background the fundamental aims of education and the recognition of personal value. The idea of play as a holistic activity capable of simultaneously stimulating multiple abilities such as cognitive, linguistic, communicative, attentional, and mnemonic skills is rooted in broader pedagogical perspectives that view play as an experience able to activate dimensions not always cultivated in ordinary classroom practice. During play, the child engages the full range of their potential, since it is an intrinsically motivating activity that allows teachers to observe attentional span, the ability to memorize rules and sequences of play, and thus to assess the child's real capabilities. Moreover, play can involve varying levels

of complexity, thereby enabling teachers to carry out systematic observations over extended periods of time.

Finally, play represents an activity of high ecological value, in the sense that it occurs naturally within the child's daily relational environment, developing in an informal and spontaneous manner, and taking shape in relation to the actions of the child and their peers.

Fedeli (2018) therefore emphasizes the importance of play within the educational context, describing it as an instrument of pedagogical intervention that, from the earliest years of a child's life, enables global development across multiple domains and provides a valuable opportunity to observe the child's potential. During play, the child is highly motivated, unlike in standardized testing situations, which often limit the authenticity of performance.

Starting from the notion of complexity inherent in the ludic approach, expressed both in its cognitive dimension, which involves exploration, interpretation, and understanding of reality, and in its expressive dimension, related to the reinterpretation and symbolic transformation of the child's experiential world (Frabboni, 1974), play emerges in pedagogical research as a privileged methodological tool. It encompasses multiple functions that are closely aligned with the principles of experiential learning (De Rossi, 2008). While these aspects may be analytically distinguished within a phenomenological framework, in everyday educational practice they appear interdependent and complementary, offering educational spaces that span multiple dimensions of reality: objective, subjective, experiential, virtual, cultural, intercultural, and social. This plurality expresses the praxeological potential inherent in the circular and recursive process of reflection on practice, which continually generates new learning.

In this regard, play, anchored in active methodologies and situated within the child's lived experience, serves as an educational tool grounded in the epistemological and theoretical framework that underpins much of contemporary thought in the human and educational sciences. It draws on the conception of action as a fundamental mediation for understanding reality, consistent with Dewey's notion of intelligent action, and resonates with theoretical paradigms of systemic complexity, in which the learner is not a mere interpreter but an active constructor of meaning and reality.

From this perspective, a renewed conception of human intelligence emerges, one that diverges from Piagetian models and is informed by hermeneutic-constructivist approaches to knowledge. The child is thus viewed as both a reader and a builder of reality, within a world that continuously transforms in response to the operations and representations through which its rational order is constituted and reconstructed (Acone, 1991).

2. *The play experience: from meaning-making to empowerment*

For centuries, play was regarded as an activity of little significance or value, interpreted mainly through the lenses of carefreeness and action for its own sake. Contemporary pedagogical thought, however, views play as a privileged space and

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moment of education. Pedagogy, also understood as a philosophy of education, highlights play as a methodological device that, when supported by appropriate educational planning, contributes meaningfully to the learner's experience.

Farnè (2016), in addressing the complex relationship between play and education and the enduring question of whether play may be understood as a pedagogical device, reconsiders the contribution of Piero Bertolini (1982, as cited in Farnè, 2016). Bertolini, who redefined the scientific framework of Italian pedagogy within a phenomenological perspective, recognized play as one of the essential dimensions of the educational experience. He thus outlined a pedagogy of play in which play becomes a phenomenological exercise of openness to the possible, not aimed at educating the individual to escape from reality, but rather at engaging with and transforming it in both its concrete and imaginative dimensions. As Farnè (2016) notes, Bertolini conducted an in-depth investigation of the original intentional directions of educational experience (Bertolini, 1988), understood as those characteristics that cannot be conceived as laws in the same way as in the natural sciences, but rather as structural frameworks that define education as a distinctly human experience in its essential traits.

Within this perspective, play is conceived as an original and constitutive feature that gives meaning to the educational experience and sustains the process of intentionality. This claim holds true only if the conventional dichotomy between play and work is transcended. Play is often regarded as an end in itself and consequently dismissed as superfluous from the standpoint of utility and productivity. Instead, a different distinction should be drawn: between an activity or action (whether play or work) that is meaningful and therefore culturally productive, and an activity or action that is meaningless, alienated, and alienating, merely reproductive and repetitive because it is highly mechanized (Bertolini, 1988, cited in Farnè, 2016, p. 47). The criterion of value thus becomes the degree of cultural productivity and the sense of authenticity that such activities hold for the individual who plays and works. It is therefore a matter of recognizing play as a pervasive dimension of human life rather than as an isolated activity, thereby replacing a logic of separation and distinction with one of continuity and integration (Scurati, 1994).

Adopting the perspective of *homo ludens* as a disruptive figure who embodies the demand for transformation and the capacity to put reality "back into play," Farnè identifies three dimensions intrinsic to play that stand in contrast to a conformist view of education yet are fundamental to a pedagogy of play: risk, error, and adventure.

Historically, theories and models of child development have conceptualized play as both a catalyst and an indicator of growth (Bondioli, 2002). However, from a pedagogical standpoint, play is interpreted as a formative process through which individuals construct meaning, embed intentionality within reality, and shape modes of social coexistence. This interpretation transcends traditional structural views that focus primarily on the psychological mechanisms involved. It also redefines the conventional distinction between exercise play, symbolic play, and rule-based or social play, identifying instead a shared underlying principle that enables the

interpretation of playful expressions across the continuum of childhood and adult life (Perrucca, 1994).

If the unity of the various forms of play can be traced to the processes of meaning-making through which individuals seek balance between their inner and outer worlds (where the playful attitude enables the personalisation of experience by redefining reality in ways that belong more to the affective than to the cognitive sphere) then educating through play entails educating towards a non-univocal relationship with the world. It becomes an education oriented toward a dynamic search for meaning, which Mounier (2016) describes as the dual process of personalising the world and fostering personal growth.

Play thus emerges as a privileged space for the construction and elaboration of meaning: first, through the search for significance in symbolic play, and later, through the pursuit of interaction and negotiation in social play. In this sense, educating through play means teaching children to be themselves among others, to construct their own play while co-creating shared play experiences.

The educational needs of children, therefore, do not lie merely in *learning through play* but rather in *learning to play*, in recognizing and valuing the individual as a source of meaning and values, authentically free, consciously engaged, and directly responsible (Perrucca & De Canale, 2012). The concept of a child whose productive intelligence is no longer confined to reproducing systems of object-symbols but instead employs them as tools of understanding marks the transition from the *experimenting child* to the *episystemic child*. This pedagogical evolution finds expression in the Italian *Orientamenti* (National Guidelines for Early Childhood Education, 1991), which reaffirm the centrality of the child's lived experience and capacity to organize that experience, drawing on Dewey's notion of experiential learning, Montessori's active pedagogy, and the constructivist principle of the child as a builder of reality (Acone, 1991).

3. *The Italian tradition of play pedagogy*

This pedagogical commitment was particularly emphasized in the 1990s, a period marked by an increasing awareness of the complexity of society and the consequent need to address the authentic educational needs of the learner. Within this framework, play was conceived as the practical expression of an education capable of restoring meaning, coherence, and value amid the fragmentation of events, the historical relativity of values, and the dispersiveness of contemporary experience that characterize the new human condition.

In an era also defined by the massive diffusion of video games—which often alienated young people from their social contexts and contributed to the trivialization of experience—there emerged a renewed need to reclaim playfulness as <<a serious and not superficial motivation intrinsic to the goal to be achieved>>, an <<urgent need for gratuitous and unselfish dedication>> and as a means of enhancing divergent thinking in opposition to social conformism (Cattanei, 1994, p. 10, author's translation).

Acone also placed Froebel's thought at the core of modern pedagogical culture,

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conceiving play as <<a source of energy and a manifestation of the depth of human creativity>>. In this view, play extends beyond the psychic life of childhood, serving as the <<basis for the implementation of forms of productive imagination, convergent and divergent simulation, and the assimilation of cognitive and normative regularities.>> (Acone, 1994, p.68, author's translation).

The most authoritative strands of pedagogical research have therefore conceptualized playfulness as a generative and capitalizable dimension, one that enables individuals to engage with reality and the world through heightened awareness and an expanded repertoire of possible actions. It thus emerges as an attitude which, when strengthened through experience, can guide adults toward solutions to questions that seem otherwise unsolvable. Within this perspective, research has intentionally distanced itself from the games and toys of the Western consumer industry, often marked by a profound crisis of meaning.

A few years earlier, research had attempted to move beyond the partial definitions proposed by earlier theories of play, developing along two main directions: studies adopting an analytical perspective grounded in Freudian theory, and studies adopting a genetic perspective focused on the child's development and adaptive processes. The concept of play soon found strong resonance within contemporary pedagogy, becoming a key reference for the formulation of new ludic theories. As Ballardini, Frabboni & Battacchi (1971) observed, these theories emphasize the complex and multifunctional nature of play, rightly underscoring its emergence in childhood as a means of mediation and communication between the individual and the environment.

Italian scholars such as De Bartolomeis interpreted play as *adaptability* - that is, the capacity to respond appropriately to changing circumstances - rather than as mere *adjustment*, understood as a static equilibrium between the organism and its environment. In this view, play represents the use of energy directed toward the construction of personality: it is an active stance toward the world, expressed through inventive and symbolic forms that support personal growth and are sustained by a continuous interplay with objective reality.

From this perspective, children create in the same way as scientists or poets. Similarly, Volpicelli (1966) compared play to adult artistic expression, seeing it as a creative dimension of life that marks the first encounters with reality, the first contact with oneself, and the first revelation of one's own humanity. Bertin (2023) further defined adaptation as a form of experiential integration in which both subjective and objective realities must be considered, arguing that play acquires true educational value only when it is integrated into an educational curriculum that includes practical activity.

Starting from a few basic assumptions, namely the recognition of play as a unique experiential domain that cannot be precisely defined by shared features, except for its intrinsically motivated and non goal oriented nature, since it does not aim to satisfy primary physical needs or respond to external rules and social obligations, and is inseparable from the educational process through which children construct their personalities (Orlando Cian, 1970), the pedagogy of play extends beyond the

enhancement of cognitive potential and the promotion of prosocial attitudes.

This approach requires careful attention to the child's inner world, with the aim of fostering personal identity, promoting autonomy, encouraging planning, regulating impulses, enabling access to symbolic reality, and cultivating empathic decentration, as articulated by Bondioli (2002).

All these dimensions represent manifestations of a process of empowerment, both individual and collective. What distinguishes play is not so much the content of the activity as the psychological disposition that underlies it: it is the playful experience itself that defines the quality of play as a subjective state of being. The playful attitude, understood as the spirit that animates action *for fun* thus becomes a key factor in fostering future cultural and educational growth. From this perspective, school practices inspired by a theory of the relationship between play and learning can act as powerful drivers of educational transformation, promoting participation, creativity, and knowledge construction through active, play-based methodologies.

4. *Reinterpreting play in the age of digital and artificial intelligence*

Within the rapidly evolving landscape of contemporary education in the knowledge society, play is once again emerging as a powerful formative device of remarkable relevance. The advent of digital technologies, and more recently of artificial intelligence (AI), is reshaping educational paradigms and transforming the ways in which individuals learn, interact, and construct meaning. In this context, the design and experimentation of playful experiences that integrate play with digital and AI environments represent not merely a methodological innovation but a pedagogical necessity. Such approaches aim to reinterpret the profound educational value of play as an experience of knowledge, relationship, and creativity.

Traditionally, play has been regarded in pedagogy as a privileged form of active learning (Dewey, 1938; Piaget, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978). Through play, learners explore, imagine, cooperate, and attribute meaning to reality by means of simulation, narrative, and shared rules. The introduction of digital technologies should not undermine these functions but rather amplify them, offering new expressive, narrative, and interactive possibilities. From this perspective, game-based learning and gamification are not mere tools of entertainment; they constitute cognitive and affective environments that foster motivation, critical thinking, and active participation.

The integration of generative AI into these learning contexts opens up new and innovative scenarios. The ability to create images, stories, environments, and characters through human-machine interaction supports a co-creative process in which pedagogical imagination is intertwined with computational potential. However, the use of AI in playful and educational settings requires a conscious and reflective approach, grounded in an ethics of responsibility and an awareness of the human dimension of learning. Even when mediated by technology, play remains a space of freedom, exploration, and meaning-making.

For these reasons, it is essential to embed laboratory-based, play-centered activities within initial teacher education programs, allowing future teachers to experience firsthand the pedagogical potential of digital play and AI as tools for didactic innovation. Such experiences not only strengthen pre-service teachers' methodological and digital competences but also promote a conception of education rooted in active participation, creativity, and sustainability (Massaro, Albano & Ascione, 2023).

The following educational activity was implemented by university students as part of the Environmental Education Laboratory in Primary Education with this purpose in mind. Within the Primary Education curriculum, the laboratory serves as a privileged space for pedagogical experimentation, where play acquires reflective and professional value, becoming a tool for research, methodological innovation, and the development of active teaching competences. Experimenting with game-based teaching methods enables students to recognise their own pedagogical potential in terms of engagement, inclusion, and the development of transferable skills. It also helps them to understand the complexity of game design, including the need to define clear educational objectives, coherent rules, dynamics of challenge and cooperation, and authentic assessment strategies.

4.1 *Integrating play, digital technologies, and AI in teacher education*

The laboratory experience presented in this article focused on nutrition education as a privileged domain for fostering responsible behaviors and conscious lifestyles. The instructional design placed strong emphasis on play and narrative as both cognitive and affective mediators, integrating them with the potential of digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) to stimulate imagination, reflection, and participation. This integrated approach situates play at the intersection of cognitive, emotional, and ethical learning, highlighting its potential to connect ecological awareness, digital culture, and creative expression. Within teacher education, the laboratory also serves as a testing ground where pre-service teachers design, experience, and refine the same activities they will later implement in their classrooms, thereby developing professional awareness and reflective competence. It is grounded in a didactic framework that conceptualizes learning as an active, creative, and collaborative process, oriented toward personal growth and social responsibility.

Play, understood as a complex formative experience, creates a learning environment in which cognitive, emotional, and social dimensions converge through game-based learning, conceived as the intentional design and use of game dynamics, rules, narratives, and challenges to activate engagement, problem-solving, and reflective processes leading to meaningful learning outcomes. In this sense, game-based learning represents a pedagogical strategy that transforms the act of playing into an experience of exploration, negotiation, and shared construction of knowledge.

In parallel, the use of AI in educational contexts opens new expressive and

inclusive possibilities: it enables the co-design of visual and narrative content, encourages critical reflection on the ethical use of technology, and strengthens the digital competences of future teachers (Lasić-Lazić et al, 2018). AI also becomes a catalyst for meta-learning, as it invites learners and educators to reflect on the nature of creativity, authorship, and human-machine collaboration in educational processes.

The integration of narrative, play, and AI defines a didactic ecosystem that promotes experiential learning, co-construction of meaning, and the development of AI literacy, understood as the ability to understand, use, and critically and responsibly evaluate AI systems. Such an ecosystem fosters sustainable and inclusive learning environments, where technology serves as a means for empowerment and the cultivation of ethical, creative, and participatory citizenship.

4.2 *Methodology*

The experience was organized into five integrated phases.

1. Self-observation and food diary. Individual activity focused on the analysis and reflection of personal eating habits, supported by the collection and visualization of data through charts, drawings, or infographics. This phase aimed to raise awareness of daily behaviors and initiate a reflective process on the relationship between self, food, and well-being.

2. Analysis and comparison with the Mediterranean Food Pyramid. Critical exploration of nutritional balance, excesses, and deficiencies, linked to broader themes of health promotion, environmental sustainability, and cultural identity. Students engaged in discussions connecting personal data with the principles of the Mediterranean diet and sustainable lifestyles.

3. Collaborative work on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2, 3, and 12. Group-based activities centered on the elaboration of conceptual maps, posters, and digital artifacts that visually represented the interconnections among food, health, and sustainability. Outputs were produced in both paper and digital formats to foster multimodal expression and teamwork.

4. Storytelling and artificial intelligence. Design of short educational narratives set in the world of food, featuring characters, roles, and objectives aligned with the Food Pyramid model. Students used generative AI platforms (e.g., Chatsonic, Leonardo AI) to co-create visual representations, images, and characters, developing critical awareness of the accessible and ethical dimensions of AI-assisted storytelling.

5. Playful-didactic production. Development of final products synthesizing the previous phases:

- Group A: creation of an interactive digital eBook (figure 1) containing quizzes, digital memory games, and playful learning activities (figure 2)
- Group B: production of a paper-based pop-up book integrating tactile and narrative elements, including hands-on games such as memory, riddles, and a “Food Goose Game.”

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Figure 1. Digital eBook created with the Book Creator app.

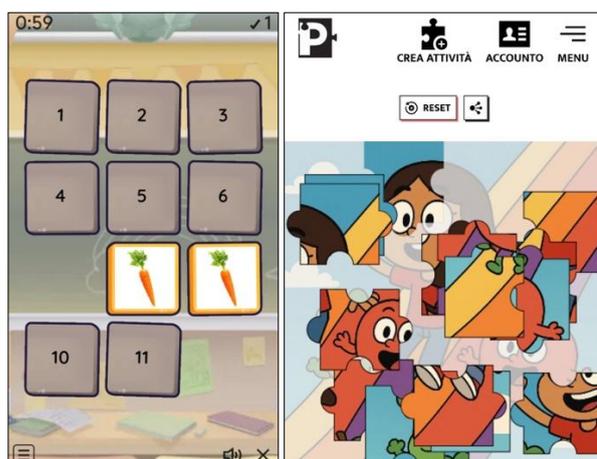


Figure 2. Examples of digital games created within an eBook

4.3. Evaluation and results

The assessment process was designed as a continuous and formative pathway. It included direct observations and reflective discussions with particular attention to participation, creativity, and collaboration. An approach was adopted that combined the analysis of group discussions with indicators derived from observation grids. This formative strategy aimed to enhance students' awareness of their own learning process and to value both the process and the outcomes achieved.

The data collected revealed high levels of engagement (92% of participants actively took part in all phases of the project) and the activation of transversal competences.

The experience fostered the development of multiple competences:
 - Environmental and nutritional competences. Greater awareness of sustainability, health, and critical consumption issues, with 85% of students reporting increased

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attention to their food choices and environmental impact.

- Playful-didactic competences. Strengthened ability to design game-based activities connected to disciplinary content, with 80% of participants demonstrating alignment between playful strategies and learning objectives.
- Digital and AI literacy competences. Development of a conscious and critical use of artificial intelligence as a creative and expressive tool, supported by ethical reflection on authorship and AI-mediated production.
- Narrative and cooperative competences. Enhanced capacity to co-construct complex educational plots and collaborative products, demonstrated by the quality and originality of group outputs.

5. *Discussion*

The experience demonstrated how the integration of play, storytelling, and digital technologies can serve as a complex and coherent formative framework that responds to the challenges of contemporary education. Students actively participated in all phases of the project, recognizing the value of play as a means of shared meaning-making, as a bridge between disciplinary knowledge and personal experience, and as a mediator between individual and collective dimensions of learning.

Reflective activities fostered the development of metacognitive awareness and self-assessment skills, both of which are essential for the construction of professional teaching identity. The playful dimension proved to be a catalyst for cognitive, emotional, and relational activation, contributing to the creation of an inclusive and motivating learning environment.

The innovative aspect concerning the use of artificial intelligence expanded the expressive, narratives, and designed further possibilities available to students. Beyond enriching the creative process, AI also encouraged critical reflection on authorship, responsibility, and human-machine collaboration, highlighting the importance of developing digital competences grounded in ethical awareness and critical thinking.

Conclusions

The experience confirmed the value of the laboratory as a privileged context for pedagogical research and experimentation within teacher education. The ludic-narrative approach, integrated with the potential of artificial intelligence, proved effective in fostering transversal, reflective, and design-oriented competences aimed at building active, creative, and sustainable teaching practices.

Play thus emerges as a transversal pedagogical perspective capable of supporting motivation, participation, and the shared construction of knowledge. Integrating playful and digital methodologies into university teacher education programs means promoting the growth of educators who are able to combine technological innovation with educational competence.

Looking ahead, the future goal will be to extend the experimentation to the internship activities of the degree program, allowing students to bring their own educational and playful artifacts into schools and test them directly with

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children. This next step will represent a key moment to validate the formative potential of the developed products and to strengthen the dialogue between university and school toward an authentic and transformative pedagogy.

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Understanding Humanity through Play: from Historical Roots to Symbolic and Social Dimensions / *Comprendere l'umanità attraverso il gioco: dalle radici storiche alle dimensioni simboliche e sociali*

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ABSTRACT. The work explores play as a key to understanding human experience, from its etymological and sociological roots to its philosophical and pedagogical implications. Drawing on Huizinga, play emerges as a symbolic and cultural matrix, a space of freedom, creativity, and awareness. An analysis of ludus and paidia reveals its dual nature, both structured and spontaneous. Through a review of scholars across various fields of the human sciences, play is confirmed as a tool for growth and learning. In the digital age, as Turkle argues, play can serve as a dialogical space for critical reflection and for cultivating an authentically human education.

Keywords: human sciences, cultural pedagogy, play, game.

ABSTRACT. Il lavoro esplora il gioco come chiave interpretativa dell'esperienza umana, dalle radici etimologiche e sociologiche alle implicazioni filosofiche e pedagogiche. A partire da Huizinga, il gioco emerge come matrice simbolica e culturale, spazio di libertà, creatività e consapevolezza. L'analisi di *ludus* e *paidia* ne rivela la duplice natura, regolata e spontanea. Attraverso una rassegna di studiosi in vari ambiti delle scienze umane il gioco si conferma dispositivo di crescita e apprendimento. Nell'era digitale, infine, come suggerisce Turkle, il gioco si configura potenzialmente come spazio dialogico capace di alimentare il pensiero critico e di sostenere un'educazione autenticamente umana.

Keywords: scienze umane, cultura pedagogica, gioco, game.

1. *Exploring play as a lens for understanding humanity: an introductory analysis*

Since the publication of Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, scholarly discourse on play has undergone a profound epistemological shift. No longer relegated to the margins of "leisure" or to the realm of childhood activity but rather as a cultural phenomenon *sub specie ludi*.

Huizinga identifies the elements characterizing play as aspects common to all the dynamics underlying the rules that humans have developed over time and the cultural institutions they have created. This does not imply that play transforms or evolves into culture; rather, it suggests that culture, in its earliest manifestations, inherently bears the qualities of play, and as such, play is a central and essential aspect of human development: it recounts the origins and history of humanity¹.

In his masterpiece *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman describes a dramaturgical conception of the social, in which human behavior is apprehended through the performative logic of the stage. The individual, positioned as actor, inhabits a multiplicity of roles, each enacted according to the situational scripts and expectations governing interpersonal relations. Through this analytic frame, Goffman discloses the radical contingency of the self: identity is not a stable essence but a continuous negotiation among scenes, audiences, and the statuses conferred or withheld by others².

Within this paradigm, there is no interlude free from performance; existence itself is sustained by an unbroken sequence of role enactments. We alternate the symbolic garments of the employee, the parent, the affectionate or the aggressive other gestures that do not reveal an inner self but rather constitute the very fabric of social reality. Unlike Pirandello, who intuited a hidden and tormented personality beneath the masks, Goffman asserts the absence or, at least, the irrelevance of such an interior core.

If, as Goffman proposes, social life is ontologically performative, an incessant play of appearances, then the principles regulating it converge with those identified by Huizinga: the ludic structures through which culture itself manifests and sustains its meaning.

This historical and social scenario provides the framework for an inquiry into the value and significance of play in human development, emphasizing its fundamental role in fostering harmonious growth and a balanced way of life from early childhood onward.

As in every scientific field, the study of the origins and evolution of play is marked by diverse and at times conflicting approaches. Some theorists maintain that play merely satisfies an innate need for imitation or amusement; others argue that it functions as preparation for adulthood, serving as a gradual exercise in self-regulation; still others attribute to play a profound cultural and existential dimension.

For Eugen Fink play constitutes an essential modality of human existence. Fink advances an ontological understanding of play, observing that it is often regarded as unserious and inconsequential, a merely childlike or frivolous form of activity. From this perspective, play appears a momentary escape from the demands and repetitions

¹ Huizinga J., *Homo ludens*, Einaudi, Torino, 2002.

² Goffman E., *The presentation of self in everyday life*, Anchor Books, 1959.

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of the everyday, a transient interlude through which individuals may recover their vitality and reengage more fully with daily existence³.

Yet for Fink, play is integral to what it means to be human. Within a society that privileges productivity and efficiency, it is a category error to dismiss play as unproductive. On the contrary, Fink contends that play allows the individual to inhabit the present fully, liberated from concern for the future. Precisely in this disinterested and self-contained nature lies its value. Play thus detaches itself from the temporal economy of ordinary life, assuming instead the character of a serene and autonomous present: an oasis of happiness within the flow of existence.

Only those who wholeheartedly commit to play are able to play seriously; only those who acknowledge the gravity and absoluteness of life can truly engage in it and realize their freedom within it. Conversely, those who presume to toy with life resemble players who attempt to cheat at a game, they ultimately remain outside its domain. If life is indeed a game, one participates in it fully; one does not manipulate it as a mere object of amusement. Similarly, those who feign concealment behind a mask often fail to perceive that, in doing so, they remain fundamentally faceless⁴.

For the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, in his essay *La deshumanización del arte*, play constitutes both a form of distraction and a distinctly human invention. He describes it as «the art or technique developed by man to virtually suspend his enslavement within reality, to escape, flee, or withdraw from the world in which he lives, seeking refuge in another, unreal one»⁵. The Spanish philosopher argues that human beings are forcibly and unwillingly immersed in life: the environment we live in is imposed on us as it is, and we can do nothing to change it; we must only regulate and adapt to it in order to live.

Imprisoned within the constraints of reality, humans turn to play as a means of creating illusions that permit them to escape into an alternative realm, one in which they may indulge in distraction, embrace irresponsibility, and temporarily suspend the demands of seriousness. The antithesis between play and seriousness, emphasized by Ortega y Gasset, is thus reinterpreted: play emerges as a potential form of liberation, freeing individuals from the weight of obligations and concerns imposed by the exigencies of everyday life.

Edgar Morin's concept of play is articulated in his essay *L'Esprit des Temps. Loisir*, conceived as an ethic of culture, is embodied in leisure, understood as time freed from work and utilitarian obligations. The theoretical and practical significance of leisure, Morin observes, has evolved in parallel with the modern organization of industrial labor. Industrial labor, characterized by regimented schedules, repetitive tasks, and the prioritization of productivity, imposes a strict temporal and social order on human life. Within this context, leisure emerges not merely as a respite but as a vital counterbalance, a sphere in which individuals may reclaim autonomy, creativity, and personal meaning. It is through this separation from the utilitarian demands of work that play acquires its cultural and existential significance, allowing humans to

³ Fink E., *Oasi della gioia. Idee per una ontologia del gioco*, Edizioni Salerno, 1986.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ortega y Gasset J., *La deshumanización del arte y otros ensayos de estética*. Espasa-Calpe, Madrid, 1925, p. 163.

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experience freedom, reflection, and engagement beyond the constraints of industrial discipline⁶.

From this perspective, leisure highlights individual well-being and should not be dismissed as mere idle time devoted to rest. Rather, it represents a space in which individuals seek renewal by pursuing their passions and cultivating their talents, deliberately carving out a domain that belongs exclusively to themselves.

In this context, play assumes a central role in modern entertainment, as it generates a disinterested and gratuitous form of pleasure, responding to the human need to inhabit a space removed from the imperatives of daily productivity and efficiency.

Nietzsche's reflection, as is often the case with his aphoristic style, is both succinct and definitive: «I no longer know of any other way of dealing with the great problems of life than through play»⁷. Here, play is not mere frivolity or distraction; rather, it constitutes a vital mode of engagement with existence itself. For Nietzsche, the act of playing enables humans to confront life's fundamental challenges with creativity, flexibility, and a sense of freedom, transforming the weight of existence into a space for experimentation and self-overcoming. In this sense, play becomes an essential existential strategy, allowing individuals to navigate the tension between necessity and freedom, order and chaos, seriousness and delight.

In conclusion, we can assert that, taken together, these thinkers converge on a shared insight: play is not a marginal or trivial activity, but a profound existential and cultural phenomenon. It enables humans to navigate the tensions between freedom and constraint, seriousness and creativity, reality and imagination, ultimately functioning both as a medium for self-realization and as a lens through which the structures of human life and culture may be understood.

2. *Understanding the game through words: etymological definition and sociological perspective*

The history of human evolution has long been marked by a "playful attitude." Exploration, whether of forests by our ancestors or of scientific phenomena by modern researchers, is grounded in the essence of play and the "divergent pleasure" of discovery.

Humans have always shared playful behaviour, expressing it through a rich and diverse set of words and linguistic forms. Civilizations that have valued and practiced play in its myriad forms have developed extensive vocabularies to capture the playful experience. For example, in Greek, the indeclinable suffix *-inda* was used to denote various playful activities: «Greek children played ball *sfairinda*, tug-of-war *helkustinda*, throwing *streptinda*, king *basilinda*»⁸. Furthermore, the Greek term *paidia* conveys improvisation and light-heartedness, a cheerful and rule-free nature. *Paidia* is not goal-oriented but exists for its own enjoyment and intrinsic value. In Greek culture, *paidia* was not trivial. Philosophers and writers often acknowledged that play is a form of human expression and creativity, a precursor to artistry,

⁶ Morin E., *L'esprit du temps: Essai sur la culture de masse*, Grasset, Paris, 1962.

⁷ Nietzsche F.W., *Ecce Homo*, Adelphi, Milano, 1970, p. 37.

⁸ Huizinga J., *Homo ludens*, Einaudi, Torino, 2002, p. 37.

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storytelling, and social rituals. Unlike structured play (*ludus* in Latin), which is more formal, rule-bound, and goal-oriented, *paidia* is spontaneous, fluid, and self-directed. Huizinga emphasizes this distinction to show that culture grows from the interplay of structured and unstructured play.

In Latin, the conceptual domain of play was articulated primarily through the verb *ludere*, while *iocus* and *iocari* referred specifically to jokes or pranks. The distinction lies in emphasis: *ludus* denotes action-oriented play, the enactment of the game itself, whereas *iocus* designates verbal play a joke, jest, or playful discourse.

The concept of *ludus* also encompassed a practical dimension within political and civic tradition, functioning as a form of apprenticeship in social roles. Beyond its social function, *ludus* was associated with magical and sacred contexts, being employed to designate festivals of Etruscan origin intended to awaken the forces of nature and the spirits of the dead. Over time, the Romans extended the meaning of *ludus* into more profane realms, imbuing it with a range of connotations, including game, mockery, deception, and seduction.

In comparing *ludus* and *paidia*, Roger Caillois assigns to the former the semantic qualities of skill, patience, and the capacity to overcome obstacles, implicitly entailing the acceptance of risk in the outcome, while he attributes to *paidia* the qualities of exhilaration and excess, understood as a source of pleasure and an escape from the ordinary constraints of life⁹.

Whereas *ludus* denotes a regulated form of play requiring effort and specialized abilities, *paidia* represents a free, improvised, and spontaneous form of activity. As play begins to organize itself, define specific objectives, and become structured within codes and rules, *ludus* emerges. In this sense, *paidia* embodies tumult and exuberance, while *ludus* imposes order and form upon that which is initially unstructured, creating the frameworks and opportunities through which the innate human desire to play can be channelled and “regulated.”

From a historical and philosophical perspective, play precedes both culture and humanity, manifesting itself even in the behavior of animals. As Huizinga observes, there is no essential distinction between human and animal play; the advent of civilization did not create the phenomenon, nor did it confer novelty upon it. Animals do not wait for humans to instruct them in play.

What sets humans apart is the capacity to transmit knowledge across generations. Play becomes instrumental when humans recognize that its dynamics can enhance survival and improve quality of life. Understanding the world emerges from what Huizinga calls “intuition,” a creative and exploratory engagement that operates without fixed rules, a “game of possibilities” through which humans apprehend reality.

Eugen Fink extends this perspective by emphasizing play as an ontological dimension of existence: a domain in which humans inhabit the present fully and exercise freedom beyond utilitarian concerns. Ortega y Gasset similarly frames play as a human invention that allows temporary escape from reality, a space where imagination and self-determination can flourish. Roger Caillois distinguishes between *paidia*, the spontaneous and exuberant aspect of play, and *ludus*, the structured, rule-

⁹ Caillois R., *I giochi e gli uomini. La maschera e la vertigine*, Bompiani, Milano, 1981.

governed form, highlighting the interplay between freedom and order in human cultural life.

Together, these thinkers suggest that play is neither marginal nor trivial. It is a fundamental existential and cultural phenomenon, central to human creativity, learning, and socialization. Play allows humans to navigate the tensions between freedom and constraint, seriousness and pleasure, reality and imagination, and it provides the structures through which knowledge, skills, and social norms are transmitted and transformed across generations.

Play encompasses two complementary dimensions: the creative aspect, which underlies the original construction of knowledge, and the repetitive aspect, which ensures the acquisition, preservation, and transmission of that knowledge.

Play is indispensable not only to the individual, as a biological function, but also to the community, as a cultural practice. Its value lies in expression, in the social and spiritual bonds it fosters, and in its capacity to fulfill both the ideals of personal development and the imperatives of collective life.

In contemporary contexts, the lexicon of play has regained prominence in educational and technological discourse. Concepts such as *gamification* and *serious games* attest to the enduring relevance of the play paradigm as a tool for experiential learning, capable of integrating knowledge, engagement, and motivation.

3. *The historical-pedagogical foundations and early psychoanalytic insights into the role of play*

Since the 19th century, numerous theories have emerged regarding childhood and the role of play, reflecting a profound shift in epistemic understanding. The precursors of the pedagogical conception of play include the French philosopher and statesman Michel de Montaigne and the English philosopher and pedagogue John Locke. In his *Essays*, Montaigne, remarkably ahead of his time, devotes particular attention to children's education. He argues that human development is not characterized by definitive or final stages; rather, it constitutes a continuous, dynamic process extending across the entirety of an individual's life.

Montaigne asserts that early education requires careful study and ongoing reflection. While it would be desirable to guide children according to their natural predispositions, this task is complicated because such inclinations are obscured from the outset by customs, laws, and public opinion, as humans are simultaneously products of nature and culture. A possible solution lies in introducing children to enjoyable activities from an early age and fostering critical reflection on their own habits as soon as possible, thereby reducing the distorting effects of socialization on natural tendencies.

De Montaigne dedicates an entire chapter of his *Essays* to pedagogy, offering a highly critical perspective on the school education of his time. He emphasizes that education should develop the whole person, body, mind, and character, simultaneously, using activities like play, exercise, music, and practical skills. Learning must be guided with "severe gentleness", avoiding coercion or fear, which he argues can distort a child's natural development. Education, in his view, should inspire engagement and cultivate virtue without violence or force. For Montaigne,

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children's games constitute their most serious and privileged activities and should never be underestimated or dismissed¹⁰.

John Locke similarly emphasized the importance of learning through play. He argues that all children's games and amusements should be intentionally guided to foster positive and useful habits, because if left unchecked, they can encourage undesirable behaviors. He emphasizes that every action a child takes at a young age leaves a lasting impression, shaping their tendencies toward good or evil. Therefore, adults must carefully consider the influences to which children are exposed, as early experiences play a crucial role in moral and behavioral development¹¹.

Locke also recognized the importance of nurturing children's curiosity as a central tool for learning. Education should foster spontaneity in cognitive processes through physical and practical activities. Parents play a crucial role in this model, as they are responsible for imparting ethical principles, guiding children's education, and supporting their overall well-being. These ideas represented a significant departure from entrenched Puritan beliefs, which emphasized strict discipline and moral control.

Building on these ideas, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in *Émile*, challenged the eighteenth-century Puritan view of children as inherently evil beings in need of correction through coercion and punishment. He theorized a new pedagogical model that emphasized the natural goodness, innocence, and spontaneity of childhood. Rousseau argued that education should align with individual development across all stages of life, grounded in direct engagement with the world. In this context, play, as a source of joy and self-directed activity, emerges as a fundamental tool for exploring and understanding the world¹².

During the Romantic era, Friedrich Wilhelm August Fröbel reconceptualized play as a central element of childhood development. He regarded it as a free and spontaneous activity through which children experience joy, inner balance, and harmony with the world, laying the foundation for creativity and emotional stability in adulthood. According to Fröbel, the quality of early play profoundly influences the child's later capacities and social relationships, forming what he described as the "seeds of the future tree of life".

Building on the pedagogical insights of Montaigne, Locke, and Rousseau, Fröbel operationalized these principles by founding kindergartens, environments structured to foster self-expression, exploration, and autonomous learning. Within these spaces, children engaged in creative activities guided by a "master gardener", rather than following rigid schedules, allowing play to become a primary vehicle for cognitive and social development.

In *The Education of Man*, Fröbel combined Pestalozzi's emphasis on spontaneity with Schelling's concept of unity between nature and soul, framing education as the cultivation of the divine within each individual. Play, in this context, is not trivial; it is a reflection of the child's deepest dispositions, encompassing both emotional and intellectual growth.

¹⁰ De Montaigne M., *Saggi. Dell'educazione dei fanciulli*, Libro I, cap.XXVI, Bompiani, Milano 2012.

¹¹ Locke J., *Pensieri sull'educazione*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze, 1942.

¹² Rousseau J.J., *Emilio, o dell'educazione*, Mondadori, Milano, 2005.

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Fröbel introduced the concept of educational “gifts” — materials such as balls, cubes, and cones — to stimulate sensory, cognitive, and emotional development. Initially abstract, these materials were later adapted to objects drawn from everyday life, encouraging children to connect learning with real-world experience. Through this approach, Fröbel established play as an indispensable tool for holistic education: not merely a form of leisure, but the most natural and profound mode of learning¹³.

Since the 19th century, the role of play in childhood has been the focus of numerous pedagogical and psychological theories, reflecting a profound shift in understanding.

Attention to the conditions that allow children to play freely and express themselves was further advanced by Maria Montessori, who promoted an educational model attuned to children’s specific needs and capacities¹⁴. Similarly, John Dewey emphasized a causal link between play and learning, arguing that practical activity and intellectual life are inseparable; both play and work serve serious and constructive purposes. Through play and experimentation, children actively shape their understanding of the world, developing creativity and imagination¹⁵.

Maria Montessori emphasized the importance of providing children with an environment that respects their individual needs and potentials. In her view, play is a means for children to explore, experiment, and express themselves freely, fostering autonomy and self-directed learning.

John Dewey similarly highlighted the inseparability of play and intellectual activity, arguing that practical engagement and learning are intertwined. For Dewey, play is a serious endeavor through which children actively construct knowledge, combining experimentation with reflection in ways that mirror adult problem-solving. Both Montessori and Dewey regard play as central to education, but while Montessori stresses individual autonomy and the prepared environment, Dewey emphasizes the social and experiential context in which learning occurs.

Building on Montessori and Dewey’s innovations, the first Children’s Museum was founded in Brooklyn in 1899, reflecting the recognition that contemporary pedagogical research demonstrated: learning occurs more effectively through playful engagement and experiential activities than through traditional methods such as reading and writing.

Jean Piaget provides a developmental perspective, viewing play as a cognitive activity that evolves alongside the child. In his theory, play progresses from sensorimotor exploration in early childhood to symbolic and rule-governed forms in later stages, supporting the development of abstract thinking, perspective-taking, and problem-solving. Piaget situates play as a mechanism for internalizing experience and constructing mental representations of the world, highlighting the individual’s active role in learning¹⁶.

Lev Vygotskij, in contrast, places greater emphasis on the social dimension of play. For Vygotskij, play is a zone of proximal development in which children internalize social norms, rules, and cultural tools through interaction with peers and adults. He

¹³ Fröbel F., *L’Educazione dell’uomo*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze, 1993.

¹⁴ Montessori M., *La scoperta del bambino*, Garzanti, Milano, 1999.

¹⁵ Dewey J., *Esperienza e educazione*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano, 2003.

¹⁶ Piaget J., *L’introduzione all’Epistemologia genetica*, Laterza, Roma-Bari, 2000.

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underscores the role of imagination in creating a “play reality” that allows children to experiment with behaviors and roles beyond immediate reality, facilitating both cognitive and social development¹⁷.

In comparison, Montessori, Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotskij converge on the view that play is fundamental to child development, linking exploration, learning, and creativity. Montessori and Piaget highlight the child’s autonomy and internal cognitive processes, whereas Dewey and Vygotskij emphasize the social and experiential dimensions. While Piaget focuses on developmental stages and cognitive structures, Vygotskij stresses the cultural and interactive context through which learning and self-regulation occur. Together, these theorists illustrate that play is simultaneously an individual, social, and cultural phenomenon, essential for the holistic development of the child.

Building on the insights of pedagogical theorists such as Fröbel, Montessori, Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotskij, who emphasized the centrality of play in cognitive, social, and emotional development, psychoanalytic scholars further deepened our understanding of the child’s inner world. While the pedagogists focused on the educational, social, and experiential functions of play, psychoanalysis explored its role in the emotional and unconscious life of the child.

Psychoanalytic studies have significantly advanced our understanding of children’s inner worlds. While Freud pioneered the connection between childhood and psychoanalysis, Melanie Klein made a major contribution through her pioneering research on object relations and the analysis of children’s behavior during play-based therapy. Observing play allows the expression of thoughts and affective dynamics underlying children’s actions, in much the same way that dream analysis reveals latent content in adult sessions¹⁸.

Klein’s work also profoundly influenced Donald Winnicott, who emphasized play as a creative activity that enables children to navigate the boundary between reality and imagination. Central to his theory is the role of illusion, which underlies both emotional development and artistic processes. In play, children experiment, create, rebuild, and even destroy, activities that echo the processes of art and self-expression¹⁹.

Play is essential for emotional development, serving as a child’s primary means of engaging with the world, others, values, and knowledge. Through playful activity, children seek balance between their internal emotional states and the external reality. By its nature, play is educational: it fosters socialization, stimulates creativity, and promotes adaptability. Within play, children learn the importance of rules in interpersonal relationships, develop emotional regulation, exercise autonomy in choosing behaviors, and learn to manage conflict.

Emotional education, therefore, involves more than cognitive or linguistic development; it encompasses social skills that enable children to identify, harmonize, and construct a rich emotional world both within themselves and in interaction with

¹⁷ Vygotskij L.S., *Il ruolo del gioco nello sviluppo del bambino*, in Bruner J.S., Jolly A., Sylva K. (Eds.), *Il gioco. Ruolo e sviluppo del comportamento ludico negli animali e nell’uomo*, Armando, Roma, 2005.

¹⁸ Klein M., *I principi psicologici dell’analisi infantile*, in *Scritti 1921-1958*, Boringhieri, Torino, 1978.

¹⁹ Winnicott D.W., *Gioco e realtà*, Armando, Roma, 2005.

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others. Emotions are the product of complex experiences that mediate the relationship between organism and environment and are closely linked to perception, memory, intelligence, and action²⁰.

Contemporary pedagogical and neuroscientific research continues to confirm play as a fundamental affective and cognitive matrix for development. Even when mediated by technology, playful experiences remain privileged spaces for emotional and social exploration, enabling children to construct meaning, develop identity, and strengthen relational skills. Digital tools and interactive platforms, including educational apps, virtual simulations, and gamified learning environments, can enhance these experiences by offering immediate feedback, adaptive challenges, and collaborative problem-solving opportunities.

For instance, coding games or virtual science labs allow children to experiment, hypothesize, and observe consequences in a safe and engaging environment, fostering creativity and critical thinking. Socially interactive games, such as multiplayer educational platforms or cooperative storytelling apps, promote empathy, turn-taking, and negotiation, reinforcing socio-emotional learning. Even augmented and virtual reality experiences can immerse children in scenarios that expand perspective-taking, spatial reasoning, and decision-making skills, while maintaining the intrinsically playful and motivating nature of the activity.

In this context, the pedagogical insights of Fröbel and Dewey gain renewed relevance. Fröbel's emphasis on structured yet flexible play environments and the use of "gifts" to scaffold learning resonates with the way technology can guide exploration while allowing autonomy. Dewey's focus on experiential, reflective, and socially situated learning is mirrored in interactive digital experiences that integrate experimentation, feedback, and collaborative engagement. These technological affordances illustrate how play, far from being merely recreational, continues to function as a core mechanism for holistic development, cognitive, emotional, and social in contemporary society.

4. *Play as Dialogue: a symbolic framework for developing critical awareness*

In contemporary society, marked by profound social and technological transformations, play reemerges as both a field of challenge and opportunity. Digital interactions, from video games to immersive experiences, expand the spaces and languages of play, demanding careful pedagogical reflection. The playful dimension now permeates the platform society, shaping both identity and modes of interaction.

Sherry Turkle explores how digital technologies, social media, online games, virtual worlds, and immersive platforms, allow individuals to experiment with multiple versions of themselves, effectively "multiplying" the self. In these virtual spaces, people can adopt different identities, roles, and modes of expression that may not be possible in face-to-face life. This multiplicity is not simply a form of escapism;

²⁰ Goleman D., *Intelligenza emotiva*, Rizzoli, Milano, 1997; Ekman P., *All Emotions Are Basic*, in Ekman P., Davidson R. (Eds.), *The Nature of Emotion: Fundamental Questions*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1994, pp. 15-19.

it is a mode of self-exploration, where users can test behaviors, try out new social interactions, and reflect on their desires, values, and emotions²¹.

Turkle emphasizes that these digital selves are dialogical: they exist in interaction with others and are constantly shaped by feedback, observation, and social negotiation. In this sense, technology extends the concept of play highlighted by Huizinga and Goffman, where freedom and rules, improvisation and structure, interact to create spaces for identity formation. The virtual environment functions as a stage on which individuals “perform” aspects of their identity, experiment with social roles, and navigate emotional and relational landscapes.

However, Turkle also warns that such multiplicity carries risks. Without reflective guidance or educational support, individuals may experience fragmentation, confusion, or a sense of inauthenticity, struggling to integrate their multiple digital selves with their offline identity. Thus, she calls for a pedagogy that cultivates critical awareness, empathy, and ethical reflection, enabling technology-mediated play to foster growth rather than alienation²².

In short, Turkle’s notion of the “multiplied self” positions technology as a new frontier for psychological and social exploration, where play becomes a tool for self-understanding, identity experimentation, and relational development.

5. *Conclusions: a final look at play*

The present study has traced the historical, philosophical, and pedagogical dimensions of play, highlighting its enduring significance as an anthropological constant. From its etymological and sociological roots to its role in human development, play emerges as a cognitive, relational, and cultural device that shapes both individual and collective growth. Far from being marginal or merely recreational, play constitutes a space of freedom, creativity, and social negotiation, as reflected in the works of Huizinga, Fink, Fröbel, Dewey, Winnicott, and other influential scholars. The dual nature of *ludus* and *paidia*, structured and spontaneous, underscores its capacity to balance rules with imagination, discipline with creativity, and individuality with social engagement.

In contemporary times, the exploration of play extends into the digital sphere, where technology-mediated experiences, as Turkle shows, allow for new forms of identity construction, dialogical interaction, and critical reflection. Play becomes not only a tool for learning and emotional growth but also a medium for fostering autonomy, empathy, and ethical engagement in a complex, digitally mediated society.

On a normative level, the recognition of the right to play in the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*²³ and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*²⁴ affirms its universal value. This principle is further echoed in the 2030 *Agenda for Sustainable*

²¹ Turkle S., *Insieme ma soli. Perché ci aspettiamo sempre più dalla tecnologia e sempre meno dagli altri*, Einaudi, Torino, 2019.

²² Turkle S., *La conversazione necessaria. La forza del dialogo nell'era digitale*, Einaudi, 2016.

²³ United Nations, *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*, 1959, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights> (Verified 29/10/2025).

²⁴ United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, 1989, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child> (Verified 30/10/2025).

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*Development*²⁵, which promotes well-being, inclusive education, and the reduction of inequalities. Although the term “play” does not appear explicitly in the Agenda, it is implicitly embedded within the Sustainable Development Goals, especially in relation to children’s rights, learning, and health.

In conclusion, play represents a foundational dimension of human experience: a symbolic, cognitive, and relational practice that transcends cultures, historical periods, and technological transformations. Recognizing its centrality means reaffirming a holistic vision of education and development, one that integrates freedom and structure, spontaneity and reflection, individuality and sociality, and that prepares children and adults alike to navigate the complexities of both the real and digital worlds with creativity, responsibility, and humanity.

Note: The present study was conducted in full collaboration with the authors. However, Maria Annarumma wrote *Exploring play as a lens for understanding humanity: an introductory analysis; Understanding the game through words: etymological definition and sociological perspective; Conclusions: a final look at play*; Ines Tedesco wrote *The historical-pedagogical foundations and early psychoanalytic insights into the role of play*; *Play as Dialogue: a symbolic framework for developing critical awareness*.

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²⁵ United Nations, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, 2015, <https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda> (Verified 30/10/2025).

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Gamification against Bullying / *Gamification contro il bullismo*

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ABSTRACT. Bullying is a phenomenon present in Italian schools¹.

A key factor in this trend is the lack of a comprehensive understanding of bullying.

The negative effects of bullying are expected to persist into adulthood, particularly during the behavioral and cognitive developmental stage in primary school, when children are most receptive to changes in behavior and attitude.

Traditional lecture-based methods used to teach bullying awareness to primary school students often lead to boredom and disengagement, reducing their ability to understand and effectively address the phenomenon.

This study, through the use of a gamified interactive e-book, aims to improve primary school students' motivation and knowledge about bullying.

A quasi-experimental design with pre-test and post-test assessments was used to evaluate the effectiveness of the approach. The study involved two fourth-grade classes from a primary school in the province of Naples (Campania region, Italy) with a total of 56 students.

Students were randomly assigned to an experimental group that used the gamified interactive e-book and a control group whose teaching activities were carried out as planned by the teachers, i.e., without the use of the e-book.

Despite the limitations of this study, the results demonstrated that the experimental group showed significant improvements in motivation and understanding of bullying compared to the control group. This supports the conclusion that the gamified interactive e-book represents a valid educational tool for

¹ Please note that there is no official ISTAT 2025 data referring exclusively to primary schools in the standard press release of June 26, 2025. Despite this, the most recent school surveys indicate that approximately 1 in 4-5 primary school students may experience bullying episodes in the short period observed, with lower percentages for cyberbullying than for older age groups.

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bullying prevention, as well as making learning more engaging and effective.

Keywords: gamification, bullying, e-books, learning.

ABSTRACT. Il bullismo è un fenomeno presente nelle scuole italiane.

Un fattore chiave di questa tendenza è la mancanza di una comprensione completa del fenomeno.

Si prevede che gli effetti negativi del bullismo persistano anche in età adulta, in particolare durante la fase di sviluppo comportamentale e cognitivo della scuola primaria, quando i bambini sono più ricettivi ai cambiamenti di comportamento e atteggiamento.

I metodi tradizionali basati sulle lezioni frontali utilizzati per sensibilizzare gli studenti della scuola primaria sul bullismo spesso portano a noia e disimpegno, riducendo la loro capacità di comprendere e affrontare efficacemente il fenomeno.

Questo studio, attraverso l'utilizzo di un e-book interattivo gamificato, mira a migliorare la motivazione e la conoscenza del bullismo degli studenti della scuola primaria.

Per valutare l'efficacia dell'approccio è stato utilizzato un disegno quasi sperimentale con valutazioni pre-test e post-test. Lo studio ha coinvolto due classi quarte di una scuola primaria della provincia di Napoli (Campania, Italia) per un totale di 56 studenti.

Gli studenti sono stati assegnati in modo casuale a un gruppo sperimentale che ha utilizzato l'e-book interattivo gamificato e a un gruppo di controllo le cui attività didattiche sono state svolte come pianificato dagli insegnanti, ovvero senza l'utilizzo dell'e-book.

Nonostante i limiti di questo studio, i risultati hanno dimostrato che il gruppo sperimentale ha mostrato miglioramenti significativi nella motivazione e nella comprensione del bullismo rispetto al gruppo di controllo. Ciò supporta la conclusione che l'e-book interattivo gamificato rappresenta un valido strumento educativo per la prevenzione del bullismo, oltre a rendere l'apprendimento più coinvolgente ed efficace.

Parole chiave: gamification, bullismo, e-book, apprendimento.

1. Introduction

Bullying is a form of abuse, defined as aggressive behavior by an individual or group that intentionally inflicts physical, verbal, or psychological harm on another person, repeatedly over time². Bullying typically occurs in interpersonal interactions and is characterized by a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim. This power imbalance can manifest itself in various ways, such as differences in height, intelligence, popularity, or hierarchical positions between leaders and

² G. Torregiani, A. M. Mariani, C. Amoroso, *Il contributo delle neuroscienze cognitive e del diritto in una prospettiva interdisciplinare sul fenomeno del bullismo*. *Formazione & insegnamento*, 2025, 16(2 Suppl.), 1-xx.

subordinates³.

The phenomenon of bullying has three key roles:

- the bully;
- the victim;
- the listener.

Each of these roles contributes to reinforcing bullying behavior.

The consequences of bullying include physical and psychological problems (anxiety, depression, loneliness and sleep disturbances) as well as academic difficulties (e.g., lower grades), health problems and difficulties in social adaptation⁴.

Primary school children are in the early stages of behavioral and cognitive development, which makes them more receptive to corrective interventions⁵. Therefore, implementing anti-bullying interventions during childhood is crucial to prevent long-term negative effects on children's development.

The prevalence of bullying has been estimated at between 15 and 25% in Europe, Australia, and the United States⁶.

With the spread of information technology and the internet, school bullying has become increasingly diverse. What initially involved verbal insults and physical attacks has now expanded to include psychological bullying and cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying is defined as an act of bullying conducted via the internet or digital devices, characterized by an imbalance of power, repetitive behaviors, and the intent to harm the victim. Its anonymity and rapid spread make it particularly threatening for victims⁷. This distinction makes cyberbullying an emerging and increasingly worrying form of school bullying.

2. *Bullying and cyberbullying at school*

Strengthening students' social skills is an effective strategy for preventing bullying. Lack of knowledge about bullying behavior is one of the main reasons for its increasing prevalence, so insufficient knowledge of this phenomenon can lead students to misperceive it. However, elementary school students are generally

³ P. O'connell, D. Pepler, W. Craig, *Peer involvement in bullying: insights and challenges for intervention*. J. Adolesc. 1999, 22, 437–452.

⁴ F. Mohamed El Swerky, H. Esmat Mahmoud Khalil, H. Sayed Mohamed Sayed, W. Mohesen Ahmed Elkady, W. Hamed Kamal Elshafie, & N., Ali Maher Nashaat, *Effect of coping strategies education regarding bullying on knowledge and behavioural change among secondary school students*. Egypt. J. Health Care, 2022, 13, 655–669.

⁵ L. Fei, M. Liao, L. Ke, Y. Zou, X. Li, Y. Chen, et al., *School bullying among Chinese third to fifth grade primary school students in a cross-sectional study: the protective effect of psychological resilience*. PLoS On. 2022.

⁶ R. Veenstra, S. Lindenberg, A. J. Oldehinkel, A. F. De Winter, F. C. Verhulst, & J. Ormel, *Bullying and victimisation in elementary schools: a comparison of bullies, victims, bully/victims, and uninvolved preadolescents*. Dev. Psychol. 2005.

⁷ C. Marinoni, M. Rizzo, M. A., Zanetti, *Fake profiles and time spent online during the COVID 19 pandemic: a real risk for cyberbullying?* Curr. Psychol. 2024, 43, 26639–26647.

unaware of bullying⁸.

Schools in most countries continue to rely on traditional methods to increase student knowledge and awareness of bullying. These methods include, but are not limited to, group discussions, seminars, and large-scale school assemblies. However, these approaches often have limited effectiveness⁹.

Some scholars have highlighted the difficulties students face in deepening their understanding of bullying through traditional methods, particularly those in elementary school, often because they lack intrinsic motivation to learn about bullying. Traditional approaches struggle to create an engaging learning environment, leading to boredom and disengagement, which ultimately hinder students' ability and willingness to deepen their knowledge about bullying¹⁰. Despite recent efforts to integrate innovative teaching methods to improve students' knowledge about bullying, traditional lecture-based teaching remains the predominant approach in many schools¹¹.

3. *Gamification to promote learning*

With the advancement of digital technologies, e-books are gradually establishing themselves as a digital alternative to traditional paper books, offering users a convenient reading experience via electronic devices. Compared to traditional paper books, gamified interactive e-books integrate multimedia and interactive features, improving not only students' reading experience but also their learning outcomes, increasing motivation, engagement, and satisfaction¹². Therefore, integrating gamified interactive e-books into learning activities can make the most of digital features, offering innovative support and exploratory opportunities for students.

Gamification was initially defined as “the use of game design elements in a non-game environment”¹³.

Hamari et al. (2019)¹⁴ described gamification from a broader perspective as a cultural and social phenomenon in which reality becomes increasingly game-like,

⁸ M. P. Osiesi, A. O. Arogundade, M. N. Odinko, S. A. Adeniran, O. O. Fajobi, E. C. Udemba, et al., *Perceptions and experiences of bullying among primary school learners in Ekiti State, Nigeria*. *Education* 2023, 3-13, 1-18

⁹ R. W. Widayati, E. Lestiwati, F. M. Wijaya, *The effect of bibliotherapy to improve youth's knowledge and attitudes about bullying in the Diponegoro orphanage*. *Jurnal Keperawatan Respati Yogyakarta* 2021, 8, 67-71.

¹⁰ J. Saibon, S. M. S. Abdullah, A. L. C. Har, *Effectiveness of creative pedagogy in enhancing the knowledge and awareness on bullying amongst secondary school students*. In 3rd ASEAN conference on psychology, counselling, and humanities. 2018, pp. 286-292. Atlantis Press.

¹¹ A. Bobbio, M. G. Maino, G. Battaglia, E. Viale, *Società, cultura, educazione. La pedagogia torna a scuola*. *DIRIGERE SCUOLE*, 2025, 11(1), 24-34.

¹² A. G. Bus, B. Sari, Z. K. Takacs, *The promise of multimedia enhancement in children's digital storybooks” in Reading in the digital age: Young children's experiences with e-books*. eds. J. E. Kim and B. Hassinger-Das (Cham: Springer). 2019.

¹³ S. Deterding, D. Dixon, R. Khaled, L. Nacke, *From game design elements to gamefulness: defining “gamification”*. In Proceedings of the 15th international academic MindTrek conference: envisioning future media environments. 2011, pp. 9-15.

¹⁴ J. G. Hamari, G. Ritzer, C. Rojek, *The Blackwell encyclopedia of sociology*. 1479. Malden, MA: Blackwell. 2019.

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fostering the development of skills, motivational benefits, and engagement. This suggests that gamification is not simply a technical tool, but an innovative strategy designed to enhance experiences and motivational outcomes. As an educational technique, gamification has received considerable attention in both practical applications and academic research. Integrating game elements into real or virtual learning environments can create a more engaging and enjoyable experience for students. By incorporating these gamified components into meaningful learning content, teachers can offer students a more immersive and interactive learning process.

This work has demonstrated that this approach effectively improves student engagement, promotes deeper learning, and cultivates a more positive attitude toward education. Furthermore, gamified learning, which integrates game elements into traditional classroom teaching, has been observed to significantly improve student motivation, learning skills, participation, and social interaction.

4. *Job description*

In this study, the use of a gamified interactive e-book aimed to raise awareness of bullying among primary school students.

This gamified interactive e-book is composed of three modules:

- Educational content, to present anti-bullying curricular content;
- Interactive content, to present a series of activities and challenges directly related to bullying scenarios;
- Gamified learning content, useful for incorporating game mechanics such as points, leaderboards, and badges to further motivate student engagement and reinforce learning.

This modular structure proves useful because it offers a comprehensive and engaging learning experience, aimed at improving both understanding and motivation regarding anti-bullying behaviors.

This study bases the design of the gamified interactive e-book on Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which identifies three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Satisfying these needs fosters intrinsic motivation, which is critical for cognitive, social, and physical development. Intrinsically motivated students are more likely to engage in learning activities aligned with their interests and preferences, thus improving their knowledge and skills in personally meaningful ways¹⁵.

The gamified interactive e-book aims to provide students with an immersive and engaging learning experience about bullying.

Students can choose to play one of three roles: victim, bully, or bystander. This allows for branching narratives or simulations in which students' choices directly influence the story's progression. Therefore, the context also varies (school, home, online environments via social media, etc.). This variety of scenarios, combined with the need for students to make decisions in these contexts and assume different roles,

¹⁵ R. M. Ryan, E. L. Deci, *Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: classic definitions and new directions*. *Contemp. Educ. Psychol.* 2000, 25, 54–67.

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allows students to gain a multifaceted understanding of bullying, as well as receive timely feedback on their choices and actions. Thus, inappropriate behaviors are immediately addressed, offering guidance on how to react in similar situations and clarifying whether the observed action constitutes bullying.

<i>Role</i>	<i>comprehension</i>
Prey	teaches students how to protect themselves
Bully	highlights the negative consequences of certain actions and the positive outcomes of choosing kindness
Viewer	enables students to recognize bullying behaviors and learn effective intervention strategies

Table 1: Students' understanding of the role

After each segment of the story, students complete a repeatable quiz to consolidate their knowledge and assess their ability to apply the concepts learned. Correct answers earn points, which can be converted into badges, adding an element of gamification to the learning process. Furthermore, the gamified interactive e-book encourages social interaction by allowing students to share their points and badges with their peers.

This research adopts the gamification design framework proposed by Kam and Umar (2018)¹⁶, Integrating carefully selected game elements to support student motivation. These elements were implemented to foster a learning environment aligned with SDT principles, thus promoting student engagement and improving learning outcomes.

In terms of autonomy, students can make independent choices during their experience with the gamified interactive e-book, thus having full control over the tool's operation. They can start, pause, repeat, or skip sections of the story at any time, allowing them to learn at their own pace and in a style that best suits their needs, in line with the identification of various gamification elements¹⁷.

In terms of proficiency, it offers students a sense of accomplishment and progress. Questions included in school and homework stories encourage students to think critically and apply their knowledge. After each choice or quiz answer, timely feedback is provided, reinforcing correct answers and correcting incorrect ones with explanations. Earning points for correct quiz answers and converting them into badges further contributes to a sense of proficiency and progress. Finally, in terms of

¹⁶ A. H. Kam, I. N. Umar, *Fostering authentic learning motivations through gamification: a self-determination theory (SDT) approach*. J. Eng. Sci. Technol. 2018, 13, 1–9.

¹⁷ P. Buckley, E. Doyle, *Individualising gamification: an investigation of the impact of learning styles and personality traits on the efficacy of gamification using a prediction market*. Comput. Educ. 2017, 106, 43–55.

relationships, social interaction is encouraged through features that allow students to share earned points and badges with their peers. This fosters a sense of community and offers opportunities for discussion and collaboration, further enhancing student engagement and knowledge sharing.

By combining carefully selected gamification elements with relevant educational content, the use of the gamified interactive e-book aims to create an engaging and effective learning environment.

The design, based on self-determination theory, encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning, experience a sense of progress, and connect with their peers, ultimately fostering a deeper understanding of bullying behavior.

This study employed pre- and post-intervention tests to examine the effects of gamified interactive e-books on primary school students' knowledge and motivation to address bullying.

Participants were randomly assigned to an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group participated in the intervention using the gamified interactive e-book, while the control group received "traditional" lessons on bullying. Pre- and post-tests were administered for both groups to measure the targeted variables, with pre-test scores included as covariates in the analysis to account for any pre-existing differences between the groups.

The sample for this study consisted of two fourth-grade classes with a total of 56 eighth-grade students aged 9 ± 1 year. Informed consent was obtained from parents or legal guardians prior to participation, and students were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participants were randomly assigned to the experimental group ($n = 23$), which used the gamified interactive e-book, or to the control group ($n = 23$), which received traditional lessons on bullying.

As part of the pre-test, students' basic knowledge of bullying prevention was assessed to control for differences in prior knowledge.

The analysis was based on an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) framework, with statistical power set at 0.8 (80%), significance level of 0.05, and effect size of $f = 0.4$. According to Cohen (1988)¹⁸, $f = 0.4$ indicates a high effect size, suitable for studies where the intervention is expected to have a significant impact.

This study used two primary measurement tools: the Student Bullying Knowledge Level Scale and the Motivation to Learn Scale. Both tools used a five-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), and included reverse-scored items. This scale was adapted from Scientific Motivation to Learn Scale (SMTSL) of Tuan et al.'s (2005)¹⁹, which originally consisted of 35 items and demonstrated high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.89 for the overall scale and 0.70–0.89 for the subscales). The adapted scale demonstrated strong reliability in this study, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.922. This scale is adapted from

¹⁸ J. Cohen, *Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences*. 2nd Edn. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. 1988.

¹⁹ H. L. Tuan, C. C. Chin, S. H. Shieh, *The development of a questionnaire to measure students' motivation towards science learning*. Int. J. Sci. Educ. 2005, 27, 639–654.

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Nguyen's Bullying Behavior Awareness in Schools Questionnaire (2015)²⁰, which reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.859. La scala di conoscenza del bullismo studentesco adattata utilizzata in questo studio è composta da 30 item e ha ottenuto un alfa di Cronbach di 0,963, indicando una buona coerenza interna.

This study lasted three months and involved separate phases for both the experimental and control groups. The initial phase (first month) of this study required all students to complete a 40-minute pre-test to assess their basic understanding of bullying and their motivation to learn new information. The assessment included the Student Bullying Knowledge Level Scale and the Motivation to Learn Scale. After the pre-test, the teacher conducted a 20-minute session to introduce the learning objectives and study requirements, ensuring that all students understood the purpose and procedures of the subsequent learning activities.

During the second phase (second month), students participated in learning activities based on their group (experimental or control). The experimental group used the gamified interactive e-book for 45 minutes per class (at least twice a week), while the control group received traditional lessons on bullying for 45 minutes per class (at least twice a week).

Finally, during the third phase (third month), all students completed a 40-minute post-test to assess their knowledge of bullying and their motivation to learn following the interventions. The Student Bullying Knowledge Level Scale and the Motivation to Learn Scale were also used in this case.

Regarding data analysis, to determine the effectiveness of the intervention, analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to examine the differences between pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental and control groups.

Data analysis was performed using SPSS 26, and statistical significance was set at the 0.05 level. To further improve the reliability of the results, an independent samples t-test was conducted on the pre-test scores of both groups to confirm the absence of significant initial differences between the two groups.

First, the normality of the pretest and posttest scores for knowledge about bullying in both the control and experimental groups was assessed using the Shapiro-Wilk test. The results ($p = 0.115$, $p = 0.155$, $p = 0.241$, $p = 0.661$) confirmed that the data met the normality assumption, as all p values were greater than 0.05.

The results for learning motivation derived from the pretest and posttest scores ($p = 0.701$, $p = 0.976$, $p = 0.535$, $p = 0.054$) indicated that the data for both groups and both time points met the normality assumption, as all p values were greater than 0.05.

The between-subjects effect test revealed that students' pretest scores on knowledge about bullying did not significantly influence their posttest scores ($F = 0.204$, $p = 0.654 > 0.05$).

The ANCOVA results demonstrated a significant difference in mean posttest scores between the two groups; specifically, the experimental group achieved a significantly higher mean score than the control group ($F = 63.530$, $p < 0.001$, $\alpha^2 = 0.527$). This demonstrates that the intervention implemented in the experimental group effectively improved students' motivation to learn about bullying compared to

²⁰ V. T. Nguyen, *Vietnamese high school students' perceptions of violence on campus*. [Master's thesis]: Southwest University. 2015.

traditional lessons.

Furthermore, the experimental group demonstrated significantly higher knowledge about bullying than the control group ($F = 30.182, p < 0.001, \alpha^2 = 0.376$). These results indicate that the use of the gamified interactive e-book was effective in improving students' understanding of bullying compared to traditional lectures.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of a gamified interactive e-book in improving primary school students' motivation and awareness of bullying prevention behaviors. The results demonstrate that the intervention significantly improved both learning motivation and student awareness of anti-bullying behaviors compared to traditional lecture-based teaching.

The results of this research demonstrate a significant improvement in students' awareness of bullying prevention among those in the experimental group compared to pre-test results.

This finding is consistent with the findings of Rončević Zubković et al. (2022)²¹, which support the idea that elements such as role-playing, scenario-based decision-making, feedback and rewards, and social interaction integrated into the experimental group effectively increase students' motivation to engage in bullying prevention behaviors. This motivation boosts students' enthusiasm for learning, encouraging them to participate more actively in learning activities, thus improving their behavioral awareness related to bullying prevention. The results of this study also reveal that students in the experimental group performed significantly better than their peers in the control group on aspects such as awareness of bullying prevention. This finding supports the hypothesis that increasing students' motivation to engage in bullying prevention content would lead to greater awareness of bullying behaviors and appropriate responses.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the effects of gamified interactive e-books on primary school students' knowledge and motivation regarding bullying.

The results provide compelling evidence that the use of gamified interactive e-books can significantly improve both students' understanding of bullying and their willingness to learn more about this important social issue.

Furthermore, a positive correlation was found between intrinsic motivation and learning persistence, indicating that students with higher intrinsic motivation are more likely to maintain their engagement in educational activities. Similarly, gamification can effectively improve student motivation if it meets all three SDT needs. However, meeting these needs uniformly across different students presents challenges, as students may prioritize different psychological needs based on their personal preferences and motivations.

Educational settings should implement gamification while respecting students' freedom of choice, offering multiple attempts, reducing the risk of failure, and allowing them to choose their preferred learning modality or style. A sense of

²¹ Rončević Zubković, B., Kolić-Vehovec, S., Smojver-Ažić, S., Martinac Dorčić, T., and Pahljina-Reinić, R., *The role of experience during playing bullying prevention serious game: effects on knowledge and compassion. Behav. Inform. Technol.* 2022, 41, 401–415.

competence is fostered by providing students with tasks or challenges that best match their abilities and by offering positive and timely feedback upon completion, strengthening their sense of accomplishment.

The findings of this study have significant implications for educational practice, particularly in the area of bullying prevention. Gamified interactive e-books offer a promising approach to engaging students in a topic that can often be

difficult to address with traditional methods. By integrating interactive storytelling, game mechanics, and opportunities for social interaction, gamified interactive e-books create a dynamic learning environment that fosters both comprehension and motivation. Therefore, offering students the ability to choose their role, control their navigation, and control their learning pace supported their sense of autonomy. The integration of challenges, quizzes, feedback mechanisms, and reward systems helped foster a sense of competence and progress. Enabling social sharing of results fostered a sense of connection among students. As highlighted by Teba (2023)²², satisfying these psychological needs through gamification is crucial for promoting intrinsic motivation and the desire to learn.

In conclusion, this study provides compelling evidence regarding the effectiveness of using gamified interactive e-books in improving anti-bullying knowledge and motivation among primary school students.

The findings highlight a positive impact on educational practice and contribute to theoretical understanding of how gamified interventions can leverage SDT principles to promote meaningful learning.

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²² S. C. Teba, *Using gamification to improve Beninese primary pupils' oral proficiency: a case study of the experimental School of Attakè*. Int. J. Adv. Educ. Res. 2023, 8, 79–84.

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**Gamification in Primary School for Emotional and Social Well-being /
Gamification nella scuola primaria per un benessere sociale ed emotivo**

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ABSTRACT. Gamification is now considered a valid strategy in education. It involves integrating game elements into pedagogical activities that can improve motivation and the development of cognitive and social skills.

The objective of this study is to analyze the effects gamification has on emotional well-being and social skills (the variables analyzed are self-esteem¹, self-concept², social skills³) of primary school students.

Fifty-four students from a primary school in Naples, with an average age of 9 ± 1 year, were involved. The students were divided into an experimental group, which completed a program based on gamification of physical exercise, and a control group, which completed an educational program without gamification.

Self-esteem, self-concept, and social skills are interconnected and are shaped by academic and social experiences, highlighting the role of school as a key environment for strengthening them.

Although the study presents obvious limitations in terms of replicability due to the limited time frame of the experiment, the small number of students involved, and its implementation in a single school, the results demonstrate that the experimental group significantly improved self-esteem compared to the control group. Improvements were also observed in all social skills subdomains, with the exception of the jealousy/loneliness subdomain.

Keywords: gamification; self-esteem; self-concept; social skills; children.

¹ A. Pignault, M. Rastoder, C. Houssemand, *The relationship between self-esteem, self-efficacy, and career decision-making difficulties: Psychological flourishing as a mediator*. *European Journal of Investigation in Health Psychology and Education*, 2023, 13(9), 1553–1568.

² O. Erdogan, *A system approach to the self: Interpretive phenomenological analysis*. *Heliyon*, 2023, 10(1), e23260

³ P. Soto-Icaza, F. Aboitiz, P. Billeke, *Development of social skills in children: Neural and behavioral evidence for the elaboration of cognitive models*. *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, 2015, 9, 333.

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ABSTRACT. La gamification è oggi considerata una valida strategia in ambito educativo. Consiste nell'integrare elementi di gioco in attività pedagogiche che possono migliorare la motivazione e lo sviluppo di competenze cognitive e sociali.

L'obiettivo di questo studio è analizzare gli effetti della gamification sul benessere emotivo e sulle competenze sociali (le variabili analizzate sono autostima, concetto di sé e competenze sociali) degli studenti della scuola primaria.

Sono stati coinvolti 54 studenti di una scuola primaria di Napoli, con un'età media di 9 ± 1 anno. Gli studenti sono stati divisi in un gruppo sperimentale, che ha completato un programma basato sulla gamification dell'esercizio fisico, e un gruppo di controllo, che ha completato un programma educativo senza gamification.

Autostima, concetto di sé e competenze sociali sono interconnessi e sono plasmati dalle esperienze accademiche e sociali, evidenziando il ruolo della scuola come ambiente chiave per il loro rafforzamento. Sebbene lo studio presenti evidenti limiti in termini di replicabilità dovuti al periodo di tempo limitato dell'esperimento, al numero limitato di studenti coinvolti e alla sua implementazione in una singola scuola, i risultati dimostrano che il gruppo sperimentale ha migliorato significativamente l'autostima rispetto al gruppo di controllo. Miglioramenti sono stati osservati anche in tutti i sottodomini delle abilità sociali, ad eccezione del sottodominio della gelosia/solitudine.

Keywords: gamification; self-esteem; self-concept; social skills; bambini.

1. Introduction

Primary education is a crucial period for the development of emotional and social skills that form the basis for complete well-being throughout life⁴. At this stage, children experience significant changes in their ability to understand and regulate emotions, establish interpersonal relationships, and develop a positive self-image⁵. Obviously, these skills are fundamental in the process of adapting to the school environment, in their academic success⁶ and in their ability to face the challenges of the social environment. However, multiple contextual and personal factors can interfere with this development⁷, highlighting the need for specific interventions that

⁴ R.D. Taylor, E. Oberle, J.A. Durlak, R.P., Weissberg, *Promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions: A meta-analysis of follow-up effects*. Child Development, 2017, 88(4), 1156–1171.

⁵ S. A. Denham, K. M. Zinsler, *Social and emotional learning during early childhood*. In *Encyclopedia of Primary Prevention and Health Promotion*. Springer. 2014, pp. 926–935.

⁶ J. A. Durlak, R. P. Weissberg, A. B. Dymnicki, R. D. Taylor, K. B. Schellinger, *The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions*. Child development, 2011, 82(1), 405-432.

⁷ R. Pianta, J. Downer, B. Hamre, *Quality in early education classrooms: Definitions, gaps, and systems*. The Future of Children, 2016, 26, 119–137

favor the promotion of these skills from childhood⁸.

Among the most relevant variables for emotional and social well-being in this population are self-esteem, self-concept, and social skills⁹. Self-esteem is related to one's ability to face challenges and maintain healthy relationships¹⁰, while the self-concept represents the fundamental pillar for building personal identity¹¹, finally, social skills are essential for integration into groups and positive interaction with others¹².

These three variables are interconnected and are influenced by school and social experiences, highlighting the role of school as a key environment for their strengthening.

On the other hand, physical exercise, in addition to its obvious benefits in terms of physical health, represents a protective factor that contributes to emotional and social development during childhood¹³, in particular, positive associations with improved self-esteem, reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression, and strengthened social interactions have been highlighted¹⁴.

Group physical activities are an ideal context for learning social skills, as they foster cooperation, empathy, and joint problem solving.

In recent years, gamification has emerged as an innovative methodology that combines the motivating elements of play with the benefits of physical exercise, offering a more engaging and effective educational experience¹⁵. This methodology is based on the incorporation of playful dynamics into physical activities, creating an environment that stimulates active participation, social interaction and emotional

⁸ M. B. Santamaria-Villar, R. Gilar-Corbi, T. Pozo-Rico, J. L. Castejon, *Teaching socio-emotional competencies among primary school students: Improving conflict resolution and promoting democratic co-existence in schools*. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2021, 12, 659348.

⁹ S. Di Nuovo, C. Ugolini, *Costruire il benessere personale e sociale mediante la speranza attiva: dimensioni psicologiche*. *Rivista di Scienze dell'Educazione*, 2025, 63(1-2), 43-58.

¹⁰ A. Pignault, M. Rastoder, C. Houssemand, *The relationship between self-esteem, self-efficacy, and career decision-making difficulties: Psychological flourishing as a mediator*. *European Journal of Investigation in Health Psychology and Education*, 2023, 13(9), 1553-1568.

¹¹ O. Erdogan, *A system approach to the self: Interpretive phenomenological analysis*. *Heliyon*, 2023, 10(1), e23260

¹² P. Soto-Icaza, F. Aboitiz, P. Billeke, *Development of social skills in children: Neural and behavioral evidence for the elaboration of cognitive models*. *Frontiers in Neuroscience*, 2015, 9, 333.

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¹⁴ R. Cody, J. N. Kreppke, J. Beck, L. Donath, A. Eckert, C. Imboden, M. Hatzinger, E. Holsboer-Trachsler, U. E. Lang, S. Ludyga, S. Mans, T. Mikoteit, A. Oswald, A. Rogausch, N. Schweinfurth, L. Zahner, O. Faude, M. Gerber, *Psychosocial health and physical activity in people with major depression in the context of COVID-19*. *Front Sports Act Living*, 2021, 29(3), 685117.

¹⁵ E. Gkintoni, F. Vantaraki, C. Skoulidi, P. Anastassopoulos, A. Vantarakis, *Promoting physical and mental health among children and adolescents via gamification-a conceptual systematic review*. *Behavioral Sciences*, 2024, 14(2), 102.

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reflection¹⁶.

Unlike other methodologies, gamification activates game dynamics in which aspects such as rewards, levels and challenges represent the key factor capable of increasing intrinsic motivation and participant involvement¹⁷.

The purpose of this study is to examine the influence of active gamification on the emotional well-being and social skills of primary school students.

2. Job Description

This study used a randomized controlled trial to evaluate the influence of a gamification program on the emotional well-being and social skills of primary school students.

The participants included 54 students aged 9 ± 1 year. They were divided into an experimental group, which completed a program based on gamification of physical exercise, and a control group, which completed an educational program without gamification. All students who participated in the study did not have any medical conditions that limit physical activity. Furthermore, all participants provided informed consent signed by their parents or legal guardians, which was required to participate in the study.

The values considered were:

Self-esteem: The self-esteem test for students aimed to assess the child's self-image (whether positive or negative). The test consists of 23 items, each assessed with two response options: YES or NO. Table 1 shows the reference model (developed by the author), which includes responses indicating a high level of self-esteem. If, during the evaluation of the tests, the answers match, 1 point is assigned to the lowest answer; if the answers differ, 0 points are assigned to the lowest answer. The useful score is shown below:

- High self-esteem: 20–23 matching responses;
- Tendency to have high self-esteem: 14–18 matching responses;
- Self-esteem at risk: 9–12 matching responses;
- Low self-esteem: 8 matching responses.

	Description	Expected answer
1	My classmates make fun of me	No
2	I am a happy person	Yes
3	I'm smart	Yes
4	My appearance bothers me	No

¹⁶ J. Yang, F. Y. Ju, Z. G. Tian, *Sports and social interaction: Sports experiences and attitudes of the urban running Community*. International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 2022, 19(21), 14412

¹⁷ A. Fornasari, *Gamification e inclusione scolastica: il progetto PYRAMID per promuovere competenze trasversali e partecipazione attiva negli studenti*, CADMO, 2025.

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5	When I grow up I will be an important person	Yes
6	I'm good at doing homework	Yes
7	I like being the way I am	Yes
8	I usually get into trouble	No
9	I can speak well in front of my class	Yes
10	I'm the last one chosen for the games	No
11	I'm good looking	Yes
12	I want to be different	No
13	I give up easily	No
14	I have many friends	Yes
15	When I try to do something, everything goes wrong	No
16	I feel left out	No
17	My family is disappointed in me	No
18	I have a beautiful face	Yes
19	I'm clumsy	No
20	In games and sports, I watch instead of playing	No
21	I forget what I learned	No
22	My classmates think I have good ideas	Yes
23	I am a good person	Yes

Table 1: Self-esteem test for students

The Garley Self-Concept Questionnaire (CAG) is used for self-concept¹⁸.

¹⁸ B. Garcia, *Cuestionario de autoconcepto GARLEY CAG (Version 1.0)*, Instituto de Orientacion Psicologica EOS, 2001.

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It is a test consisting of 48 statements that are distributed across six dimensions:

1. Physical self-concept: assesses the subject's acceptance and satisfaction with their physical self (appearance);
2. Social acceptance: assesses the subject's perception of their ability to be accepted by their peers;
3. Family self-concept: assesses the subject's relationship with themselves and their family and how they feel about it;
4. Intellectual self-concept: assesses the subject's intellectual abilities;
5. Personal self-assessment: overall assessment of the person;
6. Sense of control: the subject's perception of the degree of control they have.

The 48 items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, with the following response options.

Answer options				
direct items	1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 40, 42, 43, 44, 46 e 47			
Direct Elements Score				
never (1)	rarely (2),	I couldn't say (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)
Indirect items	3, 8, 11, 16, 17, 20, 39, 41, 45 e 48			
Indirect Elements Score				
never (5)	rarely (4)	I couldn't say (3)	Often (2)	Always (1)

Table 2: Likert Scale Score Garley Self-Concept Questionnaire Test (CAG)

Each subscale has 8 items ranging from 5 to 1, so the maximum score for each can range from 8 to 40. The sum of each item generates the score for each scale and overall. The interpretation of the scores is straightforward; therefore, the higher the score, the better the student's self-esteem.

Social skills were assessed using the Matson Assessment of Social Skills in Youth (MESSY)¹⁹. This questionnaire included 24 items relating to social skills, each of which was associated with a response divided into four options: never, sometimes, often and always.

Areas affected	Questions
Having friends, expressing one's emotions, sharing	"I look at people when I talk to them"; "I turn to people and start a conversation."
Inappropriate assertiveness (16 items)	"I take things that aren't mine without permission"; "I hit when I'm angry."

¹⁹ J. L. Matson, A. F. Rotatori, W. J. Helsel,, *Scale to measure social skills in children: The maskills with youngsters (MESSY)*. Behavior Rese, 1983, 21(4), 335-340

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Impulsiveness (5 item)	"I get angry easily"; "I interrupt others when they're talking."
Excessive security (6 item)	"I like to brag to others about the things I own." "I think I know everything."
Jealousy/loneliness (4 item)	"I have no friends."

Table 3: Sample Matson Social Skills Questionnaire for Young People (MESSY)

The experimental group was implemented in the 2025/2026 school year. It lasted 8 weeks (start date: October 6, 2025 – end date: November 30, 2025). For the experimental group, the educational proposals, specifically designed for primary school students, integrated gamification into physical activity, aiming to transform physical activity sessions into highly motivating and immersive experiences, integrating recreational and narrative elements.

Phase 1: Movement Explorers				
Settimana	1: Introduction to Exploration. Coordination Challenges	2: Overcoming Challenges. Explorer Consolidation	3: Hero Training: Speed and Strategic Challenges	4: Collaboration Challenges
Phase 2: Guardians of Health				
Settimana	5: Guardian Challenge	6: Guardian Missions	7: Preparing for the final battle	8: The Final Battle

Table 4: Example of an educational proposal based on gamification and storytelling

Regarding immersive narratives, each phase was immersed in a progressive story, in which students not only performed isolated physical activities but also "experienced adventures" related to explorations, heroic missions, and challenges to protect a kingdom.

The points and ranking system allowed students to accumulate points in each session, which were used to classify equipment and strengthen motivation through symbolic rewards.

Incremental challenges included physical activity proposals designed with progressive levels of difficulty to promote the development of skills such as teamwork, coordination, endurance, and strategy.

Team dynamics aimed to encourage cooperation and communication among students, promoting social skills alongside physics.

Rewards and achievements were presented at the end of each phase and session, allowing participants to celebrate their achievements through closing activities that consolidated learning and maintained enthusiasm.

This highlights that, while in the control group the exercises were typically functional and focused on individual physical abilities, in the experimental group, thanks to the presence of gamification, it was possible to integrate a holistic approach,

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using games and storytelling as pedagogical tools.

Furthermore, the program proposed in the experimental group was divided into three thematic phases, each of which progressively increased in difficulty and intensity over the course of several sessions held three times a week (45 minutes) and structured into three parts:

- Activation: 10 minutes with activities such as reaction games or small challenges to prepare students both mentally and physically;
- Main activity: 30 minutes;
- Closing: 5 minutes, dedicated to assigning points and updating team rankings.

It's important to note that all questionnaires were completed by participants at two points: before the start of the intervention and after its conclusion. To maintain consistency in the delivery of the gamified program, teachers underwent two weeks of training on the methodology before the program began.

3. Data Analysis

Data analysis included calculating the means and standard deviations of the variables studied. The student t-test for independent samples was used to analyze group differences. A mixed-design analysis of variance (ANOVA) was also conducted to assess the impact of the intervention.

The dependent variables analyzed included concentration, attention, memory, and creativity, with appropriate tests applied to each.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the effects of gamification on the emotional well-being and social skills of primary school students. Effect sizes, calculated using Cohen's *d*, were classified as small (0.2), moderate (0.5), and large (0.8) effects. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was used for all tests.

Area of intervention	Pre- and post-intervention values	
self-concept	Experimental group (pre/post-intervention)	$p = 0,0021$, d di Cohen = 0,43
	Differences between the control and experimental groups (post-intervention)	$p = 0,012$, d di Cohen = 0,49
self-esteem	Experimental group (pre/post-intervention)	$p = 0,003$, d di Cohen = 0,46
	Differences between the control and experimental groups (post-intervention)	$p = 0,000$, d di Cohen = 1,56
Abilità sociali	Experimental group (pre/post-intervention)	$p = 0,002$, d di Cohen = 0,33
	Differences between the control and experimental groups (post-intervention)	$p = 0,041$, d di Cohen $d = 0,39$

Table 5: Data collected

Regarding self-concept, the results showed significant differences in physical self-

concept between the pre- and post-intervention measures for the experimental group ($p = 0.00211$, Cohen's $d = 0.43$). Furthermore, the differences between the groups were significant in the post-intervention measure ($p = 0.012$, Cohen's $d = 0.49$).

In terms of self-esteem, significant differences were observed between the pre- and post-intervention measures for the experimental group ($p = 0.003$, Cohen's $d = 0.46$). Furthermore, there were significant differences between both groups in the post-intervention measure ($p = 0.000$, Cohen's $d = 1.56$).

Regarding social skills, significant differences were found between pre- and post-measurements in the experimental group ($p = 0.002$, Cohen's $d = 0.33$), and between both groups at the post-intervention measurement ($p = 0.041$, Cohen's $d = 0.39$).

The results of this study revealed that the group that underwent the gamification intervention experienced beneficial effects on self-esteem and self-image. Furthermore, improvements were found in all subdomains of social skills, with the exception of the jealousy/loneliness subdomain. The development of emotional and social skills during primary schooling is a growing area of interest in the fields of educational psychology and pedagogy. These skills, which include the ability to manage emotions, establish healthy interpersonal relationships, and build a positive self-image, are crucial for children's overall well-being and their long-term success in various contexts²⁰.

Self-esteem is fundamental to the psychological well-being and social development of students, as it influences their ability to face challenges and build healthy relationships²¹. Physical activity plays a crucial role in developing self-esteem in children and adolescents²². This study demonstrated how a game-based program positively impacted students' self-esteem. These improvements are explained by the presence of physical challenges, which offered children the opportunity to overcome achievable goals, strengthening their confidence in their physical abilities. This, considering that the cooperative aspect of group activities also had a positive impact, highlights the importance of creating environments that allow students to experience tangible results, an aspect that, as observed, improves self-esteem.

Social skills are a set of behaviors and skills that enable people to interact effectively and appropriately in different social contexts²³.

In the educational field, social skills play a crucial role in the complete development of students, as they foster a positive climate of coexistence and improve collaborative

²⁰ R. Speidel, T. K. Y. Wong, R. Al-Janaideh, T. Colasante, T. Malti, *Nurturing child social-emotional development: Evaluation of a pre-post and 2-month follow-up uncontrolled pilot training for caregivers and educators*. Pilot Feasibility Study, 2023, 9(1), 148.

²¹ J. Tevere, A. Gritti, A. V. Testa, I. Granata, T. Salvati., *Quando l'autostima fa la differenza: un'analisi delle relazioni tra percezione di sé e aggressività nei contesti scolastici*. TOPIC-Temi di Psicologia dell'Ordine degli Psicologi della Campania, 2025, 4(1).

²² G. Ferrara, F. La Versa, *La corporeità per potenziare l'apprendimento nella scuola primaria*. Nuova Secondaria, 2025, 42(7).

²³ M. Maleki, A. Mardani, M. Mitra Chehrzad, M. Dianatinasab, M. Vaismoradi., *Social skills in children at home and in preschool*. Behavioral Sciences, 2019, 9(7), 74.

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learning²⁴.

In this study, the results showed significant improvements in social skills in the experimental group compared to the control group, demonstrating the impact these activities have on developing essential social skills in students.

The observed improvement in social skills is explained by the gamification program design, which included dynamics that required teamwork, effective communication, and group problem-solving. These activities not only provided opportunities to practice social skills but also reinforced values such as cooperation and mutual respect.

4. Conclusion

This work has highlighted how play, far from being considered a marginal activity, actually constitutes a fundamental dimension of the human experience.

Primary education represents a unique opportunity to promote the development of children's emotional and social skills, as key competencies such as self-esteem, self-confidence, and social skills are consolidated during this period.

Within this framework, Gamification emerges as an innovative approach that draws on play dynamics to apply them in educational contexts, fostering all those values that foster engagement and make learning processes more effective.

Gamification, in relation to physical activity, therefore, with the presence of motivating game elements, not only encourages children's participation and engagement, but also creates a safe and dynamic environment in which they can experiment, learn, and practice these skills in a meaningful way.

Gamification, therefore, presents itself as a comprehensive tool for addressing students' emotional and social needs, promoting balanced development and preparing them to face life's challenges with greater resilience and confidence.

In conclusion, Gamification should not be considered a passing fad or simply a gimmick to make lessons more fun. It should represent a pedagogical perspective that, if applied with awareness, can help transform the way we learn and motivate ourselves to build skills. Therefore, Gamification, when understood as a bridge between experience and knowledge, between play and learning, between motivation and competence, can become a crucial resource for addressing the transformations underway in society and schools.

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²⁴ M. R. Mancaniello, *Formarsi in un clima di classe collaborativo: le metodologie partecipative per promuovere l'agio dell'apprendimento e prevenire le forme di dis-agio relazionale nella scuola dell'adolescenza*. *Nuova Secondaria*, 2025, 42(6).

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Gender Equality through Gamification and Physical Education in Primary School / *Parità di genere attraverso la gamification e l'educazione fisica nella scuola primaria*

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ABSTRACT. Education and sports are fundamental aspects, recognized worldwide, capable of promoting policies that promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

In schools, physical education is presented as a fundamental component capable of enhancing girls' empowerment and, consequently, countering the strong tendency to place the male gender at the helm of society.

This project involved 61 students, 29 of whom were female, in the fourth and fifth grades of primary school. It aimed to challenge gender stereotypes through a modified narrative of a television series contextualized by gamification.

The results showed that the majority of students responded positively to the narrative, generating significant aspects of empowerment within them. Specifically, the female students identified with the protagonists and, consequently, recognized the fundamental role of women in society.

This contributed to developing their awareness of their ability to overcome limitations, improve their physical condition, and develop habits to stay fit, as well as increasing their enjoyment, enjoyment, and sense of well-being.

The results of the study indicate that designing gamification strategies based on the principles of the activist approach fosters girls' empowerment and improves their active and effective participation in physical education classes.

Keywords: women's emancipation, physical activity, gamification.

ABSTRACT. L'educazione e lo sport sono aspetti fondamentali, riconosciuti a livello mondiale, in grado di promuovere politiche che promuovano la parità di genere e l'emancipazione femminile.

Nelle scuole, l'educazione fisica viene presentata come una componente fondamentale in grado di rafforzare l'emancipazione femminile e, di conseguenza, contrastare la forte tendenza a porre il genere maschile al timone della società.

Questo progetto ha coinvolto 61 studenti, di cui 29 femmine, di quarta e quinta

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elementare. L'obiettivo era sfidare gli stereotipi di genere attraverso una narrazione modificata di una serie televisiva contestualizzata attraverso la gamification.

I risultati hanno mostrato che la maggior parte degli studenti ha risposto positivamente alla narrazione, generando in loro significativi aspetti di empowerment. Nello specifico, le studentesse si sono identificate con le protagoniste e, di conseguenza, hanno riconosciuto il ruolo fondamentale delle donne nella società.

Ciò ha contribuito a sviluppare in loro la consapevolezza della propria capacità di superare i limiti, migliorare la propria condizione fisica e sviluppare abitudini per mantenersi in forma, oltre ad aumentare il loro divertimento, il loro piacere e il loro senso di benessere. I risultati dello studio indicano che la progettazione di strategie di gamification basate sui principi dell'approccio attivista promuove l'emancipazione delle ragazze e migliora la loro partecipazione attiva ed efficace alle lezioni di educazione fisica.

Keywords: emancipazione femminile, educazione fisica, gamification.

1. Introduction

Schools have a duty to develop programs aimed at promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.

The 2030 Agenda emphasizes the need to integrate a gender perspective into each country's curricula¹.

In sports, the process by which women acquire the confidence, strength, knowledge and skills needed to make strategic decisions that improve their lives is defined as female empowerment². Given the above, it's essential to consider aspects such as students' physical and mental health, in order to improve their self-esteem, self-confidence, and sense of control over their bodies. It's from this perspective that empowerment takes on a dual meaning:

- a) Promote an active lifestyle;
- b) Acquire knowledge and healthy behaviors³.

2. Analysis of the relationship between physical activity and girls

Research such as that conducted by Guthold et al.⁴ highlights a higher prevalence of physical inactivity among girls in nearly every country in the world (84.7% compared to 77.6% among boys), with no significant changes observed in this trend for girls over the past decade

¹ United Nations (UN). *Global accountability framework on gender equality and women's empowerment*, 2019.

² Right To Play (RTP). *Harnessing the power of sport for development and peace: Recommendations to governments*, 2008.

³ I. Beutler, *Sport serving development and peace: Achieving the goals of the United Nations through sport*. *Sport in Society*, 11(4), 2008, 359–369.

⁴ R. Guthold, G. A. Stevens, L.M. Riley, F.C. Bull, *Global trends in insufficient physical activity among adolescents: A pooled analysis of 298 population-based surveys with 1.6 million participants*. *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, 2020, 4, 23–35.

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Further research reveals that girls tend to distance themselves from physical activity, including that carried out in the school context, at certain stages of their lives⁵.

Other research shows that during both primary and secondary school, physical activity levels are lower among girls⁶.

The practice of physical activity has numerous benefits, among which is certainly the ability to transmit and reinforce healthy habits and behaviors that allow students to adopt an active and healthy lifestyle throughout their lives⁷. It is for this reason that it is necessary to design learning situations that encourage girls' engagement and participation in the classroom⁸. Duffey et al. argue that to achieve this goal, educators must promote physical literacy from an early age, as this will help girls develop the confidence and skills needed to maintain adequate levels of physical activity throughout adolescence. Table 1 below identifies five key aspects that can negatively impact physical education practices and female gender.

<i>Factors that negatively influence physical education practice and female gender</i>	
1	Girls receive less social and family support to engage in physical activity ⁹
2	In early adolescence, female students show less enjoyment in class; they feel uncomfortable; they experience less satisfaction, motivation, enjoyment, or enthusiasm; or they don't understand the usefulness of the subject or the benefits of physical activity ¹⁰

⁵ K. Duffey, A. Barbosa, S. Whiting, R. Mendes, Y.I. Aguirre, A. Tcymbal, K. Abu-Omar, P. Gelius, J. Breda, *Barriers and facilitators of physical activity participation in adolescent girls: A systematic review of systematic reviews*. *Front Public Health*, 9, Article 743935, 2022.

⁶ M. Kirkham-King, T.A. Brusseau, J.C. Hannon, D.M. Castelli, K. Hilton, R.D. Burns, *Elementary physical education: A focus on fitness activities and smaller class sizes are associated with higher levels of physical activity*. *Preventive Medicine Reports*, 2017, 8, 135–139.

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⁷ D. Galimberti, *Longevi, sani e felici: Scienza, stile di vita e abitudini per vivere più a lungo in salute*. Harper Collins Italia, 2025.

⁸ M. Fabbri, *Dall'empowerment all'agency pedagogico-trasformativa. Prospettive di ricerca e linee per l'azione didattica*. Scuola e Cittadinanza Democratica, 2025, 1-324.

⁹ S. Metcalf, *Adolescent constructions of gendered identities: The role of sport and (physical) education*. *Sport, Education and Society*, 2018, 23(7), 681–693.

¹⁰ M. Huhtiniemi, A. Sääkslahti, A. Watt, T. Jaakkola, *Associations among basic psychological needs, motivation and enjoyment within Finnish physical education students*. *Journal of Sports Science Medicine*, 2019, 18(2), 239–247.

T.J. Saunders, S. Rollo, N. Kuzik, I. Demchenko, S. Bélanger, K. Brisson-Boivin, V. Carson, B.G.G. da Costa, M. Davis, S. Hornby, W.Y. Huang, B. Law, M. Ponti, C. Markham, J. Salmon, J.R. Tomasone, A.J. Van Rooij, L.J. Wachira, K. Wijndaele, M.S. Tremblay, *International school-*

3	Some sports are traditionally dominated by men (think football or basketball) and do not encourage girls' participation ¹¹
4	Some sports are associated with the defeminization of women and the masculinization of men (think soccer, wrestling), potentially leading to a reluctance to participate and/or negative perceptions of motor skills ¹²
5	Consciously or unconsciously, teachers design and implement lessons that reproduce actions and discourses on gender stereotypes, providing fewer sporting opportunities for girls ¹³

Table 1: Factors that negatively influence physical education practice and female gender

These aspects highlight how girls' involvement in physical activity remains influenced by the perception of gender stereotypes. Crawford and Unger (2004)¹⁴ classify these stereotypes as:

- instrumental (or masculine): in which men are physically active and manipulate the world effectively;
- affective-expressive (or feminine): in which women are physically passive with affective and caring roles.

Furthermore, these aspects create a barrier to girls' participation that can influence the factors (motivation, perceived competence, self-identification) that promote girls' emancipation in physical education, as well as compromising the acquisition of a healthy physical sense linked to the body, femininity and physical experiences¹⁵.

These cultural difficulties have created a real challenge for the 21st century¹⁶, highlighting the need to develop a pedagogical model in physical education to work with girls, in order to obtain an activist approach and learn to value a physically active

related sedentary behavior recommendations for children and youth. International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity, 2022, 19, Article 39.

¹¹ R. Eime, J. Harvey, M. Charity, H. Westerbeek, *Participation of Australian women and girls in traditionally male-dominated sports 2016–2018.* International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics, 2022, 14(3), 545–561.

¹² J. Butt, R.S. Weinberg, J.D. Breckon, R.D. Clayto, *Adolescent physical activity participation and motivational determinants across gender, age, and race.* Journal of Physical Activity and Health, 2011, 8, 1074–1083.

¹³ S. Preece, R. Bullingham, *Gender stereotypes: The impact upon perceived roles and practice of in-service teachers in physical education.* Sport, Education and Society, 2022, 27(3), 259–271.

¹⁴ M. Crawford, R. Unger, *Women and gender (4th ed.).* Mc Graw Hill. 2004.

¹⁵ M. Trombetta, V. Bosna, E. Isidori, *La donna nello sport. Identità, pratiche, culture.* Edizioni Quapag. 2024.

¹⁶ World Health Organization (WHO). *WHO guidelines on physical activity and sedentary behaviour: At a glance.* 2020.

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life¹⁷.

What has been said therefore requires a pedagogy that focuses on certain aspects:

- student-centered,
- personalized,
- research- and action-based,
- developed by listening to the girls' responses over time.

Student participation in physical education classes is influenced by the content taught by teachers, the methodological approach used, and the importance of the educational purpose.

The health benefits of physical activity must be considered more critically, while also encouraging fun and social interaction. This encourages students' active participation, allowing them to maintain and improve their motor skills¹⁸.

One aspect that shouldn't be underestimated in physical education is the ability to integrate activities with a strong gender cultural focus, transformation, and change. This highlights the need for teachers to actively commit to gender equality¹⁹ through coeducational teaching proposals.

3. *The role of gamification in schools*

Gamification is considered an innovative approach that uses game elements to achieve educational objectives, including activities in game dynamics and storytelling²⁰.

The potential of gamification is linked to positive affective and emotional components, generating an impact on motivational and behavioral aspects, as well as promoting the consolidation of learning and academic performance²¹.

Gamified experiences to work on physical activity and health with students recognize this model as a motivating factor for healthy behaviors and improving physical activity practice at all educational levels.

¹⁷ K.L. Oliver, D. Kirk, *Girls, gender and physical education: An activist approach (1st ed.)*. Routledge. 2015.

¹⁸ M. Corr, J. McSharry, E.M. Murtagh, *Adolescent girls' perceptions of physical activity: A systematic review of qualitative studies*. American Journal of Health Promotion, 2019, 33(5), 806–819.

¹⁹ S. Soler, *Los procesos de reproducción, resistencia y cambio de las relaciones tradicionales de género en la Educación Física: El caso del fútbol*. Cultura y Educación 21(1), 31–42, 2009.

²⁰ G. Marinensi, M.R. Carbonell, *Migliorare il coinvolgimento nei corsi moodle attraverso la gamification narrativa: il caso di the chronicles of knowledge*. 2024. Atti del MoodleMoot Italia 2024

²¹ G. Flores-Aguilar, M. Iniesta-Pizarro, J. Fernández-Río, “PE money heist”: *Gamification, motivational regulations and qualifications in physical education*. Apunts Educación Física y Deportes, 2023, 151,36–48.

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Rodríguez-Martín et al. (2022)²² and Martín-Moya et al. (2018)²³ perceived how the implementation of a gamified program reduced the girls' level of anxiety and overwhelm when faced with failure.

This study aims to analyze students' perceptions of how the presence of female protagonists in the narrative of a gamified physical education program, designed to improve physical fitness and health, influences key factors of empowerment in primary education.

4. Job Description

This study involved 61 students, 29 of whom were female, in the fourth and fifth grades of primary school. Specifically, four classes (two fourth and two fifth) from a comprehensive school in the province of Naples were involved. Their ages ranged from 8 +/- 1 year to 10 +/- 1 year, and they were from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. The students were selected randomly, with the sole purpose of conducting the research while maintaining natural and intact groups.

All the classes involved had already experimented with gamification programs in previous years, so the teachers involved had theoretical and practical experience with this methodological approach.

This study was developed taking into account the socio-critical paradigm, and therefore aims to understand and transform reality through two aspects: participation and reflection²⁴.

In line with the socio-critical tradition, a qualitative methodology is used, as well as encouraging active participation and critical reflection²⁵.

The work involved the following phases²⁶:

- study design;
- data collection;
- interpretation of results using a narrative content analysis approach.

The data collection tool was an open-ended questionnaire, which allowed participants to express their perspectives in depth. The work began with obtaining ethical authorization from the Comprehensive Institute. Subsequently, the work was explained to the school administration and participants (teachers and parents of the students). Finally, the families were informed and their consent was obtained. At the end of the intervention, the information was collected and the results were analyzed.

The implemented program focuses primarily on physical education and the use of gamification. Specifically, everything is presented in the form of a narrative set at

²² B. Rodríguez-Martín, G. Flores-Aguilar, J. Fernández-Río, *Ansiedad ante el fracaso en educación física ¿puede la gamificación promover cambios en las alumnas de primaria?* Retos, 2022, 44, 739–748.

²³ R. Martín-Moya, P.J. Ruiz-Montero, O. Chiva-Bartoll, C. Capella-Peris, *Motivación de logro para aprender en estudiantes de Educación Física: Diverhealth*. Revista Interamericana de Psicología, 2018, 52(2), 270–280.

²⁴ W. Carr, S. Kemmis, *Becoming critical: Education, knowledge and action research*. Falmer Press. 1986.

²⁵ P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum, N.Y. -London, 1970.

²⁶ N.K. Denzin, Y.S. Lincoln, *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research (5th ed.)*. SAGE. 2018.

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Hogwarts School. The narrative presents the female students of Hogwarts as the protagonists and heroines of the story: Hermione, Ginny, Luna, and other girls are tasked with saving the wizarding world from the evil Voldemort, while the male protagonists of the saga were transformed into statues. This eliminates the stereotypical vision of the male hero, favoring one in which women take on a central heroic role.

Gamification was offered three times a week, each lasting one hour. The methodology used, in addition to gamification, also included cooperative learning, with each member assigned four roles with specific responsibilities²⁷. During the proposed activities, each participant developed specific skills that promoted positive interdependence, helped improve running technique, and the activation phase.

Educational proposal	
Fiction	Hogwarts is threatened by "Volde Statue." To counter this, the heroes, Hermione and her fellow witches, enlist the help of the students. To defeat the statue army, they must prepare themselves physically and mentally and become "Professors of Advanced Magic."
Object of the game	Defeat Voldemort and his army by gaining power in six "Arts" (contents): 1. Divination: experiencing real emotions; 2. Spells: individual physical-motor challenges; 3. Potions: working on stamina; 4. Personal Magic: habits, equipment, punctuality, hygiene, a healthy breakfast, and cooperative work; 5. Magical Quests: three projects on health and BP; 6. Active Magic: demonstrating an active lifestyle.
Levels	Apprentice, Master, and Professor of Advanced Magic. To reach these levels, they accumulate points (p)/badges (a) for their work, progress, and the correct completion of the "Arts" (contents) in their individual passport. Players and Teams: Teams of four participants with roles/responsibilities:

²⁷ D.W. Johnson, R.T Johnson, E.J. Holubec, *Cooperation in the classroom (9th ed.)*. Interaction Book Company. 2013.

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	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Secretary: Responsible for group records; 2. Materials Manager: Manages equipment; 3. Coach: Organizes participation and helps overcome physical challenges; 4. Fair Play Coordinator: Ensures that the rules are respected, mediates conflicts, and promotes a positive atmosphere.
Awards	<p>Each day, they record/accumulate in their individual passport the results of:</p> <p>Divination: one point (p) for identifying and recording the emotions experienced during the session;</p> <p>Spells: one badge(s) for overcoming a physical challenge;</p> <p>Potions: one badge(s) for recording endurance work;</p> <p>Personal Magic: one point (p) for following the rules: equipment, hygiene habits, and health habits;</p> <p>Level medals acquired.</p>
Experience points (optional)	<p>Active Magic: They earn a pearl of power by presenting evidence of an active lifestyle: a photo of them engaging in physical activity/sports, an explanation of the activity, and the emotions they experienced. By earning two or more pearls, they reach the level of Professor.</p>

Table 2: Example of an implemented teaching proposal

Each proposal was divided into two phases:

1. Step 1: An activation phase was implemented through chasing games, running, joint mobility exercises, stretching, and a game related to the content being worked on.

2. Step 2: The students were asked to complete an individual physical-motor challenge or engage in activities to complete a group mission.

The same narrative was presented to both fourth- and fifth-grade students, but with differences in performance levels for the physical-motor challenges.

At the end of the intervention, a questionnaire was administered via Google Forms, with open-ended questions to gather information about the gamified experience.

Questionnaire

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	What do you think about using the Hogwarts story to introduce the topic "Learning to take care of your health"?
	What do you think about the fact that the protagonists and heroines of the story were girls? Explain why.
	What motivated you to perform well? Why?
	What do you think you improved with this project?
	What do you think you learned from this project?
	How do you feel after evaluating and recognizing your physical improvements (endurance, strength, speed and flexibility), balance and agility?
	What did you enjoy most about this experience? Why?
	What things would you change or add? Why?

Table 3: Example of a questionnaire implemented

Data analysis followed a structured process based on thematic analysis²⁸, using a deductive-inductive approach²⁹. Therefore, a preliminary coding framework was developed based on theoretical concepts drawn from the literature review (deductive phase). Specifically, the initial categories were based on Rowlands' definition of women's empowerment in sport and strategic decision-making skills for life³⁰.

Self-esteem, self-confidence and a sense of control over one's body are considered essential indicators of empowerment³¹.

In the second phase, the data was examined to identify emerging themes and categories were defined accordingly.

In the third phase, subcategories were defined to capture the reasons behind participants' evaluations and motivations for involvement.

In the fourth phase, coding matrices were used to cross-reference the data, identifying relationships along three dimensions:

- Evaluations and stereotypes;
- Evaluations and psychological empowerment factors;
- Program and narrative changes.

Finally, the results were summarized and qualitative reports were generated to interpret the findings within the established theoretical framework.

The analysis of the results on the use of heroines in gamified storytelling shows that the majority of the group (56 responses) positively evaluated the presentation of women as heroines and protagonists of the story, although the reasons for this varied depending on their greater or lesser presence:

²⁸ V. Braun, V. Clarke, *Using thematic analysis in psychology*. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 2006, 3(2), 77–101. a

²⁹ N.K. Denzin, Y.S. Lincoln, *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research (5th ed.)*. SAGE. 2018.

³⁰ J. Rowlands, *Empowerment examined. Development in Practice*, 1995, 5(2), 101–107.

³¹ I. Beutler, *Sport serving development and peace: Achieving the goals of the United Nations through sport*. Sport in Society, 2008, 11(4), 359–369.

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- social relevance that women should have in society.

Here are some comments:

"It's great because often boys are the heroes, and it's time for us girls to show what we can do";

"Women are underrated";

"Women can do everything men can do";

"We can be heroes too";

"We can save the world";

"Long live girl power."

- identification as protagonists.

The following are some comments:

"If the protagonists are of the same sex, it will be more fun";

"I understand the character better because she's the same sex as me";

"We shouldn't give up and just do things."

- male stereotypes as aspects that socially undervalue women.

The following are some comments:

"A great idea because most superheroes are always boys";

"In almost every comic or story, boys have to be the ones saving the world, and therefore, girls have a leading role";

"Girls are strong and brave too, and we can do the same things boys do."

- physical aptitude/motor skills and enjoyment.

Here are some comments:

"It's really nice and fun that we were heroic athletes";

"It's a way to be more motivated when playing sports";

"We had a lot of fun";

- push the boundaries.

Here are some comments:

"I think it encouraged us a lot and thanks to them we surpassed ourselves";

"I enjoyed helping the girls because I improved my endurance and my running technique";

"we got back in shape with Hermione".

Conversely, a small group of students critically evaluated the use of heroines in the narrative.

- Equality as uniformity

Here are some comments:

"It doesn't matter if it's male or female."

- lack of critical awareness regarding the hegemony of male heroes

Below are some comments:

"I didn't like it because it's not typical for girls to have to save boys";

"Everyone is equally important."

Finally, only one student expressed a negative opinion:

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"We exclude men too much."

Regarding student impressions, it was recognized that the gamification story and its elements were motivating for multiple reasons:

- Health

Here are some comments:

"This way I would be healthier and stronger";

"for my health, which is the most important thing";

"to improve my motor and physical fitness."

- activate the imagination.

Here are some comments:

"I could be like a wizard";

"It was like I was a real person there, fighting";

"It inspired me to think that we could de-petrify the Hogwarts kids with our physical actions."

- do well

Here are some comments:

"You feel good, proud";

"Satisfied."

- Get rewards.

Here are some comments: "ottenere la pozione di depietrificazione";

"Points to save Hogwarts";

"Passport goals";

"The badges and awards we've won";

"End up as a professor of advanced magic."

- get a good grade

Here are some comments:

"This way I can improve on the subject";

- Working in a group

Here are some comments:

"It motivated me: my classmates";

"I like collaborating."

- Engage in physical activity.

Here are some comments:

"Knowing I exercised motivated me";

"Exercising."

5. Conclusion

Girls' empowerment is a key aspect in the health field and should be considered a priority in physical education classes³².

³² F. Casolo, *L'Educazione Motoria e scuola primaria*. Formazione & insegnamento, 2025, 17(3 Suppl.), 1-xx.

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The results of this study, while limited in their replicability due to its implementation in a single school and with a small number of students, showed that a gamified educational proposal, centered on the students, enabled them to perceive the fundamental aspects of their empowerment in physical education. Specifically, this experience allowed them to identify with the protagonists, and therefore with their heroine roles and characteristics (courageous, combative, and proactive in finding solutions to problems). This activated their imagination, which motivated them to overcome limitations, obtain rewards, achieve good results, and improve their grades. It was possible to stimulate a reorientation of their success goals toward the task or learning objective, which resulted in positive consequences such as enjoyment and participation in physical activity, while being aware of the impact on their health. It is in this sense that it is possible to understand how the psychological factors that promote female empowerment in physical activity were stimulated (think of motivation, self-identification, or the attribution of physical and health-related value and meaning to their physical experiences).

Another aspect worth analyzing is that students identify and value male stereotypes as aspects that socially devalue women. This leads to the belief that female students perceive socially recognized stereotypes and appropriate behaviors and activities for boys or girls as a social conditioning to perceive themselves as active, strong, or capable of problem-solving. For this reason, teachers' work must aim to reverse this perception.

Finally, emphasizing the importance that women should have in society, students attributed a positive personal value to presenting a narrative in which the protagonist was a woman with heroine-like roles and characteristics.

This suggests that this gamified educational proposal promotes non-discrimination against girls/women in physical education. It allowed students to recognize their ability to overcome their limitations and improve their physical and motor skills, as well as motivate them to work, learn, train, or stay fit.

In conclusion, the results of the study suggest that the gamification program design promoted pleasure, enjoyment, feeling good, or being satisfied and proud of themselves or their work. These emotions, combined with the positive evaluation of teamwork, demonstrate the potential to influence participants' emotional well-being, a fundamental objective for achieving their empowerment.

This research demonstrates how gamified pedagogy can be a key tool for transforming physical education from a gender perspective, promoting girls' emancipation through narratives that exalt them as active and heroic protagonists, fostering self-identification, motivation, and the perception of the value of an active, inclusive, and equitable lifestyle.

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Dal gioco ai libri: come il gioco può migliorare l'istruzione / *From Games to Books: How Games Can Improve Education*

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ABSTRACT. Il gioco rappresenta un elemento essenziale per lo sviluppo psico-fisico e cognitivo del bambino, non mera distrazione ma vero e proprio "lavoro" attraverso cui esplora la realtà, interiorizza competenze, regole e valori: questa consapevolezza è un'acquisizione di senso che la cultura pedagogica ha sempre promosso e con la quale sono state formate tutte le generazioni di maestri dal Novecento in poi. Studiosi come Froebel, Montessori, Makarenko, Caillois e Malaguzzi ne sottolineano il valore pedagogico: stimola creatività, logica, motricità, identità e socializzazione.

Nella fattispecie, il gioco simbolico permette di elaborare esperienze, esprimere emozioni e provare ruoli sociali; i giochi finalizzati favoriscono l'acquisizione mirata di abilità di base. La famiglia, primo contesto ludico, rafforza legami affettivi e prepara gradualmente all'autonomia. Concludendo, il gioco è diritto universale dell'infanzia, potente strumento educativo da valorizzare anche nelle politiche pubbliche per migliorare l'istruzione.

Keywords: giochi finalizzati, gioco simbolico, bambini.

ABSTRACT. Play is essential to a child's psychophysical and cognitive development. It is not a mere distraction, but a true "work" through which to explore reality and internalize skills, rules, and values. This awareness is a significant acquisition that educational culture has always promoted and that has shaped every generation of teachers since the 20th century. Scholars such as Froebel, Montessori, Makarenko, Caillois, and Malaguzzi emphasize its pedagogical value: it stimulates creativity, logic, motor skills, identity, and socialization.

In particular, symbolic play allows children to process experiences, express emotions, and explore social roles; purposeful play fosters the targeted acquisition of basic skills. The family, the primary play context, strengthens emotional bonds and gradually prepares children for independence. In conclusion, play is a universal childhood right, a powerful educational tool that should also be promoted in public policies to improve education.

Keywords: targeted play, symbolic play, children.

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1. Introduzione

Le istituzioni educative come la famiglia, la scuola e le ludoteche hanno un ruolo pedagogico molto importante che consiste nel promuovere le attività ludiche-didattiche che educano il bambino facendolo divertire.

Il gioco è un elemento indispensabile per la crescita psico-armonica del bambino, infatti, non può essere considerato una semplice attività da concedere al bambino solo durante il suo tempo libero, in quanto costituisce una fonte d'apprendimento ricca e varia, attraverso la quale esplora l'ambiente che lo circonda. Per il bambino il gioco è un serio lavoro che lo aiuta a crescere lungo l'arco dell'età evolutiva consentendogli di interiorizzare attraverso esperienze personali e dirette, di prima mano, concetti, nozioni, simboli, abilità e competenze.

Molti studiosi hanno rilevato in modo chiaro come spesso da attività creativa possa essere visto come un potente strumento di apprendimento, riuscendo anche a migliorare il livello di apprendimento. Quindi, avviene una stimolazione di tutte le aree del cervello mentre si gioca, sia per quanto concerne la percezione delle immagini, delle intuizioni, della gestione dello spazio e dell'affettività, che dell'emisfero del linguaggio, del pensiero logico e matematico, cioè razionale¹. Dunque, le attività ludico infantili considerate come un lavoro, uno strumento essenziale mediante il quale le abilità cognitive, sensoriali e sociali vengono rafforzate e raffinate. Per queste ragioni è importante strutturare il materiale d'istruzione, il che significa attribuirgli un linguaggio, utile per la esplorazione della realtà.

A tal riguardo è interessante citare il pensiero di Roger Caillos, uno dei più acuti studiosi sull'argomento, il quale ha sottolineato in che modo il gioco possa rappresentare una delle manifestazioni più elevate ai fini della formazione morale e intellettuale di ogni bambino e bambina². Anche Maria Montessori in tal senso parla di una guida necessaria per ricevere correttamente il messaggio relativo a colori, suoni, odori e forme³. Makarenko, invece, considera l'educazione al gioco e l'educazione relativa al lavoro come attività connesse⁴. Attraverso un'adeguata organizzazione del gioco si formano le qualità del futuro cittadino, gran parte degli studiosi dell'età evolutiva ritiene che il gioco sia uno dei bisogni fondamentali dei bambini e quindi un bambino sano è un bambino che gioca. Sostanzialmente, si tratta di uno strumento fondamentale per entrare in rapporto con sé stessi e con il mondo⁵.

Secondo Froebel i bambini che giocano con abilità, serenità e costanza diventano uomini abili sereni e costanti. Il gioco favorisce la crescita democratica e la formazione del futuro cittadino, consapevole dei suoi diritti dei suoi doveri, capace di partecipare responsabilmente alla vita democratica della nazione, non deve essere un atto solitario, ma di gruppo condiviso da più persone attraverso regole più o meno esplicite.

I bambini giocando acquisiscono capacità e modi di essere attraverso il gioco, tutto

¹ Cfr. N. Laniado, G. Pietra, *La grande enciclopedia del bambino*, Sfera 2005, pp. 199-200.

² A. Nobile, *Gioco infanzia*, La Scuola, Brescia 1994, pp. 108 -113.

³ M. Montessori, *Il metodo della pedagogia scientifica*, Crocchi, Milano 1912.

⁴ Cfr. A.S. Makarenko, *Consigli ai genitori*, editori riuniti, Roma 1961, pp. 46- 48.

⁵ A. Makarenko, *Poema pedagogico (1933)*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2022.

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questo permetterà loro di poter diventare con maggiore facilità degli adulti consapevoli⁶.

2. *I vantaggi del gioco nell'istruzione*

Il gioco è spesso visto come un'attività creativa, ma è anche considerato un potente strumento pedagogico utilizzabile per poter promuovere l'apprendimento, lo sviluppo cognitivo, sociale ed emotivo dei bambini. Citando ancora Friederich Froebel, è interessante constatare come il pedagogo svizzero abbia messo al centro della sua filosofia educativa proprio il gioco, nella convinzione che fosse il modo più naturale per indurre bambini e bambine all'apprendimento.

I "doni", infatti, non erano altro che strumenti pedagogici progettati per aiutare il mondo infantile a sviluppare le proprie abilità; infatti, ogni dono venne progettato per stimolare la creatività, la logica e la coordinazione motoria di bambini.

Le sue idee sull'educazione infantile hanno influenzato notevolmente la pedagogia moderna. In molti asili e scuole materne si dedica attenzione alla strutturazione degli ambienti di apprendimento di modo che siano stimolanti, ricchi di spazi che incoraggiano la scoperta e l'autonomia nei bambini. Molti educatori utilizzano strategie per promuovere tutto questo, per esempio Loris Malaguzzi, fondatore del modello educativo per l'infanzia, anche lui considerò basata l'importanza dello sviluppo della curiosità, creatività ed esplorazione nei bambini. Negli asili di Reggio Emilia i bambini erano protagonisti attivi del loro processo di apprendimento.

Insomma, i bambini che giocano con abilità, serenità e costanza diventano uomini sereni crescendo in modo democratico ai fini di una completa formazione del futuro cittadino, consapevole dei suoi diritti dei suoi doveri⁷.

2.1 *Alcuni esempi di giochi educativi: il gioco simbolico o di finzione*

Il gioco è un'occasione ricca di stimoli sul piano della formazione dell'identità come persona autonoma.

Nei bambini si sente frequentemente la frase "facciamo finta di..." è la tipica espressione che inserisce il cosiddetto gioco simbolico. Questo tipo di gioco richiede un livello di maturazione più elevato e si presenta dal primo al terzo anno di vita e si protrae per tutta l'infanzia. Attraverso i giochi di imitazione il bambino familiarizza con il mondo degli adulti conoscendolo meglio, attraverso questo tipo di gioco che può svolgere da solo o insieme agli altri.

Il gioco di finzione è la nuova forma di giocare del bambino, fondamentale per uno sviluppo sano, che richiede immaginazione e si basa sull'imitazione del mondo degli adulti, questo è un processo molto importante per il suo sviluppo psicologico attraverso il quale inizia ad identificarsi con i genitori (le bambine con la madre e i bambini con il padre).

Rispetto al gioco senso-motorio è un gioco più complesso ed elaborato attraverso il quale il bambino ricrea tutto ciò che succede attorno a lui, nella vita quotidiana, in casa e a scuola, nel suo rapporto con gli altri bambini, con i fratelli, con ciò che vede in televisione.

⁶ Cfr. F. Froebel, *L'educazione dell'uomo e altri scritti*, la Nuova Italia, Firenze 1967, p. 44.

⁷ L. Malaguzzi, *Il gioco delle parti. Scritti di Loris Malaguzzi dal 1969 al 1993*, Zerosei, Bari 2024.

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Mentre gioca in questo modo, pensa a tutte queste esperienze le ordina e poi le elabora. Il gioco simbolico lo aiuterà a capire come funziona il mondo in cui vive a mettere in pratica quello che si deve e non deve fare, ad assegnare ad ogni persona nota il ruolo che le compete a esprimere le tensioni, preoccupazioni, conflitti e interiorizzare regole di comportamento che saranno alla base della sua integrazione sociale.

Si tratta di un modo per avviare una sorta di liberazione da parte del bambino e della bambina di quella pressione che rappresenta il fatto di fare sempre quello che gli adulti gli dicono; infatti, la caratteristica del gioco è proprio la spontaneità e la libertà, "avere il mondo ai propri piedi e dirigere gli avvenimenti nel modo più consono alle proprie scelte"⁸.

Mentre rappresenta le cose che le sono successe e gli hanno provocato inquietudine o sorprese, può liberare tensioni ed esprimere le sue idee e i suoi sentimenti,

al tempo stesso in cui crea trasforma e modifica il mondo a sua misura anche dando ad alcuni oggetti delle funzioni diverse da quelle che hanno dalla realtà: usa la scopa come cavallo o fa un treno con dei cubi...

Per i genitori e gli educatori sarà molto utile osservare il bambino durante questo tipo di gioco, perché durante questo, il bambino lascia affiorare alla superficie il suo mondo interiore.

Alcuni dei contenuti più comunemente usati dal bambino durante il gioco simbolico di ruolo consistono nell'interpretare personaggi mitici, fantastici, familiari e sociali.

I bambini amano travestirsi da principi eroi in genere armati, le bambine invece preferiscono essere principesse, fate, mamme che curano i loro piccoli.

Attraverso il gioco simbolico il bambino diventa sempre più cosciente della propria identità attraverso alcuni giochi come:

Il gioco della mamma in cui le bambine imitano la mamma prendendosi cura del loro bambolotto facendo finta che sia un bambino vero, quindi preparandosi a quello che sarà il loro ruolo nell'età adulta.

Il gioco della casa costruita da lui con cubi e tessuti, in cui può entrare materialmente. La casa simbolicamente rappresenta il corpo contenente l'io; infatti, ha la fondamentale caratteristica di dividere lo spazio in due parti: il dentro e il fuori.

Il gioco delle armi in cui i bambini fingono di essere indiani, cowboy, guerrieri spaziali. L'uso delle armi nel gioco dei bambini esprime e allarga la potenza di se diventa simbolo del contenuto del corpo portatore di forza e potenza.

Il gioco simbolico per avere effetti positivi sull'evoluzione dei bambini deve ricevere delle risposte rassicuranti dagli educatori: è necessario che quando il bambino gioca riceva un riconoscimento positivo dall'adulto anche solo attraverso un semplice sorriso.

Gli educatori giocando con lui, osservandolo mentre gioca e stimolando a proseguire potranno conoscerlo meglio scoprire i suoi desideri, sapere tutto quello che sta imparando su come funziona il mondo e comprendere come sta vivendo i momenti di crisi e di conflitto e di conseguenza potranno aiutarlo a crescere sano e felice.

⁸ L. Malaguzzi, *La educación infantil ed Reggio Emilia*, Editorial Octaedro, 2011.

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3. *Il valore pedagogico o dei giochi finalizzati*

I giochi finalizzati sono delle attività ludico didattiche che l'educatore programma e propone ai bambini tenendo conto dei loro interessi dei loro bisogni delle loro capacità e delle loro esperienze. I giochi finalizzati sono giochi strutturati attraverso i quali l'educatore raggiunge specifici obiettivi. Per esempio, Makarenko era dell'idea che i giochi finalizzati fossero un potente strumento di educazione, poiché consentono ai ragazzi un apprendimento avviato attraverso l'esperienza e la pratica.

I giochi finalizzati costituiscono per l'insegnante uno strumento per conoscere il livello delle capacità raggiunte dai bambini e rispetto da determinati compiti; per verificare, in che grado sono state acquisite dal bambino certe abilità linguistiche, percettive, logiche e se egli è capace di trasferire le conoscenze acquisite da un ambito all'altro (ad es. se una volta acquisita una capacità di classificazione con materiale strutturato riesce ad utilizzarlo su un insieme di oggetti di uso comune).

I giochi finalizzati permettono all'educatori di sciogliere le difficoltà di apprendimento, utilizzando materiali strutturati che stimolino quelle capacità in cui il bambino si mostra incerto.

Acquisizione delle capacità di base i giochi finalizzati possono essere efficacemente utilizzati dalla scuola per permettere al bambino di acquisire e rafforzare le capacità di base per la scuola elementare⁹.

3.1 *I giochi familiari*

Infine, uno strumento importante è rappresentato dai giochi familiari "La famiglia è l'istituzione educativa primaria, sia in senso cronologico sia sotto il profilo di importanza, essa non è soltanto l'ambiente naturale della procreazione ma è anche un fattore fondamentale dell'educazione, al suo interno i membri che la compongono hanno rapporti interpersonali caratterizzati dalla piena comprensione, dalla fiducia e dall'affetto reciproco"¹⁰. La famiglia rappresenta il primo contesto di vita e di apprendimento nel quale il bambino gioca, matura abilità, competenze, cognizioni, assimila norme di comportamento, interiorizza valori e ideali di vita¹¹.

Possono essere giochi creativi come: il teatro improvvisato, il disegno, i racconti fatti insieme e i giochi di creatività usando la musica. Ovviamente, questa tipologia di giochi ha la particolarità di riuscire a rafforzare i legami tra i componenti della famiglia, favorire la comunicazione familiare e dunque favorire anche ricordi duraturi nel tempo. I genitori hanno un ruolo importante nella promozione e nell'organizzazione dei giochi che hanno valore educativo e pedagogico.

In virtù del calore, delle cure e delle attenzioni da parte della figura materna "il bambino prova sensazioni di benessere e tranquillità che saranno alla base di uno sviluppo psico-fisico armonico"¹², l'amore materno si trasmette e comunica al bambino attraverso il comportamento che la madre ha nei suoi confronti nel modo in

⁹ Cfr. L. Anolli, S. Mantovani, *Giochi finalizzati e materiale strutturato*, Franco angeli, Milano pp. 22.

¹⁰ Cfr. S. Spini, W. Ferrarotti, *la scuola del bambino nella società contemporanea*, la scuola, 1982, p. 9

¹¹ A. Nobile, *Gioco e infanzia, la scuola*, La Scuola, Brescia 1994 pp.161-162.

¹² Cfr. G. Mischi, *Identità del bambino e contenuti formativi. Un progetto educativo per l'infanzia*, La Scuola, Brescia 1995, p. 10.

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cui lo prende in braccio, lo nutre, lo lava, nel modo in cui gli rivolge la parola, da come e quanto è in grado di ridere e giocare con lui: in altre parole l'«amore materno» che stimola il bambino è la capacità dimostrata da un adulto, di stabilire con lui un rapporto comunicativo, non di tipo generico e differenziato, ma un rapporto coerente con i valori e le mete del gruppo della società di appartenenza

Il rapporto madre-figlio fornisce gli elementi basilari dei fenomeni ludici; perciò, è probabile che il gioco abbia origine da tale rapporto, "I genitori devono intrattenersi nel giocare assieme al bambino sollecitandolo con opportuna stimolazione, sensoriali, mimiche, verbali, motorie, adeguate risposte ludiche e affettive.

Nel compiere questa auspicata azione di promozione di stimolo, l'adulto dispone della voce con la quale si rivolge al bambino con tono caldo e carezzevole, protettivo e rassicurante.

Una buona famiglia pone salde basi all'educazione integrale del bambino, permette al piccolo di maturare con rapidità senza essere sopraffatto dalle durezze dell'ambiente fisico e delle pressioni della società, essa protegge la sua debolezza e ne accresce gradualmente le sue capacità, preparandolo ad instaurare rapporti costruttivi con la realtà extrafamiliare. I genitori e i fratelli stimolano l'attività, motoria e sensoriale del bambino ne sollecitano le varie forme espressive, gli insegnano a parlare e a pensare, gli comunicano fondamentali cognizioni, gli fanno acquisire preziose abilità, gli offrono modelli di comportamento e valori da interiorizzare.

Il bambino nei primi anni di vita ha due sentimenti ambivalenti, uno è rappresentato dai momenti in cui sente il bisogno di essere protetto e sostenuto, in quanto fragile e immaturo, e altri momenti in cui sente il bisogno di essere autonomo, di imparare, fare a sé, in quanto rapidamente matura e ha sempre nuove risorse a propria disposizione.

Una buona famiglia è consapevole di questi bisogni, quindi promuove congiuntamente e nell'esatta misura la sicurezza affettiva e lo spirito di iniziativa. I genitori preparano i propri figli alla vita esterna facendogli vivere delle piccole esperienze nell'ambiente extrafamiliare, tale iniziazione deve realizzarsi con saggezza e gradualità. I padri tendono ad anticipare l'esperienza di esplorazione del mondo dei propri figli, mentre le madri sono inclini a rinviarla e ridurla.

La compresenza e la complementarità delle due impostazioni educative dell'uomo e della donna aiutano la famiglia a fungere nella giusta misura da filtro e da cuscinetto tra bambino e mondo. "L'azione dei genitori di mediatori tra i bambini e il mondo gradualmente si riduce perché i figli devono acquisire la capacità di superare le frustrazioni e gli ostacoli della vita sociale".

4. Conclusioni

Il gioco è un aspetto fondamentale dell'esperienza umana, presente in tutte le culture e in tutte le età, è un'attività che gli studiosi di pedagogia ne hanno immediatamente compreso il potenziale educativa e socializzante.

Inoltre, è importante che il gioco sia considerato anche un diritto non solo dell'infanzia, ma anche dell'adolescenza; attraverso il gioco si sviluppa un linguaggio universale che può essere compreso da tutti, prescindendo dalla cultura e dall'età.

In ultima analisi, è imprescindibile sviluppare politiche pubbliche che riconoscano l'importanza del gioco e lo sostengano ai fini di un miglioramento dell'istruzione e

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della crescita umana.

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Il gioco come dispositivo educativo nei contesti di marginalità e povertà culturale / *Play as an educational tool in contexts of marginalization and cultural poverty*

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ABSTRACT. Il contributo analizza il gioco come dispositivo educativo privilegiato nei contesti di marginalità sociale e povertà culturale. Partendo dalle teorie classiche di Piaget, Vygotskij, Huizinga e Freire, l'autore evidenzia come il gioco favorisca lo sviluppo cognitivo, emotivo e sociale, operando nella zona di sviluppo prossimale e promuovendo apprendimenti attivi, cooperazione e costruzione identitaria. Nei territori di esclusione, il gioco assume valore emancipativo: accessibile, trasversale e a bassa soglia di ingresso, contrasta isolamento, stigmatizzazione e fallimento scolastico, rafforzando autostima, autoefficacia e legami sociali. Vengono descritti interventi concreti (giochi simbolici e di ruolo, giochi cooperativi come Sedie Cooperative o Nodo Umano, teatro sociale, musica partecipata, attività creative con materiali poveri) che favoriscono empowerment, narrazione di sé, gestione del conflitto non violenta e trasformazione della percezione di sé e dell'altro. L'efficacia dipende da una progettazione pedagogica intenzionale e contestualizzata, orientata all'inclusione e all'equità educativa.

Keywords: Gioco educativo, Marginalità sociale, Povertà culturale, Empowerment ludico, Inclusione educativa

ABSTRACT. The paper examines play as a powerful educational device in contexts of social marginality and cultural poverty. Drawing on classical theories by Piaget, Vygotsky, Huizinga and Freire, the author shows how play supports cognitive, emotional and social development, operating within the zone of proximal development and fostering active learning, cooperation and identity construction. In excluded territories, play acquires emancipatory value: accessible, culturally transversal and low-threshold, it counters isolation, stigmatization and school dropout while strengthening self-esteem, self-efficacy and social bonds. Concrete

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interventions are described (symbolic and role-playing games, cooperative activities such as Cooperative Chairs or Human Knot, social theatre, participatory music, creative play with poor materials) that promote empowerment, self-narration, non-violent conflict management and transformation of self- and other-perception. Effectiveness relies on intentional, context-sensitive pedagogical design oriented towards inclusion and educational equity.

Keywords: Educational play, Social marginality, Cultural poverty, Ludic empowerment, Educational inclusion.

1. *La funzione riconosciuta del gioco*

Il gioco rappresenta una dimensione fondamentale dell'esperienza umana e, in ambito pedagogico, costituisce un oggetto di riflessione di primaria importanza. Lungi dall'essere una semplice attività ricreativa, esso può essere considerato un autentico dispositivo educativo, in grado di incidere in modo significativo sui processi di apprendimento e di sviluppo della persona. Numerosi studi nell'ambito delle scienze dell'educazione hanno infatti evidenziato come il gioco favorisca lo sviluppo cognitivo, emotivo e sociale, contribuendo alla costruzione dell'identità individuale e collettiva.

Dal punto di vista teorico, il gioco si configura come uno spazio esperienziale caratterizzato da libertà, sperimentazione e sospensione temporanea delle conseguenze dell'errore. In tale contesto, il soggetto può esplorare la realtà, interiorizzare regole e attribuire significati attraverso un processo attivo e partecipato. Jean Piaget ha sottolineato il ruolo centrale del gioco nello sviluppo cognitivo, interpretandolo come una modalità privilegiata di assimilazione della realtà e di riorganizzazione delle strutture mentali del bambino¹. Secondo questa prospettiva, il gioco accompagna le diverse fasi dello sviluppo, adattandosi ai cambiamenti delle capacità cognitive.

Un ulteriore contributo teorico di rilievo è fornito da Lev Vygotskij, il quale attribuisce al gioco simbolico una funzione determinante nello sviluppo psichico. Attraverso l'attività ludica, il bambino è in grado di operare all'interno della cosiddetta "zona di sviluppo prossimale", anticipando comportamenti e competenze che non sarebbero ancora pienamente accessibili nella vita quotidiana².

Il gioco assume dunque una funzione propulsiva, orientata non solo all'espressione delle capacità già possedute, ma anche alla promozione di nuovi apprendimenti.

La rilevanza educativa del gioco emerge con particolare evidenza anche nella sua dimensione sociale. I giochi collettivi e cooperativi favoriscono l'interiorizzazione di

¹ J. Piaget, *La formazione del simbolo nel bambino*, Firenze La Nuova Italia, 1972, p. 34.

² L. Vygotskij, *Il gioco e il suo ruolo nello sviluppo psichico del bambino*, Roma Editori Riuniti, 1980, p. 90.

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norme condivise, lo sviluppo di competenze relazionali e la capacità di gestire il conflitto. In tale prospettiva, il gioco diventa un contesto privilegiato per l'apprendimento sociale, poiché consente ai soggetti di confrontarsi con l'altro, di riconoscerne il punto di vista e di sviluppare forme di collaborazione e partecipazione attiva³.

2. *Il gioco e la sua funzione strategica*

In ambito scolastico e formativo, l'impiego del gioco come strategia didattica ha assunto negli ultimi anni una crescente rilevanza, anche grazie alla diffusione di approcci quali il game-based learning e la gamification. Tali metodologie prevedono l'integrazione di elementi ludici all'interno dei contesti di apprendimento formale, con l'obiettivo di incrementare la motivazione, il coinvolgimento e la partecipazione degli studenti⁴. È tuttavia necessario sottolineare come l'efficacia educativa del gioco dipenda da una progettazione intenzionale e consapevole, coerente con gli obiettivi formativi e con i bisogni degli studenti.

Il valore formativo del gioco non si esaurisce nell'età evolutiva, ma si estende anche ai contesti di educazione e formazione degli adulti. In ambito professionale e organizzativo, pratiche quali le simulazioni e i role-play vengono impiegate per favorire lo sviluppo di competenze trasversali, tra cui la capacità di problem solving, la comunicazione efficace e il lavoro di gruppo. In tali situazioni, il gioco assume una funzione riflessiva, permettendo di rielaborare l'esperienza e di promuovere apprendimenti significativi e trasferibili⁵.

Considerare il gioco come dispositivo educativo implica il riconoscimento del suo potenziale formativo e trasformativo. Il gioco si configura come una modalità privilegiata di relazione con il sapere, fondata sull'esperienza, sull'interazione e sulla partecipazione attiva. Valorizzare la pratica ludica nei contesti educativi significa promuovere una concezione dell'apprendimento orientata allo sviluppo integrale della persona e alla costruzione condivisa della conoscenza.

Nei contesti caratterizzati da marginalità sociale e povertà culturale, i processi educativi incontrano ostacoli strutturali che incidono profondamente sulle opportunità di sviluppo degli individui. In tali situazioni, la carenza di risorse materiali e simboliche, l'accesso limitato ai servizi educativi e la fragilità dei legami sociali contribuiscono a generare condizioni di svantaggio persistente. In questo quadro, la pratica ludica assume un rilevante potere educativo, configurandosi come uno strumento privilegiato di inclusione, partecipazione e promozione delle capacità personali.

Il gioco, in quanto attività accessibile e culturalmente trasversale, possiede la capacità di attivare processi educativi anche in assenza di contesti formali strutturati.

³ J. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, Torino Einaudi, 2002, p. 88.

⁴ M. Prensky, *Digital Game-Based Learning*, McGraw-Hill New York, 2001. pp. 110-111.

⁵ D. A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning*, Prentice Hall Englewood Cliffs, 1984, p. 203.

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Nei territori segnati da esclusione e marginalità, esso rappresenta spesso uno dei pochi spazi di espressione libera e di riconoscimento reciproco. Attraverso il gioco, i soggetti possono sperimentare forme di relazione basate sulla reciprocità e sul rispetto delle regole condivise, contrastando dinamiche di isolamento e di stigmatizzazione⁶.

Dal punto di vista pedagogico, la pratica ludica nei contesti di povertà culturale favorisce l'emergere di competenze cognitive e relazionali che difficilmente trovano spazio in ambienti educativi tradizionali. Il gioco consente infatti di valorizzare saperi informali e competenze implicite, spesso non riconosciute nei percorsi scolastici standardizzati. In tale prospettiva, l'esperienza ludica diventa un dispositivo di empowerment, capace di rafforzare l'autostima e il senso di autoefficacia dei partecipanti⁷.

Un ulteriore elemento di rilievo riguarda la funzione del gioco come mediatore culturale. Nei contesti multiculturali e socialmente fragili, la pratica ludica permette di superare barriere linguistiche e culturali, offrendo un linguaggio condiviso fondato sull'azione e sull'esperienza. Il gioco crea così le condizioni per un apprendimento situato e partecipato, in cui la conoscenza si costruisce attraverso l'interazione e la cooperazione tra i soggetti coinvolti⁸.

La dimensione educativa del gioco emerge con particolare evidenza nei servizi educativi territoriali, quali centri di aggregazione, comunità educative e interventi di educativa di strada. In questi contesti, il gioco non assume una funzione meramente ricreativa, ma diventa uno strumento intenzionale di intervento pedagogico. Attraverso attività ludiche strutturate, gli educatori possono promuovere competenze sociali, sostenere processi di socializzazione positiva e offrire alternative significative a comportamenti devianti o a situazioni di rischio⁹.

La pratica ludica riveste, inoltre, un ruolo centrale nella prevenzione della dispersione scolastica, fenomeno particolarmente diffuso nei contesti di svantaggio socio-culturale. L'introduzione di metodologie ludiche nei percorsi educativi formali e non formali contribuisce a rafforzare la motivazione all'apprendimento e il senso di appartenenza, contrastando esperienze di fallimento e di esclusione. In tal senso, il gioco può essere interpretato come un fattore protettivo, capace di sostenere la continuità dei percorsi educativi¹⁰.

3. *La pratica ludica nei contesti di marginalità*

⁶ P. Freire, *Pedagogia degli oppressi*, EGA, Torino, 2002, p. 56.

⁷ A. Bandura, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*, Freeman, New York, 1997, p.45.

⁸ J. Bruner, *La cultura dell'educazione*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 1997, p.32.

⁹ F. Cambi, *Manuale di pedagogia sociale*, Laterza, Bari, 2003, p.98.

¹⁰ L. Benadusi, O. Giancola, *Equità e merito nella scuola. Teorie, indagini empiriche, politiche*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, 2023, p. 87.

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È tuttavia necessario sottolineare che il potere educativo del gioco nei contesti di marginalità non è intrinseco all'attività ludica in sé, ma dipende dalla qualità della progettazione pedagogica e dalla competenza degli operatori coinvolti. Un approccio educativo consapevole richiede la capacità di leggere i bisogni del territorio, di valorizzare le risorse locali e di costruire interventi ludici coerenti con gli obiettivi di inclusione e giustizia sociale.

La pratica ludica nei contesti di marginalità e povertà culturale si configura come un dispositivo educativo di grande rilevanza. Essa consente di creare spazi di possibilità, di promuovere la partecipazione attiva e di sostenere percorsi di emancipazione personale e collettiva. Riconoscere e valorizzare il gioco in tali contesti significa assumere una prospettiva educativa orientata all'equità, al riconoscimento delle differenze e alla promozione dei diritti educativi fondamentali.

Nei contesti di povertà culturale, spesso caratterizzati da una limitata esposizione a stimoli educativi, il gioco diventa un mediatore fondamentale. Attraverso regole condivise e attività cooperative, esso favorisce la costruzione di legami sociali e il riconoscimento reciproco, elementi centrali per contrastare l'esclusione e il senso di invisibilità sociale¹¹.

Un primo ambito di intervento riguarda i laboratori di gioco simbolico e di ruolo, particolarmente efficaci con bambini e adolescenti. Attraverso la simulazione di situazioni quotidiane (il mercato, la famiglia, la scuola, il lavoro), i partecipanti hanno la possibilità di elaborare vissuti personali e sociali, sperimentando ruoli alternativi e nuove modalità di relazione. Queste attività risultano particolarmente utili nei contesti segnati da fragilità familiari o da esperienze migratorie, poiché facilitano l'espressione emotiva e la narrazione di sé¹², soprattutto nei contesti educativi e sociali in cui la parola diretta può risultare difficile, inibita o povera di strumenti espressivi. Attraverso il "far finta", il soggetto può raccontarsi in modo indiretto, mediato e protetto, utilizzando personaggi, situazioni e oggetti simbolici come rappresentazioni del proprio vissuto¹³.

Nel gioco simbolico, l'esperienza personale viene trasformata in azione ludica: ciò che è stato vissuto, desiderato o temuto prende forma in una scena giocata. Questo processo consente di dare ordine e significato alle esperienze, favorendo una prima strutturazione narrativa dell'identità. Il bambino, o l'adolescente, non si limita a riprodurre la realtà, ma la rielabora, selezionando eventi rilevanti e attribuendo loro un senso soggettivo¹⁴.

¹¹ S. Loos, *99 Giochi cooperativi*, EGA Edizioni, Torino, 1989, p. 77.

¹² J. Piaget, *Il giudizio morale nel fanciullo*, Giunti-Barbera, Firenze, 1972, p. 68.

¹³ P. Patfoort, *Io voglio, tu vuoi... Manuale di educazione alla nonviolenza*, Edizioni Gruppo Abele, Torino, 1990, p. 26.

¹⁴ D. Novara, *La grammatica dei conflitti. L'arte di restare nelle difficoltà*, Sonda, Milano, 2011, p. 71.

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Il gioco di ruolo amplia ulteriormente questa possibilità, permettendo di assumere punti di vista diversi dal proprio. Interpretare un altro personaggio un genitore, un insegnante, un lavoratore, un eroe consente di esplorare parti di sé spesso non espresse nella vita quotidiana. In questo modo, la narrazione personale si arricchisce di nuove prospettive e diventa più complessa e consapevole.

Un elemento centrale è la distanza simbolica: parlare di sé attraverso un personaggio riduce il rischio emotivo dell'esposizione diretta. Questo rende il gioco particolarmente efficace in situazioni di fragilità, disagio o trauma, dove il racconto esplicito può risultare doloroso. Il soggetto mantiene il controllo della narrazione, decidendo cosa mostrare, cosa nascondere e come trasformare la propria storia.¹⁵

Infine, il contesto relazionale del gioco favorisce la condivisione della narrazione. Essere ascoltati e riconosciuti dagli altri partecipanti contribuisce alla costruzione di un'identità narrativa più stabile e positiva. Il gioco simbolico e di ruolo diventa così uno spazio in cui il sé può emergere, essere rielaborato e riconosciuto, sostenendo processi di crescita, consapevolezza e integrazione personale.

Un ulteriore esempio è costituito dai giochi cooperativi, nei quali l'obiettivo non è la competizione ma il raggiungimento di un risultato comune. Attività come la costruzione collettiva di una struttura con materiali di recupero o i giochi di problem solving di gruppo favoriscono lo sviluppo di competenze sociali, quali la comunicazione, la negoziazione e la gestione dei conflitti. In contesti di marginalità, tali competenze risultano fondamentali per rafforzare l'autostima e la fiducia nelle proprie capacità. A differenza dei giochi competitivi, dove il successo di uno implica necessariamente il fallimento dell'altro (logica a somma zero), il gioco cooperativo sposta l'obiettivo dal battere l'altro al raggiungere insieme un obiettivo. In contesti di marginalità, dove la sopravvivenza quotidiana è spesso percepita come una lotta individuale contro tutti, questa inversione di tendenza è rivoluzionaria. Il gruppo non è più un ostacolo, ma una risorsa indispensabile: se uno cade, cade la squadra; se uno vince, vincono tutti. Questa inversione di paradigma richiede un profondo lavoro sull'intelligenza emotiva e sul decentramento cognitivo.

Partecipare a un'attività cooperativa costringe l'individuo a uscire dal proprio isolamento autoreferenziale per sintonizzarsi sulle necessità e sulle competenze dei compagni.

In contesti di povertà educativa, dove mancano spesso gli strumenti linguistici per verbalizzare il disagio, il gioco offre un terreno neutro, uno spazio simbolico in cui il conflitto può essere agito e risolto senza conseguenze distruttive. Attraverso la negoziazione delle strategie e la sospensione del giudizio sull'errore, i partecipanti sperimentano una forma di comunicazione non violenta che è propedeutica all'esercizio della cittadinanza attiva.

¹⁵ D. A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, 2nd Edition, Pearson FT Press, New York, 2015, p. 44.

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Le regole, vissute solitamente come imposizioni autoritarie da bypassare, diventano qui patti condivisi necessari al raggiungimento di un obiettivo comune, trasformando la percezione dell'autorità e della convivenza civile.

4. *Esperienze di giochi che si situano*

Quando si lavora con adolescenti che vivono in contesti di forte disagio, è necessario proporre attività che sfidino la loro percezione di forza e controllo. Un esempio emblematico è il gioco delle "Sedie Cooperative". A differenza della versione competitiva tradizionale, qui l'obiettivo non è escludere chi resta senza posto, ma fare in modo che, al diminuire delle sedie, tutti i partecipanti riescano comunque a trovarvi spazio, magari sedendosi gli uni sulle ginocchia degli altri o sostenendosi a vicenda. Questo gioco genera inizialmente una tensione legata alla paura del contatto fisico e della perdita di equilibrio, ma evolve rapidamente in una sfida di problem solving collettivo in cui il corpo dell'altro diventa il supporto indispensabile per non cadere.

Un altro esercizio potente è il "Nodo Umano", in cui i ragazzi, disposti in cerchio, devono afferrare le mani di due compagni diversi senza guardare chi sono, per poi tentare di sciogliere l'intricata matassa umana senza mai staccare le mani. In questo contesto, il conflitto esplose quasi subito sotto forma di urla, accuse reciproche e tentativi di tirare con forza. Tuttavia, l'impossibilità fisica di procedere individualmente costringe il gruppo a un silenzio riflessivo e alla ricerca di un leader situazionale o di una strategia coordinata, insegnando che la forza bruta è inutile laddove serve coordinazione.

Ancora più complesso e simbolico è il gioco del "Campo Minato", svolto a coppie dove uno dei due è bendato e l'altro deve guidarlo attraverso un percorso a ostacoli usando solo la voce. Per un adolescente cresciuto in un ambiente di strada, la fiducia è una moneta rarissima; affidare la propria incolumità fisica alla voce di un compagno è un atto di vulnerabilità estrema. Qui il conflitto si manifesta come diffidenza, ma il superamento della prova cementa legami che vanno oltre l'attività ludica, creando ponti di empatia inaspettati. Infine, attività come la "Costruzione di un Ponte" con materiali poveri (giornali, scotch, spago) che deve reggere un peso specifico, mettono alla prova la capacità di gestione del fallimento. Se il ponte crolla, la frustrazione tipica della marginalità porterebbe all'abbandono o alla ricerca di un colpevole. La mediazione educativa trasforma invece il crollo in un momento di analisi tecnica collettiva, dove l'errore del singolo viene assorbito dalla responsabilità del gruppo, permettendo di ricostruire non solo l'oggetto, ma anche il senso di autoefficacia e di appartenenza.

Infine, un ruolo rilevante è svolto dalle attività ludico-espressive, come il teatro sociale, la musica partecipata e il gioco creativo con materiali poveri. Queste pratiche permettono di superare i limiti imposti dalla povertà culturale, valorizzando le risorse individuali e collettive. Il teatro dell'oppresso, ad esempio, utilizza il gioco teatrale come strumento di consapevolezza critica e di empowerment, consentendo ai

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partecipanti di riflettere sulle proprie condizioni di vita e di immaginare possibili trasformazioni¹⁶.

Il teatro sociale è una delle forme più potenti di riscatto culturale. In un quartiere degradato o in una periferia esistenziale, l'adolescente vive spesso schiacciato da un ruolo predefinito dal contesto sociale. Calcare le scene permette di sospendere per un attimo la propria identità sociale per esplorarne altre. Recitare significa allenare l'empatia: per interpretare un personaggio, bisogna comprenderne le motivazioni, i dolori e i desideri. Questo processo di decentramento cognitivo è fondamentale per superare la povertà culturale, che spesso coincide con una visione del mondo ristretta e rigida. Attraverso la drammatizzazione, il conflitto reale viene trasposto sul piano simbolico, diventando oggetto di analisi e trasformazione creativa anziché esplosione di violenza¹⁷.

Invece, nei percorsi educativi in cui la musica partecipata, come le orchestre sociali o le percussioni di gruppo, offrono un modello immediato di convivenza civile. In un'attività corale o orchestrale, il singolo scopre che il proprio contributo è essenziale, ma solo se armonizzato con quello degli altri. In contesti dove la sfiducia nel prossimo è la norma, la musica impone l'ascolto. Non si può suonare insieme se non si impara a percepire il ritmo dell'altro. La povertà culturale si può combattere anche sviluppando una sensibilità estetica e relazionale che permette di riconoscere la bellezza nella cooperazione. Il "rumore" della marginalità si trasforma in suono strutturato, offrendo ai partecipanti un senso di ordine e realizzazione che la quotidianità spesso nega.

Il gioco creativo condotto con materiali poveri (carta, scarti, elementi naturali) assume un valore politico in contesti di privazione. Insegnare a un bambino o a un ragazzo che da un pezzo di cartone può nascere un castello o un robot significa educare alla trasformazione. La povertà culturale porta spesso alla passività e al consumismo acritico; il gioco creativo, invece, stimola l'attivismo cognitivo. Si impara che la mancanza di risorse materiali non coincide con la mancanza di idee. Questa nuova forma di architettura cognitiva aiuta a sviluppare il problem solving: se non ho lo strumento pronto, devo inventarlo. È una palestra di libertà che rompe il determinismo sociale¹⁸.

6. Conclusione.

Il gioco si conferma un dispositivo educativo di straordinaria efficacia, soprattutto nei contesti di marginalità e povertà culturale. La sua capacità di attivare apprendimenti significativi, promuovere relazioni positive e valorizzare competenze informali lo rende uno strumento privilegiato per interventi educativi orientati all'inclusione e all'equità sociale.

¹⁶ C. Bernardi, *Il teatro sociale. Modelli e pratiche*, Carocci, Roma, 2017, p. 90.

¹⁷ F. Tonucci, *La città dei bambini*, Zeroseiup, Bergamo, 2020, p. 79.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 83.

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Quando progettata in modo consapevole, la pratica ludica favorisce processi di empowerment, rafforza il senso di appartenenza e sostiene la costruzione dell'identità personale e collettiva. Riconoscerne il valore significa adottare strategie educative capaci di trasformare il disagio in opportunità educativa.

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