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# PROMUOVERE L'INCLUSIONE SOCIALE: IL PROGETTO "FAMIGLIE IN ACQUA"

# PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSION: THE PROJECT "FAMILY IN WATER"

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## Abstract

This article aims to present the development of an inclusive educational method implemented in a swimming pool in order to foster the development of children with autistic syndrome. The innovation of the project lies in bringing together the knowledge and experience of educators seeking to develop a pedagogical understanding and practice of play activities, both with children with autistic syndrome and their parents. In addition, the potential for social inclusion was documented using in particular the theory of Motor Praxeology, which illustrates how physical experience influences not only biophysical but also socio-relational aspects, facilitating the acquisition of self-awareness. The present article then reports empirical results on the impact of the "Families in Water" project on inclusion. The data were collected mainly through observations on fragile children, and on the processes produced by the activities carried out. Finally, the inclusion potential is examined through a communicative/relational approach that questions the traditional way of interpreting physical activities, which hinders the understanding of the social inclusion processes for each child. The results indicate that the project guided the children towards a transformative process, through the design of an inclusive environment able to meet and support the children's needs, highlighting how play and motor practices can both reveal aspects of personality and provide meaningful social and relational experiences.

Questo articolo si propone di presentare lo sviluppo di un metodo educativo inclusivo implementato in una piscina, al fine di favorire lo sviluppo dei bambini con sindrome autistica. L'innovazione del progetto sta nel riunire la conoscenza e l'esperienza di educatori desiderosi di sviluppare una comprensione pedagogica e la pratica delle attività di gioco, sia con i bambini con sindrome autistica che con i loro genitori. Inoltre, le potenzialità dell'inclusione sociale sono state documentate utilizzando in particolare la teoria della Prasseologia Motoria, la quale illustra come l'esperienza fisica influenzi non solo gli aspetti biofisici ma anche quelli socio-relazionali, facilitando l'acquisizione della consapevolezza di sé. L'articolo riporta quindi i risultati empirici sull'impatto del Progetto denominato "Famiglie in acqua" rispetto all'inclusione. I dati sono stati raccolti principalmente attraverso osservazioni su bambini fragili, e sui processi prodotti dalle attività svolte. Infine, il potenziale inclusivo viene esaminato attraverso un approccio comunicativo/relazionale che mette in discussione il modo tradizionale di interpretare le attività fisiche, che ostacola la comprensione dei processi d'inclusione sociale per ogni bambino. I risultati indicano che il progetto ha guidato i bambini verso un processo trasformativo, attraverso la progettazione di un ambiente inclusivo in grado di soddisfare e sostenere i bisogni dei bambini, evidenziando come il gioco e le pratiche motorie possono sia rivelare aspetti della personalità che fornire esperienze significative a livello sociale e relazionale.

## Keywords
Social Inclusion, Body Techniques, Motor Praxeology, Motor-Game Communication.
Inclusione sociale; Tecniche del corpo; Prasseologia motoria; Comunicazione ludico-motoria.

"It is by playing, and only by playing, that the individual, child or adult,
is able to be creative and use his or her whole personality."
Donald-Woods Winnicott (1974, p. 102).

## 1. Introduction

This empirical experience is intended to provide some elements relating to the educational value of what Marcel Mauss (1966) called *bodily techniques*. Essentially, the view is taken here that personal attitudes and behaviours enacted in life contexts, which are fundamental expressions of socio-cultural existence, pass above all through direct and concrete experiences that require bodily communications, implying a certain use (and hopefully awareness) of one's *own body* (Merleu-Ponty, 1945). In particular, Mauss points out that different cultures involve markedly different bodily modalities in terms of eating, resting, maintaining hygiene, mating, procreating, moving around, and performing physical activities. A central aspect for the economy of this work is represented by the fact that customs and traditions are to be considered as forms of expression that, far from being natural, are actually elaborated and transmitted in forms whose traits reflect the social, historical and linguistic context (in a word: the culture) to which the subjects taking part in them belong.

Amongst these techniques certainly are the many forms of motor activity, i.e., games, gymnastic and athletic exercises, sports and pastimes in their various forms: institutionalised or of free choice, competitive or cooperative, etc. However, it usually happens that these are perceived as completely "natural" ways, either due to inexperience or because one has simply always seen activities being carried out in a certain way, so that by following the slogan "that's the way everyone does it" one easily ends up failing to grasp their cultural origin.

In order to consider activities not so much as biologically determined, but rather as social re-productions, it appears necessary to adopt a critical approach. In other words, in order to reveal that apparently natural situations and processes are actually cultural products, it is necessary to become aware of the arbitrariness of the representations that guide judgements and actions, as for example clarified by *Symbolic Interactionism* (Mead, 1934), a theory that holds that the presumed universality of symbols is superficial and illusory.

In this field, as Mead himself already stated, playful experiences constitute a privileged field of observation. As a matter of fact, they offer the opportunity to analyse conditions, social ties and the performance of actions in extremely detailed ways, so much so that they are situations defined as *quasi-experimental*, thus allowing the meaning of the activity to emerge in the participants. In terms of the epistemological approach adopted hereby, namely *Motor Praxeology* (Parlebas, 1997, 1999), these quasi-experimental situations are fully defined by the relations between *internal logic* and *external logic*: the former is constituted by the context and the conditions of the game, which can be described through the analysis of the *ludic universals*, considered such as they are present in every motor proposal; the latter is instead the subjective (or inter-subjective, therefore belonging to the group) consideration by the participants. This differentiation is also fundamental at an observational and scientific level, since it is by unambiguously determining the reference context (the internal logic of the activity) that it becomes possible to notice and therefore record any relationships between the players' behaviour and their "external" logic, i.e., the ways in which they interpret their activities, in order to collect quantitative and qualitative data in ways that are consistent between the two levels.

In a nutshell, this was the process outlined in the present paper: starting from the analysis of the context of reference (a step that is literally essential), we tried to understand how much the game device itself was able to promote certain relationships, and therefore reactions, in the people involved, allowing them to experience sociality rather than isolation, help or rejection, domination or submission, well-being or discomfort, and so on. It is no coincidence that one of the favourite maxims of Motor Praxeology reads "the master of the game is not the teacher, it is the game" (Bortolotti, 2019). Playful-motor activities, from this point of view, can therefore be interpreted as extraordinarily incisive processes of educational incorporation, with implications

of social, psychological, cognitive, affective and emotional value that therefore deserve to be analysed in depth.

**2. The project "Families in the water"**

In order to illustrate the specifics of the educational values developed by bodily games, the "Families in water" project will thus be described. This has been developed to favour the integration of autistic subjects aged between 3 and 6 years, who participated in a play activity in water, each accompanied by a parent (Bortolotti & Simoni, 2019).

The main characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) defined in the medical literature are as follows: disturbance of relationships and communication; atypical behaviour, especially in the manipulation of certain objects or in the way of perceiving a space; interests limited in objects, relationships, etc.; and, finally, the presence of an atypical behavioural pattern. These three characteristics define the pathology, but are expressed in ways specific to each child (APA, 2000). It was therefore a considerable challenge to stimulate the development of areas recognised by science as being rather fragile.

The project relied on fun activities to stimulate the spontaneity of the parent-child dyad, in order to encourage them to "get involved". The instructions had to be simple and clear so that the child could act in a relevant way, gradually gain trust in the educators, and thus feel at ease in the new environment. Furthermore, objects were used in the hope that they would activate the "transactional" function masterfully described by Winnicott (1974), so as to facilitate distancing in the parent/child dyad, allowing both to enjoy a certain degree of autonomy. The activity programme took place in eight lessons, each of which comprised the following phases:

- Poolside greeting with introduction of the theme of the day, including objects;
- Fun activities in the water;
- Final greeting and common exit from the pool.

In summary, the aim was to find appropriate solutions for each person to the typical issues that arise when immersed in water, i.e.: entering, floating, breathing, moving forward, exploring space, etc.

The project was also characterised by the presence of the parent in the water during the activities, an essential condition for children with autism and very young children to have meaningful experiences in the water space. Moreover, parental involvement seems to be a facilitating factor in the subsequent development of autonomy (Lieber et al. 1997). This is why the philosophy of the project involved a triangular relationship, so as to be able to introduce the principle of the progressive dissolution of the parent-child dyad, whereby while at the beginning it is the parent who mediates between the child and the environment, gradually it is the educator who becomes the reference figure, above all to open up any excessively close relationships. In this way, gradually and if everything works well, at the end of the course the teacher directly conducts the activities and can physically interact with the boy or girl, favouring integration into present but also future experiences in the pool (and beyond).

The specificity of the aquatic environment, largely made up of the effects of Archimedes' buoyancy, also makes it possible to experiment with original practices such as floating and diving, whose physical, relational and symbolic meanings are of great socio-cultural interest (Jeu, 1983). These activities can therefore greatly stimulate subjects with motor, relational or cognitive difficulties, to the point that parents themselves often discover unexpected abilities in disabled sons and daughters who take part in aquatics courses (Brunet, Blanc & Margot, 2009).

From a praxeological point of view, it must be said that the peculiar characteristics (the internal logic) of the project presented are defined by two main dimensions: on the one hand the physical environment of the swimming pool, on the other hand the socio-relational environment constituted by the group of participants. The pool space is characterised by artificiality and stability, in that everything is under control and safe, a very different situation from a natural context which can be unpredictable (just think of currents, waves or difficult weather conditions at the sea or in open water). As far as social relations are concerned, they were essentially based on

sharing the route with one or more partners, i.e., of a cooperative nature. In reality, a large part of the activities was also carried out on an individual level, which nevertheless allowed the development of interesting processes. In summary: the context was characterised by standardised environmental conditions and cooperative social relations, i.e. without physical uncertainties and with positive (or at least never oppositional) motor communications on the part of the participants.Un punto fondamentale dello studio, infine, è costituito dalla scelta di analizzare esclusivamente le azioni di gioco spontaneo che sono state identificate durante le attività, poiché si ritiene che siano queste a mostrare gli interessi e il grado di sviluppo personale dei partecipanti, come sottolinea l'epigrafe di Winnicott (1971) presentata all'esordio del presente report.

**3. Empirical experimentation**

The empirical experience examined the spontaneous behaviours of subjects with autistic spectrum disorders, exhibited during a cooperative activity course in a swimming pool. The behaviours related to free play were interpreted as ludic-motor signals (*ludemes*) and decoded on the basis of a situation defined by the context, exactly as for the signs called indessical by Garfinkel (1967), the American sociologist founder of *Ethnomethodology*. According to these positions, in order to grasp the meanings of *indexical* communications such as ludemes, it is necessary to assess the context and the relationships between the communicants very carefully, since these are "signs" that do not express abstract linguistic meanings with a universal value, but rather relatively opaque expressions. Sometimes, in fact, they are not even voluntarily emitted.

The ludems analysed are of two different kinds, namely: *praxies* (spontaneous actions), which in turn can be divided into forms of experience carried out alone (therefore called *psychomotor*) and of collaboration (sociomotor); lastly, game gestures or *gestems* that accompanied or replaced verbal communications, which have great metacognitive value.

The question that prompted the work was therefore: how do autistic subjects who play in water communicate with their peers and adults, and what is the meaning of their ludemes?

In order to fully understand the situation, it was literally necessary to "dive" into the activities, because in order to discriminate the meaning of the behaviours, it was necessary to grasp first-hand and therefore very closely the different factors at play, such as: the children's abilities, the work phase, the relationships with educators and parents, as well as the intertwining of all these elements. It was therefore decided that an observer should intervene in the water as an instructor-assistant among the participants. Participatory epistemic work was thus initiated, which made it possible to collect, thanks to the involvement of the protagonists of the activity, the information necessary to trace the nature of spontaneous play interactions, defined in the ludemes identified and described analytically. The latter were found to be strongly linked to the child's personality, in particular to verbal, physical and relational communication skills, and to the strength of the bond with the parent.

We will now present some quantitative data concerning the most valuable moments among those identified, also because all in all there were few spontaneous activities. The observations concerned 3 children (A., S. and B.) who collected a total of 18 attendances. The average frequency was 2.4 participations per session, with a rate of about 75%. A total of 33 ludemes were identified, with an average attendance of 4.1 ludemes per lesson and 1.8 per participant. The praxies were more numerous than the gestems (20 and 13 respectively); the "interlocutors" of the ludemes were:

- people, almost exclusively adults (19) and only 2 friends; and
- physical elements (7 towards space and 5 towards objects).

Table 1 below summarises the main characteristics of the identified ludems, both for each child and in general.

| | *Ludemes* | | | *Game phases* | | *Who/what is the motor behaviour aimed at* | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Children* | *Gestemes* | *Psychomotor praxies* | *Sociomotor praxies* | *Infra-game* | *Game* | *Adults* | *Spaces* | *Objects* | *Children* |
| A. | 9 | 8 | 2 | 10 | 9 | 10 | 4 | 4 | 1 |
| S. | 3 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 4 | 6 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| B. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Tot. | 13 | 11 | 9 | 15 | 17 | 19 | 7 | 6 | 2 |

Table n. 1: Definition of ludemes and their characteristics in relation to phases of play and relationships with elements of the context

The gestures, not by chance addressed exclusively to adults, appear to be extremely interesting signals: they are expressions around the game itself, suggestions to make the activity assume forms desired by those who emit such signals, confirmations given so that it continues as it is going or on the contrary to disconfirm it. In short, gestures reveal the ability to communicate something about the game, its rules and course, opening also to change. They are communicative expressions that Bateson (1976, p. 219) defines as meta-assertions of the type "this is a game", and that the praxeologist Enrico Ferretti (2016, p. 30) considers statements about the way of playing or signs of *infra-game*.

On the whole, the analysis confirmed the ambiguity of the semio-motor code, i.e., the presence of apparently similar signs that actually expressed different meanings, or, on the contrary, different signs with the same meaning. For example, it was recorded the same sign, the throwing of the ball, that in one case resulted a sociomotor praxis of direct communication to a child-partner of the game (in short: a passage), while in another situation appeared a gesture that expressed an infra-play communication, that is a request to carry out a ludic activity that in substance had the value of a word-phrase with an interrogative value such as: "shall we play?".

Table n. 2 shows a series of examples related to each participant in the activities, of which one gesture and two practices are reported, one of a psychomotor type (solitary activity) and one of a sociomotor type (cooperative activity). For each ludeme identified, the corresponding motor action is described first, then the characteristics relating to: the type of ludic phase in which it emerged, the state of the personal condition to which it gives voice, and finally some detailed reflections. In summary, the table that considers and therefore describes motor activities as communicative exchanges highlights the complexity of the field, while facilitating the understanding of the developmental processes that playful-motor activities are able to activate.

| ***Participating child*** | | ***Gesteme*** | ***Psychomotor praxies*** | ***Sociomotor praxies*** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **A** | *Action* | Kicking of the lower limbs to push the parent away | Advancing and floating in the water | Throwing the ball to the educator |
| | *Game phase* | Infragame | Exploratory game | Cooperative gaming |
| | *Personal condition* | Search for autonomy | Proactivity | Active participation |
| | *Reflections* | Enterprising personality | Autonomia, tono muscolare rilassato | Attention request |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **S** | *Action* | He/she seeks physical and visual contact with the parent | He/she explores the environment and floats in the water | He/she enters the water sliding towards the instructor |
| | *Game phase* | Infragame | Gioco esplorativo | Cooperative gaming |
| | *Personal condition* | Insecurity | Autonomy and calmness | Self-confidence |
| | *Reflections* | Difficulty in detaching from the parent | He/she gets in touch with space and objects | Good relationship with the educator |
| **B** | *Action description* | As it moves forward, he/she detaches itself from the parent and continues with the educator. | Solitary fluctuations | Repeated throwing of the ball towards a new teacher |
| | *Game phase* | Infragame | Exploratory game | Cooperative gaming |
| | *Personal condition* | Proactivity | Pleasure of moving | Contentment |
| | *Comments* | He/she shares activities with educator | Good level of autonomy | Seeking complicity through the mediation of an object |

*Table n. 2: Different examples of Ludemes (spontaneous communicative expressions of play) observed during the "Families in the water" play-motor activity pathway*

In conclusion, motor play practices can help each child develop a certain degree of awareness related to what they are capable of doing in relation to both the physical and social world. In order to understand these processes, it seems useful to consider that gestural and praxic expressions can be considered communicative forms or ludemes. The analysis of the latter, as a matter of fact, provides a fairly clear picture of what happened in the "Families in the water" project: bearing in mind what emerged at the quantitative level, the spontaneous behaviours of the children are on the whole equivalent as far as praxies are concerned, given that half are of a sociomotor nature (i.e., addressed to people), while the other half is of a psychomotor nature (individual). As regards gestures, on the other hand, they are almost exclusively directed towards adults, such as attracting attention with one's hands or hitting adults to free oneself. Sociomotor games between children, on the other hand, are very few, so they played a rather marginal role. Overall, the results appear to be consistent with the condition of the participants.

At the methodological level, by highlighting the relationships between subject and context, the analysis of ludemes thus seems to represent an appropriate method for inferring the intentions and values of subjects and the group. In this case, the praxies were expressed mainly towards the physical elements (spaces and objects) and the adults, who often took on the role of "bodily host" for the immersion, i.e., in order to welcome the children when they entered the water by diving or sliding off the edge of the pool. On the other hand, the gestures showed the presence of an interesting relational and communicative level towards the social environment, showing an appreciable capacity for participation and giving indications about the personalities of the participants.

Therefore, if through ludemes such as praxies one can consider that the subjects give substance to the need for exploratory research and to familiarize themselves with space and people, through gestemes they show instead that they possess very important awarenesses that allow them to express themselves on a metacommunicative level, an aspect that is confirmed by the fact that the children accompanied the gestures with facial expressions, attitudes, behaviours and even coherent verbal messages. Secondly, it was possible to cross-reference the inferences drawn from the interpretations provided by the parent and the experts regarding the child's activity and the context, so as to obtain a precise "triangulation" of the data that substantially confirmed the evidence reported.

## 4. Some concluding thoughts

The experience described here has provided a framework that can be defined as "quasi-experimental" in which a participatory educational system and the semio-notory code inspired by Ethnomethodology were used. In this way, it was possible to collect and analyse the spontaneous play behaviours expressed by autistic subjects aged between 3 and 6 years who participated in play activities in the swimming pool, each accompanied by a parent. The analysis carried out first of all showed the presence of praxies that put the subjects in relation with the aquatic space, the objects and the other people (mainly adults) considered as functional "points of reference" to support the educational path. Gestemes, on the other hand, provided indications of desires regarding ways of playing. These signs revealed the presence of a certain degree of awareness of the relationships themselves, thus opening the analysis towards an interesting metacommunicative dimension. In spite of the limitations of time and resources, the investigation has therefore allowed us to outline some factors that make motor activities effective not only for bio-anatomy, but also in the sense of the global development of people, as well as bidirectional adaptive relationships between subject and context.

The factors that attribute value to the motor activity are numerous, but in order to grasp them in a relevant and specific way with respect to the context it is necessary to remember the relationship between the characteristics of the activity (or internal logic), and the perception of the participant in relation to the proposal itself the so-called external logic (Parlebas, 1999). While the former is a situation that can be defined through ludic universals (space, time, objects, roles, relationships and conclusion), the latter refers rather to the socio-cultural environment, to the criteria of subjective judgement that are influenced by culture, social group, historical period, etc. (Parlebas, 1999). When a ludic activity is a phenomenon that perfectly reflects social structures (this is the case of the *deep play*; Geertz, 1984), it usually achieves enormous popularity - as is currently the case with sport, in particular with the almost universally popular and appreciated sport: football.

The perception ( i. e. the external logic) of the parents appears to be a fundamental reinforcement: in this respect, if they do not consider the activity to be adequate, they will tend to make little effort to attend it, ending up by making the commitment become sporadic, so that the consequent risk of not obtaining the desired results would increase precisely because of such negative attitudes, while, on the contrary, an opening towards trust could lead to real positive progress. Moreover, this is perfectly in line with one of the best known and in some ways paradoxical educational mechanisms: the *Pygmalion Effect* or self-fulfilment prophecy (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968).

It is very important to keep these mechanisms in mind since the results of motor activity cannot be taken for granted precisely because they depend not only on the educational offer itself, i.e. the internal logic, but also on the investment of meaning that influences the perceptions of the participants, hence on (their) external logic. It is also for this reason that it is necessary to analyse, evaluate and disseminate the value of motor play proposals at a scientific level, emphasising their effects not only in relation to physical aspects but also to sociocultural ones. The latter appear to be at least as important as the former, although less consolidated at the level of the collective imagination, i.e. precisely that which in praxeological terms is defined as external logic.

From this point of view, a rather interesting "game of glances" was found in the project, and developed on three levels: the "singular" use by the child, whose perception of the environment, as well as its representation, is personal; the parent's glance at his or her son or daughter, which is important for giving a "dyadic" sense to the activity itself; finally, the expert trainer's point of view, which is fundamental for being able to act effectively in the context constituted above all by his or her overall and therefore "triangular" interpretation of the activity.

The formative interest of these experiences does not only lie in the motor aspects, although fundamental, but also in the association between them and social relations: through the didactic skills, we can, as a matter of fact, facilitate the acquisition of self-awareness and relations

with others, stimulate change and the construction of identity. Playful bodily practices prompt not only physical but also cultural issues: playing requires observation, analysis and decision-making, thus leading to "agent reflection", which is to say that motricity leads to profound reflections within the framework of the dialectical relationship between theory and practice. It is in this respect that the activities of swimming, diving, floating, immersing, manipulating objects in water, etc., provide effective ways of working for the development of a new education that is truly open to all.

We therefore believe that projects of this kind help all children, including those with autism spectrum disorders, to develop both motor skills and to establish better relationships with themselves, others and the environment. The observation of the games showed the presence of significant relational modes, as well as good expressive styles and developmental levels in each participant. It was interesting to notice that the participants emitted apparently similar messages that actually carried different meanings: this confirms the particularity of the praxemic code, which is not language in the strict sense but it rather represents a form of communication with strong specificities.

The expert trainer therefore differs from the beginner in his ability to interpret the different ludemes, to understand what relates to the subject's competences or what depends on the context, and finally the relations between the two dimensions. These latter depend to a large extent on socio-cultural norms, as these experiences are significantly influenced by the deep-seated values of our society,

We believe that the current project has helped children with autism spectrum disorders not only to develop certain motor skills, but also to establish relationships with themselves, others and the environment. It can be said that the observation and the analysis of the games made it possible to identify different expressive-relational styles and individual levels of development of the project participants. In particular, it was interesting and useful for the educators to observe how the subjects emitted messages that were similar only in appearance, because what appeared to be formally identical actions actually assumed different meanings; for example: the sense of "kicking" the lower limbs to move forward in the water is completely different from that made to push the parent away - although it is the same action! This confirms the particularity of the praxemic code, which cannot be considered as a ''body language'', but rather as a form of communication whose signs take on meaning in relation to the context and not 'per se'. Ultimately, the expert educator differs from the beginner also, if not above all, thanks to his or her interpretative skills regarding the specific meaning of ludemes. This competence allows him or her to understand the meaning of subjective movements; therefore, to grasp and interpret them as real messages issued by the subject in relation to the environmental and social context, consequently responding effectively and appropriately to educational needs.

Lastly, it is worth emphasising an under-recognised role of sport, namely the fact that it constitutes a kind of "social initiation rite" that allows people to practise and learn about the deep values of our society *sub specie ludi* (in the form of a game) (Geertz, 1984; Parlebas, 1999). Sports and motor activities, as a matter of fact, intimately reflect the socio-cultural norms of our society, so carrying out this type of experience can have a strong impact not so much in terms of health or friendships, but in educating about social norms and customs.

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