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Foreword

Assessing play to pave the way to the child's freedom

In the framework of the LUDI approach to play, at a first glance this book might seem like a contradiction. In fact, if – as the huge literature in the field states (Besio, 2017) – the play activity is free by its nature and exempt from constraints other than those it creates by itself; if it is able to change, to modify itself, to become more complex during its development during both solitary play and play with peers; if it gives players the opportunity to experience contemporarily and consciously different degrees of reality; then, why should it be catalogued, measured, evaluated? Why should it be necessary to set the seals of rationality and regularity on it? Shouldn't the existence itself of tests and tools for the assessment of play contradict or contrast its nature, shouldn't it impose on play the imperative, rationalizing, perhaps even destructive shadow of the adult's gaze? Doesn't it force the play within a perspective that impoverishes it, a reductive interpretation, doesn't it deprive play of its playfulness?

As it is known, the European network “LUDI – Play for Children with Disabilities” aims at achieving two ultimate objectives: a) the recognition of the importance of play for children with disabilities, as an exercise of a right that is enshrined in the major UN Conventions in the field (1989; 2006); which must still be implemented, in the form of appropriate practices, inclusive social attitudes as well as adequate skills and competences; b) the emphasis on play for the sake of play, especially for the child with disabilities, whose life is often forced into the narrow tracks of rehabilitation practices and educational recovery.

While claiming the children with disabilities' right to play, and in particular to the play without external objectives, LUDI ultimately claims their right to the acknowledgement of their childhood, viewed as the period of human life to which care, attention, resources and protection must be mostly devoted – as indicated by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Only in this way, in fact, the needed time and the necessary spaces can be made available to these children – in the family and more generally in the society where they grow up – so that they can develop all their potential and try out their autonomy.

The rights to the freedom of the child, mentioned several times in this Convention, are themselves the result of a long journey undertaken throughout history by the successive concepts of *child* and *childhood* in the related science fields, particularly in the pedagogical area.

Only in the twentieth century, however, it has been clearly established that the child is not a diminished individual, a miniature adult, nor a savage to be subjected to a discipline – to duty or work, for example (Becchi & Julia, 2004). Only in the last century the need to consider childhood as an extraordinary and unrepeatable period in

the individuals' life has finally proved clear. As a consequence, the main cornerstones of the educational processes, in formal and non-formal contexts, should become the exercise of playfulness – the quintessentially activity of childhood – within settings and relationships that allow the total absence of responsibility (Limone, 2007). These cornerstones, however, demand the presence and the participation of responsible adults, aware of what is at stake. In order to respect the natural propensities of the child and to carefully discover and cultivate his/her talents, a refined direction must be adopted, which includes a watchful choice of the activities to propose, a consistent organization of the day schedule and the acknowledgement of the role played by the establishment of good relationships with peers as well as with adults.

These statements are well clear today in the studies and practices dedicated to childhood. The Reggio Emilia Approach (Thornton & Brunton, 2015; Hewett, 2001) is considered as one of the most promising proposals in this area: the child has rights, he/she is an active builder of knowledge within the social contexts he/she lives in; the adult is a collaborator of his/her growth, in co-evolution with the learning development in act and is a guide, a facilitator, but at the same time a researcher. Knowledge, in its turn, is seen as a multifaceted object, including different areas and modalities to evolve, but always within relationships and social contexts (Tzuo et al., 2011; Edwards et al., 1998).

Thus, freedom is an end. Also for the child with disabilities: it means in fact being free, expressing oneself freely, without any constraints.

What is it, if any, that prevents the child with disabilities from living his/her childhood through play, from experiencing and displaying their autonomy and freedom? On the one hand, the children and their life contexts have to deal with the functional limitations; however, on the other hand, these limitations are such – the WHO's definition of disability (2001) clearly states this point – only in relation to the social, physical and relational environments where children live and which they come into contact with.

Being able to see *the child* in the child with disability means first of all to consider the functional limitation exclusively as his/her way to interact with the world, which must be dealt with, an element intrinsic to the situation. Secondly, it means to look beyond this limitation, and to make available to the child that care, that attention, that protection which allow the adult to change the world around him or her, and to change it radically, if necessary.

Freedom is not just an end, then: it is also part of the process (Renaut, 2002). To make the children with disabilities free to exercise their full right to play, many measures are still necessary, and this has been one of the study fields of LUDI during the last years.

We need to release their lives from confining obstacles, we need to open up their future towards wider perspectives. Physical barriers must be broken down (Barron et al., 2017): for example, toys and playing tools are not accessible (Costa et al., 2018), playgrounds have not yet fully adopted the Universal Design principles (Moore &

Lynch, 2015). To reach these goals radical leaps of mentality are needed, the related norms must be significantly modified, the stakeholders – companies of the sector, policy and decision makers – must become aware of the necessary changes.

But we must also rally people at large around new and different cultural perspectives: in the educational field, for example, they must start to look at play as an essential, unique activity of the child's life, of all children, and therefore they must set up adequate spaces and time accordingly, in order to implement play activities in the best and most complete way. In particular, this means setting up environments and activating inclusive relationships, shared by all children, integrating also different approaches and different characteristics and abilities (Watkins & Meijer, 2016).

A similar change must take place in the medical and rehabilitative fields, where the unveiling of the human behind the label, or behind the disease (Guerin, 2017) is more difficult. In fact, if the need to present the exercises and the rehabilitative activities in a playful way or at least according to a playful mood (the so-called *play-like activities*; Visalberghi, 1958) – is today fortunately spreading, a real and deep awareness on the importance of play for these children would require more radical changes. It would need, in fact, a rebalancing of the activities undergoing in these children's life, in order to dedicate daily time and space to play, totally free from therapeutic goals.

Furthermore, the opportunity to play should become an area of investigation and application (not only of research, where it begins to receive some interest) (Cruz et al., 2017; Sobel et al., 2015), also for what concerns the technical aspects, for example in the Assistive Technologies area, because in some cases the identification of individualized solutions is crucial to allow access to play.

Last, but not least, parents and adults sharing their time with a child with disabilities should be supported to re-discover his/her childhood, including their own play memories. A special responsibility is entrusted to this scope to the Associations and the pressure groups, which should help relatives to face and overcome the possible anxiety towards the rehabilitation results, and to take back their parenting, serene and creative relationship skills, as adults, with their child.

The end of freedom can be obtained through its exercise in the process of growth. One learns to be free; one learns to play, studies say (Schaffer, 1977; Bondioli, 2002). As a consequence, once this kind of learning is considered a need, one can also teach how to play.

Today, however, a contemporary culture of play for the sake of play is not widespread. In general, play is considered important as a vehicle for learning, especially literacy and school learning (Adolfsson et al., 2013; Veitch et al., 2006); and this is the main reason for toy companies stress the “educational” value of their products. Or, play is intended as private moment of relaxation. It needs scarcely to be reminded the incredible spread of videogames with respect to the dramatic loss of play activities in natural environments, that characterizes the children's life in the world's Northwest societies today.

Moreover, in the case of the child with disabilities, some studies report that play is only rarely a clear evidence for adults (Smith et al, 2015), so demonstrating that, at least so far, the discovery and/or the awareness of an impairment, and the establishment of rehabilitation goals subtract *hic et nunc* to these children their own childhood.

Yet, there are many studies now – even if still cautious and sporadic – highlighting that the play of children with disabilities, if supported carefully and adequately, can improve, become more complex, rich, intentional; some of them indicate that a positive change in play can be related to a change in the child’s cognitive and linguistic abilities (Dempsey et al., 2013; Lillard, 2001; Ingersoll & Schreibman, 2006). Some systematic literature reviews have also begun to focus on specific types of play – as in the case of pretend play (Barton & Wolery, 2008; Swindells & Stagnitti, 2006) – or on particular types of disability (Oates et al., 2011), so underlying the various characteristics and differences the play activities may assume, with respects to these variables. Autism spectrum disorders are specially represented, in this sense, perhaps due to the fact that play – for example, imitative or symbolic – is in this case an area of specific functional limitation.

In these studies the accent is often placed, as said, on the obtained functional changes and improvements: the step towards the interest in play for the sake of play is short, and this bodes well. But this short step requires a complete change of epistemological perspective, and this constitutes an important challenge to face.

From where to approach it, then? And, returning to the questions presented at the beginning of this work, why proposing a book which contains a structured, reasoned and in-depth review of play assessment tools and methods? Doesn’t this choice still insist on the clinical, evaluative perspective of play as a play-like activity?

We don’t think so; we think indeed that gathering all the existing knowledge in the sector is urgent; and that this knowledge must be harnessed for an innovative goal, potentially disruptive in the overall conception of disability. Establishing the goal of respecting the play for the sake of play of children with disabilities means building an authoritative, appropriate and competent area in favour of these children’s needs. It certainly does not mean only providing time and objects; on the contrary, it means bringing into play social relationships, inclusive contexts, expert knowledge. In this way, the children with disabilities will be able to take over their playing skills, thus expanding their freedom.

It is now necessary to disseminate awareness, through appropriate and devoted training models, about the importance of the adult’s role in the child’s play, in order to favour its emergence and its development. Vygotskij had already pointed out, many years ago, that the action of the adult within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is decisive for the emergence of new skills and the solicitation of abilities and still unveiled capacities (Bodrova & Leong, 2015). Other authors (Hakkarainen et al., 2013; White, 2012) have identified in the “play facilitation” methodology a possible key for further developments in this field. LUDI itself has taken some steps forward in the direction of

an investigation and a systematization of the playful relationship modes adopted, in particular supporting the scaffolding methodology, highly inspired by the ZPD concept.

To pursue this task, adults – educators, rehabilitation professionals, but also parents – must achieve full competence on the subject, including the management of play contexts, relationships, methodologies and tools; above all they must acquire self-awareness on their role as companions, mediators, or scaffolders, rather than instructors.

In the meantime, it is also necessary to improve the adults' ability to perceive and evaluate the real playfulness of the play situations and relationships; methods and tools should be found – or developed – to support them in this respect. On the other hand, children should also be given the opportunity to express their own opinion on the same topic (and appropriate strategies should be developed to make this possible, in spite of possible impairments). How playful is the play situation proposed? How should it be improved? Which are the major changes to implement?

Most is still to be built: the existing literature is not always perfectly suited to the LUDI's particular perspective and needs; and the field still requires huge, exciting experimentation and study in-depth.

Play for the sake of play for children with disabilities is not a successful slogan, nor a dream. It represents a precise idea of child, and of disability. Therefore, it also represents an idea of mankind, social participation and relationships between humans.

This is why we must insist on this concept, this is why we need to build the way for it to spread. This book is intended as a part of that way.

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