

■ FRANCESCA BUCCINI

WHEN DIVERSITY IS A RESOURCE?

DIVERSITY AND CAPITALISM

During the sixties and the seventies, researchers and teachers focused on the definition of handicap. Until the mid-1960s, the approach to the question was predominantly, if not exclusively, from the viewpoint of a medical specialist: abnormality is deviance, a disease to be treated with medical–therapeutic interventions within particularly equipped facilities and, above all, taking care to keep the abnormal carefully separated from the norm-gifted to safeguard both from the traumatic impact of an interaction that would challenge the cultural patterns of that time.

This logic translated, in the scholastic field, into the development of a differential didactics activated within structures reserved exclusively for abnormal pupils, the intellectually disabled, characters and those with learning deficits, who were inserted into the so-called differential classes. The concept of difference is one of the most striking contradictions of traditional pedagogy because it is the exact opposite of the concept of integration; the choice of difference, despite the best intentions of the teachers, resulted in isolation, solitude and existential marginalization – a real ghettoization of the different pupil, with serious and permanently compromising effects on adaptation and learning. In reality, as evidenced by the pedagogical debate that began in the late sixties of the last century, the traditional boundaries between normality and abnormality are absolutely labile and approximate until, finally, they disappear completely. Consequently, every intervention technique based on differentiation, that is, on separation and isolation, must be decidedly disavowed. In its place, a different strategy of acceptance founded on the interaction between individuals must take over, with each caught in its peculiar and unrepeatable diversity, as part of an ecological vision of the

person and pedagogical relationships.

The consequence of this, which we could define as a real cultural revolution in contemporary educational psychology and sociology, was not slow to make itself felt within the schools. In 1975, with the decree leg.vo 970, also known as the Falcucci decree, differential classes were abolished in elementary schools and new forms of specialized qualification for support teachers were established. In 1977, Law 517 was approved, which introduced profound transformations in compulsory education, including the obligation to include abnormal pupils, for the first time defined as disabled, in the common classes, so as to favour – via comparison and interaction with nondisabled peers – socialization and the optimal realization of individual potential. Finally, in 1982, as a result of Law 270, access for children with disabilities was extended to state and non-state nursery schools.

In the early 70's -an Italian psychiatrist- the Basaglia wrote about the negative impact of capitalist society on people in his books "*L'istituzione negata*" and "*La maggioranza deviante*". The theory elaborated by Basaglia was simple and shocking. How disruptive and prophetic was his proposal to suppress the asylum structures, veritable infernal circles of brutalization and solitude without hope or redemption! The crazy voices and objects of power of the "deviant majority" were a category upon which the shared projections of the "sane" were built. Since Basaglia spoke of the majority, of the sane, and not of the mad, his ideas could be extended. The way mad people were treated could also apply to other minorities, particularly those who could not make their voices heard: the disabled (first the intellectually disabled, and by extension, not only them); foreigners who spoke another language and with whom mutual understanding seemed impossible; and surely even the deaf, whom the hearing majority had always called "dumb", though they had never been silent.

The madman became a ghost onto which the fears of the majority were projected, the shared construction of a difference. The need for custody, which was then a need for defense, was implemented through something very similar to a prison – a madhouse, which was a complete institution. In the capitalist society a small group of people produces and buys all goods and services, whether a vast majority of people, such as students,

old people, children, disabled people, people with mental issues, does not take place into the productive process. The paradox is in the fact that deviance, from a minority phenomenon, is transformed into a widespread, devastating condition that feeds on itself in a perverse circuit of isolation. This deviant majority is systematically denied that condition of civil representation that is condensed in the institution. Professor Basaglia says to reduce the gap between people the society must be restructured only a society that is flexible and that takes a care of diversity can guarantee equality.

To eliminate such difference from the institutions, today in Italy, the disabled are in everyone's school, the school of integration. The norms that sanction these students' access to the common classes and sections of the basic school come from a fairly simple concept: Isolation and differentiation aggravate the disadvantage that results from the disability itself; indeed, in many cases, these themselves cause a conditioning that translates, over time, into irremediable social deviance. On the contrary, inclusion in the peer group favors psychological interchange, strengthening of identity, profitable use of diversified models of behavior and adaptation, and participation in a work project that carries out – albeit in a restricted area, that of the class and the school – the equality enshrined in the Constitution. It must also be said, however, that the greatly innovative nature of Laws 517 and 270 at the civil and scholastic levels did not always find Italian schools that were prepared, or at least did they not find a generalized and qualified implementation, so insertion did not always translate into effective integration of pupils with disabilities within training processes.

In the conflict between the strong expectations aroused by the new regulations among the parents of children with disabilities and the still-fragile motivation and pedagogical–didactic attitude of the school, insertion often assumed a passive, merely formal character, seen as savage precisely because of the continued lack of any significant recovery project. It is not by chance that the 1985 programs underline the need to prevent the integration of students with disabilities into a mere socialization through presence.

The practice of purely formal insertion, lacking strong educational motivations, did not arise from psychological insensitivity or indifference,

but from the difficulty of fully implementing the innovations introduced by Laws 517 and 270, especially with regard to the conversion of education to the logic of curricular planning and organizational flexibility. The integration of different children, whatever the reason, form or incidence of their diversity, is feasible only within a training project that privileges path differentiation, providing individual roles within the project in a rational, systematic way. Only a work strategy for groups, both at teacher and student levels, only a reasoned flexibility in the management of time and space, equipment and methods, and only a shift of teaching professionalism toward the culture of specialization and scientific pedagogy can allow full implementation of integration for the recovery and adaptation of pupils with disabilities.

A decisive qualitative leap was represented by the approval, in 1992, of framework Law 104, which set rules by which all individuals, groups and institutions were bound to abide. The person with a disability has inalienable subjective rights, and it is the task of civil society and its institutions to protect and promote these at all levels through the elimination of cultural, psychological and regulatory barriers, even before physical and architectural ones, which, by inhibiting the full personal, emotional, social and professional fulfilment of people with disabilities, deprive them of effective civil equality. In this sense, Law 104 starts with the important distinction between deficit and disability: The former consists of a clinically ascertainable functional impairment, while the latter depends on the degree of psychological and operational subordination that falls upon the disabled when, for objective and structural reasons, they are prevented from exercising their rights–duties. This is a very important distinction because it places us before the reality that has so far been little or not at all accepted: the disabled person can take an active part in social life and in the production of goods and services if placed in a position to do so, having available facilities, equipment, working conditions, study and assistance appropriate to the person's special needs. Today, when we talk about inclusion and being included, we mean a way of living together, based on the belief that each individual has value and belongs in the community.

This new vision of diversity led to many national and international laws, and in education to what Dario Ianes calls inclusive education. By the

time- with the laws and pedagogical researches – disability has been protected, and new processes of inclusion started. By the time- with the laws and pedagogical researches – disability has been protected, and new processes of inclusion started¹.

Disability tend to be misconfused and considered the cause of isolation and exclusion, because of its effects on people: limits, difficulties, pains. Can the diversity itself help people with diversity?

The experience and life example of people who overcame disability and have seen it as an opportunity, a chance to strive for more, can support and help other differently abled people?

Differences in the school are a resource, but their potential as a resource, an advantage and a benefit must be built. It must be actively sought and not taken for granted or merely invoked ideologically or emotionally. Inclusion helps us to better understand the difference between teaching and learning and between education and education, allows us to better understand various individual differences, highlighting the plurality of languages, the meaning of the body and the various modes of communication, thought and learning. Inclusion is not a burden. It is a competitive advantage for the quality of the school that allows us to understand human reality by recognizing its most intricate complexity. Just imagine how complex and varied today's classes are compared to those of the past due to the presence of students with certified disabilities, specific learning disabilities (DSA), psychosocial difficulties and/or family problems or complex behaviors to manage, as well as foreign students. Inclusion is the only catalyst for change to make teaching, school work, the emotional connections of relationships and learning more meaningful. The incessant search for quality in inclusion is the search for quality in daily schooling for all students. The “different” student questions every day and seeks quality every day. It is precisely the students' differences that become a resource, promoting processes of change and methodological/didactic and structural innovation that lead to quality schools and educational success for all.

THE “GIFT” OF DIVERSITY: TEMPLE GRANDIN AND DONNA WILLIAMS

¹ D. Ianes, *La Speciale normalità Strategie di integrazione e inclusione per le disabilità e i Bisogni Educativi Speciali*, Erickson 2006.

Temple Grandin is a professor of animal sciences at Colorado State University and a breeder of breeds studied as a result of her research on the behavior of cattle. Grandin was diagnosed with autism in the late 40s, at a time when very little was known about the syndrome. The symptoms of autism include the inability to speak, destructive behavior, reluctance to hug others and the compulsion to use an object, such as a spinning top.

Thanks to a “heroic” mother, who motivated her by not isolating her (“she let me do the autistic an hour a day rest of the day was structured and overworked”), and to the high school science teacher who was able to develop her potential, Grandin has become a successful person. She told of being hypersensitive to noise and other sensory stimuli and feeling the need to transform everything into visual images. According to Grandin, her success as a designer is due to her autistic condition. Because of this condition, she manages to dwell on very minute details and is able to use visual memory as if it were an audio-visual medium, mentally experimenting with the different solutions that could be adopted. In this way, she can also foresee the sensations that the animals would experience when the equipment is used. In addition to the role of professor, Grandin is known for her studies on animals, which led her to design the Hug Machine (also known as the Hug Box or Squeeze Machine) at the age of 18. The autistic subject to overcome his/her affective and emotionally expressive deficit through the simulation of an embrace and the resulting proactive sensation that occurs.

The idea came to her after observing the calming effect that touch had on animals about to be visited or vaccinated by a veterinarian. She conducted an experiment using a similar tool on autistic children, and she discovered that, in that condition, the child let himself/herself be embraced. That is why she called it the Hug Machine.

Grandin also noted that there are innate differences in the circuits, which would explain the discrepancies in skills and deficiencies. For example, she has a hyperconnected visual cortex, linked to my immense visual memory and my skill in art and design. However, her amygdala, the part that processes fear, is much larger than normal. Grandin explained: “And there are sounds, like the buzzing of electric towels or airport

alarms, that cause me panic attacks”.

According to Grandin, is sensory research is another promising, but little explored territory. This field of research has provided evidence showing that autistic people are much more connected with the outside world than they appear to be or than people assume.

Grandin noted that many children do not tolerate being in environments such as malls, restaurants or supermarkets because they are hypersensitive to visual or auditory stimuli. Their neuronal system is overloaded and all sensations become painfully intense. There is too much information. Grandin believes that, to help autistic children, the most important thing is to intervene early. Thus, she insists that children must be forced to leave their comfort zone at least 20 hours a week: “We need to work on deficits as much as on strengths. Get them out, become responsible, prepare them for adult life. Children are sponges: “their database must be filled with experience web pages” (Grandin, 2014)

Donna Williams’ book, *My and Their Autism* (1998) is an autobiography of a high-functioning autistic person who was diagnosed in adulthood. Williams expresses herself through her personal experience indicating the peculiarities of her autism and those of others with autism. Thus, from the first pages of her book, she explains how she expresses herself, contrary to stereotypes, labels and false myths, because there are many types of autism and because applying a common label to the condition does not necessarily mean that all people with autism share the same mechanisms. In fact, innate and culturally learned factors contribute to the definition of personality and to the development of the psychophysical characteristics of each person; therefore, it is possible to find oneself in front of individuals that have an apparently milder form of autism who still experience discomfort. Moreover, it is likely to think that there are people who present a moderate degree of autism but without the difficulties that would be expected. Autism is a condition that is experienced differently by each individual. Williams writes that she was a child who not only did not understand the world, its meaning and meaning, but who could not even stand it. She urges professionals and families to eliminate the stress that children with autism experience resulting from emotional and biochemical overload. Thus, it is important to remember that the difficulty in quickly accessing

information, together with other factors, such as hypersensitivity to light or chemical intolerances, often produces effects that can range from intense emotional discharges to the inability to modulate the action; it can also lead to difficulty in elaborating on physical sensations, up to a possible deficit of elaboration of the emotional meaning. All this can result in unexplained excesses, obsessional rituals, anxiety or even avoidance—especially in very young children. It is also prudent to understand that, very often, some bizarre manifestations are actually attempts, sometimes even effective, to adapt. It is fundamental that interlocutors understand this so the appropriate interventions can be implemented.

Being equipped with inefficient processing, Williams tells us, does not mean being incomplete or unsuitable; it only means having to apply better adaptive strategies.

CONCLUSION

In recent years, the powerful emergence of what has come to be called critical disability studies (CDS) has added new force to the theoretical impetus already at the heart of the social model, taking it in innovative directions that challenge not simply existing doxa about the nature of disability, but questions of embodiment, identity and agency as they affect all living beings: insofar as each of us, however we are embodied, is complicit in the construction and maintenance of normative assumptions, it challenges every one of us to rethink the relations between disabled and non-disabled designations – not just ethically as has long been the demand, but ontologically, right at the heart of the whole question of self and other.

The individual who lives well his social/relational dimension is aware of himself and of others, is accustomed to dealing with others with an “equal” attitude without thinking of prevaricate over others and without fearing that others can prevaricate over he is a person who knows how to adapt well to circumstances, who knows what is worth, who feels well integrated without homologation, who always succeeds in being up to the situation, who knows how to take responsibility, is interested in others and respects the rights and freedoms, is tolerant,

collaborates with others, is authentic and honest in attitudes and behaviors, who thinks not so much in terms of “I” but in terms of “we”. It is the school’s task to create the conditions so that even parents and adults who generally revolve around it can grow and mature in this perspective; these conditions coincide with the quality of the relational climate that the teachers will know and will want to arouse in the classes and in the school. In this sense, a strategy of involvement and sharing based on the stimulation of people’s critical and creative attitudes is the privileged vehicle for a socialization lived in the perspective of democratic coexistence. The most relevant aspect of this strategy is the establishment of mixed work and research groups of a non-directive nature, based on the recognition also of parents as subjects of education and education, on trust in their progressive self-government capacity. The school can effectively constitute an environment for promoting democratic coexistence if the teachers dynamically and positively resolve the conciliation of freedom and authority; when authority is configured as authoritativeness and not as authoritarianism, individual freedom is not repressed but enhanced and results in conscious growth of each and every one.

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Francesca Buccini, Ph.D. student in “Mind, gender and languages”, “Federico II, Naples has a degree in Biotechnology, in Sciences of primary education, and enrolled in the order of biologists since 2009. In 2018 he obtained the qualification to support educational activities, at the International University of Rome.

His doctoral research lies in the field of gender studies and specifically in the role of female education and the relationship between education, from the earliest stages of childhood, and professional / educational choices in later stages.

His research activities also focus on disability, and in particular the training of teachers for special education, and, more recently, the issue of educational poverty.