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Special Education's view of young people, disabilities and educational contexts

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Abstract
This paper intends to outline the theme of young people with disabilities, with respect to the educational contexts to which they belong. Starting with brief references to the situation faced by young people in Italy, the author takes up themes dear to Special Education, with a particular focus on the theme of 'belonging' (relational, affective, cultural and institutional), which is often lacking or non-existent for those with a disability. The family, school and community of reference represent the educational 'contexts' of greatest interest and responsibility, in order to initiate young people's identity processes and contain the risks deriving from 'adhesive identities' and 'false selves'. The family contributes extensively to the positive development of self-orientation and the school can put itself forward as the most important reference point in learning processes, through the group. This widespread responsibility of educational contexts can also contribute to reducing situations of poverty and marginality that are, in fact, real conditions of capability deprivation, which prevent access to all the opportunities that life offers, risking further aggravation of 'problematic' situations, making them chronic and depriving them of a positive development.

Keywords: youth, disability, education, contexts, belonging, learning

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The construction of youth identity by family and school

In Italy, widespread and capillary education – starting with the single middle school law (De Giorgi, Gaudio and Pruneri, 2019) – has led to a radical transformation in relationships of communication and authority within the family. This change has made it possible to adapt – for better or worse – to

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the coexistence of two generations, one of adults (the parents) and the other of young people (the children) in unusual ways, compared to previous eras. Young people seem to be able to devote themselves only partially to emancipation from the family today, and show that they have negotiated considerable room for freedom within the family: for example, the possibility of having relations with the opposite sex, without parental supervision, has led to a decrease in the tendency to leave home. A large proportion of young Italians have a higher level of education than their parents: the former can 'negotiate' from a favourable position, since education and training enable young people to assert their rights in the face of parents who are sometimes reduced to a defensive position (Istituto Toniolo, 2020; 2021).

The Italian family seems to have a capacity for transformation and adaptation to new situations, but this does not prevent it from running the risk of leaving young people in *suspense*, turning their *moratorium* into the typical trait of a generation, into a lifestyle, which is extended and generalised, depriving the young generation of opportunities for choice and decision-making.

In order to make the transition from the status of dependent child to that of independent subject, the young person – from adolescence onwards – has move away from the family environment and towards what is, in a broader sense, the social environment. Basically, there are three types of *bereavement* that the young people have to experience from adolescence onwards: the loss of the image of parental figures as omnipotent and omniscient; the loss of the image of their pre-adolescent body; the loss of their role in previous family relationships. In addition to these bereavements, there is also the bereavement that the parents must implement in relation to their child: it is only through the coming together of reciprocal and accepted separation that it is possible to achieve the young person's autonomy; only if children are supported towards autonomy, driven by their parents, can they adequately proceed towards independence as youths and then adults.

Some of the developmental tasks that the young person must undertake from adolescence onwards concern the assumption and definition of sexual identity, the use of new cognitive skills and the expansion of relationality. From this point of view, some possible areas of support that adults can offer to adolescents and young people concern: the attenuation of Oedipal ties with parental figures, promoting the transfer of feelings, affectivity and sexuality towards peers; *non-competitiveness* on a sexual level, also offering positive identifications in terms of *non-dogmaticity*, *tolerance*, the *ability to 'take care of...'*.

As far as the exercise of the new cognitive dimension is concerned, it is necessary to offer wide and varied opportunities to '*put oneself to the test*', by taking on small or large commitments (of a personal, institutional, social nature, etc.), so that young people can think of themselves, in terms of projects, as *significant* and capable of improving the world, by promoting the experience of *choice*, which also involves awareness of the *limits* and *resistance of reality*, and by encouraging the use of *critical thinking*, the acceptance of *novelty* and *change*, as fundamental ways of learning.

Regarding the expansion of relationships, it is important to *authorise* the adolescent and young person to go through their *relational bereavements,* offering them ours (this is a meeting between the young person's demands and the adult's authorisations), guaranteeing participation in the *peer group*, accepting *secrecy* about everything that dating entails, committing to valuing not only *protective* modes, but also *emancipatory* ones that push towards *independence* and the *discovery of the social environment* (Cinotti and Caldin, 2020; Caldin, 2018, pp. 131-36; Caldin, 2015, pp. 134-47).

In order to live mentally, every young person, even those with disabilities, needs to be *thought of* by their parents and the adults around them in *future roles*. Indeed, as Goffman pointed out, the *role is* not assigned within a social situation in an automatic and ahistorical way, but is instead an interactive behaviour that is learned by subjects progressively, on condition that they become capable of anticipating in themselves the attitude of others and the response that their action determines in them. It is interesting to note that *role* continues to remain a fundamental element of identity, but also – and above all – a formidable primary factor of learning (Goffman, 1969; Lepri, 2020).

This opportunity is often denied to people with disabilities. Indeed, all too often young people with disabilities are represented in the social imagination and in the context to which they belong as small, needy and/or sick. They are therefore exempted from active and responsible roles both during adolescence and youth, when they should be transitioning from a predominantly family identity – with all the protective elements implicit in this – to an adult social identity. There is a distance, a no man's land, between the two identities that is not easy to cross and that is often never crossed by the disabled adolescent and young person: *the golden age*, as adolescence is often called, risks turning into a *tin-foil age*, as Montobbio and Lepri warn (2000).

Moreover, the concept of *extinction* is intrinsic to educational action, which tends to cancel the initial asymmetry of the educational relationship between adults and minors: the drama of parents of children with disabilities is, however, that of risking never becoming extinct as educators, because they are continuously – and often permanently – engaged in the educational and care relationship. On the other hand, it is a context of trust, made up of parents, relatives, friends, teachers, educators and other significant adults, that can instil that hope and generate that trust which leads to a *belief* in the adolescent and the young person, facilitating the start of the processes of autonomy and the construction of an adult identity (Caldin, 2021, pp. 11-23).

Identity as a continuous perception and sense of self, through time and despite all the changes of time, can be configured as a *construction of memory* in which both the individual processes of separation/individuation and the collective and relational processes of representation/reflection converge. But the experience of mirroring all too often produces a *suffering* for young people with disabilities, an infantilised, perpetually needy image: they are *denied a plural identity*, their own personal history, their own experiences, their own emotions, the roles they could *play*, and are reduced to a *mono-identity* (that of the disabled person). Moreover, they are not given that *competent identity* whose competence depends on a *valuing gaze* and *context*, or rather on the ability to glimpse unusual abilities and talents in the other person, designing appropriate, *non-handicapping* situations. However, appropriate situations and contexts require clear and ordinary characteristics: disabled people can perceive themselves as *useful* within social contexts where this happens *for everyone* and within an overall design in which *real* – not fictitious – and *meaningful* things are done for themselves and for others, as is the case in the world of work (Caldin and Friso, 2019 b).

It is a widespread belief that disability is accompanied by regression, taking childish and laughable attitudes, incompetence and goodness, incapacity and happiness for granted in young disabled people, denying the expression of vital feelings (anger, aggression, etc.) that can be reworked, neglecting important ethical and social reflections that would lead to the issues of the rights and active citizenship of disabled people. In this way, however, the false attitudes that surround young people with disabilities, especially during adolescence, mystify their self-perception and deprive them of any *maturative adaptation*.

Precisely in this sense, we cannot forget that our very words and actions, those with which *we meet* young disabled people (in whatever context), reveal the mental representation we have of them and lead us ourselves (and, sometimes, in spite of ourselves) to be *builders of* their identity. The idea that we are all, immediately and forever, builders of a possible adulthood for the disabled urges us to take on an educational responsibility which has its most challenging temporal perspective in the *future*; in the awareness of the *irreversibility* of educational action, the ethical indication to *think about* educational intervention; in *possibility, the* extraordinary field of action; in *utopia*, the driving dimension of pedagogical work; in *intentionality*, the thoughtfulness and intention of an adequate educational intervention (Bertolini, 1988).

An enormous responsibility lies with the school and the community to which the young person with disabilities belongs. In these schools and communities, a *pedagogy of roles* should increasingly be implemented, combined with experiences gained in different contexts, allowing for new situations and opportunities, in addition to those of the family, the school or the employment centre. Personal identity could in fact be configured as the result of all the roles played by each individual that are socially recognised: these are what can lead to significant and useful changes in the pathway to adulthood, precisely because they are *real* and experienced *in situations.*

Family, school and society can activate training methods that also orient, meaning that they are able to provoke behaviours and attitudes that generate and increase confidence in one's own potential, in the possibility of improving oneself and learning in cooperation with one's peers, sharing with them and with adults involved in relevant growth projects. In this sense, one should not forget the effectiveness of the *implicit orientation* and the *complementary orientation* offered by the family and the social context to which one belongs, made up of stimuli, confirmations, disconfirmations, etc., which are implemented on a daily basis – and throughout the subject's entire educational itinerary – and have a significant impact on personal expectations and self-esteem.

In young people with disabilities, even *counter-dependency* (Ammaniti and Gallese, 2014) risks being partial or non-existent and, in this way, parents can have a greater influence on school and professional choices through mechanisms that are not always conscious, starting from the overall educational setting. It is therefore essential to positively develop the family and social representations of young people with disabilities that facilitate an effective *complementary orientation of* the family, through the re-activation of dormant projects (Caldin and Friso, 2019 a).

In order to ensure that family orientation fosters self-orientation, it is necessary to commit to the promotion and support of methods aimed at enhancing the experience of *choice*, the testing of *limits* and the *resistance of reality*, gradually moving from the level of the hypothetical to the level of the feasible, taking into account the gap between the intentions behind the various and multiple educational interventions and their outcomes, progressively selecting what is realistically feasible, while at the same time remaining as faithful as possible to the chosen ideal. The integrated variation of protective/constraining and emancipative/autonomising educational methods helps to contain situations of perennial dependence and prevents obstacles to the drive for self-determination and self-orientation from even beginning in the family.

For parents, it’s necessary to learn to attenuate certain filter-behaviours with regard to frustrations, difficult and complex experiences; or those that are substitutes for the children themselves and that limit and frustrate the processes towards adulthood. Indeed, to a careful observer, overprotection appears to be implemented primarily to spare parents the embarrassment aroused in them by mistakes made by the child, in proceeding, by trial and error, to grapple with new experiences, rather than to protect the child. Overprotection not only runs the risk of endlessly postponing the disabled young people’s question of identity, but also of exempting them from the rules, by suspending the prescriptive code, it produces identity consequences with marked ambiguous elements and *false selves,* which are often observed, intertwined with many other distorted factors, in the assumptions of *adhesive* identities among people with disabilities (Winnicott, 1965, It. trans. 1970; Montobbio and Lepri, 2000, p. 74).

In the case of children with a disability, parents are often tempted to attribute all the anomalous, unforeseen, aggressive and unruly behaviour that characterises them to their impairment: in fact, the *speciality* of disability does not have any boundary parameters and it is for this reason that comparison with those who have already experienced that same educational situation or that disability becomes essential. Parents who have adolescent/young children with disabilities may underestimate or overestimate certain problems, considering them physiological or, on the contrary, pathological, subordinating the importance and urgency of educational intervention. Instead, during this period it is indispensable to refine the observation, increase the mental vigilance, conduct comprehensive negotiations, just to succeed, as adults, to give depth to the educational principle of promotion and containment of conflict without reprisals, stripped of the arrogance that can derive from a long and rich experience given by the years (Pietropolli Charmet, 2019).

Often, even educators (and/or other professionals working in the area of disability) interpret the behaviours and experiences of young disabled people as ‘expressions of their disability’, instead of linking them to autonomous personal impulses of experimentation, conflict, verification of their own potential and abilities. As one can easily deduce, the path that leads to the identification of the impairment as the only irreversible variable, from among the many others on which educational intervention is possible and necessary, is long and complex.

Challenge, change, autonomy and dependence are, in fact, dimensions that characterise all educational relationships. On a more general level, this also regards young people today who spend long periods *dependent* on adults. This is why it is necessary to place disability within a broader framework of normality, seeking out *common* themes and issues. Indeed, general educational methods influence those for people with disabilities: if the socially prevalent is that of the eternal child, of exaggerated infantilism, we make the same findings, albeit hypertrophic accentuations, in disability.

First and foremost, the dimensions on which it is necessary to work with parents concern *work on general educational models*; *the initiation, re-starting or adjustment of processes linked to the imagination and planning of adolescent children* if completely *absent* (and/or hidden by years of removal); if concerning an *anticipation of the possible*; if concerning an *anticipation of the desirable.* While in the first two directions the work is clearly positive and easy to carry out (mainly on themes and issues common to all parents and – only secondarily – focused on the specific situations of disability), in the third direction – concerning the *anticipation of the desirable* – the criticality is significant. In fact, it is a question of bringing together – without overdoing it – the re-activated planning, the imaginative investment in the child with the awareness of the limits deriving from the impairment. These are the constraints that force the perhaps definitive abandonment of future elements that are desirable in the parents' expectations, but totally *impossible* in the child's realistic *performance.* Paradoxically, the laborious emergence of realistic elements regarding the future expectations of one's own child risks triggering further attitudes of overprotection, compensating for the feelings of guilt deriving from this new status: the formative intervention with the parents experiences its most difficult moment in this case, and also constitutes a significant testing field for the facilitator (Caldin and Friso, 2019 a; Caldin and Friso, 2019 b).

If young people with a disability prepare for work, they go through a variety of itineraries that have a profound effect on their self-image and contribute gradually but unequivocally to the construction of an adult identity: *learning to work* (even before *learning a job*) constitutes an enormous opportunity for identity that is achieved through tangible experiences (doing), interesting perceptions (feeling useful) and decisive reflections (the gaze of others that ratifies the role of a competent worker).

As we have said, the pre-eminence, for children, of *learning to work*, even before *learning a job*, is configured as a predominantly cognitive operation, which leads to the learning of operational sequences useful for the tangible manifestation of work skills.

Learning to work refers to 'relational maturation and concerns: the ability to respect rules, to introject the work role, to socialise for positional roles' (*collaborative*); failures and failures of work integration experiences are more ascribable to difficulties in *learning to work* and to relational immaturity (rather than to the limited learning of operational work sequences), dimensions that can potentially be assimilated in the formative family context. Work integration is configured as the final phase of a complex operation of construction and restitution of social autonomies, behaviours and operational skills. Because of this, the work must be carried out not only by the family, but especially by the school, and not only in high school, but at all levels of school, in order to avoid the *existential vacuum* that risks thwarting the autonomies acquired and places the family in a welfare situation of chronic immobility (Caldin, 2019).

We believe that high school and/or vocational education (where a large percentage of young people with disabilities come together) can be centres of excellence for the enhancement of introspective dimensions in young people and for the redefinition, through reflection on oneself and one's actions, of future roles and possible paths at an age when (all) young people try to use all their potential.

This commitment – which schools can do very well – supports the actions of families since, all too often, the effort required of parents is excessive, especially if they are on their own or if they do not feel that a support network is close by to uphold them and plan *with* them. For this reason, parents' thinking and acting must be supported by a constructive and affective alliance involving other parents, the children themselves, teachers and the whole world of schools, the social and health services in the area, and the academic world with its availability of skills and with the offer of research paths, aimed at assuming clear and coherent co-responsibilities. This is an alliance that enables parents to recover the ability to plan for their children, finally thinking of them as adults from a very young age.

Belonging and learning

Those with an impairment need to experience non-dominant relationships: it is necessary to reflect on relationships so that they are not static or presentistic, but can evolve. All of us are responsible for what happens with regard to people with disabilities: we are responsible because we situate ourselves in and inhabit *belonging*, and we do not perceive ourselves as self-referential. These are existential design dimensions that guide action and are part of an anthropological model that chooses the person, and does not place the logic of the market, competition or meritocracy divorced from the social dimension before it. Indeed, talent should be confronted and not buried; it should be invested, circulated and placed in a social dimension where merit is not tied to isolating and segregating dimensions.

To this end, teaching and educational work to motivate or re-motivate the *recovery of desires* can be particularly useful, because illness and disability *can cage* individuals, limiting their relational dynamics, in the sense that they produce a distance between *desire and the actual possibility of its achievement* that is highlighted on a daily basis. The dimensions of play and recreation allow a process of thought-emotion-movement to begin, which can give rise to a precise emotion and a word that responds to *inward instances* that are not very explicit; or it can stimulate the body as an expressive tool, making it a *lived body* (and not just an *endured one*), in order to be able to enhance and make it possible to express the bodily potential of each person. Indeed, the dimensions of play and recreation are configured as a privileged area of re-elaboration of languages and belonging, a favourable place in which each person, with their own constraints and resources, can 'speak of' (narrate, show) their existence to others.

But it the dimensions of play and recreation have to promote and achieve *relational/communicative acts* within groups of people: it is this groupality that is charged with significance and that confirms the individual in *belonging*, understood as *existing within a field of meanings shared with others. Regression* in the group, as so well indicated by Bion (2009, It. trans.; 2013), facilitates the re-elaboration of the proposed contents and allows each subject to experience, in contact with others, affective and emotional dimensions such that while it attenuates the perception of individuality, it increases that of functional dependence referred to the need for the other that each one of us has, against a background of reciprocity and belonging that limits situations of infinite dependence and replicated omnipotence.

Regression facilitates the learning of cognitive and affective elements. It produces a change in self-organisation and self-perception, supported by self-exploration and confrontation with others. The dimensions of recreation and play can stimulate the creative elements in which each person can become capable of responsible initiative, placing him/herself within a field of possibilities and action.

Gestural language is encouraged, especially when it is necessary to convey complex messages, overcoming difficulties of interpersonal comprehension; acquiring ease and confidence, including as regards relational functions, attention to the other, and informative and symbolic exchanges between two or more interlocutors. At times, educational initiatives with young people with disabilities focus on attachment and dependence rather than on personal autonomy and doing things for oneself. In other words, there is a risk of depersonalisation and a great alteration of the ego, an estrangement from oneself, an experience of being perpetually *acted upon by others*, and the 'value-adding capacity to be in the world as a subject endowed with meaning' is lacking, given that the only meaning becomes that of de-realisation, which prevents one from marking the boundaries and the limits of one's own territoriality and living space.

Teaching work can take place at various levels: it must certainly allow each individual to encounter and process meta-meanings to be shared with others (through artistic and expressive activities, etc.), where the adult can also be the *experience of the other,* who encourages and urges the crossing of those limits (and not rejection, nor unconditional acceptance), so that a bodily and emotional experience of, suffering (such as an impairment) becomes an organising metaphor, a symbolic, introspective dimension, which is also made possible by mediators such as hands, arms, body, voice, musical instruments, objects/mediators and basic facilitators of the relationship itself.

The resulting social and community decisions must *go beyond* compensating for disadvantages through the supply of goods and services, expanding and guaranteeing individual and collective capacities/faculties of choice – *capabilities* (Sen, 1999) – which concern, above all, the freedoms and fundamental rights related to all dimensions of human life. In this sense, it is necessary to reconceptualise 'disability', understanding it not only as an umbrella word to indicate impairment-related situations, but to place it within a more inclusive *framework*, which sees it as one of the possible 'diversities' and in which situations of poverty and marginality can be read as deprivation of freedom (*capability deprivation*) to access all the opportunities that life offers. From this point of view, poverty, marginality and migration may represent further aggravating factors for situations of disability, besides being considered conditions of 'vulnerability' in themselves, which lead to new forms of inequality (lack of access to technology, to the world of work, etc.).

As we have already said, from this perspective, school can represent an extraordinary opportunity for accessing a full and satisfying life, even within the constraints of each person's *cast* in the world, favouring further processes of *empowerment* in parents. These initiatives are also part of the approach to human rights, which are not the exclusive responsibility of the state, but become the *common and differentiated responsibility* of multiple players: state, NGOs, media, businesses, schools, services, families, communities, individuals. They can act co-responsibly – with a decisive impact on the success of the objectives and on the establishment of educational alliances, through networking and within *horizons of justice*, which bind equality of opportunity and *capabilities* together as a regulatory ideal towards which to move unceasingly and as a civil commitment to be implemented, intensely, day after day.

A very trivial example could concern the small-group activities that take place in high school classes or at university: the teacher/lecturer usually has an objective to achieve (for example: to guide the group of students towards the discovery of new elements within the heuristic pathway undertaken) that also leads to a visible and shareable result, a 'product' that springs from the group itself. But in addition to this, it should be remembered, as Bion (2009) indicates, that an essential factor for positive and lasting learning within the dimension of belonging is that the group regresses, that is, it loosens the rational tension and defences, doing things that are perhaps somewhat 'playful' and that acquire meanings are shared communally by all the students, including those with disabilities.

Furthermore, students who *do things together* can also help teachers and lecturers to achieve a clearer 'reading' of the 'hidden' class, the one that does not appear immediately, that is not clearly evident, but which, nevertheless, can allow the start of internal dynamics that stimulate learning and strengthen the sharing of meanings and participation *with* peers.

Therein lies the sense of presence, in a class group and in a university classroom, for students with a complex disability that require them to carry out activities along less rational paths, albeit shared by all their companions, against a background of belonging to that course, to that university, to that student community.

As Maslow taught (1954, It. trans. 2010), in order to exist mentally, one must *belong* to someone, to something: to the group of classmates, to parents, to teachers, with shared meanings in common. In a class group including a student with a disability, this also helps the others to understand what it means to have a small dependency on someone else. It therefore helps the other students to put themselves in the 'shoes' of the student with a disability, within a protected context, with a high symbolic and learning content, in the knowledge that it is a transitory test, that can be controlled and circumscribed.

This is an extremely refined operation because it requires an authoritative teacher, who guides the class/classroom group well, in order to direct it towards *change*, accepting that some of the previous knowledge will be lost in order to introduce some new elements in the structure of knowledge. This process allows the interiorisation of the content, the modification of the attitude (for example: the mental representation of the disabled student) and not only of the behaviour (for example: giving the seat on the bus to the disabled person because we feel too sorry for him or her!). In these situations, the role of teachers and university lecturers is unparalleled and full of responsibility, since they use themselves as the main instrument of their work. From this point of view, the work of the person who takes on this task is centred around the recovery of the person and the enhancement of his or her healthy aspects through the assignment of active social roles. For example, in the educational intervention that pushes towards work integration, it is the whole initial accompanying part that is important, so that the professional game of chess is contained.

Another aspect that needs to be worked on is the primarily psychological and educational aspect, aimed at initiating, in parallel with the drive for awareness and maturity in children, similar paths and changes in the minds of parents, family members and teachers.

There is therefore an urgent need for a huge commitment on the part of the school to offer introspective and relational paths of comparison and awareness regarding the potential and limits of all students, leading to an *awareness* (not passive resignation) of their own resources and constraints.

We are supported in this by the indications of Special Education. The teacher's aim is to create situations in which young people with disabilities can learn by themselves through observation, touch, experience and thinking. Learning is an interactive process and interaction should take place between students and teachers, between students, between students and their environment. There can be no learning if students are not actively involved in the learning process and if the learning process is not meaningful and useful for everyone. Teaching content, methods and ways of presenting it must be varied so that students with different learning styles can follow and progress according to their learning process.

Teachers can offer multiple opportunities for interaction by organising flexible groups, soliciting and encouraging friendships and collaborations. Education can create situations in which pupils can 'decide', express themselves, feel, think and act within a positive relational climate in which each pupil is respected and helped to achieve their potential.

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