

Educatability and possibility, difference and diversity: the contribution of Special Pedagogy

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Riassunto: *Il presente contributo approfondisce alcune dimensioni fondanti della Pedagogia Speciale – educabilità e possibilità, differenza e diversità – a partire da alcuni studi italiani su questi temi. Le “zone comuni” concettuali tra Pedagogia e Pedagogia Speciale sono particolarmente ricche riguardo alle suddette questioni; in tal senso, l’Autrice richiama alcune interpretazioni provenienti da approcci teorici (fenomenologia, problematicismo, personalismo), dalla prospettiva antropologica della disabilità, dalle recenti indicazioni della World Health Organization. Le indicazioni che ne emergono mirano ad evidenziare come le ricerche della Pedagogia Speciale possono offrire un contributo per la qualità della ricerca di tutta l’area pedagogica.*

Abstract: *This contribution examines some of the keystones of Special Pedagogy – educatability and possibility, difference and diversity – based on some Italian studies in these areas. The “common conceptual areas” between Pedagogy and Special Pedagogy are particularly rich in such questions; in this regard, the Author refers to some interpretations from theoretical approaches (phenomenology, problematics, personalism), from the anthropological perspective of disability, as per the recent indications of the World Health Organisation. The emerging indications aim to highlight how Special Pedagogy research can contribute to the quality of research across all areas of pedagogy.*

Keywords: *educatability, possibility, difference, diversity, special pedagogy.*

Educatability and possibility

Sciences are generally assigned the task of contributing to the progress of mankind; pedagogy, understood in its simplest meaning of *reflection on educational issues*, is assigned the task of describing the *sense* and the orientation of striving for personal and social realisation. In the phenomenological perspective, Iori specifies that man is connoted as *being for education*: this expression implies both an innate quality of man, seen in the dimension of *educatability*, and an act of *responsibility* and *choice*, the fact of

choosing for oneself and one's own possibility of *being for education* (Iori, 1988, 167-172).

The challenge of education (and particularly *special* education) lies above all *where common sense* sees *the impossibility* of change and unworkability of any form of progress: in pedagogical fields there is a special link – indeed, an element of *special* mediation – between utopia and pedagogy (and between utopia and education) that comes to the fore in the dimension of *possibility*.

As Bertolini specified, in our society, impregnated by a *crisis of meaning*, we must recover the dimension of *utopia as a pedagogical idea: possibility*, as a keyword of the pedagogical alphabet, dilates the meaning of utopia and and extends it so far as to change it and enhance it, from merely a place *that doesn't exist (a non-place)* to a conjecturable, if not yet realised, place (Bertolini, 1999, 250-257).

In the educational field, work must be done to reduce, and eliminate the currently evident *lack of utopia* and *lack of pedagogic design* that lead every action and every project to be confined to a single temporal dimension, the present, denying any possible evolution or improvement, flattening out and uniformising design skills, hindering emerging potential, moving towards a lack of educational commitment and responsibility, forcing the young generations into negligence, reducing educational decisions and choices to superficiality, exteriority and transience, dragging down even those who should be oriented and guided by adults into a brutal spiral of a narcissistic and distracted society.

Educatability can be understood as an *opening to the possibility of orienting oneself towards one's own destination* (Orlando Cian, 1997): «man “is for education” as he doesn't let himself be determined by the surrounding world, but rather transforms it through a project» (Iori, 1988, 167-172). It is precisely man's *being for education* that in situations of serious suffering and problematics a pedagogical intervention is needed that approaches the utopic dimension as an idea that governs the pedagogical discourse: in this perspective, utopia represents and maintains its function as a driving and guiding force (and not merely as a – sometimes unreachable – destination).

Possibility could even be understood as one of the *foundation pillars of the educational experience*, when education is understood as «[...] that learning process by which man (the individual or the group) establishes himself over time in a constant tension that projects him from the present into the

future, which from what he already is stimulates him towards that which he is not or is not yet [...]. He (*man*) is in a *field of possibilities* which is not unlimited but rather subject to many *constraints*, represented, as it is easy to understand, also by that which the individual was at the start and what he progressively became in the past [...]. It is in any case precisely due to this innate presence of possibility (which is always both the *possibility of yes* and the *possibility of no*) that man cannot completely eliminate his own sense of *uncertainty*, of *risk*, and of the *negative*. The latter are all perspectives that together represent the wealth of man and the dramatic nature of his condition» (Bertolini, 1999, 250-257; Contini, 1999, 258-263).

It is difficult to *invest* in man in educational terms when the feasibility of future projects is very fuzzy, cloudy, made improbable, for example, by a deficit, an impairment or a devastating condition, as happens with small children with terminal illnesses or degenerative deficits (Kanisza, 2000, 744-750). And yet, it is precisely from the lack of guarantee of the project, the pedagogical *risk* that always marks educational design (and even more so that of special pedagogy) that the *challenge of education* can solidly be made, even in the most problematic situations.

And thus, the *project of educational choice* (and the *choice of project*) becomes the central focus of an education that aims to constantly redeem the point of departure of the person, even when this may appear (or, realistically be) limited and vulnerable (as occurs, for example, when working with disabled people with serious mental handicap): it is a tough, worrying and difficult task, but we are not exempted of it. Commitment *of* and *in choice*, can in fact constitute *the response* that we are called on to give by the *responsibility of our being in the world*.

Today, the social representation of a disabled person as a person incapable of choosing or responding (in other words, also being even to some extent responsible) is very widespread. Lepri writes: «the image of the intellectually disabled person as an eternal child takes hold and as he grows the disabled person has trouble leaving the condition, and not for reasons linked to a deficit of intelligence, but rather due to an excess of care and protection» (Lepri, 2001).

Throughout our long educational experience, we have seen this infantilising representation of disability on many occasions. We have worked with disabled adults and adolescents who are unable to make even the smallest choice over food, clothing, leisure time; this inability was not due to their intellectual deficit, but rather to the habit of not choosing, fitting in with

decisions taken by others on all levels: from the shoes to wear, to the TV programme to watch, to the people to spend time with; their whole lives were pre-ordered and planned by others.

“Non-choice” therefore appears to be the first step towards depersonalisation, a kind of identity deprivation. In our opinion, these practices could partly be tackled by stimulating the disabled person towards even a minor *reflection*, on their own person and what takes place in the world surrounding them, in order to foster their taking a stand, making a personal choice. They need to trigger a process of identity construction through non-stop, daily training, asking themselves who they are, what they like, what they are doing, what they want, what they feel about an object, situation, person or fact: this would lead to the broadening of the educational space offered by the dimension of *possibility*, promoting *difference*.

In some memorable pages (Heidegger, 1912-1917, 1972, 1976), Heidegger described how human beings find themselves *thrown into the world*, meeting and recognising the conditions that are not chosen by them. Physical appearance (female/male, black/white, disabled/not disabled, etc.), family (conflictual/harmonious, rich/poor, large/nuclear, etc.), city (liveable/risky, opulent/poor, hospitable/hostile, etc.), country (belligerent/pacific, industrialised/rural, etc.), the era they live in (contemporary/ancient, etc.) are elements of *randomness* that precisely mark the departure point of their existence. But if, as Heidegger states, we are all *thrown* into the world, the *how* of our *being thrown* is not preordained and organised, but depends on that *possibility* that obeys us and our life choices. *Projectuality* – as a pedagogical dimension – is closely linked to the category of *possibility* that is considered «the horizon for which beings continue to recreate themselves, or [...] for which beings [...] make their own history not according to the form of certainty or necessity but rather according to the form of not always foreseeable opening, risk» (Bertolini, 1988, 146-148) of infinite possibilities. Its structurally most significant temporal dimension is the *future* and its methodological dimension is that of the «principle of dilation and expansion of the existential experience of the learner» for which the educational action stimulates the achievement of new goals, new levels of existence (Bertolini, 1988, 146-148).

Therefore, the centrality of the person and their mental, physical, social and cultural history, the processes through which they perceive, make their own, invest or remove all meaning from their sense of existence, starts from the pedagogical project; this identifies a specific object of reflection and in-

tervention: «the contribution of the individual in the construction of their own model of interpreting the world and action in the world» (Contini, 1999, 258-263), beyond any deterministic factor or any causal model; but this doesn't mean that the incidence of psychological, family or social factors are emptied of any importance (*Ibidem*).

It should be noted that also the ICF of the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2001) stated the importance of *inclusive* educational contexts and underlines the *central* concept of *interaction* between a person and their *environment*, deeming the *interaction* of *health features* and *contextual factors* to produce (or not) *handicap*; the *contextual factors* contribute to improving personal functioning or increasing difficulties by acting as barriers; in this sense, people must be considered in their constant interaction with the environment, in a vision of integration and reciprocity.

Inclusive educational contexts (school, family, services, etc.) can be better suited in problematic situations of disability/pluridisability, as they are organised to provide customised and articulated paths (plurimodal services, targeted accessibility, etc.), in order to reduce *handicapping* elements (architectural barriers, prejudice, stereotyping, etc.), within *territories for all* (school, swimming pool, theatre, cinema, etc.): in this sense, the inclusive educational context does not reduce the deficit (the irreversible variable), but helps to *reduce the handicap*, by breaking down, limiting or removing the hindering variables and segregating situations. However, to ensure that the educational project is significant and incisive, we need to learn to “read” the problematic situations of contexts patiently and analytically, without rushing to find a quick solution. As Maria Teresa Moscato states, we must not be in a hurry to turn pedagogy into a “theory of action and for action”, with merely apparent results of effectiveness and efficiency; rather, we need to learn that the understanding of reality always remains the primary purpose of knowledge (Moscato, 2012, 36 and following) and our pedagogical thought must move in that direction.

We have already widely discussed the term *inclusion* in a recent work (Caldin, 2013, 11-25); here we wish only to specify that the meaning of *inclusion* is a pedagogical concept that links appropriately to the reference model of the WHO's aforementioned ICF classification: it takes on meaning when broadened to encompass *inclusive pedagogy* which, placing disability in a broader context rich in interdisciplinary contributions, is able to competently tackle the specific functioning of people in their life situations. In this perspective, inclusion cannot be considered as merely an organisa-

tional intervention, nor must it remain a dimension that refers only to the world of school education, but must cover and penetrate all life and social spheres, conceptual and physical places, to become a cultural and mental process that includes all children and the learning system. In this sense, the pedagogical intervention must aim to develop and improve a radical and critical type of inclusive pedagogy that does not merely function in strictly scholastic fields but which rather works with the whole social community and the life project (D'Alessio, 2011).

Difference and diversity

All that concerns the condition of the bio-psycho-sociological situation, i.e. the *thrown-ness* Heidegger refers to, can be ascribed to the field of *diversity*, but not of *difference*: these two conceptual areas do not coincide, cannot be compared and in fact pedagogically and educationally distinguish (or not) every person's personal and social project.

Diversity is represented by the existing conditions *given* to each of us and made of genetic, bio-psychological and socio-cultural factors that cannot be denied, nor removed, but progressively and gradually accepted in order to avoid processes of classification and hierarchisation, segregation and exclusion of other human beings, often hidden behind a mask of presumed values or supported by logics of power and violence or veiled behind false ideals. We must on the other hand accept our own and others' diversity because this means defining and organising the assumptions and conditions to ensure that our and their path be marked by equal opportunities of growth and self-realisation.

Contrary to what we may imagine, change is not achieved along the path of *refusal* of diversity, which falsely leads us to think that if we accept a given situation it will not be modified. In fact, a condition of change «[...] is the *decision to accept*: not in the sense of a positive opinion or even a pleasant sensation, but rather in the sense of *acknowledgement*, recognition of a reality and acceptance of a *starting point* of what creates problems [...] The rational acknowledgement of facts and their recognition are the way of paving the way for further operational decisions, for action aiming for change» (Montuschi, 1993, 200 and following) and, we may add, the emergence of *difference* as a central dimension of existence and a regulative goal to aim for.

The same idea and the aspiration for change cannot come before the decision to accept the reality to be modified in its real and current configuration: accepting means feeling the drama of what has happened, recognising a limit, a disability (sometimes temporary, sometimes permanent) and in any case striving to make it a springboard for seeking other resources, other multimodal pathways, which highlight the original and specific contributions of each of us in the best possible way. It is only in this way that also those who suffer an accident, a deficit, can take control of their own lives: in fact, «[...] the meaning of life belongs to people and not to events, to human responses and not to the fickleness of fate» (*Ibidem*, 202). Without pondered and reflective acceptance and/or without systematic analysis, change remains sterile, unproductive, unrealisable, false: «the paradox produced in change is precisely due to acceptance. The person who accepts himself, recognises himself, decides to start from the personal position and situation he is in, is in the best condition to actually change: he can find the energies to modify all he feels can be improved in himself» (*Ibidem*). Only in this way can we envisage, for anyone – even those who may be indicated as *diverse* – the possibility to conquer *difference*, a pedagogical dimension that indicates the deviation between what already exists (the thrown-ness) and the ever possible (possibility and projectuality), even when the constraints we are catapulted into this world with can appear, or be seen to be, intolerable and overbearing burdens, millstones of existential oppression.

By following this arduous educational orientation, we may then find the original dimension of *difference*. Referring to an interesting contribution by Angori from a few years ago and to the studies he carried out, the term *difference* comes from the Latin *disfero* and indicates *to move, to carry apart* linking back specifically to the baggage of potential each one of us holds, the singularity and specificities that make us stand apart, the originality of our way of being and the mutual enrichment that qualifies inter-subjective relationships (variety of resources, personal skills, originality of expressive styles, etc.). The pedagogical perspective assumes difference not as a limit but as a wealth, despite its complexity, insecurities, worries, doubts and questions it poses (Angori, 1998, 357-359).

Recent literature recognises a positive connotation of the term *difference* – cancelling out the negative interpretation of *distance* and *gap to be overcome* – able to identify the presence of qualitatively characterising and specific traits of human subjectivity and originality. According to the proposal of Bertin and Contini, *difference* represents “the principle for which every

man has the right to not be considered an indistinct element of formless pluralism, and/or a means of functions which are *needed* transcending his awareness and, above all, his consent. Man on the other hand has the right to be considered as a potential bearer of existential transcendence (understood in Nietzsche's meaning of man's *overcoming* in immanence), creating, rather than utopic ambition, the lucid and courageous will of individuals and groups [...] to challenge the sea – immense and tumultuous, yet open to hope – and possibility” (Bertin, Contini, 1986, 57). From this viewpoint, *difference* represents an objective to be chosen and worked towards, as it implies the ability to initiate and produce a process of overcoming existing conditioning. But the protagonist of such arduous project can only be a critical, self-aware person freed from the constraints of conformism and impersonal routine, looking to improve his own and others' projectuality, committed to educating himself and others in order to construct rather than submit to existence; in this perspective, we must investigate the role played by relatives and workers (educators, etc.) within the life of disabled persons with limited decision-making autonomy.

Diversity, according to Angori's interpretation, derives from *disverto* which means *to turn elsewhere, proceed in another direction* and recalls the idea of divergence, moving away from what is common, widespread, usual or socially agreed. *Diversity* is understood as a deviation from the norm, an alteration compared to socially accepted elements and characteristics, the underlining of a (not necessarily pathological) anomalous state or datum and which, sometimes, requires a range of compensatory interventions: physical, psychological, cultural, educational and so on. This is how the disabled, foreigners, gypsies, people belonging to marginal groups who adopt original and unusual life models are commonly thought of. Generally, the term diversity concerns that which deviates from generally agreed habits and conventions, that which stands apart from these and which, in specific contexts and particular situations, requires effort, interest, the search for appropriate forms of help, in order to avoid causing or initiating processes of distress, exclusion and marginality. In its polysemy, the term *diversity* indicates those realities that demonstrate separation from what is usual and which demand a response in terms of support and care (educational, economic, social, rehabilitational) (Angori, 1998, 357-359).

Luckily, the discriminating attribute of the past which indicated the *diverse* as lacking in something, requiring practices that made it normal or

which excluded it, is on the wane. In the first case, diversity is felt as a set of factors (deficit, illness, poverty, cultural deprivation) that have a negative impact on personal and social development: this perspective demands prompt measurement, legislative consideration, and intervention through specific compensatory and/or multimodal provisions. In the second case (and here we are approaching the concept of *difference*) *diversity* is considered an element rooted in some realities: consequently, instead of hiding or covering up deformities, it is better to recognise them as peculiar to specific social spheres, or singular existential choices.

The best path is the *acknowledgement* of *diversity*, the *respect for the forms it is manifested in* (provided they guarantee and protect human dignity), rather than promoting a comparative assessment (with other models) which all too often is filled with prejudice and fanaticism: this dual interpretation of diversity demands clarification. Both as a product of external factors, suffered and therefore independent from us, and as an innate deviation from certain realities, in the educational project diversity leads to the need to take this situation on board (through the realistic acceptance and decision for action aiming for change), as the departure point of the project to be implemented: in education it means answering the question: «what can I do to improve myself and improve the world which surrounds me, despite the constraints (limits, advantages) my situation presents?». It means identifying the positive elements of diversity, that extraordinary and unmeasurable *quid* that is originally in us and appears to us thanks to the vision of ourselves that others offer us.

However, as Montobbio underlines, saying that diversity is a value is enigmatic and equivocal (and often demagogic), as diversity appears as a value only to those who have reached maturity and wisdom. For many others, diversity is a *worrying experience*: it constitutes one of the most complicated human problems as it produces confusion and anxiety in us. Diversity can then be experienced as an authentic assault on identity, a human reaction to the personal narcissistic process that lives the contrast between the simultaneous desire to be like others and at the same time the terror that derives from this very perspective. And neither must we neglect that which philosophers call *mysterium iniquitatis*, the mystery and problem of human aggressiveness: indeed, diversity has always been a target of aggressiveness: «this sense, the integration of diversity is a conquest which is renewed time and again in societies and cultures and can never be taken for granted, precisely due to these two problems. Diversity is an

attack on identity and is the ideological target of human aggressiveness» (Montobbio, Grondona, 1994, 38-39).

But all these difficulties cannot be removed from reflection, conceptualisation, design, responsible action that is coherent with the educational project: we must therefore recover the perspective of hope, and with it, the certainty that man can and will be able to re-design and ensure the significance of his own presence in the world.

In this vision, the *diverse* can also fulfil a *salvific function*: his being, the testimonial of his complex, difficult and problematic life (deemed by many to be unworthy of existence, even in recent historical eras) which can arouse curiosity, interest, participation, can lead even the most hostile to rethink the human condition and enrich it with new perspectives: «primitives fought and annihilated each other only because they hadn't abolished differences; we, on the other hand, for reasons of *humanity*, have abolished these differences, we no longer fight men but we circumscribe children's spaces, we shut old people away, we extradite the mad, abolish the gods, forget our ancestors, reject foreigners, fence off our dead, all in the name of humanity, a concept which, the more universal it becomes, the more it creates areas of segregation, to gather the *diverse*, those who least resemble or most deviate from the universal definition of man that culture has given itself to protect it and legitimate its discriminations [...]. Man and the universal definition he has given himself are enriched by the exclusion of these differences that are no longer offered as a challenge, but as what man separates from himself, and what he rejects as some inhuman species» (Galimberti, 1983, 288 and following).

Regarding diversity, the *context* (institutions, associations, organisations, structures, people, etc.) are inalienable, as they are considered a condition that opens up to possibility and, therefore, is always in harmony with freedom (health, events, climatic, political and social conditions, etc.). This is why the sense of limit must be seen as the *possibility* that reduces the risk of a deterministic perspective which would bar all educational intervention. In this viewpoint, a founding category of educational intervention is that which G.M. Bertin, referring to Nietzsche, identifies in *lightness*, freeing reality from connotations of burden, transforming it into the desire for flight, looking towards the horizon, in laughter, dance, play, imagination and creative construction (Bertin, 1977).

Educational work can be done on several levels: it must certainly allow each one of us to find and process meta-meanings to share with others,

where adults can also be the *experience* of the other, exhorting and stimulating to cross those limits (rather than refusal, unconditional and passive acceptance), so that a bodily, emotional experience or suffering (as a deficit can be) becomes an organisational metaphor, a symbolic, introspective dimension, made possible also by mediators such as hands, arms, the body, voice, musical instruments, objects/mediators, basic facilitators of relations. For instance, an indispensable educational effort must be made to motivate and/or re-motivate the *recovery of desires*, because illness, disability *can imprison* the person, limiting their relational dynamics, in the sense that they produce a distance, seen every day, between *desire and the effective possibilities of realisation*. But the ludic-recreational dimensions must foster and implement *relational and communicative actions* within groups of persons: group dynamics filled with meaning and which confirm the individual's sense of *belonging*, understood as *existing within a field of meanings shared with others*. Regression in the group facilitates the processing of the contents proposed and allows every person, in contact with others, to experiment affective and emotional dimensions that, while reducing the perception of individuality, increase those of functional dependence concerning the need for others, which each of us has, but against a background of reciprocity that limits situations of infinite dependence and replicated omnipotence.

Sometimes, educational interventions with disabled children focus on attachment, dependence, rather than on personal autonomy and doing things by themselves: we should remember how, even merely in anthropological terms, deficit (and particularly mental deficit) already holds the meaning of *experience of being actioned by*, which involves the loss of the self, which turns into being separated from oneself (De Martino, 1975).

The awareness and recognition of one's own partiality allows us to meet with others, with the diverse (diverse from each of us, first of all), and allows us to appreciate its wealth; however, only those who are not clouded by uniformity and standardisation and who hunger for *ulteriority* can find what Paul Claudel calls the *magnificent diversity of our peers*, intending diversity as that which specifies each of us (including both *diversity* and *difference*).

In this perspective, it is possible to think of disability as an integral part of existence, a particular angle on a *theory of equality* which envisages the recognition of our human condition which for some involves disability in the present, but which for all of us could involve it in future.

Educatability, possibility, difference and diversity represent pedagogical steps in a long, tough research path aiming to understand the human condition, starting from the dynamics of education, with no gratuitous urgency of action but rather rich in well-thought reflections and lucid analysis. Indeed, the development of research, «[...] in time, will also have the effect of confirming, refuting, modifying and broadening the initial definition, in a virtuous circle in which the experience of reality works to progressively modify the categories with which reality has been thought and represented» (Moscatò, 2012, 37 and following)

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