

# "SILENT" EDUCATORS FOR INCLUSION. TALES, STORIES AND NARRATIVES

## EDUCATORI "SILENZIOSI" PER L'INCLUSIONE. RACCONTI, STORIE E NARRAZIONI

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### ABSTRACT

The article - starting from a reflection on the relationship between regulatory interventions and educational practices in Italy around the themes of disabilities and Special Educational Needs (BES) - intends to propose stories, tales, and narratives as "silent educators" capable of favouring and promoting inclusion at school. Children's literature, in fact, offers a key to addressing the issues of disability and inclusion, also considering the most recent editorial production of picture and silent books. The latter are able to stimulate, in young readers, the activation of empathic processes and the discovery of the absolute uniqueness of each subject.

L'articolo - a partire da una riflessione sul rapporto tra interventi normativi e prassi educative in Italia attorno ai temi delle disabilità e dei Bisogni Educativi Speciali (BES) - intende proporre i racconti, le storie e le narrazioni come "educatori silenziosi" capaci di favorire e promuovere l'inclusione a scuola. La letteratura per l'infanzia, infatti, offre una chiave di volta per affrontare i temi della disabilità e dell'inclusione, considerando anche la più recente produzione editoriale di *picture* e *silent book*. Questi ultimi sono in grado di sollecitare, nei piccoli lettori, l'attivarsi di processi empatici e la scoperta dell'assoluta unicità di ogni soggetto.

### KEYWORDS

disability; inclusion; storytelling; children's literature.  
disabilità; inclusione; narrazione; letteratura per l'infanzia.

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## Introduction\*

Italy, unlike other western states, has included students with disabilities in mainstream schools since the 1970s, boasting a highly advanced legislative framework for safeguarding the right to education and combating prejudice. However, as is often the case in our country, the full and effective implementation of these norms has entailed and still involves a challenging path that is difficult to navigate, partially compromising its innovative value. In fact, the trajectory of integration, which over the last forty years has granted individuals with disabilities the status of "rights bearers," appears to have, in practice, lost the driving force that initially positioned our country at the forefront of caring for people with disabilities. Perhaps the necessary experiences of proximity and sharing, crucial for interpreting integration in terms of belonging and reciprocity, demand longer timelines, greater resources, and a more conscious and competent commitment.

Considering that the evolution of disability-related regulations has inevitably been intertwined with diverse worldviews and cultural paradigms regarding differences that have characterized the collective imagination at different historical moments, we will try to identify the key transitions from the practice of isolation to that of integration, and ultimately, inclusion. In particular, we aim to demonstrate how encounters with limitations and the otherness of oneself have, over time, given rise to various perceptions of the very concept of normality.

The issue of disability is extremely complex and involves, in fact, a dual impairment: one physical and/or mental, and another social, stemming from a devalued and distorted image of one's own body and self, with significant repercussions on safety and self-esteem processes. The negative image that society attributes to disability (or simply to deformity or ugliness) is adopted and internalized within the structure of the self<sup>1</sup> (which appears fragmented and poorly integrated) to the point of

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\* The work is the result of the collaboration between the authors; however, for academic recognition purposes, the paragraphs are attributed as follows: to Stefania Maddalena, paragraphs 2 and 3; to Valerio Ferro Allodola, introduction and paragraph 1; conclusions and bibliography are equally attributable.

<sup>1</sup> The Self is not merely a perception of a private nature but is part of the psycho-social field. An individual has an identity for oneself and another for others, and these are not independent facts: having an identity entails, beyond knowing who one is, being recognized by others as the same person. This relationship between the two identities is so deeply rooted and rarely questioned that it is not explicitly conscious as a structural condition of human interaction. The idea of the Self gradually emerges during the interaction between

becoming a severe form of handicap in itself. This, in turn, gives rise to a dual marginalization: one connected to external factors, such as social non-acceptance, and the other related to internal difficulties in self-development and the formation of a personal identity. (Fratini, 2002: 118-119).

Being integrated into a social, educational, and/or work context, while a significant achievement, is not sufficient for complete integration. In fact, the shame and sense of guilt experienced are not inherent to being disabled but arise from a daily limitation that stems from not fully reflecting and connecting with others. It is necessary, therefore, to take ownership of one's physical, mental, and social identity, whatever that may be.

A disabled person often employs fictions upon which to build an apparent identity, aiming to be recognized or labeled differently from how they perceive themselves (although this also leads to a state of self-frustration). It is evident that we need to overcome the mechanisms established in the "external" environment so that internally there is no longer a need for pretense. Therefore, it is necessary to prepare society to accept diversity in such a way that it does not force the disabled individual to construct a false personal and social identity, which inevitably results in a situation of marginalization.

### **1. Children's literature as a tool for inclusion.**

The narrative device has the ability to facilitate the understanding of diversities and the educational value of differences in a context where individuals and their actions are not exclusively reducible to an analysis in terms of logical-paradigmatic explanation. Instead, they are understood particularly within a perspective linked to hermeneutic processes that allow making sense of one's own and others' events

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the individual and the surrounding world; it is much more than a cognitive representation of the individual. It is also something cherished, the focus of attention and concern around which needs, fears, and desires revolve. New needs arise, essential for well-being and life itself, that are of a different order than the satisfaction of physiological needs: the need to be respected and loved, to be known and appreciated, to earn and maintain a place in the social sphere. This means being capable of consciously taking a position in the world, asserting claims and rights as individuals, and assuming responsibilities.

and attitudes. This is achieved through the connection between actions and intentions, desires, beliefs, and feelings of individuals. (Bruner, 1988, 2002)<sup>2</sup>.

In particular, children's literature - understood as "a space of encounter, a time in which ordinariness and extraordinariness can intertwine [that passes] through the conquest of a word, a word that reveals, a word that affirms, a word that recognizes, a word as a form of opportunity" (Filomia, 2023, p. 9) - constitutes the theoretical framework of reference in which this paragraph intends to position itself.

Around the central theme of inclusion, as suggested by Lepri and Baldini, "it can be useful to reflect on what it is not" (2022, p. 39). Inclusion is not a politically correct scheme to be "applied" as needed; it is also not a political tool. Instead, inclusion is "a set of practices aimed at fostering the creation of virtuous circles that one hopes can permeate every aspect of society; rigorous and pedagogically grounded practices to be implemented daily without any exception" (Ivi, p. 40). Practices that, in the context of inclusive education, are capable of outlining a new mindset for teachers in the perspective of Universal Design for Learning (Sgambelluri, 2020).

To promote and facilitate inclusive processes, it is necessary to create a "culture of inclusion" in a "well-rounded mind" (Morin, 2000), starting from the early years of life; from childhood, precisely. Beginning with Gianni Rodari's "The Book of Mistakes" (1964), the reflection on the importance of "valuing differences" has certainly intensified, especially in the processes of deconstructing stereotypes (related to disability, gender, etc.) and recognizing differences as opportunities for dialogue, growth, and improvement.

Aware that children's literature, especially that aimed at pre-readers, is part of the gradual transition from oral to written culture, it is necessary to remember, in this regard, the famous collection of Italian fairy tales curated by Italo Calvino in 1956, in which many represent forms of disability, deformity, and illness.

In storytelling, characters with disabilities have served two functions: a) pedagogical, as an "example" to the reader, and b) narrative: its presence allows, in fact, to activate a wide range of feelings and emotions in the reader. In fairy tales,

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<sup>2</sup> Studies in neuro-narratology have shown that from preschool age, a child is capable of identifying the protagonist of a story and empathizing with them. Moreover, the protagonist is the focal point of the story for the child. The processes of evaluation and interpretation enable the child to extract from the story what will serve for their own personal understanding of the world (Barsotti, Cantatore, 2022, p. 61).

the presence of the different is a constant: "it, in fact, develops precisely from the problem that afflicts one of the key characters, protagonist or deuteragonist - from having a hump or any other deformity to not knowing how to laugh [...] it is given as the trigger for the whole narrative action that ends, precisely, only with the solution of the initial problem" (Genovesi, 2005, p. 125).

It is Calvino himself who asserts that "what interests us above all are the trials that man goes through and how he overcomes them" (2007, p. 23).

Moreover, studies on the collections of Jacob Ludwig and Wilhelm Karl Grimm show that in fairy tales, physical abilities and aesthetic appearance are often used to mark the moral values of the character, and conversely, infirmity is employed to highlight wickedness and marginalization (Schmiesing, 2014). Often, antagonists have disabilities or are victims of them as punishment for their actions, while heroes with disabilities are typically rewarded with a magical removal of the disadvantage.

Staying within the realm of children's literature, in recent years, for example, the production of picture books and so-called silent books has grown exponentially. Editorial products for early childhood that enable young readers to discover diversity, prompting the activation of empathetic processes towards all peers and other individuals who appear different and special<sup>3</sup>.

In the analysis by Lepri and Baldini (2022), these two types of books are relevant to the category of inclusion at different levels:

1. Images break down the language barrier. Nevertheless, a good picture book is layered with narrative plots and messages not always explicit, arising from the dialogue between the text author and the illustrator or expressed by the artist who takes care of the entire book.

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<sup>3</sup> For example, the children's book author Luigi Dal Cin has published illustrated books that explain certain illnesses through narration. Among the titles written by Dal Cin and illustrated by Carrer, we find "The Blooming Desert: Angelman Syndrome Explained to Children" (2015), "Matteo's Puzzle: Prader-Willi Syndrome Explained to Children" (2015), "The Fragile Gaze: Fragile X Chromosome Syndrome Explained to Children" (2017), and "Reach for the Summit!: Epilepsy Explained to Kids" (2019), within the scientific pedagogical context.

2. Regarding content: various picture books present authentic stories in which the value of difference bursts forth to dismantle the "already known," leading to an understanding of its cognitive potential<sup>4</sup>.

In such a framework, for example, Widget Literacy Symbols (WLS) and Picture Communication Symbols (PCS)<sup>5</sup> can facilitate reading not only for the subjects they are intended for but can also be an effective means to overcome language barriers. The goal is to make editorial products a universally accessible cultural heritage to generate transformative processes aimed at forming a more inclusive society.

Illustrated books, in fact, function as "silent educators" (Lepman, 2018) capable of mediating between oneself and one's imagination, as well as with others and their imagination, promoting identity construction in the "space" of shared reading. Such literature supports a profound shift in perspective, emphasizing inclusivity and turning the book into a tool for relational mediation that can fit into different learning environments while adequately addressing the educational needs of everyone.

## **2. Tackling Diversity: Legislative Interventions and Educational Practices.**

The socio-professional context of the teacher constitutes a working environment where, in particular, the variable and complex dimensions that define it are crucial elements in influencing the processes of constructing one's sense of self. The

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, a classic example is illustrated by "Little Blue and Little Yellow" by Leo Lionni (USA, 1959; Italy, 1966), where the encounter between two identities results in a contamination destined to initiate a redefinition of the distinctive traits of the protagonists. Many other picture books will follow this trend, grafting onto imaginative processes and stimulating reflectivity, participation, and inclusive thinking within the scientific pedagogical context.

<sup>5</sup> PCS (Picture Communication Symbols) is probably the most widely used set of symbols worldwide. It lacks explicit rules for representing meanings and boasts an extensive collection of over 10,000 symbols. PCS originated in the USA, where it remains most widely utilized. It exists in 42 languages, with representations adapted to different cultural contexts. WLS (Widget Literacy Symbols) is a symbol system born in the United Kingdom. Its graphic style exhibits greater maturity compared to PCS, and the symbolic representation maintains good internal coherence. Symbols for concrete objects retain the same level of transparency as PCS, while the inclusion of elements for representing morphosyntactic components of language aligns WLS with Bliss (named after its creator, Charles K. Bliss). Bliss is the progenitor of symbolic languages, inspired by Chinese ideogram-based writing, a "semantic graphic" system. The strength of this symbolic system lies in its expressive power through the use of modifiers (plural, verb tenses, conceptual concretization) within the scientific pedagogical context.

encounter with the other, understood as different from ourselves, often generates closed attitudes or even fear, ultimately compromising the natural development of interpersonal relationships.

Teachers can overcome this obstacle by proposing activities for the exploration and enhancement of individual differences, making them an integral part of the general curriculum. Activities that teach students to understand and appreciate the value of individual differences can facilitate the acceptance of all students and generate a "sense of community" within the class. Since students are inclined to interact with those they perceive as similar, work on individual differences should promote the belief that among people, there are always more commonalities than differences (Janes, 2001: 344).

It is undeniable that currently, in the educational system, the key concepts of inclusion have been firmly established, and the recognition of the rights of people with disabilities is also the result of regulatory measures adopted during this long journey from isolation to inclusion. Now, the responsibility lies primarily with autonomous schools that have embraced the challenge, well aware that:

If a child is admitted to a school that undergoes no changes, they are assimilated. However, if the inclusion of a child in a school involves small adjustments, both on the part of the child and the school, then we can talk about "integration." Moreover, the difference is crucial for the educational choices experienced by disabled children. Integration is therefore a change and a reciprocal adaptation, an open process correlated with the recognition and assimilation of "incorporated" identities and knowledge.

A welcoming school is not a merely tolerant school that merely opens its arms and acknowledges the state of affairs without distinguishing between difference and inequality. On the contrary, it is a demanding, uncomfortable school that refuses to resign itself to accepting the status quo, as it rejects standardization. Such a school is provoked by the challenge of diversity (Canevaro, 2007: 133-147).

Of significant impact and pedagogical importance is the hope that specialized training extends to all teachers in the school and does not remain confined to the margins of the knowledge of a "specialist." This is also aimed at avoiding forms of empty self-reference that still characterize support activities and any tendency to delegate the care of disabled students to individual professionals.

The current school of multiple intelligences and special educational needs requires all teachers, whether specialists or not, to operate with the awareness that:

"Simply allowing access to educational institutions is not enough to provide equal opportunities. It is essential to achieve the effectiveness of educational activities and stimulate the full unfolding of individuals' potentials. The educational system has a role in compensating for factors of inequality, whether related to social belonging or individual peculiarities or difficulties. The fundamental right to education for all should be interpreted as giving to each according to their needs" (Simenon, 2002: 1).

The approach to disability has undergone significant variations over time as a direct result of the cultural nature of its roots. It is, in fact, the result of the distinction between normality and pathology that every society has developed at a given historical moment. The different perspectives that have gradually intertwined become evident in the continuous transformation of adopted terms and classifications. The way of thinking, imagining, managing, and embracing disability has been influenced by this terminological evolution.

All school classes exhibit a multifaceted range of diversities, not always traceable to certification, which, due to various concurrent factors, may hinder learning. All these instances of "special normality" demand that the school acknowledges the plurality of languages and thinking styles beyond any compensatory or remedial perspective.

In this new perspective, indeed, any reference to the etiology of the disorder or to a specific pathology disappears, as every individual may find themselves in a situation in their life that creates Special Educational Needs, at a time when normal educational needs take on a higher level of complexity. In this sense, lanes urges schools to hold together, to coexist with the concept of normality as an expression of the natural and common need for development and specialty as a recognition of the right to the difference and singularity of all students.

The challenge of inclusion, ultimately, calls on educational institutions, their practitioners, and all technical entities in the community, in alliance with families, to establish a network of competencies capable of conducting a comprehensive analysis of educational needs. This should be the basis for constructing individualized teaching practices tailored to specific difficulties to prevent that terrible, and all too often current, condition that Canevaro defines as tragic mimicry. This is "the position that tends to recognize the atypical as equal to the 'normodotato' (typically developing), and thus enacts a new violence and a new denial of identity. It is a position that resembles egalitarianism in education, that is,



the recognition of a formal equality, which is actually subjugation of all to a single educational and cultural model" (Canevaro, 1976: 114).

The Life Project can be regarded as the logical evolution or completion of the Individualized Education Plan, stemming from the recognition of the individual's uniqueness and potential, the multidimensionality of growth and relational needs in every single phase of life, within the pedagogical scientific framework.

### **3. Storytelling to foster inclusion**

A school community that, in the unity of its components, chooses to truly embrace a "support function" is primarily called upon to implement alternative educational, didactic, and organizational solutions, attentive to the development of networks of relationships among all students in the scientific pedagogical context.

As Jerome Bruner asserts, knowledge is the result of "an interactive process where people learn from each other, not only through narrating and showing; it is in the nature of human cultures to form communities where learning is the outcome of mutual exchange" (Bruner, 1997: 35) in the scientific pedagogical context.

The use of stories and the narrative form, which connects "to the structural mode of giving meaning to events and reality that individuals experience and share in their daily relationship with the world," allows for a in-depth analysis of events while simultaneously maintaining attention to general contexts. Not surprisingly, François Lyotard assigns the narrative the primary function of transmitting and processing knowledge, recognizing it as a crucial function in knowledge construction (Lyotard, 1981) in the scientific pedagogical context.

It is precisely stories, tales, and children's literature in general that offer a key to addressing the issue of disability and inclusion, even when there is no explicit mention of disability, serving as true "Silent Educators" thanks to the fact that:

"the storylines rearrange, reknit, stitch up and invent a metaphorical construction in which it is possible to depict a drama (one's own drama seen from afar, Calvino suggested) circumscribed within the confines of the narrative; by thus placing time 'under control' and time/space in the symbolic dimension of elsewhere, the stories seem to be able to detach themselves in a levity of their own that allows for the narration of pain in its articulations, providing visibility and words to feelings, experiences and wounds that are too often unspeakable, especially by children [...]"

What children's literature, in its most authentic and elevated productions, can do and has always done concerning the various manifestations of child pain, does not lie in proposing solutions and adjustments primarily for easy consolations or, worse, for the denial or disguise of suffering. On the contrary, it lies in constructing metaphors in words and images capable of approaching the possibility of expressing, naming, and even deciphering the folds, the fragile rifts of the profound nuances of pain (Berardi, 2010: 256).

Through storytelling and narrative reading, especially for the younger audience, they learn what Bruner defines as the language of culture, which is not simply the passive acquisition of notions but rather a generative language of wisdom and knowledge that arises from active and critical engagement, not only with written words but also with the worlds, experiences, and ideas of others. In this sense, storytelling becomes a journey to unknown worlds, offering the possibility to explore uncharted places, beings and characters never encountered before, and gain a different awareness about them. It is in this metaphorical journey that the educational value of storytelling is embedded.

“Without this impulse towards what is not and what is not understood, humanity would be stuck in the passive acceptance of what is, closing itself off, indifferent to everything that is unknown, different, and new. The mechanism of escape-return, on the contrary, compels us to confront the fact that wisdom is an achievement; that such an achievement is a complex and challenging journey; that the journey is open to everyone even though not everyone has the courage or the desire to undertake it (Avanzini, 2013: 13).

Fairy tales, narratives, stories, and storytelling serve to bring order and meaning to our experiences, contributing to the construction of personal and collective identities. The identity of an individual is both a resource for the individual and for society; however, it is not something predetermined but rather an extended, complex formative process that demands commitment and continuous challenges. This process of identity formation is influenced by relationships established with adults and peers, with books playing a fundamental role, not only in conveying messages but especially in facilitating positive interactions. As observed by Calvino,

"Fairy tales are the catalog of destinies that can unfold for a man and a woman, especially during the phase of life that constitutes the shaping of a destiny: youth, from birth, often carrying within it an omen or a condemnation, to the detachment from things, the trials to become an adult and then mature, to reaffirm oneself as a human being" (1996: 38).

It is possible to start with short stories that address the issue of disability in a way that is not completely explicit, consider, for example, the plot of Valerio Massimo Manfredi's historical novel, *The Shield of Talos* (2011). The book tells the story of Talos, a Spartan boy whose first name was Kleidemos. The boy was born with a crippled foot; his father realized that his son would remain lame and abandoned him on Mount Taigeto, following the law of Sparta, while he was still an infant, because he could never become a strong and valiant soldier. The child was found by the dog of an Iliota shepherd, who adopted him and named him Talos.

"The old man, having now reached where the dog had stopped, bent down to pick it up and retrace his steps but remained suddenly still, so bent in the middle: "it's not a bear cub, Krios," he muttered, racqueting the beast with a caress, "it's a man cub...maybe a year old or so let's see," he then said, opening the wrapper; but as he had seen the little one barely moving, shivering as he was, a grave expression painted itself on his face: "They abandoned you," he said. "Surely you have some defect that would have prevented you from becoming a warrior. is now what shall we do, Krios? shall we abandon him too? No, no Krios the Iloti do not abandon children...We will take him with us," he decided, picking up the bundle from the hollow of the plant. 'And you will see that he will be saved...if he has not died so far it means that he is strong" (Ivi: 12-13).

Despite his physical problem, thanks to the shepherd's care he became strong and very skillful in handling weapons. "And several months had now passed since Critolaos had begun to teach Talos the use of the bow, and not a day had passed without the old man imposing hard training on the boy" (Ivi: 14).

When the entire Spartan population was drafted to fight the Persian Wars, Talos, who did not know his true origins, found himself fighting alongside his brother Brithos. The two fought for months, and only after the death of his father and brother did Talos find out what his true identity and name was.

He also met his mother Ismene, but after a brief period devoted to a new military career under the protection of King Pausanias, he decided to return among the Iliothians because he felt a strong sense of belonging to the people he had been raised by. He waged a struggle against the Spartans and helped the Iliothians finally win their freedom.

The book lends itself to a reading that activates different planes of reflection around the concept of diversity, handicap and normality, ranging from the evolution of the concept of disability, to the different ways of dealing with it throughout the ages, to the importance of care, not only material, to overcome any

deficits, on the evidence that with commitment, willpower and perseverance even the most insurmountable obstacles can be overcome. It also allows us to reflect on the importance of the influence of a stimulation-rich environment on the development of the cognitive and relational abilities of people with disabilities. Living in an environment rich in stimuli allows one to acquire new knowledge, exercise skills, make discoveries, improve one's performance, develop personal identity and a sense of belonging to places and social groups. It also offers numerous insights into the value of solidarity, gratitude, equality, fraternity and loyalty.

We can reflect with Edgar Morin, on the need to combine these ideas by finding a balance that allows freedom and equality to coexist harmoniously, avoiding extremes that can undermine either principle. And again, the inescapability of fraternity as a crucial element for the development of individuals and the community, which does not refer to a practice that can be imposed from above, but must arise spontaneously from society itself. The promotion of a new mutualism, especially in the current context of a complex society, could be a way to cultivate fraternity, creating more solid and constructive bonds between individuals, seeking to achieve a balance and promoting the development of the main values that underpin society.

## **Conclusions**

As Frattini affirms, 'it is necessary to lay the foundations (and one cannot help but repeat this once again) of a true culture of difference and solidarity founded not so much on a benevolent spirit of tolerance as, above all, on a model of social coexistence in which unconditional acceptance of the subject, whatever his or her specific condition, is truly practised. Only by starting from here, from a total and unconditional acceptance (of which every human being by nature, has an absolute need) will it be possible to realise forms of identity and communication that are not forbidden, but genuine and authentic based on exchange and mutual enrichment' (Ivi: 143).

It seems, therefore, evident that the construction of such a culture of difference must necessarily begin within the classroom, from an early age. In this work, in fact, we have analysed the potential of children's literature as a tool to foster inclusion and promote the learning of that 'language of culture', generative of knowledge and understanding. Language that springs from active and critical confrontation,

not only with the written word but also with the worlds, experiences and ideas of others.

The entire Educating Community must be based on the principles of recognition, respect and appreciation of differences. Principles that are basic for the construction of a renewed citizenship and that - in the light of the planetary revolutions underway - is also configured as 'digital citizenship'.

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