

The epistemological challenge of the “pedagogy of talents”: educating for resilience in order not to waste social capital

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Abstract. After explaining the difference between “genius”, “talent” and “giftedness”, this paper highlights the educational aspect of the pedagogy of talents. The role and skills of teachers are crucial for the development of students’ individual potential, so that they can benefit from qualitatively differentiated programs within a truly inclusive school curriculum. As a matter of fact, the intellectually gifted subjects do not usually get their needs met, feeding disadvantages that require repairing educational interventions. Thus, talents that are not acknowledged, and therefore not developed, represent the greatest waste of potentially valuable resources, for the individual himself and for the entire society. The best way to protect talents from dropping out of both school and society is a resilient recovery. Since drop out – understood as exclusion and loss – represents today an urgent cultural, political and educational problem, it is necessary to safeguard that positive “deviance” of thought, typical of talent, by planning and experimenting innovative actions of education for resilience.

Keywords. pedagogy of talents – gifted education – school and social drop outs – resilience – educating thought

1. Gifted education and talent development.

*Se tu sapessi quanto lavoro ci ho messo,
non mi chiameresti genio.*
Michelangelo Buonarroti

International studies and researches on the themes of gifted education and talent development require a necessary distinction between “genius”, “talent” and “giftedness”.

“Genius”, from the verb *geno* (“to generate”, “to create”), refers to that special natural aptitude that allows to produce artistic, scientific, ethical or social kinds of works. Genius also has the same root word of *ingenium* (“ingenuity”), or intellectual sharpness, which is opposed to the *studium*, that corresponds to the skills acquired with enduring and labour intensive commitment. Over the centuries, “genius” and “talent” have been studied by many scholars, who have provided different interpretations.

In 1897 Max Nordau¹ – a fervent follower of Cesare Lombroso – in his work *Psico-fisiologia del genio e del talento*, states that the difference between talent and genius is not quantitative but qualitative. In the Renaissance the genius is who is endowed with “multiform genius”, embodied in the figure of Leonardo da Vinci, a prototype of brilliant intelligence. Immanuel Kant elaborated his conception of genius and talent in his work *Critica del Giudizio* claiming that: «The genius is the talent (natural gift) that gives the rule to art. Since talent itself, considered as the artist’s innate productive faculty, belongs to nature, one could also express it as follows: genius is the innate aptitude of the human spirit (*ingenium*), by which nature gives the rule to art»². Even Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, in *La filosofia dello spirito*, differentiates between genius and talent by specifying that genius is something that involves the whole being, while talent is the skill in something, a technical ability, that is expressed in a specific field³. For Arthur Schopenhauer, genius is the “objective direction of the spirit” and contemplates the ideas produced by the will. He compares talent to a shooter who strikes a target that other people cannot grasp, while genius is like one who strikes a target that other people cannot even reach with their eyes⁴. For Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche the subject of genius is identified with the “free spirit”, referring to «one who thinks differently than one would expect based on his origins, his environment, his social class and his office, or based on dominant opinions. It does not belong to the essence of the free spirit to have more correct opinions, but rather to be detached from tradition, with luck or failure. However he will usually have the truth on his side, or at least the spirit of seeking the truth: he demands evidence, while others demand faith»⁵. Even the parable of hidden talent recalls an interesting interpretation, as reported by Maria Montessori. «One cannot limit the action in the educational field to the pure conservation of the existing one: one would act badly in the same way as the servant who, in the parable, was concerned only with preserving the talent in a secret place to return it to the master, but he did not care to make it bear fruit, by using it in some way. We know that in the spirit of the child there are rich energies, unsuspected energies. We must yield these energies: we must enrich life by cultivating these hidden forces»⁶.

Talent, more than constituting a unit of measure, weight and also an ancient coin, today represents an expression of thought and mind, an intertwining of abilities, inclinations, behaviors that act in an integrated approach. According to Aristotle’s theory, intelligence would be composed of three aspects (theoretic, practical and productive), in the most recent vision of Robert Sternberg intelligence revolves around the exchange between analytical, practical and creative aspects of the mind⁷. The scholar asserts that what makes the difference in determining whether a person is smart depends on the way he uses and finds a balance between his mental aptitudes. Thus, “talented” people are those who learn to combine and use aspects belonging to components of intelligence,

¹ M. Nordau, *Psycho-Physiologie du génie et du talent*, Paris, Hachette Livre, 2013.

² I. Kant, *Critica del giudizio*, Torino, UTET, 1993, p. 280.

³ G. W. F. Hegel, *La filosofia dello spirito*, Torino, UTET, 2005.

⁴ A. Schopenhauer, *Il mondo come volontà e rappresentazione*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1991.

⁵ F. W. Nietzsche, *Umano, troppo umano*, Milano, Mondadori, 2008, p. 225.

⁶ M. Montessori, *Il metodo del bambino e la formazione dell'uomo*, Roma, Opera Nazionale Montessori, 2002.

⁷ R. J. Sternberg, *Le tre intelligenze. Come potenziare le capacità analitiche, creative e pratiche*, Trento, Erickson, 1997.

optimizing the natural potential in expertise by achieving a functional balance between them. Going beyond the innatistic meaning of talent, which is usually referred to a semantic field consisting of terms such as “vocation”, “disposition”, “inclination”, “aptitude”, supporting the pedagogical dimension means accepting the epistemological challenge that recognizes the conditions of educability of talent. These conditions are identified within a dimension of “temporality”, which differentiates potential from talent: the first concerns the future, the second belongs to the present, even though it can always be improved⁸. The points in common between the two dimensions concern motivation, determination and will, that are “potential” characteristics expressed in talent. In this sense Cécile Dejoux and Maurice Thévenet states that «*le talent est un potentiel avéré*»⁹.

All current studies agree that the correct way to identify “gifted” subjects is not through a single intelligence or scores obtained in the evaluation of different cognitive abilities. Joseph S. Renzulli, Director of the *National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented* of the University of Connecticut, explains how the use of the word “gifted” is the subject of many controversies. Is the word better used as a noun or as an adjective? Is a person gifted in an absolute sense or do only certain people, at certain times, under certain circumstances, develop gifted behaviors?¹⁰ These questions now involve a shift in the paradigm, moving away from emphasizing the sectorial definitions of talent and adopting a talent development perspective¹¹.

In contemporary thought “talent”, in its quantitative and qualitative connotation, is described as a social product, with some universal basic characteristics but strongly dependent on culture. Therefore, the giftedness considers the integration of the dual form, of biological, neurological and physiological endowment (corresponding to natural abilities or aptitudes that are detached from the norm. Those aptitudes are considered “special” because they are not found in the same quality, reliability and intensity in all individuals) and of cognitive, motor, psychological, anthropological, social and pedagogical talent (considered both as a development of an “intellectual gift” and as an increase, optimization and enhancement of experiential learning). Therefore it means to allude to a bio-chemical mobility of the concatenations of thought and organic life, without one capturing the other¹². Thus the “pedagogy of talents” invites us to focus on the subject as a person, in its entirety and in its relational networks, without ever losing sight of the different social scopes in which it is adopted¹³.

The giftedness is becoming an increasingly topical subject in Italy and it is described as a complex mixture of genetic, psychological and behavioral aspects that characterize about 5% of the population. Gifted students not only think differently than the average of their peers, but they also feel different: the progress of their cognitive development, which involves an ability to think about abstract issues early enough, is usually related to a high emotional level. «Socio-emotional needs [...] may include: in positive terms, sensi-

⁸ C. Dejoux, M. Thévenet, *La gestion des talents*, Paris, Dunod, 2010.

⁹ Ivi, p. 96.

¹⁰ J. S. Renzulli, *Reexamining the Role of Gifted Education and Talent Development for the 21st Century: A Four-Part Theoretical Approach*, «Gifted Child Quarterly», 3, 2012.

¹¹ S. I. Pfeiffer, *Current Perspectives on the Identification and Assessment of Gifted Students*, «Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment», 1, 2012.

¹² G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Millepiani. Capitalismo e schizofrenia*, Roma, Castelvecchi, 2000.

¹³ R. Capobianco, *La scuola dei talenti nella società delle competenze*, «Formazione & Insegnamento», 2, 2018.

tivity, intensity, great expectations for oneself or others, a strong sense of justice, perfectionism; in non-positive terms, depression or lower than expected performance»¹⁴ and, above all, low self-esteem.

The perception that many gifted subjects report of themselves recalls the figure of Ulrich, the protagonist of the novel *L'uomo senza qualità*, published in the early 1930s by the Austrian writer Robert Musil¹⁵. Ulrich studied engineering and comes from a well respected family in society. However, he considers himself a man “without quality”, certainly not because he does not possess intellectual or character qualities but because he fails to put them into practice and integrate them into his own lived reality. His typical attitude is a sort of passivity, fueled by an acute analytical intelligence. The uncertainty and ambivalence he feels towards morals, both secular and religious, lead him to consider himself a “man without qualities”, since he is unable to adapt his character to the outside world. Therefore he finds himself being as rich intellectually as much as being without any external passion: ironic and corrosive, capable of discussing topics belonging to any field of knowledge with the various characters, Ulrich does not have a purpose in the service of which to put his great intellectual gifts, living in a constant impossible conciliation between “I” and the world, between genius and mediocrity.

2. The characteristics of the high-potential student and the role of the teachers.

*Fa parte del credo democratico che l'intelligenza,
pur essendo distribuita in maniera disuguale,
è abbastanza generale perché ognuno abbia da offrire
un suo contributo.*
John Dewey

«The ideology of a school that aims at the formation of talent is based on the conviction that everyone has an important role to play in improving society, a role that can manifest itself if we offer all students opportunities, resources and encouragement for their specific talent»¹⁶. Therefore the skills of teachers to recognize and enhance the talents of young students, within qualitatively differentiated programs, are fundamental for the development of individual potential.

There are many myths surrounding the world of high potential subjects¹⁷, first of all the idea that the gifted student does not need support because, thanks to his intellectual endowment, he will be able to develop his abilities by himself. The high-potential student, unlike the “brilliant” student, learns faster and in a qualitatively different manner, able to conquer some evolutionary stages first. Specifically, these students show clearly superior performances to those reached by their peers, with strong asynchronies characterized by

¹⁴ R. Melchiori, *Talento, competenza, capacitazione: caratterizzazioni comuni per uno schema concettuale operativo*, «Formazione & Insegnamento», 2, 2017, p. 71.

¹⁵ R. Musil, *L'uomo senza qualità*, Milano, Mondadori, 2013.

¹⁶ D. Olivieri, *Book smart-Street smart: non più contrapposizione, ma incontro e valorizzazione dei talenti nella nuova scuola*, «Formazione & Insegnamento», 2, 2017, pp. 173.

¹⁷ S. M. Moon, *Myth 15: Gifted students don't face problems and challenges*, «Gifted Child Quarterly», 4, 2009.

an early and wide development of language, a high ability of abstract reasoning and problem solving, a good attention span, already in early developmental ages, high levels of curiosity and intrinsic motivation to learn, high sense of humor, intense reactions to frustration, high sensitivity and empathy, frequent resort to fantasy and imagination¹⁸.

Other characteristics are outlined by Cindy Daubechies, Huguette Desmet, Jean-Pierre Pourtois¹⁹, such as: significant frustration for failure, lack of planning and working methods, resistance to any linear and systematic approach and, in parallel, the need for a large autonomy in learning and the determined motivation to seek at all costs the meaning of events and phenomena, in a sort of ascensionist tension of thinking that can lead them, in some cases, to a distortion of the sense of reality and to a misperception of time and space. This distraction of the mind from sensible things to turn the intellect towards the high peaks of thought, finds an effective representation in Thales’ anecdote which, while he studied the stars and was looking upwards, fell into a well. One of his young slaves, intelligent and graceful, teased him, observing that he was so concerned about knowing the things that are in the sky that he could not see the ones in front of him, between his feet²⁰. This behavior, to which Stephen William Hawking (the scientist with a cheerful smile affected by amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) urged us in more recent times when he stated that «however difficult life may be, there is always something that is possible to do. Look at the stars instead of your feet».

The recognition of talent is the expression of respect and support for the self-realization of the person. An increasingly urgent and current problem to which the philosophy of education “owes” answers. A philosophy of education inevitably situated, which has nothing to do with the human being in general but with subjects who live in a precise historical present and which obliges pedagogy to keep up with the times and to measure itself critically with current problems²¹.

It is easy to understand the main role of teachers in the promotion and support of high intellectual abilities and the different cognitive and emotional “resonance” of those students who “act” their mind activity according to unpredictable and divergent logics²², to contribute to their well-being and to ensure that the high potential is not dissipated. In this regard, the same reflection by Karl Gustav Jung is also particularly relevant. When considering the elements that identify particular talents, he states that they cannot be traced back to generic classifications or specific ages in which gifts and attitudes occur. Instead, the teacher’s ability to establish a “humanizing” educational relationship is fundamental: “the presence of a person who takes the trouble to look for the causes of the behavior of the pupils”²³ is needed. And this is necessary, with just as much “urgency”, in today’s postmodern society. As Alessandro Mariani claims, we know that teachers are

¹⁸ C. Morrone, R. Renati, *Dal quoziente intellettivo ai profili degli studenti ad alto potenziale*, «Psicologia dell’educazione», 3, 2012.

¹⁹ C. Daubechies, H. Desmet, J.-P. Pourtois, *De hauts potentiels qui vont bien. Ce qu’en disent les parents*, «Education, Sciences & Society», 1, 2012.

²⁰ Platone, *Teeteto*, Milano, Bompiani, 2000.

²¹ L. Mortari, *La materia vivente e il pensare sensibile. Per una filosofia ecologica della formazione*, Milano-Udine, Mimesis, 2017.

²² J. S. Renzulli, *Introduction to Identification of Students for Gifted and Talented Programs*, «Essential Readings in Gifted Education», 2004.

²³ K. G. Jung, *Psicologia e educazione*, Roma, Astrolabio, 1947, p. 139.

increasingly called upon to «possess a professionalism which is complex, hermeneutic, up-to-date, including, self-critical and communicative [...] which determines the overcoming of a transmissive-bureaucratic role and the recognition that teacher professionalism is always connected to formation, understood as a faded and unfinished process»²⁴.

In this direction, Christopher John Slatter carried out an in-depth study to identify the characteristics that make a teacher “effective” towards gifted students, also investigating the preferences of the students themselves in relation to the behaviors of teachers. What emerged is that the qualities found referred not so much, or not only, to cognitive traits (planning and successfully implementing differentiated lessons, applying critical thinking, etc.) but greater importance was attached to personal characteristics (being friendly, enthusiastic, have a sense of humor, etc.). Furthermore, it turned out that the teachers who had attended a training course on gifted education “loved” gifted students, did not feel their professionalism undermined and recognized the importance of implementing specific teaching strategies²⁵.

Robert Sternberg, in an article entitled *Excellence for All*, proposed a model to achieve excellence, which is to focus on excellence for all students, not only in relation to the promotion of traditional skills (reading, writing and arithmetic) but mostly transversal skills (reasoning, responsibility and resilience), affirming that society needs its “gifted” individuals to possess, in addition to intellectual analytical skills, also creative, practical, ethical and wisdom-based skills²⁶. Therefore it is essential to be able to recognize, share and “move” talent because with the discovery of the value of the person, knowledge is produced for all.

In the international arena there are some specific programs that can be useful to teachers to promote a “Gifted and Talented Education”. According to the “Gifted and Talented Education (G.A.T.E.) Program Options” it is necessary to consider some specific enhancement paths that include enrichment (to present additional or higher level material), acceleration (to predict class advancement), the Pull-Out (periodically assign the student to classes with a special focus), summer and home enrichment (follow specific programs during periods of suspension of regular teaching activities).

In Italy the idea of “excellence” does not call into question the need for “support”, with the tendency to contrast the two concepts, at the expense of both the enhancement of individual potential and the growth of social capital²⁷. For this reason it is opportune to consider the different programs of talent promotion as solicitations, to rethink a national curriculum more responsive to the needs of gifted students, always respecting the Italian model of scholastic inclusion²⁸ that enhances the social dimension of learning by means of the link that the subject establishes with his environment. It is no coincidence that the Italian Constitution refers to «capable and deserving» students (art. 34) and not by chance reaffirms the need to «remove the obstacles [...] that impede the full development of the human person» (art. 3). The Constitution recognizes that talent can be hindered and assigns to the Republic the task of creating the conditions

²⁴ A. Mariani (a cura di), *L'orientamento e la formazione degli insegnanti del futuro*, Firenze, Firenze University Press, 2014, p. XII.

²⁵ C. J. Slatter, *Talent Development for the Talent Developers: Identifying and Developing the Qualities of Effective Teachers of Gifted Students*, 2008, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED537613>, ultima consultazione 7 novembre 2019.

²⁶ R. J. Sternberg, *Excellence for All*, «Educational Leadership», 2, 2008.

²⁷ R. Renati, G. Gualdi, M. A. Zanetti, *La relazione a supporto degli apprendimenti. L'insegnante e lo studente gifted*, «Psicologia dell'educazione», 2, 2013.

²⁸ T. Zappaterra, *Special needs a scuola. Pedagogia e didattica inclusiva per alunni con disabilità*, Pisa, ETS, 2010.

so that all “potentials” can have the opportunity to manifest themselves. Therefore, with the conviction that a theory of education must «rest on an analysis as broad and deep as possible of the human condition and banish the tendency [...] to simplifications and reductionism»²⁹, it becomes necessary a deconstructive acknowledgement of the postmodern curriculum that finds inspiration and conviction in relation to three devices fielded by deconstructionism and that take on deep meanings within the pedagogy of talents: “the themes of otherness, difference and diversity”³⁰.

3. Hardship at school and “dispersion” of potential.

*Condannare un giovane di genio alla fatica di una scuola
è come mettere un cavallo da corsa su un tapis roulant.*
Samuel Taylor Coleridge

In 2009, a group of leading experts in the world drafted the “International Declaration of Navarre on Talent”, defining it as the competence needed to maintain a competitive organization over time. This “Declaration” offers a holistic and nuanced definition of talent, to which, rather than individual specializations, personal and social characteristics and experiences are brought together. In the “Declaration” there are four peculiar ways of developing talent: identifying it, attracting it, retaining it and activating it, arguing that in the future we will need new talent, so it will be essential to cultivate the ability to “learn to learn”, in line with the key competences for lifelong learning that the European Parliament, in 2006, identified as active and determining factors for the active citizenship, realization, personal development, social inclusion and occupation.

In Italy, nowadays, among the many accusations against the school, there is also the one relating to its inability to make talents emerge. «It is a non-trivial criticism given the social and economic crisis we are facing and considered the urgent need for the school to invest and not waste human capital»³¹. Gifted children are not usually considered among those who have special educational needs, as teachers implicitly rely on the biological-innate paradigm, according to which talent – as an exclusive natural gift – has the opportunity to express itself without the need for other support. Thus, unidentified talents not only do not receive specific “reinforcements” at school but are often mistaken for learning disabilities, hyperactivity or poor academic performance, because their specific modes of thinking and learning are not properly valued and stimulated³². To prevent these behaviors from increasing the “exclusion”, it is necessary to adopt a systemic vision that allows to interpret these problems from different points of view: cultural (towards the recognition of the value dignity of each person), political (to share the sense of personal development and social growth), educational (thinking about really inclusive contexts and training interventions).

²⁹ L. Mortari, *La materia vivente e il pensare sensibile. Per una filosofia ecologica della formazione*, Milano-Udine, Mimesis, 2017, p. 33.

³⁰ A. Mariani, *La decostruzione in pedagogia. Una frontiera teorico-educativa della postmodernità*, Roma, Armando, 2008, p. 64.

³¹ M. Benetton, *Ragazzi dotati e scuola democratica: il risvolto etico-pedagogico del talento*, «Studium Educationis», 1, 2017, p. 66.

³² D. Olivieri, *Book smart-Street smart: non più contrapposizione, ma incontro e valorizzazione dei talenti nella nuova scuola*, «Formazione & Insegnamento», 2, 2017.

Since potentials, giftedness and excellence do not have a linear and orderly development, nor always correspond to those certified by the school, the more widespread and heterogeneous is the opportunity to experiment with different activities and methodologies, the more likely it will be that every student can really express their potential. In the scholastic context, the lack of synchrony with the learning rhythms of the classmates and the request for “adaptation” often lead to a fall in the feelings of boredom, impatience, demotivation which, in some cases, can lead to school failure³³. A feeling of “emptiness” wisely described by the French mathematician, physicist, philosopher and theologian Blaise Pascal in 1670, in his posthumous work *Pensieri*: «Nothing is so unbearable to man as to be in a full rest, without passions, without chores, without entertainment, without employment. He then feels his nothingness, his abandonment, his insufficiency, his dependence, his impotence, his emptiness. And immediately the tedium, the black humor, the sadness, the worry, the spite, the desperation will rise from the bottom of his soul»³⁴.

And if the occasional feeling of boredom can be recovered and sustained in its educational value, the experimentation of “emptiness”, daily extended in the school context by high-potential students, is certainly inadvisable. Thus, the identification of high-potential and talented individuals must today represent an important challenge for teachers in Italy, to prevent giftedness from becoming a “tragedy”³⁵. It implies the need for specific training courses for teachers, so that they can develop the necessary skills to recognize these “special” students and ensure the possibility of using appropriate and personalized teaching methods, as well as setting up educational contexts capable of supporting their peculiar needs. In this regard it will be useful to broaden the international debate around more in-depth scientific reflections and the comparison with the results of research also in other European countries, to explore the real possibilities that the Italian school system can offer to children and students with high cognitive potential and develop, in synergy, support programs to prevent early school leaving.

School failures and difficulties affect not only those students who can be defined as “at risk” for various reasons, but a large part of the school population. And this above all if we consider the school orders of secondary schools, within which the growing phenomenon of “dispersion” has become increasingly important and urgent. The concept of “dispersion” is defined as “the dissipation of intelligence, resources, potential of young people”³⁶, a symptom that, if not effectively counteracted, could have consequences in the future development of the entire country system leading to an impoverishment of human capital³⁷. It is less visible than the economic poverty, but all the same critical and risky because it does not have immediate repercussions only on the student’s educational path. As a matter of fact it blocks the possibility of children and adolescents to learn and develop their talents and skills influencing the evolution of future living conditions³⁸. In this perspective, scholastic dispersion is an indicator of the quality of the trai-

³³ R. Chauvin, *Les surdoués*, Paris, Stock, 1975.

³⁴ B. Pascal, *Pensieri*, Torino, UTET, 2014, p. 352.

³⁵ A. Miller, *Il dramma del bambino dotato*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1991.

³⁶ Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione Direzione Generale del Personale e degli AA. GG. e Amm.vi - Div. XII, «La dispersione scolastica: una lente sulla scuola», 2000, p. 7.

³⁷ Ministero dell’Istruzione, dell’Università e della Ricerca, Direzione Generale per gli Studi, la Statistica e per i Sistemi Informativi - Servizio Statistico, «Focus: la dispersione scolastica», 2013.

³⁸ Ministero dell’Istruzione, dell’Università e della Ricerca, Indire, Unità Italiana di Eurydice, «La lotta all’abbandono precoce dei percorsi di istruzione e formazione in Europa. Strategie, politiche e misure», I quaderni

ning system and, not surprisingly, the Europe 2020 Strategy has set the reduction below 10% among the objectives to be achieved in the field of education and training of early leavers from education and training³⁹. Based on the understanding and on the analysis of the variables that affect this phenomenon (individual factors linked to personal problems, family factors of “fragile” contexts, socio-economic factors at risk of poverty, scholastic factors dependent on the setting of the educational system and from the quality of relationships)⁴⁰, it will be possible to think of targeted and effective actions. For example, offering greater participatory spaces (of choice, negotiation, decision-making) and activating peer education actions, especially among secondary school students support and increase the cognitive, emotional and affective empowerment of children. In this delicate and strategic moment of “transition”, being able to fix the link between orientation and training, focusing on an analysis of the subjects’ specificities/differences and soliciting the predisposition of creative, relational and innovative environments, will favor the development of a true personalized and encouraging training⁴¹.

Specifically, the peer education methodology focuses attention on the relationship between tutors and tutee, explaining the considerable advantage that students have from interaction with peers. Already in the first century, Quintilian stated that pupils could benefit from the education of one another, as well as Seneca when he stated that «*Qui docet, discet*». John Dewey promoted the organization of groups in cooperative learning, arguing precisely that the thought of the individual is formed by experience, understood as a social experience⁴². A reference is necessary to the need to expand “internal potential” thanks to the “external opportunities” that favor its development – according to the capabilities approach proposed by Amartya Sen⁴³ and Martha Nussbaum⁴⁴ – so that each student has the possibility and freedom to be, to choose and to become, based on the relational resources at its disposal, combined with the ability to use them. Only by working in these directions, together consciously and intentionally, talent can be effectively recognized and valued as a “common good”.

4. Divergent talents, resilient talents.

Gli uomini di genio sono incapaci di studiare in gioventù perché sentono inconsciamente che bisogna imparare tutto in modo diverso da come lo impara la massa.

Lev Tolstoj

The current scenario, whether interpreted at an economic level or a political or social one, is characterized by permanent instability. All the contexts, crossed by the “liquid

di Euridyce, n. 31, 2014.

³⁹ Commissione Europea Direzione Generale dell’Istruzione e della Cultura, «Relazione di monitoraggio del settore dell’istruzione e della formazione», 2015.

⁴⁰ F. Batini, M. Bartolucci (a cura di), *Dispersione scolastica. Ascoltare i protagonisti per comprenderla e prevenirla*, Milano, Angeli, 2016.

⁴¹ A. Mariani (a cura di), *L’orientamento e la formazione degli insegnanti del futuro*, Firenze, Firenze University Press, 2014.

⁴² J. Dewey, *Esperienza e educazione*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2014.

⁴³ A. K. Sen, *La disuguaglianza*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1992.

⁴⁴ M. Nussbaum, *Giustizia sociale e dignità umana*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2002.

modernity” described by Zigmunt Bauman⁴⁵, are today subject to the principles of speed, innovation, change and conversion. At the same time, sociologists state that the new generations are “weaker” because they live in favorable situations. Not having been tempered by the difficulties of the past centuries, young people are little accustomed to patience, fatigue and attention, with the aggravating circumstance of the relative lack of meritocracy that distorts the concept of commitment in cultivating talent. This involves a great difficulty in “resisting”, “absorbing”, “reshaping”, “releasing” and most importantly developing “resilience”.

According to Michael Rutter⁴⁶ resilience can be defined as a phenomenon manifested by subjects who complete a good evolutionary path despite having experienced a form of stress that could entail serious negative consequences. It is therefore not only a matter of resistance but also of overcoming the difficulties and to found on them a new reconstruction. To interpret this “existential approach”, some traits can be identified and, in general, they are common to resilient people (self-esteem, motivation, adaptability, social support), but also some levels of analysis (individual, family, community, cultural). Nature also helps us daily with its example to understand resilience. Giacomo Leopardi in the poem *La Ginestra, o fiore del deserto* focuses on a plant, symbol of the human condition, which manages to grow even in the most disadvantaged ecosystems. As the plant “adapts” itself in order to survive, in the same way the human being must accept and face some difficult changes and continue, metaphorically, to give birth to beautiful and fragrant yellow flowers⁴⁷.

In the field of human sciences, resilience – as well as talent – presents itself as a culturally sensitive construct. Therefore, only by investigating the manifestations within a specific context will it be possible to truly understand the risk conditions and the protective factors that come into play in dealing with difficult situations. Among those at risk, it appears that recovering in a resilient direction is the most important factor, not only to overcome life’s challenges but also to achieve academic success. In a research Lou Lloyd-Zannini⁴⁸ found that a predictor of risk for gifted children (in addition to the low socio-economic family status, substance abuse, “adolescent” parenting models) is also the inadequate educational settings. Promoting resilience in a community, such as the school, implies enhancing knowledge, skills, values and culture, so that all these aspects can represent a resource in facing difficulties and in supporting the adaptation of students. The shift is therefore from a perspective in which the focus is on the shortages, on the needs and on the vulnerabilities to a vision of the creative potentials and of the resources present in the individual and in the community⁴⁹.

Following a description of the critical factors (compensating, risk, protective and vulnerability), Margie K. Kitano and Rena B. Lewis focus on studies related to intelligence, development and diversity, even of gifted subjects, compared to resilience⁵⁰.

⁴⁵ Z. Bauman, *Modernità liquida*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2007.

⁴⁶ M. Rutter, *Resilience: Some Conceptual Considerations*, «Journal of Adolescent Health», 14, 1993.

⁴⁷ G. Leopardi, *Canti*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2008.

⁴⁸ L. Lloyd-Zannini, *@Risk: Building Resilience*, «Understanding Our Gifted», 3, 2007.

⁴⁹ E. G. Arrington, M. N. Wilson, *A re-examination of risk and resilience during adolescence: Incorporating culture and diversity*, «Journal of Child and Family Studies», 2, 2000.

⁵⁰ M. K. Kitano, R. B. Lewis, *Resilience and Coping: Implications for Gifted Children and Youth at Risk*, «Roeper Review», 4, 2005.

According to the research of the two authors, it emerges that cognitive ability represents a requisite for obtaining resilient behaviors, forming a support factor, especially as regards the management and resolution of problems. However, various authors show that it is not possible to “teach” resilience through the channels of cognitive abilities, but it is certainly possible to educate ourselves to resilience⁵¹. «L'importance de l'éducation n'est pas d'enseigner la résilience, d'affirmer la lutte contre la pédagogie noire, mais de favoriser l'épanouissement de la personne, dans ses besoins affectifs, cognitifs, sociaux et idéologiques»⁵². For this purpose, it emerges that the central element for the adaptive development of the student is the meeting with a teacher able to recognize him and to believe in his potential. «Empirical evidence indicates that being involved in supportive relationships is an important element for individual well-being, associated with the activation of resilience processes, good adaptation as well as the development of cognitive, emotional, and motivational skills»⁵³.

Being part of a talented pedagogy means welcoming the needs of children and gifted students, recognizing their different resources and potential, as well as greater vulnerability and fragility. This will allow to safeguard the “different” potential and to promote that “positive deviance” typical of talent and the capacity for innovation. «Somewhere in your organization, groups of people are already doing things differently and better»⁵⁴. To create lasting change, find these areas of positive deviance and fan their flames. The adoption of this perspective refers to the concept of self-efficacy, able to counteract the effects of risk factors, or limit them. Having a good self-efficacy – as a life skill – allows you to recognize your skills, make the most of them and fully use them, beyond the difficulties and any failures *in itinere*. Another useful construct for the elaboration of “reparative” models is the empowerment, a process of recognition of personal “power” and of reliance on one’s own resources that allow to effectively overcome difficulties.

Many of the most competent and talented people in the world, are successful just because of adversities experienced in their childhood or during their lifetime. Rather than “stopping” to look at what is (or was) wrong or tragic in their lives, they are able to explore what works (or worked) and responds and re-orientates in a positive direction and with constructive attitude. Already Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche in 1878, in his *Umano, troppo umano*, had expressed in his own way this correlation between resilience and talent: «a mutilation, a crippling, a serious defect of an organ often gives another organ an extraordinary development well, having to fulfill its function and yet another. This often explains the origin of some brilliant geniuses»⁵⁵. This interdependence can be found since the origins of humanity. «Resilient people have always existed before the word itself was born. People such as Ludwig Van Beethoven, a very young orphan, Albert Einstein, dyslexic, and also literature for children is full of examples like *Tarzan*, *Cenerentola*, *Pel di Carota*»⁵⁶.

⁵¹ E. Malaguti, *Educarsi alla resilienza. Come affrontare crisi e difficoltà e migliorarsi*, Trento, Erickson, 2005.

⁵² H. Desmet, J.-P. Pourtois, *Culture et bientraitance*, Bruxelles, De Boeck, 2005, p. 168.

⁵³ R. Renati, G. Gualdi, M. A. Zanetti, *La relazione a supporto degli apprendimenti. L'insegnante e lo studente gifted*, «Psicologia dell'educazione», 2, 2013, p. 217.

⁵⁴ R. T. Pascale, J. Sternin, *Your Company's Secret Change Agents*, «Harvard Business Review», 1, 2011, p. 1.

⁵⁵ F. W. Nietzsche, *Umano, troppo umano*, Milano, Mondadori, 2008, p. 231.

⁵⁶ E. Malaguti, *Educarsi alla resilienza. Come affrontare crisi e difficoltà e migliorarsi*, cit., p. 16.

An effective exercise of “educative reflexivity” can be to know the life-stories of some “resilient talents”, through readings or watching films of biographies of people who, in different contexts but united by the same resilient approach, managed not to “waste” their talent but, instead, to use it as an example to offer to others. In the artistic sphere, Frida Kahlo (mexican painter) knew how to transform pain into color, during a life full of traumatic misfortunes and multiple debilitating accidents; in science, Stephen Hawking (cosmologist, physicist, mathematician, astrophysicist) always smiled at his genius, offering it to others, without being “blocked” by his severe disability; in sports, Beatrice Maria Adelaide Marzia Vio, known as Bebe (fencer), did not give up against a “mutilating” disease, becoming a Paralympic, European and world champion. Just to mention a few examples.

5. Support the “policies” of innovation education.

*Ognuno è un genio.
Ma se si giudica un pesce dalla sua abilità di arrampicarsi sugli alberi
lui passerà tutta la vita a credersi stupido.
Albert Einstein*

Why and how should a society dedicate special resources to the development of talent in young people in the twenty-first century? With this question Joseph S. Renzulli⁵⁷ draws attention to the objectives of a pedagogy of talents and an intentionally oriented policy, as a relevant issue in current culture. Forming talent, in the postmodern horizon, means going beyond «the losses of the current secularization and being able to catch the opportunities and challenges, the confrontation and dialogue, the tensions and the openings, the projection on the infuturation»⁵⁸. In 1994, the Recommendation n. 1248 of the Council of Europe on the education of gifted children stressed the need to develop their potential through specific tools and particular teaching conditions⁵⁹. Therefore, if we want to “cultivate” talents, a new “special” direction in education is needed, such as that of gifted education. In order for this to be effective, it must be supported by educational policies that assume a dual commitment: inserting and formalizing – with more clarity and precision – the “education for innovation” within the school programs⁶⁰, on the other hand, officially include specific thematic in-depth modules on gifted education within the framework of initial and in-service training courses for teachers. On the basis of these premises, the pedagogy of talents can offer its contribution by supporting three fundamental guidelines: an education of thought, a review of learning processes, a rethinking of method. Especially in recent decades, with the new demands “imposed” by society (instrumental dynamism, immediate and efficient solutions, fast paradigmatic changes) we know that the “school for

⁵⁷ J. S. Renzulli, *Reexamining the Role of Gifted Education and Talent Development for the 21st Century: A Four-Part Theoretical Approach*, «Gifted Child Quarterly», 3, 2012.

⁵⁸ F. Cambi, *Abitare il disincanto. Una pedagogia per il postmoderno*, Torino, UTET, 2006, p. 27.

⁵⁹ Consiglio d’Europa, «Raccomandazione relativa all’educazione dei bambini plusdotati», n. 1248, 1994.

⁶⁰ L. Shavinina, *How to Develop Innovators? Innovation Education for the Gifted*, «Gifted Education International», 1, 2013.

the citizen” and pedagogy have been called to “professionalize”, by linking the training for the future world of work and the possible employability rate. More than ever it is necessary to “recover” times and spaces to devote to the education of thought, to reflexivity, to interrogation, to doubt, to confrontation, with ourselves and with others. «Where is the human being formed? Where do you find the spaces for self-care, for the formation of a non-utilitarian soul that cannot be used by others? And the masters, what are they masters of? Do they continue to form critical spirits or trained performers?»⁶¹.

Thus together with the “space of doing”, the territory of everyday school life must also be composed of a “space to think”, especially within the curricula of secondary schools with a greater prevalence of technical guidelines (“Administration, finance and marketing”, “Chemistry, materials and biotechnology”, etc.) and professional (“Industrial and handicraft productions”, “Social-health services”, etc.) so that, whatever is the potential talent, it has the possibility to express itself and to grow. It is important for teachers to be able to activate, in daily practice, that virtuous circle between reflection, self-reflection and self-formation⁶², as a peculiar strategic device of self-development that favors the establishment of consciously resilient attitudes. To educate to think with this aim, the proposal to insert at least one hour of “philosophy” within the school curriculum of any institute (of every address and of every order and degree) might seem “risky” but it would certainly correspond to the concrete response to an effective need, of the individual and of the community.

The lack of education to think is evident in the tendency to avoid the fundamental questions, such as the ontological and ethical ones, or the epistemological and political ones, which as such absorb the questioning activity of thought without reaching any definite answer. In a culture dominated by utilitarianism, which emphasizes the formative effectiveness of instrumental rationality, for which it is essential to acquire competences that can be used directly on a practical level, it is difficult to authorize formative experiences inspired by the principle of stopping to think⁶³. Since «thought is expressed only in the harmony of oneself»⁶⁴ and that, as Bertold Brecht asserted, thinking is one of the greatest pleasures granted to the human race, the fundamental task of drawing the guidelines of «an education intended to cultivate the life of the mind with clear passion»⁶⁵. Keeping the mind open, whatever the field to which it applies, is the task of a rigorous phenomenologically oriented philosophy of education. Furthermore, as long as the training process avoids involving the minds in reflexive activities that are only apparently useless, it will deprive the subjects of self-care⁶⁶. To get more specifically into the method, in the volume *Pensare come Leonardo*, Michael J. Gelb presents the seven principles of Leonardo Da Vinci which form the basis for educating to think: curiosity (an open and investigative mentality, focused more on the questions than on the answers), the demonstration (verifying the knowledge through experience and errors),

⁶¹ F. Mattei, *Sapere pedagogico e legittimazione educativa*, Roma, Anicia, 2016, p. 200.

⁶² A. Mariani, *Elementi di filosofia dell'educazione*, Roma, Carocci, 2006.

⁶³ L. Mortari, *La materia vivente e il pensare sensibile. Per una filosofia ecologica della formazione*, Milano-Udine, Mimesis, 2017.

⁶⁴ M. Gennari, *Filosofia del pensiero*, Genova, il melangolo, 2007, p. 10.

⁶⁵ L. Mortari, *La materia vivente e il pensare sensibile. Per una filosofia ecologica della formazione*, cit., p. 155.

⁶⁶ F. Cambi, *La cura di sé come processo formativo*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2010.

the feeling (exploiting the power of all the senses and the synesthesia), the “nuance” (the willingness to embrace doubt, the paradox and the uncertainty), art/science (using the resources of both the left and right cerebral hemisphere at the same time), corporality (grace and strength, ambidexterity, health and well-being), connection (the interconnection between phenomena, systemic thinking, contemplation of totality)⁶⁷. A review of the learning processes could be dedicated to a specific analysis of those modes of learning of a contemplative, complex and connected nature. In the age of fragmentation, contemplation is a forgotten art. From Platonic philosophy we learn that contemplative thinking is generated by experiences of wonder, understood as a disposition to admire the phenomenality of life. «The moments of pure contemplation, where the sight is centered on phenomena in their happening, are characteristics of children. A healthy education must be able to safeguard this posture of existence, which is capable of a knowledge that is unreachable in other ways»⁶⁸. Plato stated that wonder was the foundation of philosophy, which was considered an open, dynamic and infinite exercise of thought. «It may seem not original, but it is still true [...] that critical intellectual attitudes and problems arise from amazement and wonder»⁶⁹ because wonder serves to «set awareness in motion».

Gifted students, on an intellectual level present «a high level of abstraction, the search for complex activities, originality in problem solving, speed in processing information, important memory skills, etc.»⁷⁰, preferring those activities that need “fast” thinking⁷¹, of an associative and intuitive kind. A sort of rhizomatic approach that «unites phenomena and concepts very distant from each other, but in a way that we can always find logical or random relationships, and in any case, always interacting with each other»⁷². To respond effectively to these particular learning modalities, we can choose the approach of enactive teaching, which is based on the relationship between teaching and other sciences of education, between affective and cognitive, between knowledge and relationships, within that complexity that allows us to identify solutions that are not hierarchical or reductive. Those are the themes outlined by Edgar Morin in his book *I sette saperi necessari all'educazione del futuro*, themes which are necessary for the education of the future and which today require a new education of the educators in the first place, turning attention to get over the current organization of knowledge, fragmented into many one-dimensional disciplinary fields that do not communicate with each other⁷³. «A framework in which transversality proves to be very useful to coordinate the typical diffraction of education sciences, to read them structurally, to transpose them into a unitary perspective»⁷⁴.

To valorize and enhance the rapid cognitive processes typical of talent, it is helpful to propose activities that call into question complex and connected thought, wonder and contemplation, analogies and metaphors, those «threads with which the mind holds

⁶⁷ M. J. Gelb, *Pensare come Leonardo*, Milano, il Saggiatore, 2014.

⁶⁸ L. Mortari, *La materia vivente e il pensare sensibile. Per una filosofia ecologica della formazione*, cit., p. 121.

⁶⁹ A. G. Gargani, *Lo stupore e il caso*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1986, p. 5.

⁷⁰ C. Daubechies, H. Desmet, J.-P. Pourtois, *De hauts potentiels qui vont bien. Ce qu'en disent les parents*, «Education, Sciences & Society», 1, 2012, p. 129.

⁷¹ D. Kahneman, *Pensieri lenti e veloci*, Milano, Mondadori, 2015.

⁷² G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *Millepiani. Capitalismo e schizofrenia*, cit., p. 33.

⁷³ E. Morin, *I sette saperi necessari all'educazione del futuro*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina, 2001.

⁷⁴ A. Mariani, *Elementi di filosofia dell'educazione*, cit., p. 66.

onto the world also when, by distraction, he has lost direct contact with things»⁷⁵. These learning processes respond to an organizational mode of knowledge that is expressed in being part of something bigger, exploiting the power of abductive thought, based on which a given formal rule recognizable between two elements can be valid for phenomena of different kinds and with different disciplinary “distances”, establishing among these a mental link that connects them⁷⁶.

And finally, a deep rethinking of the method, which includes – with full rights – the enhancement of intuition, of the unusual and of the ironic. A different approach that allows the teacher to take on the responsibility of operating that “eidetic variation”⁷⁷ necessary to change the point of view and to imagine other possible interpretations, to go “beyond the method” and to recover the heuristic value of the critical process. The intuitive part of the mind plays a fundamental role in thoughts, despite being a dimension of intelligence that is not fully recognized because it is “out of control”. We know that «the ways of intuition are not those of associationist determinism, nor those of behaviorism, but rather those outlined by psychologies and the philosophies of globality»⁷⁸.

Intuition and creativity both involve a thought characterized by fluidity, flexibility, originality and rapid elaboration of complexity. If we agree that creativity is linked to innovation, and as such «makes man a creature focused on the future»⁷⁹, there will be no possibility to work creatively with the students if we ask them only to “repeat”, methodically and uncritically, what, in an eternal present, is presented in the classroom. Innovation means creating opportunities for discoveries in the different areas of knowledge, in environments that are favorable to achieving creative work. The present postmodern society therefore requires a free, available, metacritical and therefore ironic thought, since humor «creates a rethinking and reflective detachment. It implies wisdom and autonomy»⁸⁰. And to form oneself in irony it is necessary to assume a meta-critical, retroactive, divergent and innovative *forma mentis* of points of view, of linguistic uses, of mental attitudes. It is no coincidence that the “sense of humor” was identified by Jean-Pierre Pourtois, Bruno Humbeeck and Huguette Desmet as one of the psychosocial needs among the major indicators of a resilient attitude⁸¹.

Therefore, inserting unusual and “risky” topics and methods into the school curriculum, such as relying on intuition or enhancing humor, means helping talents to express themselves better, in a resilient perspective. This means that the first teachers are experimenters and innovators and that they are not afraid to offer young talent “alternative” experiences and approaches, with the “courage”, the awareness and the professional responsibility to choose to operate an “inversion” respecting traditional contents and methods. For example, proposing highly “challenging” tasks, which go from the most difficult to the easiest, which start from the “product” to arrive at the explication of the

⁷⁵ H. Arendt, *La vita della mente*, Bologna, il Mulino, 1987, p. 196.

⁷⁶ G. Bateson, *Verso un'ecologia della mente*, Milano, Adelphi, 1995.

⁷⁷ E. Husserl, *Fenomenologia e teoria della conoscenza*, Milano, Bompiani, 2000.

⁷⁸ N. Filograsso, *L'educazione della mente. Didattica dei processi cognitivi*, Milano, Angeli, 2002, p. 89.

⁷⁹ L. S. Vygotskij, *Immaginazione e creatività nell'età infantile*, Roma, Editori Riuniti University Press, 2011, p. 13.

⁸⁰ F. Cambi, *Formarsi col riso*, «Studi sulla Formazione», 1, 2018, p. 71.

⁸¹ J.-P. Pourtois, B. Humbeeck, H. Desmet, *Les ressources de la résilience*, Paris, Presses Universitaires France, 2012.

“process”. Or by proposing activities that ask and evaluate not the answers but the questions, according to the process of formulation and reformulation typical of the Bateson metalogue, which never ends with certainties, but leave the possibility to ask many other questions, to approach the problems with a heuristic attitude, to appreciate without fear the unpredictability of divergent successions.

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