

Prejudice and Disability... Educating the *Looking* Pregiudizio e disabilità... Educare lo *sguardo*

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The article contains a theoretical and educational study about the origin and meaning of prejudice against people living a disabling condition. The author analyzes the reasons why, in the presence of deficits and/or disabilities, the action of prejudice and stereotypes inhibits the identification of those potential and human resources that are however present, but when misunderstood (sometimes even by those who are the target of prejudices and stereotypes) are unlikely to come to light. Often the action of prejudice and also the educational act contaminate stereotypes, affecting the mental representations of educators or teachers, with multiple negative effects. The article offers a series of reflections and operation cues that help you to answer the following questions:- How is it possible to re-educate the “look” of whom perceives disability through injury filters and stereotypes? How I can train those who have educational responsibilities to become aware of their own prejudices/stereotypes and to overcome them? What advantages could arise for society from overcoming prejudices towards those who live a disabling condition?

Key-words: prejudice, stereotypes, disability, education

abstract

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I. Riflessione teorica 13

Introduction

The meaning of the word “disability” has changed in recent years. In particular, the concepts underlying the word disability have evolved. For a long, time disabilities were considered birth defects, only later on they were conceptualized as something different from impairment and handicap, but anyway related to them nonetheless (ICIDH, WHO, 1980). The mutual relationship between disability and illness has only recently been broken, thanks to the establishment of a broader and more articulated perception of the word “health”, including its biopsychosocial meaning. According to the definition of the WHO, disabilities are functional problems which depend on the “*complex interaction between features of a person’s body and features of the society in which he or she lives*” (ICF, WHO, 2001). This definition goes beyond the biological concepts of health and illness and link the meaning of the word disability to the level of quality of human functions. Disabilities have much more to do with the biography of a person than with his/her biology. The reasons for disabilities, which are not imposed by the limits conveyed by specific health conditions, are to be searched in people’s lives and how they function within specific contexts, where there are obstacles/barriers or where their abilities are not fully supported. Nevertheless the word disability, in everyday language, is still a stigma-word which marks “inferiority” and “imperfection”. It describes and gives a name to something imperfect and abnormal, which nature, and not society, is responsible for. According to Pavone’s words/concepts, conveying minority and abnormality covers the entire universe of deficit-related diversity and implies the idea that these people are inferior, less capable and weaker than the average population (Pavone, 2014, p. 79). This is clearly the result of prejudices which still affect people with disabilities and, as a sort of “mental block”, prevents a new cultural shift of meaning for this life condition. This is why the philosopher Jollien (2002, p. 31) – who himself suffers from a disability – says that people do not look at what should be seen but at something else: “People perceive how strangely they move, how slowly they speak, how they limp. They do not recognize what is inside them. Spasms, rictus, lack of balance hide, without any appeal, behind a clear and cruel verdict: that’s a disability. It is difficult to modify this first impression, and it is painful to be the victim of it without any chance to explain.”

This problem amasses even more implications, if we consider it under the perspective of Education. The value of *looking* is extremely important within an educational relationship and has to be taken into consideration by every responsible tutor or teacher, especially in the framework of a special educational relationship. In this specific framework the inability of looking at “what is behind” has significant effects on the self perception of disabled persons (Klerk, 1980, p. 861).

How can we educate this *looking* to extend beyond appearances? How can we support people with educational responsibilities – and not only (many people in the public sector have a delicate role, because they have to do everyday with disabled) – to overcome prejudices towards disability? What are the possible educational and social advantages of successfully overcoming these prejudices?

These are the questions we will try to answer in the following article.



1. If we want to overcome prejudices and stereotypes, “thinking more” is not enough: we need to “think differently”

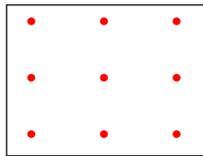
Some problems or situations, to our reasoning, appear to be overwhelming and impenetrable. In these cases, as the philosopher Ricoeur (1993, p. 7) says, thinking more is not enough, we need to *think differently*. This implies a change of strategy which consists of altering the way and the shape of our thinking. It does not affect – at least at the beginning – the content of our thinking but only the *ways our mind rests in its normal state* before the object of our own thinking. We need to learn to “think differently” in order to overcome the prejudices and stereotypes which prevent our *looking* to lay on people’s dignity beyond their deficit. The first step in pursuing this goal consists in revealing to the mind what is hidden behind prejudices and stereotypes and how thinking with prejudices and simplifications driven by stereotypes constrain our freedom of thought.

Since every prejudice is the result of a *prae-iudicium* (what comes before prejudice), we need to reveal its preconceived structure in order to free our mind from prejudice. This is possible by shifting the “focus” of our attention from the content of the prejudice to the logic through which the prejudice *distorts the meaning* of the object we are thinking of. This is the only way we can have access to the *framework of meaning* prior to judgement, which usually escapes, by its own nature, from the control of a thinking person, unless he/she operates a *epoché* (the suspension of any judgement). This is no easy task and the results are nothing but obvious since *frameworks of meaning*, from which prejudices arise, seem to be deeply rooted (Lascioli, 2011, p. 24). In the same way, a thinking person might find it very hard to give up simplifications driven by stereotypes. Stereotypes creep into our mind by offering images of reality or people which are oversimplified (Allport, 1954) and shared, in essential features, by large numbers of people (Stallybrass, 1977, p. 601). The resulting solid cognitive structure is hardly criticizable and can establish itself silently (English, 1958, p. 523).

Prejudices and stereotypes function together (Mazzara, 1997). The relationship between prejudice and stereotype resembles the interaction between background and picture in perceptual phenomena. A psychological analysis of visual perception has brought to light that our sensory perception works on the basis of fixing perceptive schemes which remain unaware unless a careful analysis brings them explicitly to the surface. One of the most bizarre laws of visual perception rules the interaction between background and image. According to this law, *it is impossible to perceive background and picture simultaneously and through a unique perceiving stimulus*. The *Gestalt* psychology has analyzed the behaviour of numerous subjects looking at images which assume different meanings on the basis of what is perceived as background and image. A classical example is the white calyx with two black profiles. We can embrace the entire image with our *looking* but we are not able to perceive both parts as image and background at the same time. This is due to on the fact that the border of the pictures can only have a single unilateral function, which is delimiting a single visual field belonging to what has been perceived as picture; the space around the

2. How prejudices and stereotypes can limit the *looking*

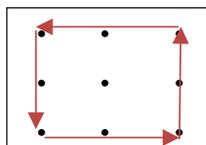
Here we show the famous “query of nine dots” provided by the *Gestalt* school of psychology. Let’s take a look at picture 1.



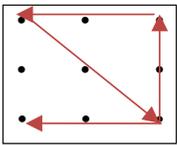
Picture 1

Now, try to find the solution to the following query: “How can you join all nine dots with only four straight lines? You should never raise your pencil from the piece of paper by drawing the four lines.” (a tip: don’t continue reading this article before you’ve tried at least once).

The most common (incorrect) attempts are the following (see picture 2.1 and 2.2):



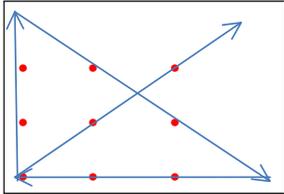
Picture 2.1



Picture 2.2

Let's have a look at what you've done: Was your solution similar to one of the above Pictures (2.1 or 2.2)? Why? With your method of looking at the query, what didn't work? First, you should have realized that both attempts shown are wrong. In both of them, one of the nine dots was left out but we were asked to join *all* of them.

The query of "the nine dots and four straight lines" reveals a relevant mental attitude useful to understanding how prejudice works. It will make sense once the solution is revealed (see solution in picture n.3).



Picture 3. SOLUTION

If we tried to solve the query and gave solutions like picture 2.1 and 2.2 (usually the majority of people) we feel disoriented when we see the actual solution (picture 3). At first we do not understand and find the given solution unusual, but then, if we look closer and analyze better, we understand everything: to solve the query we need to join the dots with straight lines which "go beyond" the imaginary borders of the "square", inside which the previous "solutions" were thought (see picture 2.1 and 2.2). We need to go beyond the false and untrue perception that the "nine dots" form a closed square (which is actually only in our head) in order to elaborate the right solution. What prevents us from having this intuition is that, even if we are given all nine dots on a clean piece of paper (sensorial stimulus), we actually perceive (perceptual elaboration) a closed figure (a square). We search (in vain) for the solution within the borders of this (imaginary) "square" and end up not being able to reach the goal of joining all nine dots with four straight lines. Why do we get stuck within the imaginary square? It's because, before judging through reasoning, our perceptual system generates a prior judgement which prevents our *looking* from catching the real problem as it actually is. The nine dots are viewed beforehand (prior judgement) as a very simplified image (stereotype) which acts as a *seal* against ability of looking through. If we do not break this *seal*, our looking cannot go beyond to find the solution. There are many half-solutions (see picture 2.1 and 2.2) which are sealed by this same prejudice. The real solution requires a conscious undermining of

this block. This is the beginning of what Ricoeur calls “thinking differently” but in order to get there we need to be aware that we are doing something wrong (I am making a mistake, I can’t find the solution, a dot is always missing). We need to see the mistake as a sign that something is blocking our *looking* (there is something in the way of my search for the solution, which does not work; my strategy does not work because there is something limiting my *looking*). We need to begin giving a name to this block (what do solution 2.1 and 2.2 tell me about my mistakes? What can I learn from my mistakes?) and we need to discover that there is no reason to continue to act and think in only one certain direction (Why don’t I look beyond? For example, longer lines, broader spaces, etc). At this point, our reasoning realizes that a prejudice has established some limits, and that our *looking* was working within a space, (forced for no reason by our own mind), and that this limit actually has no reason for existing. Only when the prejudice is revealed can it become the object of analysis and self-criticism (why do I need to think there is a square when I see nine dots?). What was once the background (prejudice) determining the image (stereotype), becomes removed and disappears under the light of reasoning, allowing the “lateral thinking”, which is not spoiled by any “prior”, to come to the surface.

Prejudices are like (cultural and symbolic) “filters” which work like the laws of visual perception and create cognitive “internal organization” (stereotypes). A stereotype is like a *force field* that influences and limits the *looking* of our reasoning. According to Tentori (1996, p. 68), prejudices and stereotypes simplify...

“...le visioni del mondo riducendole ad un dualismo “consueto/consuetudinario” come equivalente di normale, giusto, valido, contrapposto a “diverso” come equivalente d’inquietante, rischioso, ingiusto, cattivo. E poiché la normalità è quella dei nostri modi di vita, della nostra cultura, della cultura del nostro gruppo o della nostra società, questa contrapposizione s’incarna nell’opposizione tra “noi” e gli “altri”, tra noi i “normali” e gli altri “gli anormali”, se non seguono le nostre regole di vita.¹”

The individual or collective phantom illusion of certainty, truth and justice sneaks into our mind through the prejudice. This becomes particularly evident by analysing some cultural *clichés*. Let’s analyse, for example, this interesting puzzle.

A father and son are travelling by car. Suddenly they have a bad accident. The ambulance comes and brings them to the hospital. The son is in very bad shape and the doctors say he needs surgery. They bring him to the operating room and immediately call the surgeon. The surgeon arrives, enters the room, is about to start the operation but suddenly stops and

1 My translation: “the way we see our world confining everything into the dualism “usual/customary” as a synonym for normal, right and valid on one side, and “different” as a synonym for worrying, risky, unjust and mean on the opposite side. Since normality is the way we live our life, our culture, the culture of our group and the culture of our society, this contrast turns into an opposition between “we” and “other people”, between us (“normal” people) and the other people (“abnormal”), since they do not match our life’s rules.”



says: "I cannot do the surgery. He is my son!". The question is: - "Who is the surgeon?"².

When we hear this story for the first time we might get confused by the final question. We are puzzled by something completely unexpected (Can a surgeon behave like this? Who is this surgeon? Who was the person driving the car then?). That's the reason we don't find the correct answer immediately. The solution is before our very eyes however. The correct answer is very simple: the surgeon is his mother. The solution, however, eludes the majority of people. Usually we think in that way: "How is it possible that a surgeon says that the boy is his son, if the boy's father was in the car with him?" It seems logical to think, at first, that the surgeon is a man. So the solution, even if it is actually obvious, becomes inconceivable. The question is: why don't we think straight away that the surgeon is his mother, even if this answer is within everyone's reach? Who doesn't know that there are also female doctors and surgeons?

The two examples (the "square with nine dots" and "the surgeon") show that our mind is able to find impairments to "healthy" thinking when it is conditioned by something which resembles the process activating prejudices and stereotypes.

3. A look at the roots of prejudices towards people with disabilities

According to Murphy (1990, p. VI-VII), "the avoidances and even outright hostility so often manifested toward them by the non-disabled are not the natural products of their own physical deficits but, rather, expressions of deficiencies of perspectives and character, of those who behave so". But where does this prejudice towards people who live with a condition of disability come from? What causes this deficit (which Murphy refers to) in the way that we look at things? In order to answer these questions we need to analyse the logical structure of prejudices towards people with disabilities: *Diversity* - which is a fundamental characteristic of multiplicity (We are all different from each other!) - is essentially viewed as an exclusive prerogative of disabled people in order to degrade their humanity. The stereotype, which is the *cognitive core* of prejudice, is responsible for transforming and funnelling partial information and false beliefs about people who are limited by deficiencies, into coherent and usually stable images giving birth eventually to a real, solid and indisputable process of degradation and social exclusion.

Understanding the inner illogicality of prejudices towards disability is very useful in order to answer the question about the origins of these same prejudices. With this in mind, it is useful to digress a little about the Aristotelian logic, so here are essential useful aspects: if a set is built by equivalent elements, specifying is impossible (*diversity of species*); the only possible opera-

2 Puzzle taken from internet. Look at: www.pensieriparole.it › Indovinelli ›

tion on a set of equivalent elements is “division” (diversity *within* species). Given that, if the set of *human being* contains the subsets *able* and *disable*, it is not a specification but a division (because able and disabled people are always equivalent elements and represent diversity within the same species). Since the set of *human being* contains equivalent elements, any kind of differentiation is illogical. According to this, it seems also illogical (that is without rationale) to consider disabled people as a sort of species within the set of *human being* because it would mean to assume implicitly that there is a diversity of species and not a diversity *within* the species between able and disabled. If we assumed that disability is a non-accidental qualitative and substantial variety within the human set, we would operate an ontological reduction on the dignity of people with disability.

Under a logical point of view, overcoming prejudices towards disabilities implies re-evaluating diversity as a positive peculiarity. This means - according to Deleuze (1997) - trying to understand how extremely important it is to approach diversities not as something which set differences amongst similar elements, but as a condition arising from the uniqueness of life and people. Giving its real value back to the meaning of diversity means not looking at diversity as a “euphemism for defect, abnormality, or a problem to be worked out through technical or assimilationist education policies. Diversity is a social fact” (Armstrong, 2000, p. 34).

All prejudices generally share a common problem which is also rooted in prejudices towards people with disabilities: the psychological, cultural and symbolic denial of diversity as value and social fact. We therefore need to ask ourselves the following question: what is the difference between prejudice towards people with disabilities and other forms of prejudice?

4. The supposed ontological origin of prejudice towards people with disabilities

The answer to this question can be found by wondering whether this prejudice has the same origins as other prejudices which are also firmly-rooted in the history of human beings, like prejudices towards races and gender. It is well known that the roots of these prejudices draw on an assumed division between “superior” and “inferior” races of human beings (Cox, 1997). All racial theories are based on the supposed biological superiority of one human group over another. They then turn into real state doctrines aimed at justifying social inequalities and imbalances in the administration of power amongst groups (Rose, 1951). The myth of superiority of one race or of biological differences is broadly diffused amongst cultures (Fanon, 1952) and winds up being the core on which prejudices generating mutual denial are being built (Pettigrew, 1964). Biological differences become impassable borders amongst people: on one side there are people with what are supposed to be superior characteristics, who feel safe because they are not like the others; on the other side there are people with what are assumed to be inferior biological traits, who are forced to hold subordinate roles. The more these opposing mechanisms are perceived as immutable – and therefore founded on biological reasons – the more they are



useful for keeping the *status quo* of the group stable. Let's think about the case of Nazism for example. The birth and development of Nazism (Todorov, 1992; Bauman, 1992) went along with the cultural, political and legislative process which brought racial prejudices to the establishment. These were nourished by party propaganda as well as by the pseudo-scientific arguments supporting the existence of an Aryan race. As soon as the German people "ensured" their biological superiority by identifying the criteria with which to discriminate people who did not have the fortune of belonging to the *superior race*, the ethnic cleansing took place. At this point, on one hand it was possible to identify who did not belong to the superior race and therefore label them as "diverse". On the other hand, people "on the right side" felt reassured and calm. Through the assumption that the "the diverse" is also biologically different, the fear of the possibility of becoming "like the other" vanishes, and prejudices help us to remove the fear of what is "diverse". The psyche of the individual and of the community of individuals satisfies the need of securing and guarantying the conservation of its own species and own social group.

Prejudices towards people with disabilities share many traits with racial and gender prejudices but have some distinctive features and properties which lead us to think of a different origin. While the "fear of diverse" plays an important role, the "need of securing the species" does not apply in the interrelation between able and disabled people. What is "other than oneself" – whose difference is underlined by this prejudice – is neither a danger nor a threat for people pointing out the diversity. It is unthinkable, for example, that the prejudice towards people with disabilities aims at securing a system of privileges or social differences like the evident case of racial or gender prejudices. People rejected because of their disabilities are not perceived as competitors by those who have the prejudice due to their innate frailty and weakness. This is not the case for racial and gender prejudices which are, on the other hand, a constitutive part of the cultural and ideological process through which the outcast "diverse" has to be perceived as weak to the eyes of stronger people, in order to underpin the actual or developing power system. In this case we have a mutual process: denial and aggressive behaviours which racial and gender prejudices are able to activate, are usually mutual.

If we analyse the last purpose of prejudices towards disability we discover another difference but also a paradox. This prejudice aims at defending the frailty and weakness of those who do not have a disability. The drama of the frailty of human nature, which emerges excessively through those who have a disability, scares and causes distress to so called "healthy ones" because the sight of a disability tends to let us see a condition of all human beings which can generate terror and anxiety. Since the origin of this fear is not to be looked for in aggressive behaviours of excluded people – who are, on the contrary, usually annihilated by their own drama – but in the impact of their limits of people who look at them, prejudice functions reducing the open-mindedness of people. The impact would otherwise be very shocking, like the feeling of not being able to defend oneself from this diversity. According to Gardou (2006, p.178), here lies "la nostra irrefrenabile angoscia di fronte al prossimo troppo diverso che sembra minacciare la nostra identità, e si perpetua il nostro bisogno di fare riferimento a un

territorio fisico, immaginario e psichico fortemente delimitato, in cui regni la somiglianza.³”

That’s probably the most substantial difference between this prejudice and any other prejudices: the diversity of people with disability looks dangerous because it cannot be relegated to the safe ground of biological differences; on the contrary, it is perceived as an inner threat to our own biology because limits and frailty are innate elements of every human being. The strong impact of diversity is devastating because it’s perceived as a threat of the self and therefore as inalienable to others. Deficit, deformity, amputations, syndromes, disturbances and insanity can occur in every human being in different ways - for genetic or innate reasons, through illness or traumatic events. No biology (even the strongest) is immune. The origin of prejudice towards people with disabilities can even threaten the logic on which other prejudices are based, invalidating their reasons completely. We said before that the purpose of racial and gender prejudices is to affirm biological superiority by any means, and relegate others in the safe ground of “what is totally different from ourselves” in order to help people having the prejudice, to feel safe. The origin of prejudice towards disabled people, on the contrary, reveals that this process is useless and demonstrates that it is not possible to relegate diversity inside a separate biology: A weak person is someone that does not recognize his/her own limits and therefore prefers to imagine that other people are weak. We have revealed in this way the origin of prejudice towards people with disabilities, that is the need of hiding to those who have the prejudice, the fact that the myth of omnipotence and the consequent effort of deleting from the own consciousness the existence of diversity and the awareness of having limits are inconsistent processes of our mind. Perhaps this is the reason why Nazism resulted in the elimination of disabled people within the German population (which, like every other people and nation, experienced the limit of the human condition) even before affirming its racial ideology.

This particular feature of prejudice towards people with disabilities causes forces us into thinking an ontological origin because the limit is part of the being and essential to it, like the conscious, which is also made of limits. The prejudice aims at anaesthetizing the awareness of our limits in order to spare us the difficult task of finding some sense in it. Prejudices towards disability act within our conscious generating the illusion of being able to shift its limits outside of it, that is, on the other person – who is perceived as limited because they’re “different” by nature. Our own innate frailty is therefore hidden to our awareness. Overcoming prejudice involves an act of courage as well as a great awareness. This becomes even more difficult if the sense of omnipresence is deeply rooted, because it could turn into deconstructing the individual and, even more, the society.

3 My translation: our unbreakable anxiety towards our different neighbour, who seems to threaten our identity. We therefore reveal even more of our need to have a physical, imaginary, psychic and well defined territory, where similarity rules.



5. Different from whom? When prejudices and stereotypes creep into educational relationships

We have verified that prejudices and stereotypes turn the word “disability” into a concept used to include, in a defined circle, a “rejection” of humanity: “different people”. Prejudices and stereotypes, when they contribute to isolating people and preventing intelligent solutions to their problems, reinforce the idea of assistentialism, false compassion and dependency, which creates an obstacle to the building of a real culture of inclusion. We need to understand, says Larocca (1999, p. 17), that “la vergogna, il risentimento, la pietà, la compassione, non sono affatto criteri cognitivi, ma già costrutti mentali intrisi di componenti affettive ... Imbarazzo e disgusto coprono la paura di riconoscersi frammento di fronte al frammento e inizia così, in modo sottile, l’atteggiamento deprezzante e di rifiuto⁴”. Prejudices and stereotypes, in some cases, can arise in people who must constantly deal with disabled people (for example at work), and can spoil their inner attitude. The inner attitude is “non sono azioni precise [...] ma sono come l’al-di-qua dell’azione e costituiscono l’humus generativo che prepara l’azione” (Mortari, 2015, p. 115-116)⁵. When an *inner attitude* is spoiled by prejudice, even behaviours tend to be inadequate for an educational relationship, especially when the educator’s trust, hope and optimism (with respect to the possibility of recovery and development for the disabled student) are missing because of the prejudice. In an educational relationship, the intention of the educator and, in particular, his/her determination in pursuing a positive development for the student is fundamental. As proven by Rosenthal (1999), the intentional processes on the basis of educational action act as self-realizing prophecies. When the intentions and the looking of those who are supposed to educate students with disabilities – in particular minors or people with intellectual disabilities or particular fragile conditions – are limited by prejudices, the effects/results are often damaging. In these cases the risk that educators develop forms of induced dependency or impotency because of the disadvantages related to the condition of disability is very high.

Different forms of prejudices can affect the relationship between educator and students with disabilities. The following are descriptions of the most common (Lascioli, 2011, pp. 33-36):

- *The prejudice of the “almost man”*. This definition refers to the work of Victor Hugo and his character Quasimodo, a man who was banned by the author to live in a defined place, separate from the common people because of his

4 My translation: “shame, resentment, pity and compassion are not cognitive criteria but mental attitudes already filled with feelings. Embarrassment and disguise hide our fear of recognizing that we are fragments in front of other fragments. Here begins the depreciating and denying attitude.”

5 My translation: “not a specific action [...] but rather something beforehand which constitutes the fertile soil for the action.”

deformed body. He watched the “normal” life of other people from the steeples of the cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris, but he could not take part in it because he was not a man like the others. Hugo gave his human essence a label, *Quasimodo* (quasi = almost), which basically describes what he is. The victims of this kind of prejudice tend to face disabled people with an inner attitude which unconsciously communicates to them their unchangeable status of inferiority and helplessness.

- *The prejudice of the eternal child.* It is not easy to see the same growth and development potential between students with disabilities and their colleagues of the same age. This is the reason we feel justified when we stop (or don’t even begin) thinking of them as growing people, or people who will eventually become adults. The inner attitude of people (parents or others) who have an educational role, results from their perception of the disabled as an immutable person, who is only apparently developing and has no chance of becoming an adult. In this way we do not realize that every person, even if disabled, needs to be *thought of* as an adult in order to grow and to become older. Adulthood has to be trained since childhood because it is a way of being and a way of doing, which depends on the group of adults we are confronting and living with. For this reason, adulthood remains an unreachable goal for people who are not thought of as an adult.
- *The prejudice of the special identity.* The appearance, difficulties and problems of the people with disabilities can cause those who take care of them to think that they are “special human beings”. In other words, human beings who belong to a different and special category. This is the reason why disabled people are sometimes viewed as if they are an ethnic group which needs to be protected and defended. The prejudice of special identity prevents the educator from understanding the continuum between his/her humanity and the humanity of the disabled person. If, within an educational relationship, the inner attitude of the educator is spoiled by this prejudice, the disabled person is not considered for his/her own normality, but only as a “special human being.” It is not always an advantage to be considered a *special* person. On the contrary! The stigma of “speciality” is something for which we risk being seen and perceived as “diverse”, even if the need for being perceived and viewed as others (that is, normally) is very big. The label of “special person”, in these cases, does not simplify interpersonal relationships. On the contrary, it ends up pushing away, isolating, marginalizing, and even rejecting people who have been – willingly or not – labelled as such⁶.
- *The egalitarian prejudice.* We are not all equal, and it is absolutely not true that disabled people are equal to non-disabled people. What is real is that we are all different and that a disabled person has needs that – if ignored or

6 According to the *Labelling Theory* (Becker, 1963), by labelling a person we trigger a process, which is able to transform the person and influence his/her own perception. A negative connoted label can have very negative consequences for the labelled person. In these cases mistrust and stigmatization arise inducing the labelled person to revise his/her own perception, isolate and feel socially excluded.



minimized – can lead to a violation of the dignity and rights of those people who are forced to live with some limitations that other people do not have. The inner attitude of people who look at the disabled without embracing and internalizing their limits can hardly be helpful. Embracing the limits of others also means embracing our own personal limits. Looking at the limits of the person in front of us becomes harder every time we spot our own limits through theirs. We can overcome shared difficulties by embracing and internalizing the shared frailty characterized by every human being. Being aware of said limits is useful in identifying the features of our own limits, as well as those of others. Only in this way is it possible to be competent and efficient, because all limits are not identical and some of them require the analysis of complex solutions to be managed in the right way. More damaging in these cases, is the incapacity to distinguish them.

- *The prejudice of the syndrome.* Under a psychological point of view, labelling a problem or a person whose presence and traits are difficult to understand confers a sense of security. Identifying and trapping diversity into a category gives us the impression of better understanding what is in front of us. However, things are different from what they appear. The direct experience of many teachers and educators demonstrates that you can find the same character, personality and life story amongst people who have the same syndrome or impairment like you can amongst those who do not. Assuming that by knowing the features of a certain syndrome or a certain impairment you also know the features of the person affected by said syndrome or impairment is also a prejudice.

6. Overcoming the logic of rejection to free the looking and favour inclusion

Balthasar (1990, p. XXIII) writes that “ogni frammento di un pezzo di ceramica suggerisce la totalità del vaso, ogni torso di marmo è visto nella luce dell’intera statua.”⁷ People sometimes look like fragments too: illness, deficits and malformations have the power of drastically modifying life and reducing and changing forms, expressions and possibilities. However, it does not mean that life loses its value as a *whole*. Even if life becomes a fragment, the value and dignity of the fragmented person are always *offered* and *received* as a whole unit. If a lonely potsherd houses in itself the whole it belongs to, so a *fragment* of life shields the entire value and dignity of the human being as such. Inside every fragment of humanity, even if it is even more fragmented by illness or deficit, we find the splendour of life and of people, which can and must become the identity. Larocca (1999, p. 55) observes that “l’ipotesi, la nuova terra promessa, da perseguire è quella dell’integrazione, che significa insieme attenzione agli aspetti affettivo-

7 My translation: every potsherd suggests the totality of a pottery vase, every marble torso is perceived as a part of an entire statue.

emotivi di questi soggetti e attenzione a non considerarli scarti d'umanità, bensì frammenti né più né meno qual siamo tutti⁸⁷. The risk of feeling like a fragment is not a problem affecting only disabled people, but one which is affecting everyone: there is always a part of us that risks being rejected and needs to be recovered for the sake of a greater authenticity.

Acting to favour the inclusion of people who are considered “a waste” is the best way to promote inclusion of every *fragment of humanity*. Freeing the *looking* means decrying every symbolic system (the culture of rejection) which *rejects* and therefore disintegrates and fragments everything that appears weak, fragile, limited and for such reasons, useless to humanity. Prejudice demonstrates being useful only for those cultures that hide their real nature from people. That is a nature *made of limits*. Since the people with disabilities show more explicitly that they are made of limits (because they cannot hide their frailty), their life is rejected and stigmatized. The logic beyond *the culture of rejection* transforms disability into a dump of *special garbage* full of heavy and unsustainable limits which threatens the apparent “normality” of abled people. For this reason, the lives of people with disabilities are considered special, even when the desire to be normal is very strong. When we speak about social inclusion, we need to be careful not to fall into this cultural “trap.” The only authentic social inclusion of people who have disabilities, is not a legal or social fight which aims at recognizing their being special, but a cultural fight through the individual and collective awareness that the limit - and disability with it - is a part of everyone's life and, as such, it cannot be rejected. We need social changes in order to build a society which guarantees a quality of life to those people who have to live with biological, social or personal limits. Life is always life, and as such, it is always worth living, even when there are some limits. Facing disability or being individually or socially responsible for these problems are privileged ways to reach this goal.

7. Recovering the value of limits in Education

Inclusion is a word that needs to receive a new definition as well as a broader meaning. According to Larocca (1999, p. 16),

“fenomenicamente, s'è detto, il frammento è uno scarto, un resto, uno scampolo da svendere al miglior offerente nella logica mercantile. Ma civiltà e cultura agiscono sul piano del simbolico e l'equivalenza operante fra handicap e fenomeno frammento è un'equivalenza diabolica. Se *simbolizzare* è un gettare insieme, il *dia-bolizzare* è un gettare lontano, via, un *dis-perdere*. Ma cosa perdono la cultura e la civiltà disinteressandosi dell'handicap, del disabile, del “frammento d'umanità”? E cosa si guadagnerebbe invece nel *sim-bolizzare* e *meta-bolizzare*, digerire, far propri questi frammenti?”

- 8 My translation: the hypothesis (the land of promise) we need to pursue is integration, which means caring about the emotions and feelings of these people, treating them as the same fragments we all are, and not as a waste of human life.



Metabolizing would be possible only after freeing our minds from the trammels of prejudice. Inclusion would therefore mean providing ourselves the access to the need for ulteriority, which everyone has but is particularly strong in people who are partially or totally affected by limits. People affected by disabilities help us to see the prospective of a *new humanity* beyond the limit. We find this same perspective also in the Bible (Mt. 21, 42-43) where “a stone rejected by builders becomes a “cornerstone”. The ethical value of this assessment forces us to abandon any “logic of rejection” and invite us to open our minds to a new prospective: there is a value in rejection which must absolutely be recovered because it contains still unexploited potentials of progress and development for all of humanity.

This is why we need to recover the value of limit for Education. The word “limit” has a broad, semantic field: border, barrier, last resort, extreme line and so on. Let’s think about the difference between limiting (from Latin *limitarem*) and eliminating (from Latin *liminarem*). We have to do with different but complementary ideas. On one side, *Limes*, which in Latin means “border line” and - through metonymy - “fortified front line” (for example the Roman *Limes* was a big fortification controlled by soldiers); on the other side, *Limen*, which means threshold (doorstep), entrance. Education must re-find the rich semantic value of the word “limit” by including the following meanings: limit as “border” (identity border, something that defines, that helps us – even by limiting – to understand ourselves and that confers us – even by blocking – a specific form), limit as “threshold” (as a possible access to what is beyond, but also as a threshold of respect) and limit as “entrance” (as a way of meeting what we find on and inside the limit). Overcoming prejudice towards disability means regaining the value of limit as constitutive and not as reducing part of the human essence. In order to succeed, we need to learn to “think differently”, first about ourselves and our own limits, then to find the way we all have to change and improve (through and despite our limits).

Thinking about the value of limit in disability opens our minds to some considerations:

1. The value of the *visibility of limit*. Many people don’t even look at disabled people. However, being able to look at them is the first step to meeting the human limit and beginning to “think more”!
2. The value of a *question* that requires intelligent answers. When we are able to look at the limits of human beings, new questions about us and others arise. This could be a good beginning: “What are an autistic, an intellectually disabled person and a paralytic in a wheelchair doing here with us?”, “How can their life have a meaning?”, and so on.
3. The value of a “different” *meeting* from a usual one. Once we have overcome previous levels, we might want to meet disabled people more deeply. This is possible in different ways, for example by looking instead of seeing, by waving, and then again by a first contact, a conversation and a friendship.
4. The value of *experimenting* a “different” way of living. There are people who have succeeded in overcoming the embarrassment of “seeing”, looking, waving back and starting a conversation with a disabled person and they are now making efforts in order to live their own limits and the limits of others consciously. Meeting our (or other people’s) limits can change our lives and open

our minds (this is the biggest value of school and social integration for people affected by disabilities). Young people especially can perceive this meeting as an opportunity to reflect on the importance of “living authentically.” From these limits (when this becomes an object of thought and reflexion, and therefore metabolization) we can find new meaning in our lives. This would be particularly helpful for young people who have to face the frustration which derives from the efforts they make to correspond to the imposed models of beauty and intellectual efficiency. Since they lack resources to face this imposition and frustration, they get tired, lose their self-esteem, strive to live relationships in an authentic way and are afraid of the future. By caring about people with limits, young people can learn to care about themselves in a deeper and authentic way.

On another level, there is the relationship between disabled students and their teachers, in other words between disability and school education. Teachers might live, like Kierkegaard says, inside an “aesthetic self”, which is the idea that their own culture is the place where they can feel beautiful, successful and intelligent. By getting in touch with the problem of limits, we can escape, decide to stay, understand and open our own mental limits and identify “the added value” of this presence. When we meet our own (or other people’s) limit, even culture fails to be a mere aesthetic production. Culture becomes a service and a sacrifice, which means that we feel the duty of trying to find possible solutions to avoid the hegemony of the logic of rejection. This implies a big step forward in the way we understand both the knowledge and our own profession. The presence of a disabled person in schools can really become an opportunity for teachers - and for education in general - to start to “think more” and to “think differently”. This process can change the way in which lessons are arranged the way human relationships are perceived, how much culture is valued and what education actually means!

8. To conclude: *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*⁹

In the last forty / fifty years, a remarkable progress has been achieved both in respect and recognition of the rights of persons with disabilities (see, for example, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006) may lead to the conclusion that also the problem of prejudice against them has now faded away, at least in the clear and unbearable forms. However, the prejudice, at least in its more subtle forms, but no less insidious, not only it has remained but it is resurfacing in the increasingly widespread belief that those with disabilities are in some ways inferior to others (Deal, 2007, pp. 93-107). Also on the research field there is still much to do. Despite the large number of studies

9 “I am a human being and I think that nothing that belongs to human beings can be foreign to me” Publio Terenzio Afro, *Heautontimorùmenos (Il punitore di se stesso)*, I,1, 25, 165 a.C.



regarding disabilities, the problem is still not completely solved and in the same ways the real causes that knocks down prejudices (Paluck e Green, 2009, pp. 339-267), including those against people with disabilities. From an educational point of view, the value of inclusion comes out today with strength, especially in schools of all levels, because it was understood that only by the ability to live among people and respect the differences we can have a future civilization. And what, more than anything else, may prevent the realization of this project are precisely the limits of thought (Ainscow, 2005, pp. 109-124). All this represents a great challenge for future.

The ability to materially, psychologically and spiritually recover and reintegrate “the rejected” represents an evolutionary perspective for society, especially if the *object* whose rejection is prevented is a human being. By learning to care about rejected people - especially when they are weak - we earn for ourselves (and for society) a consistent value because we strengthen and expand the value and the meaning of human existence. A change in this direction means increasing the social capital of an entire population. Overcoming prejudice about disability means becoming personally and socially aware that nothing which is human can become an object of the human being’s rejection: *Homines sumus, humani nihil a nobis alienum putamus!*

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