

## Pedagogical consultants for disability and marginalization

### *Consulenti pedagogici per la disabilità e la marginalità*

**Luigi d'Alonzo**

Ordinario di Didattica e Pedagogia Speciale / Università Cattolica di Milano

abstract

*Practitioners who approach the disabled/problematic individual with trained awareness understand that their interventions must be pedagogically based and founded on the highest expertise and best practices. They carry a heavy burden of responsibility because the individuals involved are important and working for their benefit means being aware of the decisive role they play in their lives, in the knowledge that the initiatives rolled out on the ground are either of a high quality or detrimental.*

**Keywords:** *pedagogical consultants, responsibility, competence*

Coloro che si avvicinano consapevolmente alla persona problematica si rendono immediatamente conto della necessità che il loro intervento sia fondato pedagogicamente e ancorato al più alto livello di conoscenze e soluzioni sperimentate e sicure. Grande è la responsabilità di chi si occupa di pedagogia speciale, perché in essa sono importanti le persone ed operare per il bene di soggetti con problemi significa avere coscienza che si è determinanti per la loro vita, nella consapevolezza che l'intervento che si mette in campo o è di qualità o è deleterio.

**Parole chiave:** consulenti pedagogici, responsabilità, competenza

# Pedagogical consultants for disability and marginalization

---

## Introduction

In advanced Western countries and in culturally developed democratic societies, educational attention to the most helpless and the most problematic individuals is both a moral and an institutional duty. People with personal difficulties – such as individuals with a disability or those who cannot adapt to the norms of civil society due to exogenous conditions – need the help of others to cope in a dignified manner with a life that is complicated for everyone, but especially for those less well equipped and protected.

Society today demands that individuals be more highly educated: schooling is required for many years, training periods have expanded, numerous skills are needed to enter the workplace and continuous education has become indispensable for furthering one's career. The marvellous but extremely difficult world we live in also demands special education, where the adjective *special* indicates an action specifically aimed at the individual's well-being. This educational intervention is neither ordinary nor commonplace, but involves a high degree of professional or 'special' competence, since it is unique, highly specific in terms of intensity and determination, and can understand, interpret and recommend appropriate solutions for individual needs.

## 1. Areas of intervention in special pedagogical counselling

The phenomenology of special educational interventions obliges us to focus on education as a process that takes place at a certain time in an individual's life: it involves him intensely, together with one or more educators who are often – but not always – aware of their role and importance in influencing his development. In any case, special education takes place in precise areas of life that are only apparently unrelated to one another, such as in the family, at school and in prescriptive, participatory, cultural, and religious contexts.

Working in these areas requires, firstly, an understanding of their characteristics and peculiarities and of the value they assume whilst bearing in mind that “the main task of education is primarily to form man, or rather to guide the dynamic development by which he shapes himself into a man” (Maritain, 1976, p. 14).

The family context is paramount. It is widely recognized that the very concept of ‘family’ is increasingly under strain in our complex society, with an increase in new relationship groupings, fewer marriages and a steady rise in cohabitation, separations, and divorces. However, the family is still the most important educational arena for personal growth: its contribution to an individual’s fully rounded development is indisputable and indispensable, as are its duties, which should be encouraged.

The proper educational and affective impact of the family environment is always crucial even when the child, growing physically and improving his motor skills, feels energetic and begins to interact intentionally with the environment, manipulating objects, engaging with toys and occupying the available space. In this case, the child’s need for autonomy must be accompanied by the educational action of attentive and non-invasive family members who can contain his thirst for exploration and his will to succeed as well as understand, foster and direct his legitimate aspirations. Educational action translates into indispensable educational wisdom, because if at this stage “he is not gradually led towards autonomy, the child will turn his need for discrimination and manipulation onto himself” (Erikson, 1982, p. 235). This risk also exists for disabled children who are over-protected by parents: to avoid problems, the child’s legitimate aspirations are curbed, thereby precluding not only the achievement and correct exploration of space but also the inner experiences that accompany this ‘autonomous’ act. Clearly, such frustration in a child with problems can have numerous consequences, including a lack of stimulus towards autonomous action, which may be missing if the child’s disability is particularly marked. A spirit of initiative is attained through experiences of freedom and comes about when spontaneous action is integrated with the ability to plan, making the individual independent and able to manage his emotions. As a child grows physically, he becomes increasingly aware that the world is at his disposal.

If a disabled child lacks relationship with peers – whether denied or unsolicited – he is deprived of the fundamental emotional and affective experiences that arise in the company of others. It is therefore crucial that parents provide opportunities for social interaction.

The next period in a child’s life begins with primary school. The sense of industriousness that emerges at this age enables the child to acquire im-

portant skills and knowledge almost naturally. Yet it is precisely at this point – when children experience increasingly complex and sophisticated activities – that parents often realize their child has problems. Coming face to face with a child's objective difficulties may lead parents to worry about social acceptance and interaction, and they often feel 'shame' and profound apprehension.

Sometimes a child's problems do not become apparent until primary school. Often, unconscious denial in the parents prevents them from recognizing the disability. One of the most delicate moments is when parents are told that their child exhibits certain objective difficulties that need to be examined by an appropriate specialist. Even though educators are good communicators, news of this sort can sometimes cause impulsive, if not furious, reactions. At this point, a very long and difficult journey begins for the family that includes painful acknowledgement of the child's objective situation.

In our complex cultural context, the family – which is the primary educational vehicle – risks clinging to dated relational-educational models and means of communication that no apply in a novel, fast-paced world. Parents' educational decisions are consequently often directed by objective necessity and strongly influenced by the youngsters themselves. This becomes more apparent during adolescence, when the role of parents is essential in steering the teenager's development. Adolescence is also a time of ambivalence when a teenager develops in fits and starts in his efforts to attain independence, and may fail to mature and develop a perception of self that coincides with the opinion of others. If he fails to build this shared identity and constantly receives negative messages, he risks not understanding who he is and what role he might play in society. Rarely do parents succeed in handling the typical 'up and downs' of adolescence or responding adequately to the need for self-determination. The building of an 'adult' identity seems increasingly long and complex, to the extent that nowadays the period is widely referred to as an 'interminable adolescence'. For the parent of a disabled teenager, this period, coinciding with the explosion of the adolescent sex drive, can be especially worrying. Already overwhelmed both practically and emotionally, they must guide their child with all his affective, social and sexual needs, into adulthood.

The participatory context thus assumes fundamental importance. Many years of integrative experience have demonstrated that concrete interaction with others is the only way to provide the motivation for achieving fulfilling goals in a life: personal growth comes about via the verification of one's abilities in relationship with society. The child with disabilities also needs to be interact right from the start and can become a more

fully round human being only if he learns from challenging experience. Research suggests that in the case of a disabled individual, such experience can be likened to a gym: an environment in which he can test his abilities and resources in a real training context. It provides him with a true reflection of himself because it is not 'artificial' and tailor-made for him. Consequently, special education must always bear in mind the participatory realm as one of the conditions for improving well-being and quality of life.

Only in recent decades has social participation been recognized as particularly valuable in the education of the disabled. Intentional interaction in a context that requires reciprocal understanding and respect helps to mature a personal awareness of self, an identity that becomes consolidated alongside lived experience. If there is no participation, there can be no sharing and, as a result, exclusion and marginalization are reinforced. When a person feels marginalized, his sense of self is diminished and he risks perceiving himself as a 'non-self', making educational efforts fruitless. To fully develop his potential, every individual needs to be integrated into a valuable social and cultural context that enables him to acquire a social identity, achieve adequate autonomy, learn appropriate cultural and communication skills, and contribute to productive activity. There is no reason why those with a physical or cognitive disability should be excluded.

The culture that suffuses a society is crucial to promoting the human, educational and professional development of its citizens and thus increasing their 'humanity'. The more this culture is present and widespread, the better it can support those who are the subject of special education initiatives.

It is evident that educational advances require cultural contexts capable of responding adequately to citizens' needs: culture generates knowledge, critical faculties, respect and understanding, and only in the cultural sphere can planning and support for special educational initiatives come about.

However, to make a qualitative leap, a socially-oriented culture of this sort often needs to be demanded and fought for. This is what happened after an extended period of cultural mutism that ran through the 1800s and most of the 1900s. It was not until the 1960s that cultural upheavals and the striking declarations of N-E. Bank Mikkelsen and Bengt Nirjje put the need for people with disabilities to "live their lives like others and among others" (Nirjje, 1969) firmly on the agenda. Whilst this principle seems obvious today, at that time it caused a cultural revolution referred to as 'normalization', making the entire Western world aware of the rights of the disabled. In Italy, it led to Basaglia's battle to 'de-institutionalize' in-

dividuals with disabilities and to Don Milani's campaigns against selective schools and in favour of more resources for the weakest in society. These interventions made a significant contribution to the spread of innovative ideas that led to the reforms of the 1970s.

Due to the shockwaves that went through the whole of society and the peculiar combination of political and social conditions that came about, Italian parliament passed a number of innovative laws that reformed educational programmes for disabled youngsters, allowing them to access and integrate into normal classrooms. In the 1970s in Italy, laws n. 118 and n. 517 overturned a dated concept of respect for the dignity of the 'diverse' (who had previously been relegated to special institutions) and propelled Italy into the forefront of the process of complete social integration championed by associations for the disabled.

Culture's importance lies not only in promoting awareness and respect for everyone's rights, but also in its ability to transmit the cultural norms by which we function in society. The question thus arises of how an individual with disabilities can learn these norms. The role of special education and special teaching is, in this regard, decisive because it can propose new roadmaps, advance sustainable objectives, and devise suitable methods to promote personal growth and the skills needed to live in a complex society.

We live in an extraordinary part of the world and point in history. Technological and cultural advances have enabled us to access such a wide range of information that the problem is no longer access to it, but the rational discernment of the same.

Societal pressure to manage and keep abreast of such rapid developments is increasingly massive. The question of how to deal with such complex and fast-moving change is common to all educators, teachers and pedagogues, but it especially concerns and preoccupies those working with disabled individuals. To be self-aware and fully-rounded, a person needs information, knowledge, experience, and increasingly refined intellectual skills that keep pace with new developments and this applies equally in the realm of special education. A knowledgeable and competent educator knows that his commitment and skills are required daily if his students are to have a concrete prospect of a better life. His understanding of cultural innovation thus enables him to devise the best possible educational programme for the disabled student's faculties and resources.

For man, religion has always represented an exceptionally important arena of action and the enormous power it has had throughout history testifies to its relevance and influence on individual and social life. The religious sphere should, therefore, be taken into consideration in the sphere

of special education, as it can help in understanding personal aspirations and feelings, provide values, and offer perspectives on life's deepest existential questions. Julien Ries affirms that for man, religion is the perception of a 'total Otherness', resulting in an experience of the sacred that gives rise to *sui generis* behaviour. This experience, which is not attributable to any other, typifies the *homo religiosus* in humanity's various historical cultures. From this perspective, each religion is inseparable from the *homo religiosus*, since it underlies and reflects his *Weltanschauung*. Religion elaborates an explanation of human destiny and leads to behaviour that, through myths, rituals and symbols, actualizes the experience of the sacred. (Ries, 1992). Special education should not ignore this experience, which often completes and enriches the lives of individuals who choose to embrace a religious creed.

In Special Education, the regulatory sphere provides a framework for all the resources required to enable the disabled individual to develop his personal, social and cultural aspirations. Legislation creates protection because it clarifies the boundaries of an action and marks out a precise path that, if respected, helps the individual to live a better life. In the field of special education, the power of legislation, administrative decrees and ministerial directives is not limited to merely protecting the individual (unlike in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Italy when their aim was simply to subsidize institutions). Legislation is much more valuable for the disabled when it becomes proactive, that is, when it is tasked with *changing* an unsuitable status quo. Very often in Italy, such laws and regulations have also had a 'culturally uplifting' effect on society at large. A case in point was Law n. 118 of 1971, which opened the doors of 'normal' schools to inclusiveness and Law n. 517 of 1977, which regulated the integration into normal classrooms of people with disabilities. The Constitutional Court's ruling n. 215/1987 established the basis for all subsequent norms and legislative measures on the issue of integration.

Analysis of the results of rehabilitation and educational programmes with and for people with disabilities indicates that education is best way to promote personal growth. Medical intervention is certainly important (prescription drugs, physical rehabilitation, cognitive therapy, etc) but without valid and competent special education, the core problems remain. The World Health Organization affirms this in its ICF (WHO, 2001), a framework based on overcoming an eminently medical perspective of problem solving for the disabled and providing a biosocial perspective where the educational component is a decisive element.

The educational field is the way forward for the disabled individual from the earliest moments of life, also embracing the family unit, as stated

above. If this educational relationship is properly set up, the individual can develop his potential and enjoy a more fulfilling life.

However, the family unit is not enough: over many years, special education has demonstrated that disabled individuals also need other important educational arenas, the principal one being provided by school.

From nursery through to primary, secondary, and university education, a disabled Italian has 21 years of schooling available to him, a period which can be very useful for his entire lifetime if well-invested. A working knowledge of all facets of Special Education is paramount for teachers, managers, educators and trainers. A student who is registered as disabled cannot be assigned exclusively to a support teacher: law n. 104 rightly states that the support teacher has the joint authority and responsibility to teach a *mixed* class that includes a disabled student. Unfortunately, there are still deplorable educational situations in which a disabled student is entrusted exclusively to a support teacher. Years of campaigning for special education, educational best practice programmes and clear and repeated regulatory measures have made expertise available to everyone in educational institutions, so where inclusivity is poorly managed, it is clearly done so knowingly and in bad faith. The persistence of such situations today is due to narrow-minded personal convenience, lack of care for students, parent-teacher committees that ignore special education issues and headmasters who are ignorant and unwilling to engage personally, except to improve the status of their institutions. Where work *is* done on the level of special educational, there are noticeable differences: problematic students are cared for by all the teachers, educational programmes are jointly planned and innovative practices are promoted in the classroom. Moreover, the support teacher cares not only for individuals but for the whole class and abandons top-down lessons in favour of more effective teaching methods. A climate in the classroom is thereby created that safeguards the principle of sharing and of respecting and participating in communal decisions, meetings are scheduled periodically and respected by all teachers, and the headmaster participates in the implementation of processes and contributes to the life of the school.

Special education is also valuable outside of school, such as in institutions that care for people with problems outside the family (e.g. assisted care homes or type B social cooperatives). In these areas of intervention, the disabled individual needs the right relational atmosphere of support to meet his needs. Years of experience have shown that all too often these agencies fail to offer effective special education due to lack of training amongst their educators and a level of staff turnover that undermines the need for continuous interpersonal relationships. Associative experience,

especially in parishes, is also an important arena for personal growth. These associations often provide enormous opportunities for significant social interaction and affective, extra-family relationships for the disabled, who otherwise spend most of their lives either at school, working in co-ops or in the family home. Like everyone else, however, a fulfilling life involves contact with friends, cultivating interests and meeting people outside their family circle. Even in these associations, the presence of staff with skills in special educational would play a decisive role in promoting the well-being of disabled or problematic individuals.

## **2. The need for very competent special pedagogical consultants**

Berliner (2002, pp. 18-20) states that education science is not only difficult, but probably “the hardest-to-do science” as it must “face particular problems and must deal with local conditions that limit generalizations and theory building – problems that are different from those faced by the easier-to-do sciences [chemistry, biology, medicine]” (Berliner, 2002, p. 18).

Reflecting on the complexity of Special Pedagogy, one can undoubtedly say that it faces the most intractable difficulties of all the education sciences.

Two reasons support this thesis. The first concerns the wide variety of individuals involved. The visually disabled may have congenital or acquired blindness, while those with hearing impairment may have partial, total, temporary or permanent disability in one ear or both. In the case of mild intellectual impairment and disability in the sensory-motor sense, such individuals are often indistinguishable from those without mental retardation. More severe cases include individuals who, regardless of their age and the cause of their condition, cannot achieve the following goals: from the neuropsychological point of view, the ability to understand symbols; from an affective point of view, three-dimensional dynamics; and from a psycho-social point of view, the minimum degree of autonomy necessary for a sense of personal identity. In children, disability may range from behavioural problems relating to ADHD – where fundamental disability is more persistent, frequent and severe than is typically observed in subjects at a comparable level of development – to learning disabilities, “an umbrella term that covers a diverse range of persistent problems in cognitive development and learning at school” (Cornoldi, 2007, p. 28). Finally, there are individuals with and without disabilities who, due to a series of primarily exogenous conditions, fail to live a dignified life. It should be noted that even within the same syndrome, such as Down’s, there are huge differences and it is all too easy to talk simplistically about autism. It

is more appropriate to talk about autisms, since there are a whole plethora of degrees and variations within this category.

The second reason that special pedagogical counselling is extremely complex concerns the educational contexts in which it operates, including within families, schools, extracurricular socio-educational centres, workplaces and assisted care homes.

The family of a person with disabilities inevitably experiences very difficult and sometimes dramatic, situations that fall outside the normal sociological canons of study. The school environment and communal classrooms may foster either integration or exclusion, since inclusion in a class does not always guarantee real inclusiveness, just as a diverse programme undertaken outside the classroom does not always signify exclusion or marginalization.

Extracurricular educational contexts still appear inclined towards a welfare perspective: assisted care homes and community care (after individuals outlive their family members), are hardly ever taken into consideration and valid methods of social coexistence are difficult to develop. The complexity of the problems faced by individuals requires effort and investment and even when researchers conclude that “a practice in special education is effective, they must clearly specify for whom the practice is effective and in what context” (Odom, Brantlinger, Gersten, Horner, Thomson, Harris, 2005, p. 139).

A severe problem is the difficulty that teachers and tutors experience in applying the recommended results in their institutional and operational contexts (schools, training agencies, assisted care homes, socio-educational day care centres). Rarely are the principles of intervention, validated by research, interpreted and translated into basic guidelines for different working environments and disseminated on the ground via practice by teachers and tutors.

There is therefore an urgent need for pedagogical consultancy for disability and marginalization that can positively influence the various environments in which disabled individuals live.

### **3. Degree in Pedagogical Counselling for Disability and Marginalization**

It is crucial to train motivated and competent pedagogues and pedagogical counsellors who are forward-looking – bearing in mind the lifetime prospects of a tutee – and rooted in the real world, via a special educational programme that can make a real difference, underpinned by consolidated educational practice.

For over 10 years, *Università Cattolica di Milano* has conducted a Master's Degree course aimed at achieving the important goal of special pedagogical competence. Results indicate that the training programme achieves its goals: within a few months of graduation, some 85% of graduates secure jobs and fully integrate into the workplace.

The Master's Degree course in question has the following objectives:

- attainment of the highest theoretical and practical skills in the field of pedagogical, psychological, sociological, legal, historical, ethical, and medical sciences, with special reference to issues relating to disability and integration;
- acquisition of in-depth knowledge of prevention of child marginalization and resolution of personal conflicts at risk of deviance;
- acquisition of specialist skills for the designing, monitoring and conducting of innovative pedagogical research outcomes with the aim of solving issues of 'diversity' and evaluating the educational and training interventions implemented;
- acquisition of knowledge to intervene directly in educational and social contexts where the role of pedagogical competence is to address and co-ordinate the training and rehabilitation process of individuals experiencing difficult personal and socio-affective situations;
- attainment of skills conducive to undertaking educational initiatives in educational agencies and in the public and private institutions that care for individuals with specific needs from childhood through to adulthood;
- acquisition of advanced knowledge in the unified formulation of rehabilitative educational programmes and multidisciplinary communication methods for highly specialized educational initiatives to be included in the socio-administrative policies of the pertinent geographical area;
- development of skills for the acquisition of spoken and written fluency in the English language;
- acquisition of a good working knowledge of the main IT tools and on-line communication methods with reference to the fields of education and training.

The study programme is designed as follows:

<b>Year 1</b>	<b>Cfu</b>
– Pedagogy of special education interventions	10
– Personality and deviance: individual and psycho-social aspects	10
– Neuropsychiatry, public health and disability or Fundamentals of neuroscience	5
– Philosophy of the individual	5
– History of marginalization	5
– Theory of the care-giver relationship	5
– Training activities to be chosen by the student	10
– ICT and the information society II	3
– Foreign language (advanced English)	2
– Choice of 1 out of 3 laboratory workshops:	1
- Educational difficulties for persons with hearing impairment or	
- Educational difficulties for persons with learning disabilities or	
- Educational difficulties for persons with autism	
– Training	3
<b>Year 2</b>	<b>Cfu</b>
– Methodology for the integrated group management	10
– History of special education	10
– Sociology of inequality and diversity	5
– Public-law institutions and social legislation	5
– Psychology of atypical development and disability	5
– Choice of 1 out of 3 laboratory workshops:	1
- Educational difficulties for the blind or	
- Educational difficulties for persons in marginalized situations or	
- Educational difficulties for new forms of juvenile marginalization and deviance	
– Training	5
– Final exams	20

## **Conclusion**

Special education is only effective when the context and the intended educational relationship are based on the highest pedagogical, didactic, psychological, medical and sociological knowledge. Practitioners who approach the disabled/problematic individual with trained awareness know that their intervention must be pedagogically based and founded on the

highest expertise and best practices in the field. They carry a heavy burden of responsibility because the individuals involved are important and working for their benefit means being aware of the decisive role they play in their lives, in the knowledge that the initiatives rolled out on the ground are either of a high quality or detrimental.

## References

- Berliner D. C. (2002). Educational research: The hardest science of all. *Educational Researchers*, 31 (8), pp. 18-20.
- Cornoldi C. (2007). *Difficoltà e disturbi dell'apprendimento*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- d'Alonzo L. (2016). *La differenziazione didattica per l'inclusione*. Trento: Erickson.
- d'Alonzo L. (2016). *Marginalità e apprendimento*. Brescia: La Scuola.
- d'Alonzo L., Mariani V., Zampieri G., Maggiolini S. (2012). *La consulenza pedagogica. Pedagogisti in azione*. Roma: Armando.
- Maritain J. (1976). *L'educazione al bivio*. Brescia: La Scuola.
- Ries J. (1992). *Le origini, le religioni*. Milano: Jaca Book.
- Nirije B. (1969). The normalization principle and its human management implications. In R. Kugel, W. Wolfensberger (Eds.), *Changing patterns in residential services for the mentally retarded*. Washington, DC: President's Committee on Mental Retardation.
- Odom S.L., Brantlinger E., Gersten R., Horner R.H., Thomson B., Harris K.R. (2005). Research in special education: scientific methods and evidence-based practices. *Exceptional Children*, 71.

0  
P  
P