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GIFTED CHILDREN AT SCHOOL: UNDERSTANDING TEACHERS' KNOWLEDGE, PERCEPTIONS, AND EXPERIENCES IN THE ITALIAN SCHOOL SYSTEM

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1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the growing scientific and public attention to the topic of giftedness, which refers to a segment of the population possessing cognitive abilities above average, this phenomenon remains an area that is still underexplored in pedagogical reflection, at least within the Italian context. Part of this gap can be attributed to the numerous stereotypical narratives surrounding the issue, which have contributed to constructing the idea of a privilege (Siaud-Facchin, 2008): who wouldn't want to be considered a person with a superior mind? Who wouldn't wish to have a gifted child with exceptional intelligence? However, the reality is much more complex, especially in relation to children with these characteristics and their social experiences in a broader sense, and their school experiences in a more specific way.

While it is true that giftedness is internationally associated with an IQ score of 130 or above, a purely quantitative perspective is insufficient to capture the qualitatively different functioning of these individuals, which involves not only cognitive dimensions but also emotional and social aspects (Maulucci, 2021). Even within the school environment, representations of gifted students by teachers often fail to move beyond pre-conceived and oversimplified images: on one hand, there is an idyllic portrayal where such students, with their innate talents, are seen as role models and are believed to be capable of pursuing highly successful educational, professional, and life trajectories; on the other hand, the emphasis is negatively placed on the disharmony between

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high cognitive abilities and noticeable difficulties in emotional self-regulation and social adaptation (Weins et al., 2020; Reis-Jorge et al., 2021). Yet, not only can we find studies in the literature that do not agree on associating higher cognitive potential with greater difficulties in peer socialization (Peyer et al., 2016), but the causal relationship between giftedness and academic success is also widely questioned.

In this regard, it is essential to consider the broad spectrum of characteristics encompassed by this term. Alongside faster learning and the early emergence of skills beyond chronological age, such as reading and writing, other distinctive traits may intertwine, including deep interests, an avid thirst for knowledge, insatiable curiosity, perfectionist tendencies, profound sensitivity, and creativity (Maulucci, 2022). Such a complex interplay cannot ensure a linear progression in different academic trajectories, within which multiple vulnerabilities may emerge (Bianchi di Castelbianco & Sartori, 2020). These can be relational, affecting interactions with peers and teachers, or related to academic performance itself. Such challenges may lead to deep frustration, potentially resulting in disengagement from school and an increased risk of dropout. In light of this, the role of the teacher emerges as crucial in creating the conditions for every student, whether gifted or not, to fully express their uniqueness, transforming latent potential into action. It is not merely about fostering exceptional abilities, measurable through achievements, but about cultivating a pedagogical and educational care that is attentive and responsive to others (Boffo, 2011), a responsibility that always falls on education professionals.

However, to achieve this goal, a clear and solid reference framework is essential, including effective regulations, which are currently lacking in the Italian context. In fact, the first explicit mention of the gifted population within official regulations appears in a ministerial note from 2019 (MIUR, 2019); previously, the only available reference was found in the directive of December 27, 2012 (MIUR, 2012), which broadly addressed Special Educational Needs. The approach adopted promotes the implementation of personalized learning pathways for high-potential students through specific teaching methodologies. However, as highlighted in the 2019 note, the implementation of such programs depends on the decisions of individual Class Councils. Consequently, ensuring a formal educational context that is inclusive and attentive to everyone's needs relies on a virtuous vision at a micro level: the absence of a standardized national procedure places the responsibility on teachers to be not only adequately trained but also insightful in designing an inclusive teaching approach for children and adolescents with this characteristic. This underscores the importance of proper training on the topic, which is not always guaranteed.

This situation presents a challenge for pedagogy on multiple fronts. On the one hand, following the perspectives of didactics and special pedagogy, efforts focus on identifying personalized strategies that foster both the inclusive principles that, in theory, underpin the entire Italian school system and the development of each student's potential. In this context, according to scientific literature, one of the most widely used strategies internationally is curriculum enrichment (Baccassino & Pinelli, 2023). On the other hand, general pedagogical reflection must

focus on some of its foundational categories, such as *education* understood in its Greek *Paideia* and Latin *Humanitas* dimensions: through the educational relationship established with the student, the teacher is called to guide them on a journey in which, by becoming aware of their own perfectible nature as a person, they can freely, intentionally, and rationally embark on an inexhaustible search for their ideal form, overcoming any type of label (Bertagna, 2018). The research presented here is based on these premises, aiming to explore teachers' knowledge and perceptions of Giftedness in the Italian context, thus fostering awareness of the fundamental role of the teaching figure in relation to gifted students.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study, conducted as part of the preparation for a master's thesis in the LM85-bis Degree Program in Primary Education Sciences at the University of Florence[3] , aimed to explore teachers' experiences regarding Giftedness in the Italian school context. It sought to deepen their knowledge and perceptions of the topic, as well as the strategies they employ. Additionally, the study served as an opportunity to raise awareness of the important role of teachers in supporting gifted students.

To achieve this, a mixed-methods online questionnaire was developed, combining both quantitative and qualitative elements, based on a tool used in a previous Italian study (Ruzzante & Travaglini, 2023). The questionnaire consisted of twelve closed-ended questions and two open-ended questions; it should be noted that there was no obligation to answer the latter.

The questionnaire was structured into three main sections:

- The first section collected general information and characteristics of the respondents
- The second section focused on knowledge and perceptions of Giftedness, exploring received training, self-assessed preparedness, and representations of this characteristic
- The final section addressed teachers' direct experiences with students with high cognitive potential, aiming to highlight the main strategies employed and the challenges faced.

The initial sampling was carried out using the snowball sampling technique. Subsequently, the questionnaire was distributed via email, using public mailing lists from state schools. A total of 822 responses were recorded from teachers at schools of all levels across Italy. along with a small portion of other professionals, including students from the Primary Education Sciences degree program, retired teachers, school principals, and technical staff.

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3. RESULTS

Teachers' Knowledge and Perception of Gifted Children

One of the key aspects explored in the questionnaire was teachers' training on the topic of interest, specifically their participation in specialized courses. The majority of respondents (72.4%, equal to 595 participants) stated that they had never attended training programs on giftedness, while 17.6% had taken one course, and only 10% had attended more than one.

At the same time, respondents were asked to assess their level of knowledge through a self-evaluation using a Likert scale from 1 (minimum, “not informed at all”) to 5 (maximum, “very informed”). The highest number of responses fell at level 3, considered intermediate, while over 50% (415 responses) rated themselves at the lowest levels, identifying as not informed or only slightly informed. Only 13% considered themselves informed or very informed. Cross-referencing the data on self-perceived knowledge and received training, it emerged that 87% of those who placed themselves at the lowest levels had not received any training.

Additionally, teachers were asked whether they believed that schools provided sufficient resources and support for gifted students. Once again, the majority (72% of the total) selected the lowest values on the scale, indicating that they perceived little to no support available. In this section of the questionnaire, an open-ended question was also asked about stereotypes. Among the various responses, a common belief emerged: that all gifted children excel in every subject and are little geniuses.

Direct experience

A total of 38.6% of the questionnaire participants reported having worked with one or more gifted children during their professional experience. At the same time, 32.5% reported having experience with only one gifted student, 20.4% said they had never had a gifted student in their class, and 8.5% selected the response "I don’t know". Overall, 71.1% of the sample had at least one gifted child in their classroom; however, only 22.3% of them had attended a specific training course. A similar percentage is found among those who reported never having worked with giftedness: 79.8% (134 out of 168 teachers) had not participated in any training program on the topic. As will be discussed later, this data may have significant implications to consider for the future.

Regarding the most commonly used teaching strategies to support gifted students, and in line with the literature, curriculum enrichment emerged as the most frequently indicated approach, followed by peer tutoring. Additionally, this section of the questionnaire explored both the main difficulties encountered in the classroom and suggestions for promoting greater educational attention to these students, through predefined options. The most frequently reported challenges include maintaining student motivation, peer relationship difficulties, and lack of specific teacher training. The suggestions provided primarily focused on the importance of enhancing teacher training in this field. Finally, respondents were given the opportunity to share their own experiences through an open-ended question. Below is a particularly significant testimony, as it

highlights the issue of school dropout: «I had a gifted student (not officially certified as such) who had evident relational problems and very irregular attendance. In fact, he withdrew in fifth grade before the end of the school year and took the exams the following year as a private candidate (A.)».

4. DISCUSION

The issue of teacher training on the topic at hand is a significant concern. Although it is recognized as one of the key resources that educational institutions should implement to ensure an inclusive learning environment, the data from the questionnaire highlight a significant gap in this area. The majority of respondents reported being poorly informed on the topic, pointing to a lack of relevant training in their background.

This gap becomes even more worrying when considering that 71.1% of the teachers surveyed have had gifted students in their classes. In a context where these students may face significant challenges and are at high risk of disengagement or school dropout, the lack of adequate preparation threatens the ability to address their needs, potentially having negative consequences on their educational paths. The following testimony highlights how crucial teacher preparation is in fully carrying out their educational role and in preventing the contribution to a negative school experience: «I am both a father of a gifted girl and a teacher. It is important to ensure that perfectionism, which I have observed both in one of my students and in my daughter, does not turn into an obsessive rigidity demanding constant academic excellence. It is essential to create a peer-friendly environment where teachers do not expect gifted students to always achieve extraordinary results, nor subject them to noticeably different instructional treatments compared to the rest of the class. Additionally, teachers should avoid imposing highly asymmetrical tutoring tasks on them, which could further exacerbate the imbalance in their relationships with peers (C.)».

In addition to affecting the quality of teaching, insufficient training can also impact the recognition of these characteristics in school. The fact that nearly 80% of teachers who have never had direct experience with giftedness have not attended any specialized courses raises an important question: could this absence have made the cognitive potential of some students invisible, leading to misunderstandings or even incorrect diagnoses? As highlighted by the following response to an open-ended question about stereotypes, this is a risk that schools must responsibly avoid and address: «The word 'stereotype' should not exist in schools, nor should misunderstandings: these are errors of assessment and lack of professional preparation (P.)».

In this context, teacher training, both initial and in-service, is a fundamental pillar for building an educational environment that can nurture the potential of every student. Only through adequate training can the conditions be created for all students to choose their future paths with awareness and freedom.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The various opacities previously analyzed are not particularly surprising: they fully reflect the Italian regulatory framework on giftedness. Although there have been timid attempts to increase awareness among teachers, the absence of a clear intervention plan and systematized procedures means that it is up to individual teachers—depending on their level of awareness—to identify appropriate tools, including specific training, to support gifted students.

This contribution certainly aims to stimulate reflection at a micro level, directly involving teachers, helping them pursue appropriate training paths, and consequently identifying teaching strategies and relational approaches that contribute to a high-quality school experience—not solely focused on performance, but also on overall well-being.

However, the goal is also to lay the groundwork for the future, paving the way for thought and action frameworks capable of influencing the macro level as well. The cultural dimension represents fertile ground in this regard: the pedagogical perspective must contribute to revising social representations of giftedness, deconstructing stereotypes that may hinder the recognition of these students' needs. To achieve this goal, a well-prepared teaching force is essential—one that, drawing from its professional experience, can actively participate in discussions alongside families, support services, policymakers, and, not least, the students themselves. Only in this way will it be possible to promote more inclusive policies and truly welcoming educational environments.

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