

# Giftedness and peer group: an exploration of the representational repertory on giftedness in the early school age

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## ABSTRACT

There has been growing interest in the issue of giftedness and in educational paths which can counteract the development of misrepresentations and negative attitudes on the theme. These forms of common sense contribute to interpreting social reality using shortcuts in thinking that are sometimes inadequate to explain the complexity of human personality and that, therefore, may generate some stereotypes and prejudices. The analysis and orientation of distorted representations could prompt the activation of inclusive behaviour towards gifted peers. This contribution therefore focuses on the representations concerning giftedness in the peer group. The project, carried out with pupils of primary school class, aims to explore the representations and attitudes of children exposed to a path of awareness on giftedness in order to support a correct and inclusive representation of the phenomenon.

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## INTRODUCTION

Giftedness has no specific definition. From a quantitative point of view, one indicator of the presence of giftedness is the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) (Pfeiffer, 2013) but this psychometric principle implies limitations such as the risk of undervaluing potential or the risk of ignoring the influence of intrapersonal and situational factors (e.g., anxiety, motivation) on test success. Consequently, many other factors converge in the emergence of giftedness, characterizing it as a construct multidimensional, complex, and dynamic. Multidimensional (Heller, Perleth & Lim, 2005) because in the expression of potential there is a co-presence of both genetic variables and contextual variables; complex because these variables affect each child in different ways denoting high heterogeneity between gifted profiles; dynamic because giftedness is not a fixed and constant characteristic but is changeable according to the specificity of the moment and the situation (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

However, the literature has highlighted some common characteristics in the gifted population such as overexcitability (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977) i.e., stimulus-response reactions that are stronger and longer-lasting than in the average population, and asynchronous development (Silverman, 2002) i.e., the considerable difference between the level of cognitive development that qualifies as above average, and the levels of emotional, physical and relational development in line with chronological age. These peculiarities can lead to risk factors such as, for example, feelings of anxiety and unease, social isolation, school underachievement, and drop-out.

At the root of these difficulties, there is often a misconception of the gifted student, that imagines him or her as autonomous, a leader, always happy, and not in need of help (Pinnelli, 2019). For this reason, the

main protective factor is training about giftedness, which makes it possible to identify gifted students and, consequently, to take them into consideration, activating pathways of support and contrasting possible marginalization.

The investigation of the teachers' representational repertory on giftedness (McCoach & Siegle, 2007; Molapo & Salyers, 2014; Fiorucci, 2017; De Angelis, 2017) revealed conceptions very close to common sense that considers the gifted student as the *enfant prodige* with a marked propensity for calculation and associates potential with the security of success in life.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research explores teachers' representational repertoire on giftedness while students' representations are marginally investigated. The analysis and orientation of social representations, defined by Moscovici as forms of common sense that contribute «to make something unfamiliar, or unfamiliarity itself, familiar» (1984, pp. 23-24), is of primary importance since these forms of knowledge are precursors and activators of attitudes. Indeed, Ramel (2014) defines attitudes as an individual variation of a collective belief or shared representation in the social context.

Social representations are, therefore, upstream of attitudes which, in turn, influence behaviour. To promote inclusive behaviour towards the gifted peer, it is, therefore, necessary to start by analysing the representational imaginary.

For this reason, the teacher must help students recognize representations, question them, and orient them in order to avoid stereotypes and prejudices. Initiating this exploration in the peer group is essential because it is the place of affective experience and, not least, it influences the construction of identity and a sense of community.

The aim of the investigation is to understand the students' representations regarding giftedness in order to implement - in line with the context and age of the students - educational interventions on the topic. The intervention was aimed at refuting erroneous attributions. We started with a short didactic course to raise awareness of the topic, then analysed the representations present in the group and, finally, structured a guided reflection intervention concerning the heterogeneity of talent in order to encourage reflection and the development of inclusion practices. The focal question on which the questionnaire was developed was: *What representations of the gifted peer are there in students exposed to a short information course on the subject?*

The project was carried out in a primary class in the Province of Lecce. The sample of students, taken as a case study, consisted of 22 children, mostly male (68%), with an average age of 10 years.

The classroom intervention was conducted in one week in February 2021: Phases 1,2,3 were conducted on two consecutive days, requiring three hours. Phase 4 was carried out in two hours on a successive day and phase 5 took one hour on the last day.

In the first phase, two stories with gifted protagonists were presented in order to bring the students closer to the subject matter. They initially watched an extract from the TV series 'Young Sheldon', which tells the story of Sheldon Cooper, a gifted nine-year-old who skip grades and starts attending high school, facing various difficulties. The series was chosen both because the age of the protagonist is close to the target audience, and because the 'dark side' of the giftedness also emerges in the sitcom: Sheldon combines a high intellectual profile with a lack of emotionality that leads to problems in social relationships.

Subsequently, the self-produced story of Lumen a gifted light bulb was presented through a video narration. Lumen also starts school early, finding himself among more older classmates who, at first, exclude him. The turning point of the story is the 'lighting competition': a contest of various skills in which Lumen helps classmates in school disciplines and, in turn, is helped in musical, artistic, and sports disciplines. Out of this reciprocity will come a huge glow produced by the class and, so, they won the competition.

This story was written to immerse the gifted protagonist in the classroom context, thus enabling a deeper level of identification by the group and delivering the following messages: how difficult it can be for a young student to experience the disharmony between chronological and mental age, to be in a group of older people, and to be judged stereotypically; the frustration felt by a child who is not recognised for who is and left alone; the heterogeneous nature of talent that might not be identified in traditional teaching.

As a *second step*, the 'six thinking hats' methodology introduced by psychologist Edward De Bono (1985) was used with the aim of getting students to recognise the modes of reflection they use. Wearing one of the six hats indicates directing one's thinking on a single interpretative aspect that may be distant from one's habit of analysis. The type of thinking is symbolised by the colour the hats.

First the blue hat (*rational thinking*), i.e. the game controller, decided who should wear the remaining hats and the order of colours for the upcoming debate. The white hat (*neutral thinking*) then spoke, summarising the story objectively. Next, the red hat (*emotional thinking*) had the task of expressing the emotions felt by the protagonist throughout the story.

S1: *'Lumen must have felt lonely, cast aside, not understood by his classmates and older even though he was young.'*

Then the green hat (*creative thinking*) expressed itself by narrating the continuation of the story.

S2: *'Lumen, after the lighting competition, discovers that he has different interests and talents from his peers but also many things in common and because of these many sincere friendships will be built.'*

The yellow hat (*positive thinking*) noted the positive aspects of the story.

S3: *'Everyone has talents and when Lumen discovers this he no longer feels alone, he helps his friends, and they help Lumen. Unity is strength and they win the race.'*

To conclude this phase, the black hat (*negative thinking*) discloses the adverse aspects.

S4: *'Besides Lumen's exclusion, there is the worry of his parents and his brother about his loneliness'*

In the next phase (Phase 3) four-item questionnaire with two open and two closed questions was administered to which all the children responded individually in order to explore personal representations of giftedness.

By means of specific reading grids, the hermeneutic-qualitative analysis is aimed to examine students' perceptions and identify key topics by the identification of similar concepts and relationships of meaning in the collected data set. The first question "*What do you think about Lumen's adventure?*" shows that in their perception there is an ambivalence between idealisation with positive feelings and stigmatisation with negative feelings.

S5: *'In my opinion, he felt happy at first, when he could start studying. He also felt depressed because everyone excluded him. He was also bored because he had already studied those things.'*

S7: *'Lumen is a child of frightening genius.'*

S8: *'I think at his age he shouldn't go to school because he is too young.'*

The quantitative analysis of the second and third questions confirms this bipartition.

The protagonist is in fact mostly described with the adjectives *good* (82%), *sensitive* (68%), *excluded* (59%) and is identified as *sad* (77%), *happy* (50%), *interested* (50%).

To the open-ended question "*What would you do if Lumen or Sheldon were in your class?*" everyone gave descriptions of inclusion and openness that denote a possible general awareness about giftedness and the difficulties that a gifted student may encounter in school and emotional life. From the qualitative analysis of the data, the thought most frequently cited was the enriching reciprocity that could arise from the presence of a gifted child in the classroom.

S7: *'If they were in my class, I would teach them something that they don't know yet like I could teach them how to be respected, L. could teach them how to play football, C. and A. could teach them how to play*

video games. We all know how to do things that others cannot do so we could teach each other. I think they would feel good in our class because we are all special."

S9: "If they were in my class, I wouldn't exclude them like Lumen's friends did, I would include them because in my opinion, even if one is smart there are things that he doesn't know how to do"

In phase 4, a poster was produced in groups to allow immediate visualization of the results of the investigation. Drawings illustrating Lumen and keywords such as, for example, *super, interested, uniqueness, sensitive, accepting, loneliness, misunderstanding, excluded, bored, etc.*, were included.

As a final step, stories of successful individuals from not only the scientific field were told to call attention to the heterogeneity of the fields in which potential is expressed. This was followed by a guided reflection through which the children's passions and dreams regarding future professions emerged.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis conducted as a class study describes a transformative process that aims at a correct representation of giftedness. Two positions emerged from the questionnaire: a stigmatisation and an idealisation of giftedness. This view expressed in the representations that emerged is in line with the literature (Callard-Szulgit, 2012).

The need to work on representations as precursors of inclusive peer attitudes is given by the importance of the socialisation process at school age which, as highlighted in the literature (Dunn, 2004), plays a fundamental role in individual growth. School is the place where one becomes socially competent by experiencing symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships.

The present study, given the smallness of the sample, does not yet offer generalisable results, however, it proposes to define a practice of identification, valorisation, and the breaking of possible stigmatisation, in order to structure a specific pedagogical-didactic action that protects the right of everyone to be recognised and to recognise themselves in their own singular exceptionality.

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