

From the first philosophical-pedagogical communities to the magisterium of Alcuin of York and the Schola Palatina: the educational approach of universality

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Abstract: This work arises from a theoretical reflection of the universal values of pedagogy. Although prejudices and social marginalization have spanned the centuries, flashes of pedagogical attention have been traced both in the Greek and Roman worlds as well as in the inclusive approaches to education identified in the first philosophical-pedagogical communities of Alcuin of York and the Schola Palatina. Therefore, the objective of this work is to propose a general framework of humanizing pedagogy through the value of inclusion as a universal educational resource.

Keywords: Diversity; Education; Inclusion; Universal principles.

1. Introduction: diversity, integration of the socially marginalized and education of universal principles

Inclusion as a universal educational principle arises from a socio-pedagogical evolution developed over the centuries. Understanding its origins and appreciating its roots means loving its dark sides and, therefore, all the interpretative nuances (Saloni, 1969). In ancient times there was a tendency to marginalize and stigmatize those whose diversity was incomprehensible for the times, often considering them as a burden for the community and sometimes as a divine punishment for past sins, and many times they were suppressed at birth, the Tarpeian cliff is a grim historical image that evokes the death of children born malformed. Starting from ancient Greece, contrary to the dominant thought of the era fearful of “diversity”, philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle were fascinated, albeit in different ways, by diversity and in particular by the sensory disability of deafness. Plato was the first to outline the use of signs and discuss the nature of language and gestural communication of the deaf (Bergomi, 2022). An attention towards a fragile social category that was soon the victim of a stigma perpetrated for centuries when



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¹ This work is dedicated to Professor Felice Corona who was able to inspire us with his gentle teaching, passion and dedication for studies on special education. His human values will remain an invaluable example for us to cherish and perpetuate in life and in the academic world. This contribution was born from his idea of investigating the origins of special pedagogy and therefore, it is our intention to carry forward, with absolute humility, this ambitious project which begins with this contribution dedicated to him. The article is the result of the scientific collaboration of the authors. However, the attribution of scientific responsibility is as follows: Maria Annarumma is the author of paragraphs “Introduction: diversity, integration of the socially marginalized and education of universal principles”, “Conclusions”; Giulia Perfetto is the author of paragraphs “The classical world between *paideia*, *humanitas* and *philanthropia*”, “The school of Alcuin of York: the educational approach of universal principles”.

Aristotle, in the *Historia Animalium*, a treatise from the 4th century BC, defined man as a “linguistic animal”. This statement decreed a sentence that marked the lives of deaf people (Beullens and Bossier, 2000), thus sanctioning complete social marginalization and depriving them of many human rights, such as that of enjoying the sacraments, of inheriting and of enjoying other rights such as those of hereditary succession, as well as many others. This is just an example of how a disability could be the subject of investigation even in philosophers like Plato to study its origin and understand its characteristics but at the same time cultural, social and religious prejudices were decisive in stigmatizing weak and defenseless social categories, marking one’s destiny. Prejudices about diversity and social marginalization were also present in ancient Rome, due to the lack of laws and policies that guaranteed them civil rights. This contributed to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes and the denial of values such as respect and dignity.

In the Middle Ages, a far-sighted example of integration of the marginalized according to a universal education perspective was represented by Charlemagne who reckoned it was necessary to educate barbarian peoples intellectually and religiously and worked to ensure that even children of humble families could receive a basic education. For this purpose, he built many schools and tried to encourage the spread of culture by every means. For this purpose, new schools were created in monasteries and cathedrals, also open to external students. Alcuin of York is clearly the magister *par excellence*; he was called by Charlemagne to instruct students and to build a pedagogical program that could instill universal values and principles.

However, access to complete and advanced education remained mainly limited to privileged social classes; furthermore, nothing specific has come down to us to confirm the access of individuals with particular disabilities to education. The real turning point of the Carolingian school remains, therefore, the importance of education and culture as a driving force for the improvement of society.

2. The classical world between *paideia*, *humanitas* and *philanthropia*

Pedagogy, as a critical reflection on the education of every society, was born with Socrates, characterized by “know thyself” and the growth of his reflective consciousness, stimulated by maieutics and dialogue, as the soul’s ascent to beauty and ideas. With this educational process, the figure of the educator is associated with that of the midwife: her task is to bring out the knowledge present in people, through a question, which leads them to seek an answer through the interlocutor, whose task was that of awakening consciences. There is no direct evidence of Socrates’ involvement in the education of disabled people, although his dialogical approach to knowledge and morality may have inspired inclusive and compassionate attitudes towards them. Socrates’ own disciple, Plato, considered education as a means to fully develop human potential and believed in the importance of education for all citizens. In his dialogue, *De Repubblica*, he suggested a public educational system and Plato highlights how the education of young people can lead to become good citizens, who participate in the public life of the *polis*.

The development of education in pedagogical terms also affected medicine and, in particular, Hippocrates, considered the father of Western medicine, who dealt with the topic of disabilities in his medical writings: not only did he provide detailed descriptions of various disabling conditions, but also recommended treatments and educational interventions to improve the quality of life of patients.

Among the Romans, the Greek ideal of *paideia* was identified with the Latin one of *humanitas*, represented by the expression *humani nihil a me alienum puto* (Nothing that is human is foreign to me). This phrase emphasizes a sense of empathy and

solidarity towards other human beings, implying that everything involving humans should be understood and shared by all. Terence used it in his works to promote the idea of compassion and mutual understanding within society.

With the *mos maiorum* affirmation, the principles, the sense of legality, severity, austerity, frugality and composure of behaviour are affirmed. *Mos maiorum* is a Latin expression meaning “custom of the ancestors” or “tradition of the fathers”. It refers to the complex of values, social norms, traditions and behaviours handed down by predecessors and considered fundamental for the cohesion and stability of Roman society. These customs and values were considered sacred and were strictly followed to maintain social order and preserve the integrity of the Roman community. Respect for the *mos maiorum* was an essential part of Roman culture and influenced many spheres of life, including politics, religion, family and social relationships.

One of the most famous lawyers of the Roman world was Cicero (106-43 BC), a famous Roman orator, politician and philosopher, who defended the idea of education accessible to all citizens, regardless of their physical or social condition, and whose writings reflect ideals of equality and justice against the despotism of his time. Even Aulus Gellius, a less famous Roman writer and jurist who lived in the imperial era, in the *Noctes Atticae*, compares the term *humanitas* to *philanthropia* and above all to the *paideia* of the Greeks, where men are educated about *bonae artes* and participation in city life.

In ancient Rome, attitudes towards “diversity” were complex and varied greatly depending on the social and cultural context. However, there are some Roman philosophers, doctors and scholars who were interested in “diversity” and contributed to their inclusion and educational assistance, albeit to a limited extent, such as Galen (129-216 AD), a Greco-Roman physician, who practiced mainly in Rome and wrote extensively on medicine and health; his works include descriptions of several disabling conditions and medical treatments that might reflect a certain degree of awareness and understanding towards people with disabilities. Seneca himself (4 BC - 65 AC), a Roman Stoic philosopher and playwright, promoted the idea of compassion and equality among all human beings, therefore his teachings on morality and humanity may have influenced the general attitude towards them.

Pedagogical education had also touched naturalist philosophers such as Pliny the Elder (23-79 AD), author of *Naturalis historia*, an encyclopaedia covering a wide range of scientific and cultural topics, which provided descriptions of several disabling conditions and medical remedies in ancient Rome, contributing to the understanding of “human diversity” in Roman society (Saloni A., 1969).

3. The school of Alcuin of York: the educational approach of universal principles

Throughout the Middle Ages, the ideal of integrally forming a complete, upright and well-integrated person in society remained alive, giving rise to numerous treatises to broaden knowledge about man, nature and God. This desire for universality was the basis of a high-level scholastic education, based on classical authorities, and enshrined in the formula of the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, which laid the foundations for the birth and consolidation of the university system.

This system meets the reforming action of Charlemagne who had the task of providing study material for the school, where Alcuin played the role of pioneer. The intellectuals, who in various capacities collaborated with the sovereigns of the Carolingian dynasty, in fact, perceived themselves as part of a religious and cultural community, even before a political and geographical one. The intention of Charlemagne’s creation of a cultural *universitas* project is based on the vision of political

renewal and rediscovered unity of Roman and Christian civilization, offering a new essential arrangement where pedagogy plays a fundamental role. In fact, Alcuin does not hesitate to copy entire pages of classical texts, to the point of composing a synthetic, ordered and simplified collection of the classical heritage for the Carolingian reader (Allott, Stephen, 1974). For this reason, in a letter to Charlemagne (*Epistula CLXX*), he underlines the need to implement a cultural union between cultural rebirth, the process at the basis of the imperial institution, and the tradition of studies and knowledge that reached through cultural mediations up to the intellectuals of the 9th century (Leonardi C., 1981).

In a letter, Alcuin asks Charlemagne to authorize him to send couriers to York to bring his books to the *schola*, those that have been defined as *eruditionis scholasticae libelli*, that is, “particularly precious for their scientific content, made for the school”. This explains Alcuin’s productivity in the field of liberal arts and, in particular, grammar (Law V., 1992). The *De grammatica*, therefore, was born in these years of intellectual reorganization, where it seemed to Alcuin that he was starting his life as a teacher again and was about to share his knowledge with a new group of intellectuals: it is a short booklet, which the students had to handy to refresh their memory, therefore for school use, which summarized what one needs to know about grammar (Holtz L., 2009).

Alcuin, inspired by the pedagogical philosophy of Augustine, in the dialogue *De rethorica e virtutibus*, reminds Charlemagne in two letters: to question *sapienter* is to *docere*, “to question with wisdom is to teach and if there is one who questions, another who teaches, the way of thinking in both proceeds from the same source: wisdom”. Not only is he a mediator of ancient culture and patristic culture, but he is the *magister* of the *schola palatii*, in which he re-examines and reorders the culture of the past, and loves to surround himself with masters who teach and discuss literature, liberal arts and philosophy (Holtz L., 2009).

Many erudite collections of epistles, such as those of Alcuin, testify to the exchanges of scientific information, moral advice and religious notions between masters and disciples: thus the late ancient manuals are reworked for the immediacy of the passage of information and Charlemagne himself is often depicted in these dialogues in the role of a diligent and cultured apprentice who questions the master and reacts competently to his requests.

This sentence seems to outline an entire pedagogical program, where Alcuin’s various didactic texts are characterized by dialogues between master students: in the introduction to the Disciplines, the master dialogues with a single pupil, who speaks on behalf of all the others; in *De grammatica*, he converses with two students, Franco and Saxo; in *De rethorica* and *De dialectica*, the master and the pupil are perfectly identified: they are Alcuin himself, with his Latinized name of Albinus, and the sovereign Charles. Since ancient times, the dialogic form has been the pedagogical form *par excellence*, that of Donato’s little grammar, extended by the island teachers to all types of pedagogical texts, where the teacher and the students are pervaded by a communicative enthusiasm, a sort of serene lyricism (D’Onofrio G., 2013).. According to Alcuin, rational knowledge brought us closer to God and allows us to draw all the good possible from the Holy Scriptures, whose study constitutes the culmination of the entire educational cycle. In these texts, whose sources are perfectly recognizable but which have not always been recognised, the master reveals himself, capable of reviving the discussion, of guiding the search for truth and of re-establishing the flow of exposition when it deviates. Isn’t Alcuin’s entire work a reflection on the acquisition of knowledge? “*Disce ut doceas*” was his motto inspired by Bede. In his correspondence we find the echo in the *Epistola de litteris colendis*: “Choose”, says the text, “men who have

the will and ability to learn and the desire to instruct others” and again in the letter XXVII he states “*qui not discit in pueritia, non docet in senectute*”. Therefore, in addition to grammar, rhetoric, logic, the arts of the *trivium*, within the palace school there was a strong interest in geometry, arithmetic, astronomy, music, called the arts of the *quadrivium* (Ernst Dümmler, 1985). In his *Propositiones ad acuendos juvenes*, in fact, most of the problems are of the kind of so-called “recreational mathematics”, which aims to improve the mental skills of young readers through questions of varying difficulty. At a time before Alcuin’s arrival in York, the study of arithmetic and geometry were promoted only because they served as an aid to other disciplines. Thanks to the figure of Charlemagne, a strong impulse was given to the teaching of arithmetic and geometry (in fact, in some letters we read how Charlemagne asks Alcuin for explanations about astrological and numerical elements).

The *Propositiones ad acuendos juvenes* are conceived as a tool to be used within the teaching activity of the *Schola palatina* and represent the oldest collection of mathematical problems in Latin known so far. The fifty-three texts that make up the collection, all with a final solution, can be traced back to the genre of so-called “recreational mathematics”, characterized by jokes, games, riddles, paradoxes, whose even partial reading of the *Propositiones* clearly shows the low level of knowledge mathematics of the time. However, the fact that Alcuin believed it was important to propose problem solving to refine the reasoning skills of young people remains interesting. Alcuin’s witty formulations were revolutionary as it was the first time that humour was used to stimulate students’ interest in arithmetic. The *Propositiones* are therefore important because some problems require deductive reasoning, but no calculation and they are the largest repertoire of puzzles in the Middle Ages as well as the first text in Latin to contain original mathematical material.

Alcuin’s role was also very important in terms of inclusion in religious education. He promoted religious and theological education for all, including disabled people, where in monastic schools and religious institutions, disabled people could receive basic education and participate in the spiritual life of the community. These institutions offered a structured and welcoming learning environment, where each individual could receive a personalized education and where Alcuin promoted the training of teachers to be able to teach a wide range of students, including those with disabilities. This included the development of specific pedagogical skills to manage the diverse needs of students and where Alcuin encouraged an inclusive approach to education, in which each individual was accepted and valued for their unique abilities. This approach was reflected in his educational vision, which aimed to develop the full potential of every student, regardless of their physical or cognitive differences. In his treatise, *De institutione et educatione hominum*, commonly known as the *De institutione*, written around 797 AD, he extensively discusses the importance of education and education for all people, including those who have physical or cognitive disabilities, promoting the inclusive approach to education and advocating that every individual had the right to receive an education suited to their abilities and potential. Although the work is not specifically dedicated to disabled people, it reflects his commitment to access to education for all, regardless of individual differences. In this context, it is likely that he considered it important to provide education adapted to the specific needs of people with disabilities, although specific details in this regard may not have been described.

4. Conclusions

The historical *excursus* aimed to expose the first approaches to universal educational principles, and specifically the figure of Alcuin of York known for the cultural and educational rebirth of Western Europe during the Carolingian period. In fact, Alcuin underlined the importance of education and culture in forming a better society and significantly influenced the development of medieval education in Europe. However, although access to a complete education remained mainly limited to the privileged social classes, a first timid attempt to extend it to the less well-off classes was promoted thanks to Charlemagne. Its initial approach to universal education was, only centuries later, clearly formulated by Jan Amos Comenius, a 17th century Czech educator and theologian, with the principle expressed in Latin as *Omnes, omnia, omnino* (All for all without distinction). This concept emphasized the importance of universal and inclusive education, arguing that every individual should have access to a comprehensive education and that education should be adapted to each person's needs and abilities (Pavone, 2010). Comenius believed that a good education was fundamental for social and individual progress and that, therefore, education should be accessible to all, regardless of their social origin or abilities. Since then, the universal principles of education have been adequately reflected in social and educational policies throughout the world, even if inequalities and contradictions continue to be present even in the 21st century (Mortari, 2007).

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