



**Proceedings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference  
of the Journal Scuola Democratica  
REINVENTING EDUCATION**

**VOLUME II**

**Learning with New Technologies,  
Equality and Inclusion**

ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA"

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**ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA"  
Via Francesco Satolli, 30 – 00165 - Rome, Italy**

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***Title* Proceedings of the Second International Conference of the Journal “Scuola Democratica” – Reinventing Education VOLUME II Learning with New Technologies, Equality and Inclusion**

This volume contains papers presented in the First International Conference of the Journal “Scuola Democratica” which took place at the University of Cagliari on 5-8 June 2019. The aim of the Conference was to bring together researchers, decision makers and educators from all around the world to investigate the concepts of “education” in a “post-democracy” era, the latter being a set of conditions under which scholars are called to face and counteract new forms of authoritarian democracy.

Populisms, racisms, discriminations and nationalisms have burst and spread on the international scene, translated and mobilized by sovereigntist political movements. Nourished by neo-liberalism and inflated by technocratic systems of governance these regressive forms of post-democracy are shaping historical challenges to the realms of education and culture: it is on this ground, and not only on the political and economic spheres, that decisive issues are at stake. These challenges are both tangible and intangible, and call into question the modern ideas of justice, equality and democracy, throughout four key dimensions of the educational function, all of which intersected by antinomies and uncertainties: ethical-political socialization, differences, inclusion, innovation.

The Conference has been an opportunity to present and discuss empirical and theoretical works from a variety of disciplines and fields covering education and thus promoting a trans- and inter-disciplinary discussion on urgent topics; to foster debates among experts and professionals; to diffuse research findings all over international scientific networks and practitioners’ mainstreams; to launch further strategies and networking alliances on local, national and international scale; to provide a new space for debate and evidences to educational policies. In this framework, more than 600 participants, including academics, educators, university students, had the opportunity to engage in a productive and fruitful dialogue based on researches, analyses and critics, most of which have been published in this volume in their full version.

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## Premise

In recent years, an important debate has developed on the role that digital technologies are playing and can play in the transformation of education and its institutions. Digital platforms, distance learning, blended learning, online training technologies are part of a significant restructuring and reculturing of the educational worlds. Digital technologies have restructured learning practices, educational content and the forms of educational governance which are immersed in public spaces and global markets. On the one hand, the digital governance of education contributes to changing and reconfiguring educational practices and the management of education on a local, national, international and transnational scale. On the other hand, technologies make possible the interconnection of multiple modes and shapes of formal, informal and non-formal education and training, producing forms of re-spatialization of education, locating the classroom within a digital learning ecosystem and favouring the emergence of different models of blended or hybrid learning.

The pandemic scenario has accelerated these processes, making more visible the tensions between multiple worlds of education and the processes of digitalization, while triggering a complex restructuring of educational institutions whose directions are not yet easily predictable. Perhaps, we are entering a new era that will mark the end of education as we have known it so far. In such a scenario, it becomes more urgent to carry on and debate an informed educational research, that explores the realities of the relations between education and digital technologies. This is especially needed because technologies are far from neutral. They are a heterogeneous technical and social world in which possibilities to change education for the better and make education fairer can be encountered as well as risks can be run of reproducing social and educational inequalities. Therefore, key questions are: how and in what direction the processes of digitalization are changing education, its practices and its governance? What are forms of coordination between educational technology markets and the institutional and educational actors in the emerging transnational governance arenas? How do the professional and social actors (teachers, managers, students, families) that are involved in the digitalization of education react to and translate these transformations? How do digital technologies change the aims and the curriculum of contemporary educational institutions? How can the digital competencies learned by students beyond the educational spaces (school and university) become a resource for learning processes and educational socialization in educational contexts? And above all, what are the possibilities that digital technologies offer us to reinvent education and its governance that are worth to be explored?

Papers collected in the Volume try to give preliminary answers to those issues. Furthermore, contributions from a range of experts, specialists and scholars cannot avoid facing educational inequalities which haven't by any means disappeared. They have rather changed and (re)combined into new forms that challenge the resilience of educational systems in terms of both effectiveness and equity. Several contributions published in the Volume aims to address these issues from a theoretical and empirical point of view, as well as their implications for educational policies. In this sense, proposals linked to educational inequalities in relation to social stratification as a factor affecting cognitive results, educational choices, the attainment of educational qualifications and working careers are of interest for the reader. Comparative research on different scale (comparisons between national, regional or local cases) is

particularly relevant and much importance is attached to the analysis of institutional factors (tracking, comprehensive vs selective systems, accountability policies, private education, ability grouping) which can produce educational segregation dynamics affecting educational inequalities, intersecting extra-curricular factors, such as urban segregation, for example.

The intertwining and interconnecting of differences (gender, socio-economic, cultural, ethnic, cognitive, and motivational factors) often generate inequalities both for their effects in themselves and in relation to the policies implemented to address them in their multidimensionality and intersectionality. Therefore, specific tracks on how education systems and educational institutions try to manage differences and end up producing inequalities are welcome.

The links between education and the labour market are another central aspect of research: the debate on the inflation of educational qualifications and over-education, the differential returns to education according to the type of diploma, degree program or type of tertiary program attended and, more generally, the relationship between education and social mobility represent a pivotal set of phenomena to understand production and reproduction of educational inequalities.

The applications of randomized controlled trials to the assessment of policies aimed at reducing inequalities and improving cognitive and career results as well as empirically driven reflections on how educational policies intersect the complex relationship between equity (equality and inclusion), quality and excellence are one of the main focuses researchers have dealt with in the collected papers.

Gender inequalities are a key topic to understand educational differences. Educational contexts are marked by a significant gender gap in staffing and in the formative experiences of children, teenagers and young students. These differences reflect and often reproduce gender stereotypes and asymmetries in societies at large. How are gender issues addressed in classrooms? Where are they encountered in training settings? What models do teachers convey, and what are the emotional responses from students of diverse gender? How do educational institutions practice and reproduce gender stereotypes and asymmetries? Can school and university provide contexts in which to acquire gender awareness and tackle gender issues? What are the responsibilities of educational contexts in the representation of gender in society? What experiences and good practices have been activated to promote greater gender equity? What cultural resistances? Several questions are addressed in the Volume and many are the answers discussed.

Many forms of educational segregation persist, yet today a growing presence of women – which are in some cases becoming a majority – is found even in fields that have historically been a male domain; this is the case, for example, of medicine and biology in higher education. International and national data show that many things have changed in recent decades, and gender equity is rising in all spheres of education and training. At the same time, several initiatives have been launched to promote greater awareness of gender stereotypes and prevent phenomena such as discrimination and gender-based violence. However, much remains to be done – not least to prevent backlashes and the emergence of new inequalities alongside

established ones. This is the case, for example, of the asymmetries in accessing fields of knowledge that may become relevant for the future of work (e.g., digital skills), or the development of new practices of discrimination related to the use of new technologies (e.g., hate speech or revenge porn).

Younger generations have been challenging those constraints surviving from the past, but new challenges arise in a constantly evolving global environment, where the urgency of the climate crisis in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic call for societal radical shifts while populism, unemployment, artificial intelligence, remote education and communication are affecting the ordinary daily life as we knew it.

Some analysts fear the pandemic will spur a new kind of backlash against the very basis of global society, from migration to cooperation and interdependence, while others worry about younger generations' abilities to overcome mass unemployment and economic vulnerability. Economic, political and environmental crisis are now fully part of the youth horizon: how are formal, informal and non-formal education going to support young people in moving forward positively and purposefully in their lives while simultaneously ensuring space for their autonomy, decision-making and voice?

Such general question contains intersected and multiple issues and applies across contexts as diverse as the role and relevance of democracy as educational content, the changing landscape of non-formal learning/education, the forging of future visions on politics, digital technologies and the media, youth educational transitions, youth experiences at work, the relation between consumerism and environmentalism, the widening of opportunities and constraints stemming out from cooperative learning and digital exchange tools.

Social research and youth studies have been producing a wide range of analyses on these relevant issues, with the (re) emergence of broader theories and empirical inquiries directed towards the recognition and validation of non-formal education, the promotion of youth participation, and the deeper rethinking of youth policies.

Under the large umbrella of an education to be re-invented, papers in the Volume are dedicated to new generations, transitions and the future of education, with a broad, multidisciplinary, and internationally set of contributions focusing on a variegated platform of topics on youth studies theories, critical analysis of relevant societal debates surrounding youth in and out education; in and out the labour market; on youth transitions throughout and across cultures, statuses, roles, responsibilities and institutions; on the impact of the various initiatives to promote and enhance youth participation; on the role of youth organisations as well as on the strengths and weaknesses of youth policies at both a national and supranational level.



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## Misperceptions in the Social Construction of the Disabled Body. A Research in the Perspective of Disability Studies

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**ABSTRACT:** *Social representations of the body with disabilities have for centuries been associated with the idea of illness, lack, or abnormality. The body with disabilities has been seen as a 'monstrum', as a malformed body, the expression of a sin and a fault; as a sick body to be rehabilitated, as an infantile body. This way of representing the «disabled body» ended up orienting both attitudes and the social treatment of disabled people, through concealment, segregation, confinement, reification within domestic or institutional contexts. At most, the disabled body is object of pietistic glances, between disturbance and curiosity. For some years now, however, we have been witnessing a redefinition of what is considered a body worthy of being shown on the public stage: models with prosthesis win beauty contests; athletes show with ease their prosthesis; war wounded pose on calendars; many films and tv series have non-standard or non-conventional protagonists, far from the western cultural norms. Is this an important cultural shift or a form of defense by the social system which incorporates the otherness in order to normalize it? This paper intends to focus attention around the social representations of disability according to the theoretical and interpretative perspective of Disability Studies. The results of this research conducted with a specific survey tool will be presented, on the basis of a sample of male and female secondary school students. The purpose of the survey is to investigate the social representations of disability held by young people, paying particular attention to the sense of justice and fairness, to dichotomous ideas of independence/dependence, care/assistance, the claim of rights/sense of pity, legitimate/illegitimate body.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Disability Studies, Social Representations, Body, Ableism, School*

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This article is the result of the authors' joint work. It should be noted, however, that Fabio Bocci is responsible for paragraph 1, Alessandra Maria Straniero for paragraph 2, Valentina Domenici for paragraphs 3.1 and 3.2, and Gianmarco Bonavolontà for paragraph 3.3. Conclusions are in common.

## 1. Theoretical framework

This report is based on a vast literature that investigates the relationship lasted for decades between the disabled body or those we may call «other body» and society (Foucault, 2007; Goffman, 2003; Stiker, 1982; Gardou, 2006); it refers to discursive rhetoric (Vadalà, 2013) and media representations (Monceri, 2012); it is a part of a specific branch of research that we are bringing on, already started several years ago (Bocci, 2005, 2012, 2013, 2020; Bocci, Bonavolontà, 2013, 2020; Bocci, Domenici, 2013, 2019; Bocci, Straniero, 2020).

Specifically, we have focused on perception and representation of «different bodies» defined as such because they embody a dissimilarity from the dominant bodily and behavioral norms in Western societies.

From a historical perspective, the body with disability has been seen as a *monstrum*; as a malformed body, an expression of sin and guilt; as a diseased body to be rehabilitated; as an infantile body.

This way of representing the «disabled one» has orientated both attitudes and social treatment «reserved» to people with disabilities: concealment, segregation, and confinement within domestic or institutional contexts.

In the best-case scenario, the disabled body is viewed through eyes of pity, through looks and glances mixed with disturbance and curiosity (Oliver, 1990; Stiker, 1997; Goffman, 2003; Ferrucci, 2004; Medeghini, Valtellina, 2006; Fiedler, 2009; Griffio, 2010; Carlson, 2015; Murphy, 2017). Charles Gardou (2006) talked about an insular existence, reified (echoing Marx), and (echoing Murphy) caged in a condition of liminality.

Today we are witnessing a redefinition of what is considered a body worthy of being shown on the public stage: it has become increasingly common to see models with prosthesis who participate to beauty contests; athletes who proudly show their prosthesis; films and television series with characters who are physically and mentally different from the dominant western cultural norms.

And it is precisely this redefinition that intrigues us. Are we facing a cultural shift, a social change toward a more democratic and ethical society?

Or is it just a superficial change that therefore does not transform the deep dynamics of social recognition and legitimation? Is it a change that affects only bodies with disabilities that somehow manage to fit into the idea of normality, because they satisfy certain values of neoliberalism?

Our hypothesis is that the change is superficial and not one of systemic nor structural.

That is, society has not changed its own paradigms of reference (the run-up to productivity, performance, autonomy, etc.) but has instead incorporated the «different bodies» (that are disciplined in the Foucauldian sense of the term), so that they finally appear *normal* as well, since they are normalized (Bocci, Domenici, 2019).

Nowadays the question of otherness no longer seems to have a marginal role but, on the contrary, has fully entered into the mainstream and it's at the centre of audiovisual narratives (films; tv and web series; commercials). Just think of hit tv shows such as *Game of Thrones*, played by Peter Hayden Dinklage, who is actually a person with achondroplastic dwarfism; or the sit-com *Big Bang Theory*, whose protagonists seem to be autistic subjects (in particular the character of Sheldon Cooper, who has many typical characteristics of the now abandoned, as a diagnostic label, Asperger's Syndrome). Reference can also be made to characters completely out of standard, such as Walter White, hero of the cult tv series *Breaking Bad*; or Shaun Murphy, the protagonist of the tv series *The Good Doctor*, who plays a high-functioning autistic (Savant Syndrome, to be exact), landed in prime time in the flagship network of Rai (Bocci, 2019). In practice, the category of normality is not questioned as an agent of discrimination and exclusion, but it is simply enlarged to include other bodies – not all of course –, as long as these bodies remain inside the framework in which Western society recognizes itself. In this way, the different bodies are immunized (according to the concept of immunization proposed by the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito), causing them a loss of their potential transformative force. In other words, society encompasses them, incorporates them, and somehow neutralizes them.

## 2. Bebe Vio case study

Let's take an example from advertising in Italy. The Italian fencer Bebe Vio, star in many commercials and frequent guest on many mainstream television programs, is now an example of positivity and joy, a contemporary heroine. Her presence in the media has radically altered the traditional narrative of physical disability, considering that the presence of people with disabilities on Italian television appears historically to be under-represented or anyway limited to the emotional tellings, linked to the material difficulties encountered in daily life (CENSIS, 2010; Bocci, Domenici, 2019). In a study by Melchior (2020), some commercials where Bebe Vio is the protagonist are analyzed. The description of the commercials shows that the champion is never shown in passive attitudes but always in activity; the back image is that of a visibly skilled person, despite the presence of the prostheses. Another characterizing element is the absence of social relationships: Vio is almost always represented alone and even when other people appear on the screen, they never enter into an effective relationship with her. At last, the protagonist is always immersed in exceptional and extraordinary situations. From this brief description we understand how much the typical narrative of the media about disability is completely absent: the medical dimension is missing, there is no reference to disability nor to the idea of being able to do whatever, as well as dependence on others

or vulnerability, and emotional tragic perspective neither. This radical modification of the narrative is due on the one hand to the staging of Vio's willpower and, on the other, to the presence of the prostheses that allow her not only to overcome the impairment but to become extraordinary, that is, out of the ordinary (certainly out of «normality» of being disabled, as it is commonly represented). It seems to us, therefore, that, in order to become a symbol of overcoming the difficulties caused by disability, a model of positivity and *joie de vivre*, it was necessary to make Vio adhere to those typical ideals of neoliberal societies, which are performativity, skills, success, individualism, independence, self-control. These are at the very basis of the myth of the able body which instead of being questioned or deconstructed gets actually stronger. In the neoliberal vision, on the other hand, investing in oneself, control of one's own body, especially in the long term, and responsibility towards one's life become crucial. Individuals become worthy of attention, recognition and legitimation by society only if they, and their bodies, are perceived as objects of investment, first of all by the individual himself, who takes care of himself (Foucault, 2004; as cited in Bocci, Straniero, 2020). As Casalini writes, «All bodies of all sizes and all complexion colors, no matter if able-bodied or not, if old or young, can be valid if an investment / consumption is possible on them» (Casalini, 2017, 584). The way Vio's body is represented in the media shows how to make acceptable and representable her body are the principles of neoliberalism, among which we may name performance, ability, success, individualism, independence, and self-control.

Certainly, there are many other examples in TV, movies, commercials etc.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1. Sample*

We decided to test our hypotheses through a specific questionnaire called «*QueIVeD Questionnaire Images, Visual Imagination and Diversity*».

Here we present first and partial results of our survey aimed at investigating the social representations held by young people (aged between 11 to 23) about disability. Particular attention was given to sense of fairness, equity, and opposition of ideas such as independence/dependency, care/assistance, demands for rights/sense of pity, legitimate/not legitimate body.

We decided to administer the questionnaire to young people for two main reasons:

- because they are Millennials, born and raised in the age of social media, in western multicultural societies

- because these students live in a society where the inclusion of diversity is one of the main values of the education system.

### *3.1. Tools and procedure*

The questionnaire is composed of 56 questions, most of which are closed-ended and divided into 3 parts: the first and general part (items 1-8) aimed at describing the characteristics of the sample; the second and more specific part (items 9-37) aimed at investigating social representations of disability using a series of pictures of various people; the third part (items 38-56) aimed at analyzing the dichotomies previously exposed through the degree of agreement with a series of statements.

Section 1 presents a series of images of characters for each of which a description is requested, responding to these requests: «This person is a / a... or This person is the / the...». No answer options were given, but we preferred to leave an answer open. The goal was to bring out the idea of the role (social, media, etc.) that those characters can play in their lives possessed by students, without risking giving any guidance in the answers. In particular, we were interested in understanding the perception of the young students in front of images of characters unknown to them. After viewing the image and the first question, another question follows: «Did you already know this character?». If the answer is «Yes», the participant can proceed to the next question. If the answer is «No» (in the case that the character displayed is not known to the participant), another portion of the screen is displayed in which the descriptions of the characters and the question with alternative answer have been inserted (very, quite, little, not at all): «How surprised is this information?».

We have selected personalities from sports, entertainment, cinema, politics. Here are some examples: Sara Gama, soccer player, captain of the Italian national team and sports manager; Peter Dinklage, actor, well-known protagonist of the TV series *Game of Thrones*; Aaron Philip, transgender model with disabilities; Audrey Tang, Taiwanese Information Technology and Technology Minister; Bebe Vio, multiple fencing champion of the Italian Paralympic national team.

The survey was conducted through the use of an online questionnaire administered during the month of May 2021, with voluntary student participation. The identification of the survey units was done through non-probabilistic snow-ball sampling.

## **4. Results**

A total of 77 replies to the questionnaire was recorded. Approximately 47% of the participants are aged from 12 (twelve) to 17 (minors), while the remaining (approximately 53%) are over the age of 17 (adults).

Regarding the type of school attended, almost half of the participants (48.1%) come from technical schools, 45.5% of the sample are attending the high schools (Italian high schools) and the remaining 6.5% are attending the first year of secondary school (middle school).

97.4% of the participants state that they do not have a disability, 88.3% do not have learning difficulties, 93.5% do not have a specific learning disorder. When asked: «Are you a person who considers themselves neuro-diverse?», 88.3% answered no, 3.9% said yes.

In general, the results show that the average participant leans towards a non-discriminatory view.

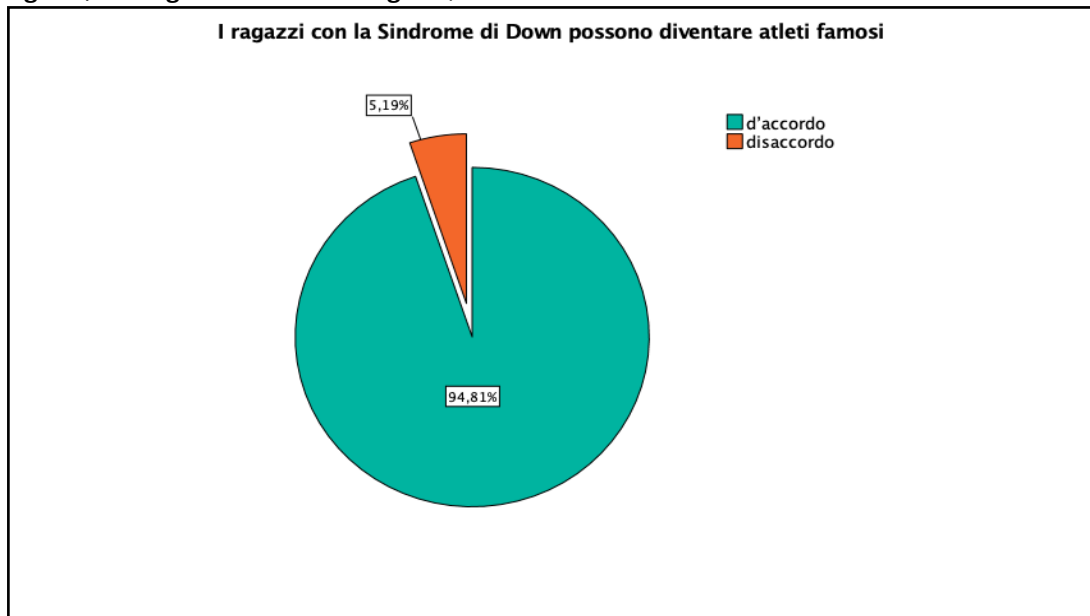
This is clearly true for statements that have as their underlying opposition pair of ideas legitimate body/not legitimate body; here the sample was explicit, expressing disagreement with statements claiming that it is impossible for disabled bodies to attend beauty contests or sports competitions («A person who has prosthetic legs is better off not participating in a beauty contest», Fig. 1; «Boys with Down Syndrome can become famous athletes», Fig. 2).

This could be read in two ways: on one hand these young people were born in the age of inclusion and therefore have an inclusive vision of society and relationships; on the other in recent years there has been a lot of talking, even at the mainstream level, about diversity, which girls and boys that composed our sample do not seem indifferent to.

**FIG. 1.** A person who has prosthetic legs is better off not participating in a beauty contest (green colour = agree; orange colour = disagree).



**FIG. 2.** Boys with Down Syndrome can become famous athletes (green colour = agree; orange colour = disagree).

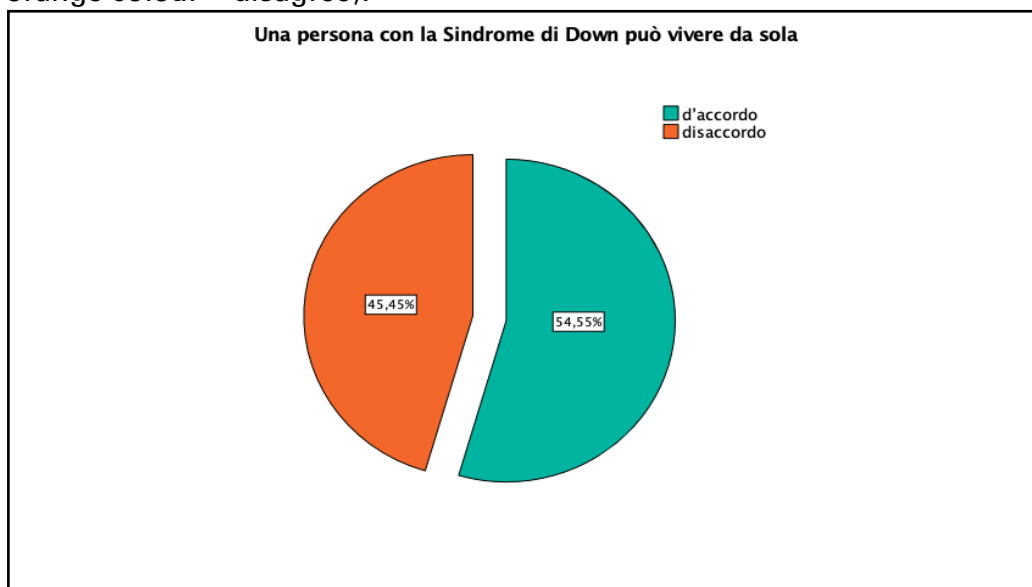


However, it is interesting to further examine some of the responses provided.

When asked: «A person with Down's Syndrome can live alone», 54.5% of the sample state that they agree, 45.5% disagree (Fig. 3).

Thus, it appears that a substantial portion of the participants do not believe that people with Down syndrome have the ability to live, with all necessary support, independently. It is possible that there is a lack of knowledge concerning the experience of people with Down Syndrome who live independently in different parts of Italy.

**FIG. 3.** A person with Down's Syndrome can live alone (green colour = agree; orange colour = disagree).



This opinion is also confirmed by answers to the statement «A person who needs assistance is not free», 18.2% agreed (Fig. 4).

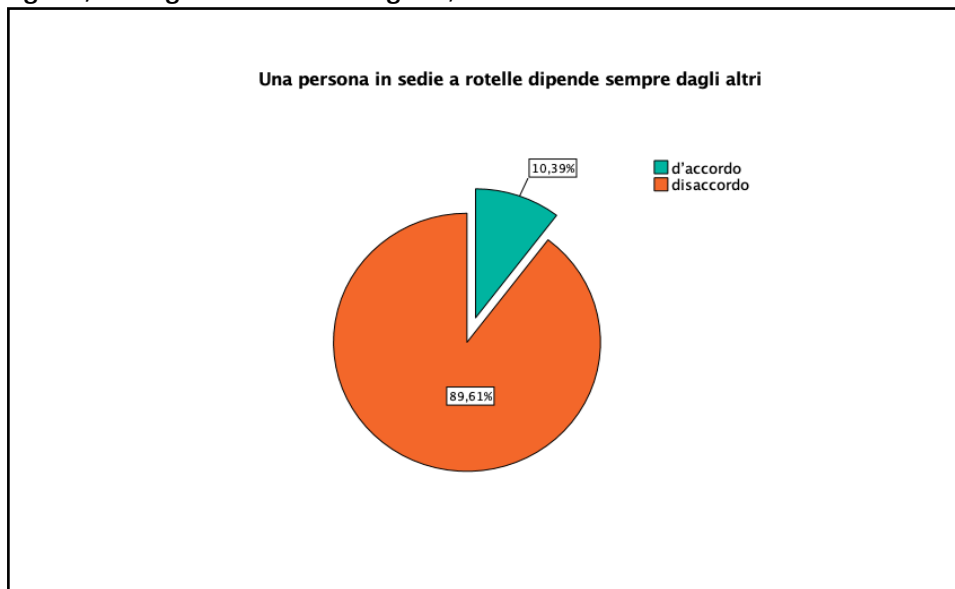
This data could be a push for teachers to start addressing the issue of independent living for people with disabilities, particularly in high school classrooms.

**FIG. 4.** A person who needs assistance is not free (green colour = agree; orange colour = disagree).



This lack of belief in the possibility to live independently as an adult does not seem to be so clear compared to physical disability, given that only the 10.8% of the sample (and however the percentage is to be monitored) agrees with the statement «A person in a wheelchair always depends on others» (Fig. 5).

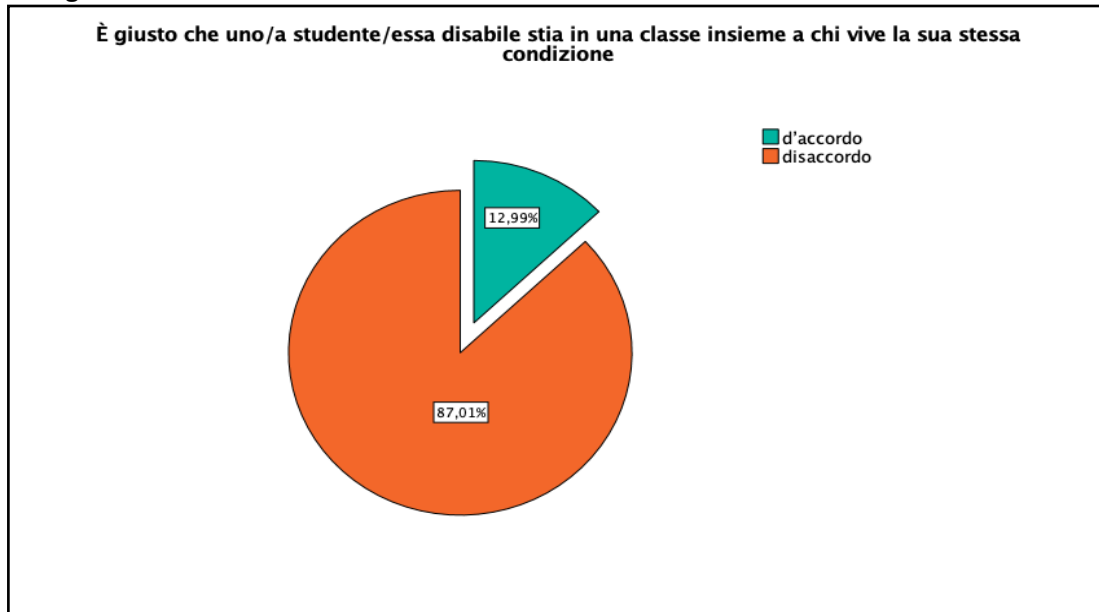
**FIG. 5.** A person in a wheelchair always depends on others (green colour = agree; orange colour = disagree).





Another result on which we want to focus concerns the statement: «It is right for a disabled student to study in a classroom together with those who have the same condition», 13% agreed, and that was unexpected, given the spread of inclusive discussions in schools (Fig. 6).

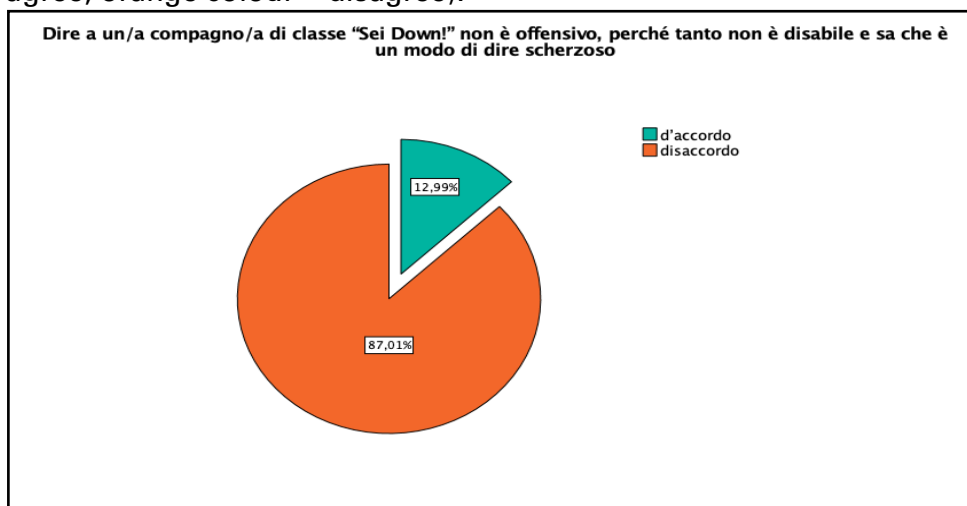
**FIG. 6.** It is right for a disabled student to study in a classroom together with those who have the same condition (green colour = agree; orange colour = disagree).



This result should be analyzed in order to find out if inclusion at school is a political slogan rather than a real practice.

The same goes for the results regarding the statement: «Telling a classmate 'You have the Down Syndrome' is not offensive, because he/she is not disabled and knows well that it is a joke» (Fig. 7). Also, in this case, 13% agree.

**FIG. 7.** Telling a classmate 'You have the Down Syndrome' is not offensive, because he/she is not disabled and knows well that it is a joke (green colour = agree; orange colour = disagree).



## Conclusions

The results of our survey addressed to the millennials would seem to indicate that younger people do indeed hold a more ethical, fairer and more democratic view of society. They seem not to be surprised or disoriented by the presence of diversity in society and to be at ease with representations and narratives in which otherness, previously excluded, marginalised or stigmatised, takes on a central role instead. We could say that these results are not only expected but desired, and indeed they are. However, one question remains open. Is this a superficial or a profound change? In other words, are the answers given by the girls and boys involved dictated by the introjection of political correctness that has legitimized within certain boundaries (those of the norm) the different bodies by incorporating them into (and thanks to) the mainstream narrative, or do they actually imply a questioning of the construct of normality with all its consequences, first of all the real accepting and not in a formal way the presence of irreducible and therefore disconcerting bodies? In our view, this is a crucial issue for framing and better understanding the phenomenon. A question that, as a working group, we intend to deepen in a second phase of the research centered on focus groups with girls and boys who participated at the survey and others who will be further involved, a phase in which we will try to better understand some problems that we found on the level of language with reference to some items of the Questionnaire.

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