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VULNERABILITY AS A FUNDAMENTAL CATEGORY OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: THEORETICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES FOR CONVERGENCE BETWEEN GENERAL PEDAGOGY AND SPECIAL PEDAGOGY

ABSTRACT

This article proposes a theoretical-pedagogical analysis of vulnerability as a fundamental category of education, capable of creating a shared conceptual ground between general pedagogy and special pedagogy. Vulnerability is not understood as a pathological or exceptional condition, but as a constitutive trait of human beings and an epistemic criterion for inclusive educational projects.

The article explores the philosophical-anthropological foundations of vulnerability (Nussbaum 2011; Levinas 1982; Ricoeur 1990; Mortari 2015), the paradigm of transformative inclusion (Booth and Ainscow 2014; Florian 2014) and the pedagogical implications for the design of inclusive educational contexts.

The aim is to redefine vulnerability as a pedagogical principle and to make an original contribution to scientific research by offering an integrated theoretical framework capable of guiding future inclusive experiments and designs.

KEYWORDS: *vulnerability, inclusive education, Universal Design for Learning, philosophy of care.*

INTRODUCTION

This study adopts a qualitative research design within an interpretative paradigm (Creswell, 2014), aimed at exploring how vulnerability is understood and enacted in inclusive educational practices. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 teachers working in inclusive contexts (primary and secondary levels). Participants were selected based on their experience in inclusive education. The interview protocol focused on representations of vulnerability, inclusive teaching strategies, and perceived challenges. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing the identification of recurring patterns. Although the study does not aim at statistical generalisation, it provides analytically transferable insights that connect theoretical reflection with educational practice.

The current educational context is characterised by increasing complexity, plurality of needs, social fragility and diversity of abilities. These conditions require a rethinking of the theoretical and methodological foundations of education, overcoming the traditional dichotomy between general pedagogy and special pedagogy.

The aim of this paper is to analyse and redefine the paradigm of vulnerability as a fundamental category of education, highlighting its ability to create a conceptual bridge between general pedagogy and special pedagogy.

The article offers an original contribution to scientific pedagogical research by: (1) redefining vulnerability beyond its historical association with deficit or marginality; (2) proposing an integrated theoretical framework of moral philosophy, pedagogy of care and transformative inclusion; (3) providing conceptual guidelines for inclusive educational design.

1. VULNERABILITY AS AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND PEDAGOGICAL CATEGORY

Vulnerability represents a structural condition of human existence, defining dependence and interdependence as intrinsic elements of subjectivity. Far from being a contingent, accidental, or pathological state, vulnerability constitutes a constitutive feature of human life: individuals enter the world in a state of exposure, need, and relational dependence. From this perspective, vulnerability is not synonymous with weakness; rather, it marks the relational openness that renders growth, learning, and ethical responsibility possible. It is precisely through this relational exposure that human beings develop capacities for care, empathy, and communal engagement, highlighting the inherently social dimension of education (Tronto, 2013).

According to Nussbaum (2011, 33–34), the development of human capabilities is inseparable from supportive relationships and institutional contexts. Vulnerability, in this framework, is not an ontological limitation; it functions instead as a regulative principle for education, emphasizing that human potential can only flourish within enabling social and political conditions (Nussbaum, 2011, 18–19). This approach reframes vulnerability as a public and collective concern: if capabilities are always situated and relational, then education must actively construct equitable, inclusive, and enabling environments. In practice, this suggests that pedagogical strategies cannot be neutral or purely procedural; they must be responsive to the structural conditions that shape students' opportunities for flourishing.

Philosophical perspectives further deepen this understanding. Levinas (1982, 88–89) foregrounds ethical responsibility toward the Other as the fundamental basis of human action, situating the educational encounter as the primary space in which the face of the Other challenges the self and calls for unconditional

responsibility (Mariani, 2024, 13–26; Levinas, 1982, 98). In tandem, Ricoeur (1990, 188–190) emphasizes the narrative constitution of identity: recognizing the fragility of others is essential for the formation of selfhood, which emerges through the dialectical interplay of vulnerability and promise. Mortari (2015, 27–29) extends this to pedagogy, proposing care as an original stance in which fragility functions as a guiding principle for educational planning (Mortari, 2015, 71–73). Collectively, these theorists suggest that vulnerability is simultaneously ethical, relational, and pedagogical, forming the foundation for educational practices that foreground responsiveness and responsibility.

Contemporary theorists further expand this framework. Butler (2004, 23–24) conceptualizes vulnerability as constitutive of bodily and relational exposure, where human beings are always *entrusted* to social, normative, and political networks that mediate recognition, security, and survival. In *Precarious Life*, she argues that precariousness is not evenly distributed but politically structured, meaning some lives are systematically exposed to material and symbolic violence (Butler, 2004, 25–32). Unlike Nussbaum, who emphasizes the enabling conditions for human flourishing, Butler highlights the critical and performative dimensions of power that produce differential vulnerability. From an educational perspective, this critique demands reflection not only on access to learning opportunities but also on the normative frameworks that define which students are considered capable, worthy, or *educable*, underscoring the inherently political character of pedagogy.

Fineman (2008, 8–12) introduces a complementary lens, framing vulnerability as universal and constant while noting that resources for managing it are unevenly distributed. She argues for a reorientation of institutional responsibility: the state and social institutions must construct mechanisms of resilience, redistribution, and inclusivity to support vulnerable individuals across the lifespan (Fineman, 2008, 19–23). Applied to education, this perspective stresses that inclusion cannot rely solely on teacher sensitivity or classroom strategies but must be embedded in systemic structures, governance, and resource allocation to ensure equitable educational outcomes. Whereas Nussbaum focuses on the realization of capabilities as the goal of political action, Fineman emphasizes the legal-political and institutional architecture required to sustain human potential in the face of vulnerability.

Integrating these perspectives produces a multidimensional understanding of vulnerability in education:

- With Levinas, vulnerability acquires an ethical and relational dimension;
- With Ricoeur, it becomes hermeneutic and narrative, shaping identity formation;
- With Mortari, it informs a pedagogical stance rooted in care;
- With Nussbaum, it serves as a criterion for justice and human development;
- With Butler, it functions as a critical lens revealing asymmetries of recognition;
- With Fineman, it defines a legal-political responsibility of institutions.

This synthesis reconceptualizes vulnerability not as a marginal or deficient condition but as a generative and constitutive principle of human subjectivity. It becomes a guiding framework for educational planning, emphasizing relationality, responsibility, and structural justice. Vulnerability thus serves as a call to transform educational spaces into environments of recognition, care, and equity, where fragility is not a limitation but a foundation for dialogue, mutual growth, and shared empowerment. In organizational and institutional contexts, such a reconceptualization highlights the need for pedagogical and policy strategies that operationalize inclusivity, foster resilience, and support both the ethical and developmental dimensions of learning.

2. OVERCOMING THE DEFICIT PARADIGM: VULNERABILITY AND INCLUSION

Special education has historically adopted a deficit-centred approach, focusing on compensatory interventions and individual adaptation strategies. This paradigm, rooted in a medical-clinical model, has played an important role in securing the legal recognition of the rights of persons with disabilities and in promoting the establishment of specialised support measures. Nevertheless, as highlighted by numerous studies published in international journals in the field, this approach has also contributed to reinforcing categorical representations of

difference, often anchored in diagnostic classifications and in rigid distinctions between what is considered *normal* and what is considered *special* (Tomlinson, 2017; Norwich, 2013). While diagnostic categorisation facilitates access to resources and targeted interventions, scholars such as Slee (2011) argue that it simultaneously produces processes of labelling that symbolically marginalise those who are categorised, perpetuating social and educational inequities.

In Italy, scholarly debate has reflected similar tensions. Journals such as the *Italian Journal of Special Education for Inclusion* and *L'integrazione scolastica e sociale* have highlighted the historical emphasis on integration as a policy objective, while also pointing toward the broader and more transformative notion of inclusion (Canevaro, 2013; Ianes, 2015; d'Alonzo, 2016). Integration, while a critical step in enabling students with disabilities to attend mainstream schools, largely assumed the adaptation of the individual to existing structures and curricula. Inclusion, by contrast, demands systemic transformation: it shifts the focus from modifying the learner to restructuring the educational environment itself, with attention to curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional culture, in order to accommodate a plurality of abilities and learning styles.

Booth and Ainscow (2014), through the *Index for Inclusion*, provide a practical and conceptual framework for this transformative approach. They argue that inclusive education is not reducible to a set of technical strategies; rather, it is a continuous, critical process of reviewing and reshaping school cultures, policies, and practices to remove barriers to participation and learning. From this standpoint, difference is not an exception to be managed, but a normative starting point for designing educational experiences that are equitable and meaningful for all learners. Florian (2014) further develops this perspective by proposing the principle of the *normality of diversity*. According to Florian, inclusive educational design must anticipate learner variability from the outset, creating flexible and responsive learning environments. This approach contrasts sharply with compensatory differentiation, which risks isolating or stigmatizing students who require additional support. Instead, inclusive pedagogy seeks to expand opportunities for all, using strategies such as differentiated instruction, co-creation of learning activities, and collaborative problem-solving (Florian, 2014).

Internationally, the *Universal Design for Learning* (UDL) framework has advanced these ideas by emphasising anticipatory planning to remove barriers before they occur (Ghedini & Mazzocut, 2017, 145–162). UDL aligns with the inclusive paradigm by promoting flexibility in curriculum, assessment, and teaching methods to accommodate learner diversity proactively. At the same time, critical analyses, notably by Slee (2018), remind educators and policymakers that inclusion is never merely a pedagogical technique; it is a deeply political and cultural project. Exclusion is produced by systemic power relations, and therefore achieving inclusion requires addressing structural inequities, challenging normative assumptions about ability, and reshaping the social and institutional frameworks in which education occurs (AA.VV., 2018).

Within this evolving discourse, vulnerability emerges as a key epistemic and regulatory category. Epistemically, vulnerability reframes disability not as an individual deficit but as a manifestation of the relational and contextual nature of human experience: learning and participation are always co-constructed in interaction with the environment. Regulatory, vulnerability provides criteria for guiding educational planning toward justice, recognition, and inclusive participation. When interpreted through Fineman's (2008) perspective on institutional responsibility and Butler's (2004) analysis of the uneven distribution of precariousness, vulnerability becomes a lens through which disability can be situated within a broader inclusive horizon. It moves the discussion beyond medicalisation, exceptionalism, or the isolated management of *special* learners and towards the design of educational systems capable of supporting all members equitably.

This reconceptualisation produces a profound paradigm shift: the field moves from special education as a segregated or exception-based domain to inclusive education as the organising principle of the entire system. Vulnerability, understood as universal but contextually mediated, functions as a tool for systemic analysis: it identifies structural and pedagogical barriers, informs teacher training, and guides the creation of learning environments that value diversity and promote equity. Consequently, the inclusive approach integrates both ethical and structural responsibilities, positioning education not simply as a site of instruction but as a space for recognition, participation, and transformative social engagement.

3. PEDAGOGICAL AND DIDACTIC IMPLICATIONS: DESIGNING INCLUSIVE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

Assuming vulnerability as a fundamental category implies rethinking educational planning not as a simple technical adaptation, but as a systemic process involving relational, methodological and organisational dimensions. From this perspective, vulnerability is not an attribute of certain students, but a structural condition that challenges the entire educational environment. International research on inclusive education has progressively highlighted how approaches focused exclusively on individualised intervention are less effective than ecological and universal models, which are capable of influencing the overall quality of the context (Florian 2014; Slee 2018).

The basic assumptions of *Universal Design for Learning* (UDL) are essentially twofold: 1) everyone learns differently and 2) skills are influenced by contextual characteristics (Hall-Meyer-Rose, 2012). *Universal Design for Learning* (along with other conceptualisation attempts, such as *Universal Instructional Design*, *Universal Design for Instruction*, and *Universal Design for Education*) represents the application of these principles in the field of education.

Universal Design for Learning (CAST 2018) provides operational guidelines consistent with these principles, suggesting the design of flexible and accessible environments through a variety of means of representation, action-expression and engagement. The principles and guidelines of UDL imply, first of all, a critique of the approach to teaching based on a single, uniform offering for all: if everyone learns differently, it makes no sense to offer only one type of tool and methodology. Secondly, since context plays a very important role, it is clear that much attention must be paid to the ways in which individual differences are taken into account. For reflections on pedagogy and special education, *Universal Design for Learning* represents a significant conceptualisation that can serve as a backdrop to the idea of inclusive teaching that takes into account the enormous variability of human differences (Savia, 2013; Mangiatordi, 2017), but also of the expressive richness hidden in fragility, without neglecting an ethic of care «understood as a demanding relational paradigm that extends to the entire human sphere» (Alici, 2016, 10).

Universal Design for Learning is an approach to instructional design developed by CAST (Center for Applied Special Technology) that recognises individual differences in the learning process as the norm and considers flexibility to be a prerequisite for educational provision, so that it is characterised, from the outset, by a variety of customisable options. Studies published in *Educational Research Review and Learning, Media and Technology* show that the systematic application of UDL principles is associated with increased active participation and a reduction in perceived barriers for students with and without disabilities (Rao, Ok, and Bryant 2014; Al-Azawei, Serenelli, and Lundqvist 2016). Empirical data indicate that design flexibility does not exclusively benefit specific groups, but improves the quality of the learning experience for the entire educational community, confirming the hypothesis that anticipating barriers is more effective than compensating for them *ex post*.

However, inclusive design cannot be limited to a set of technical guidelines. It requires a shared pedagogical culture based on values and practices consistent with the centrality of vulnerability. First and foremost, cooperation and reciprocity, as emphasised by Booth and Ainscow (2014), are structural conditions for inclusion. The literature published in the *International Journal of Inclusive Education* highlights that school contexts characterised by collaborative leadership and co-teaching practices show higher levels of participation and perceived well-being (Ainscow 2020). Vulnerability, in this sense, becomes a relational principle: recognising interdependence means overcoming the individualistic logic of performance and valuing the group as a shared learning space. Secondly, error as a learning tool – in line with the reflective stance proposed by Mortari (2015) – is reflected in research on growth mindset and formative assessment practices. Longitudinal studies published in the *Review of Educational Research* show that environments that legitimise error as a stage in the cognitive process promote greater perseverance and self-regulation (Dweck 2017). From this perspective, cognitive vulnerability – exposure to the risk of making mistakes – is not stigmatised but recognised as a condition that generates knowledge.

The narrative and affective dimension, referred to by Ricoeur (1990), is confirmed by research on social and emotional learning (SEL), widely documented in *Educational Psychologist* and the *Journal of Educational Psychology*.

Meta-analyses conducted on large school samples show that programmes aimed at developing emotional skills produce significant improvements in both academic and relational terms (Durlak et al. 2011). Integrating vulnerability into design therefore means recognising the affective dimension as a structural component of learning, not as an accessory element. Finally, ethical responsibility towards others, from a Levinasian perspective (Levinas 1982), translates operationally into the construction of environments that promote authentic participation and recognition. Qualitative studies published in Teaching and Teacher Education highlight how the most effective inclusive practices are those in which teachers adopt a reflective and dialogical stance, recognising their own shared responsibility in the production of more or less inclusive contexts (Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011).

In this context, vulnerability is not only a condition of the student, but also of the teacher and the institution, who are called upon to expose themselves to critical review of their practices. From this perspective, general pedagogy and special pedagogy converge in the construction of inclusive environments, overcoming the traditional epistemological separation between normality and speciality. Vulnerability becomes a design principle – guiding methodological flexibility, cooperation and personalisation – and an epistemic orientation, as it allows education to be interpreted as a relational process based on interdependence.

The redefinition of vulnerability as a foundational category allows for a twofold paradigm shift: from deficit to relationship, and from compensatory intervention to universal design. National and international scientific evidence shows that flexible, cooperative and emotionally meaningful educational environments produce better outcomes in terms of participation, learning and well-being.

Therefore, adopting vulnerability as a regulatory principle means recognising that inclusion is not an additional strategy, but the very form of a fair education. In this context, special education is no longer a separate field, but rather a critical lens capable of questioning the entire education system, contributing to the construction of contexts capable of transforming fragility into a shared opportunity for growth.

The empirical data collected support the theoretical framework outlined in this article. Teachers tend to interpret vulnerability as a shared and relational condition rather than an individual deficit. Inclusive practices are grounded in

trust, recognition and cooperation. Learning difficulties are often understood as emerging from the interaction between the student and the educational environment, confirming a systemic and ecological view of inclusion. These findings reinforce the shift from deficit-based approaches to relational and context-sensitive models. The integration of theoretical and empirical insights represents a key contribution of this study, demonstrating how vulnerability operates both as a philosophical construct and as a practical framework for educational action. Future research should expand empirical validation through larger-scale and mixed-method studies.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this contribution has demonstrated how vulnerability can be assumed as a foundational category of education, capable of transcending the traditional dichotomy between general pedagogy and special pedagogy. Far from being interpreted as a deficit or an exceptional condition, vulnerability emerges as a constitutive feature of the human condition and as an epistemic principle capable of guiding more equitable, inclusive, and responsible educational practices.

The theoretical framework proposed, which integrates philosophical, ethical, and pedagogical perspectives, allows for the reconceptualization of vulnerability as a regulative criterion for educational design. From this perspective, inclusion is no longer conceived as a compensatory intervention aimed at specific groups, but as a structural principle of the entire educational system, founded on the recognition of interdependence and diversity as universal conditions.

However, this reconceptualization is not without challenges. First, there is a risk that, if excessively generalized, the notion of vulnerability may lose its analytical precision, rendering less visible the specific conditions of disadvantage and the concrete inequalities that traverse educational contexts. Second, translating this paradigm into actual practices requires profound changes not only at the pedagogical level but also at institutional and political levels, which do not always correspond to the resources available or to existing educational policies.

The pedagogical implications highlight the need to develop learning environments that are flexible, cooperative, and attentive to relational and

emotional dimensions, where universal design and a culture of care assume a central role. Yet, the concrete realization of such environments entails continuous and systemic teacher training, as well as a rethinking of evaluative and organizational practices, which often remain anchored in traditional models oriented toward standardization and performance.

Vulnerability, in fact, functions both as a design principle capable of guiding inclusive methodologies and as a critical device that invites constant reflection on practices, roles, and institutional structures. In this sense, it does not represent a definitive solution, but rather a problematizing perspective that opens spaces for ongoing interrogation regarding educational equity and justice.

This entails a paradigmatic shift: from deficit-centered education to relationship-centered education, and from a compensatory logic to a universal design approach. However, for such transformation to be effective, it is necessary to prevent the inclusive paradigm from being reduced to a normative rhetoric devoid of real impact on daily practices.

Within this framework, special pedagogy no longer constitutes a separate domain, but rather a critical perspective capable of interrogating the entire educational system, contributing to the construction of genuinely inclusive contexts. It retains an essential function in making more pronounced conditions of vulnerability visible, thereby preventing the universalization of the concept from obscuring concrete differences.

Finally, adopting vulnerability as a guiding principle entails recognizing that just education is, by its very nature, inclusive: it does not merely respond to needs but creates conditions for the full participation of all. This requires shared responsibility among individuals, institutions, and public policies, and demands a continuous commitment to translating theoretical principles into sustainable, critical, and transformative educational practices.

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