UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING APPROACH AND SCHOOLWIDE ENRICHMENT MODEL: A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Universal Design for Learning model indicates that ALL students have equal chances to learn. That framework offers a flexible learning environment that recognizes individual cognitive and learning styles. Its flexibility encourages students’ success and achievements. The availability of creative and flexible learning environments that foster the potential of students according to their interests and learning styles are presented also in Renzulli’s studies of Didactics of Gifted and talented students [1]. Created in the mid-1970s, the Schoolwide Enrichment Model “SEM” [2,3], was aimed to develop creativity and superior thinking skills in high abilities students through the exposition to different disciplines, areas of interest and topics, providing opportunities to develop critical thinking and advanced problem-solving skills in specific areas of study. According to Renzulli & Reis [3] the SEM, through the creation of flexible environment for learning, can respond to the needs of the gifted and talented students, and contemporaneously, serves all students providing them challenging learning experiences and offering a set of instructional strategies focused on learning characteristics and students’ interests and preferences. A tool coming from this perspective is the Total Talent Portfolio: an ongoing way to gather information on child’ strengths and weaknesses from diverse sources, paying more attention to the firsts [4]. Personalized didactic plans are usually focused on child difficulties, deficits or areas of weaknesses, on the contrary the total talent portfolio, not excluding the difficulties of the child, is based on his learning style, preferences and interests in a way that is not compensatory but proactive. The contribute discusses the opportunity to use this perspective in order to change the point of view of school system looking special needs from a more inclusive approach that does not merely consider weaknesses and values children’ strengths and potential.

Keywords: UDL, Schoolwide Enrichment Model, Giftedness, Inclusion, Total Talent Portfolio.

1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of accessibility has been increasingly characterized as the characteristics of the technological devices to meet the needs of the disabled. In Europe, we have assisted to a close attention to this goal since the recent December 2016 Directive [5].

This cultural policy represent more than a technical adjustment and it is an opportunity for knowledge, learning and integration, so the term accessibility has been re-established, expanding its semantic value and becoming a hyperonym that refers to concepts such as culture, knowledge, information, freedom, socialization and autonomy. The right of access to a good or service must be guaranteed to all citizens indiscriminately. It follows that the needs of every person and of course of the person with difficulties need to be taken into account in the development strategy of an egalitarian society, in order to avoid creating forms of social exclusion. New goods and services should be designed from the earliest stages according to the philosophy of design for all, that is, a universal design "sensitive" and "focused" to the (different) special needs of the user [6]. In this way, the deeper concept of accessibility can be applied also to students which are gifted and have talents. The UDL framework offers a flexible learning environment that recognizes individual cognitive and learning style.

Another way to look to the accessibility is represented by the Universal Design Model [7]. Coming from the architectural design context, that model is now a way to think every social and cultural design, able to actualize the cultural model of design for all and the culture of accessibility. The Universal Design For Learning is an example of that. The UDL indicates a way of designing and managing educational practice, based on the flexibility in the way the information is presented, and how students demonstrate their knowledge and how they are involved in the learning process.

The second feature characterizing UDL is the reduction of barriers in education by making appropriate adjustments and supports and modifications and maintaining a high level of success (success) for all students.
So UDL is a set of criteria and criteria for curriculum development to provide everyone with equal opportunities for learning, it is a set of guidelines to address the main difficulties and to train experienced students within the educational environment, passing From: rigid curricula, "equal for everyone", flexible curricula, "customization" for both challenged students and those with high capacity [8]. In a UDL classroom diversity means opportunities and “teachers plan the highest achievement for all children including exceptionalities at both ends of the spectrum of learning as well as the group in the middle” [9, p.4].

2 THE SCHOOLWIDE ENRICHMENT MODEL

Students learn in natural environment and especially when they have to cope with real-life problems that engage them in finding the solution. A model used at school, that has been to be effective with Gifted Student is the Enrichment Triad Model [2] which with time led to the development of the more comprehensive Schoolwide Enrichment Model [1,3]. According to Renzulli, special programs for gifted students have been the true laboratories to create a model that foster high superior abilities, flexibility and creative thinking to all students [10]. Based on Renzulli’s [11,12] Three-Ring Conception of Giftedness, the SEM defines gifted behaviors rather than gifted individuals.

Gifted behavior consists of traits and aptitudes that reflect an interaction among three basic clusters of human characteristics—above average ability, high levels of task commitment, and high levels of creativity. Individuals capable of developing gifted behavior are those possessing or capable of developing this composite set of traits, using them interactively, and applying them to any potentially valuable area of human performance. Persons who manifest or are capable of developing an interaction among the three clusters require a wide variety of educational opportunities and services that are not ordinarily provided through regular instructional programs [13, p.8].

Despite Renzulli’s SEM roots go back to cultural contexts with special programs for the gifted and talented students, it is focused on the promotion of learning environments with appropriate levels of challenge and enjoyment in different type of schools. The objectives of the SEM model are:

1  (a) develop the talent potentials of young people, (b) improve the academic performance of all students, (c) promote continuous, growth-oriented professionalism, (d) create a learning community, and (e) implement a democratic school governance procedure.

2 Enrichment Clusters are non-graded groups of students who come together during specially designated time blocks to pursue common interests.

3 Curriculum Modification Techniques consist of strategies to modify existing curriculum and models to guide the development of instructional units. The strategies and models are used to create opportunities for students to become first-hand inquirers, to blend content and process, and to highlight the interconnectedness of disciplines.

4 Enrichment Learning and Teaching is based on four principles: (a) each student is unique, (b) learning is more effective when students enjoy what they are doing, (c) learning is more meaningful and enjoyable when content and process are learned within the context of a real problem, and (d) knowledge and thinking skills acquisition are enhanced when students can construct meaning [14].

The Renzulli’s Schoolwide Enrichment Model offers a set of instructional strategies focused on learning characteristics and students’ interests and preferences. As shown in Fig.1 students who need greater challenges at school can benefit from different services delivery components like Curriculum Compacting, an instructional procedure that allows them saving time for redundant areas of knowledge and spend more time in activities that they have not mastered yet and consequently more challenging for them [15]. Through the Talent Portfolio (described in the next paragraph) students can be recognized for their strengths and not for their deficits, in particular teachers will collect information on their abilities, interests and learning styles. Enrichment learning and teaching experiences, based on Enrichment Triad Model, are offered to all students although “Type III” enrichment experiences are indicated for students that demonstrate high ability, that are very interested in the activities and are task committed. These activities are more personalized and are usually carried out in small group or individual setting.
In order to achieve this objectives the school culture has to be flexible in the use of curricular differentiation and school time. Differentiation in fact, represents a way “to achieve equity and excellence in today’s schools” [16]. Their mission is to “improve the academic performance of all students in all areas of the regular curriculum and to blend standard curriculum activities with meaningful enrichment learning” [17, p.9].

2.1 The Total Talent Portfolio and Classroom Differentiation

Since the 1970s, the Italian school context has gone through policies of “integration” and the right to individualization of curriculum has been present for many decades for pupils with disabilities, while it is only a few years that the right to personalization of study paths for pupils with Specific Learning Disorders or with situations of particular disadvantage is recognized by law. This historical attention of Italy to diversity is leading the debate on special pedagogy to reflect on the topic of Giftedness. In effect, the idea of inclusion is not based on distance measurement from a supposed standard of adequacy, but on recognizing the importance of full participation in school life by all subjects. In the national and international literature, the construct of "inclusion" looks to all pupils as widespread and stable guarantee of participation in school life and to obtain the maximum possible in terms of learning. It is a cultural and social process of change and openness, a horizon of thought that implies and overcomes the concept of school integration on which Italy would have an undisputed advantage over the European average, an advantage that could be lost in the in the light of a more ecosystemic, inter-ethnic perspective, and, most importantly, less clinical and nomothetic idea of inclusion [18 p.11].

Differently from traditional register plans, the Total Talent Portfolio gathers information on child’ strengths and weaknesses, paying more attention on the first. It is a systematic and ongoing gathering of information and evidence from diverse sources [4].

In the Italian school context, the Personalized Didactic Plan (PDP) and the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), made for children with special educational needs, are focused on child difficulties, deficits or areas of weaknesses that have to be reinforced.

PEI - Individual Educational Plan for pupils with disabilities (Law 104/92 and Acts of Address Of 1994) is linked to the classroom programme and it is created by teachers in collaboration with parents and local medical centres. This collaboration between different figures it’s necessary for the creation of the “Project for Life” [19]. This Plan is based on a “Functional Diagnosis” issued by a public health commission and a “Dynamic Functional Profile” of the student. It describes teaching activities and teaching materials and the evaluation and assessment of the student that have to be individualized.

The PDP-Personalized Learning Plan for pupils with specific learning disabilities (Law 170/2010) is written only by the school who can ask for the contributions of experts but remains responsible for it. According to the Guidelines the PDP is drawn in collaboration with the family. The document offers
methodology and teaching indications for students with dyslexia, dysgraphia, dysorthography and dyscalculia.

As regard pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) the Directive of the 27 December 2012, points out the importance for school to deliver educational paths that support student’s success in education. The Personalized Learning Plan is not an obligation for the Class Council, but it is recommended for the best management of inclusive processes.

According to Renzulli, in a Didactic Plan usually the negative information on the child seems to be predominant and in many case it hidden the special characteristics and skills of the child [20]. On the contrary, the total talent portfolio (TPP), not excluding the difficulties of the child, is based on his learning style, preferences and interests in a way that is not more compensatory but proactive.

The TPP collects both status and action information of the student. Status information are all data that the teacher already has about the student, like grades and assessments. Status information indicates abilities, interests and learning style preferences (Fig.2). Dynamic information are specific events and reactions of the student to specific enriching activities that the teacher notices and collects.

Status and dynamic information can be used to provide different services and enrichment experiences within and outside the regular curriculum to the students and to conference with parents. For example, the teacher of technologies can discuss with parents about a specific goal and skill the child acquired in a group activity that hadn’t appeared before.

![Figure 2 The dimensions of the Total Talent Portfolio](image)

The Total Talent Portfolio can be always updated by teachers and parents and “accompanies” the student along his school career because it can be used by counsellor, the student and teachers for making future vocational choices.

An Italian adaption of the TTP has been made within a Doctoral action research in a middle school in South-eastern Italy. The student who participated in the creation of the TTP, can be considered as “underachiever” and “hidden gifted” because he wasn’t considered as Gifted by its teachers and it was failing to realize its potential in the school setting. He is a 13 years old gifted child, who was actively engaged during primary school and who is gradually losing all interest and motivation at school. This lost of interest can be caused by some family problems the child is coping. After the evaluation of the students potential by a pedagogue, a process of knowledge of child attitudes and strengths together with teacher was organized. The Student was involved in Type I and II activities inside the classroom and he had the opportunity to practice the skills and acquire the knowledge he needed to successfully conduct its own activities. He had the chance to become a positive leader inside the group and share with his classmates its knowledge, supporting them with his specific technological skills. Classroom personalized activities in Arts gave him the possibility to put in practice its hidden potential. The Total
talent portfolio (Fig. 3) was an opportunity for the student to reflect on his own capacities and the importance of commitment to transform this skills into talent.

![Image of Talent Portfolio with text: My talents are:](image)

Figure 3  En extract of the Student Talent Portfolio. Title: My talents are:

The Total Talent Portfolio was divided into different sections:
- Learning Style;
- Interests;
- School Subjects (Preferences);
- Talents;
- Projects.

The filling of the Talent Portfolio was a chance for the student to talk about himself, of what he likes, the causes of his difficulties at school and an opportunity to negotiate with the teacher some ideas about his learning process and approach to studying.

The Total Talent Portfolio could become part of the teacher’s didactic only if the School Committee have known the student for at least 6 months, so that they can offer a curriculum program that will provide enriching experiences and chances to growth its potential.

The operational proposal of the Talent Portfolio can only fit into an “open” school model in which the pupil may have the opportunity to compare his/her skills with both mixed and level competences groups. Furthermore, that proposal implies a careful curriculum design by teachers aimed at achieving the potential of all pupils in the classroom. This obviously implies costs in terms of time and human resources on the part of the school.

3 CONCLUSIONS

The paper aimed to redraw a red thread between the universal design model, the gifted interpretation model and the didactic design model that responds to the need for personalization of students. The proposal presented in the paper is based on the necessity to integrate the personalized learning plan with information based on the strengths of the pupil that enhances its potential for change. The Total Talent Portfolio should not be a mere gathering of information, a product to be passed between teachers from one school level to another. On the contrary, it must be seen as a process of understanding the student inside a school educational model the foster talent and human potential. In this sense, the Schoolwide Enrichment Model can be considered as a universal design model as it can allow all pupils to value their potential, and in particular to those with double exceptions (considering the example of children which are gifted and have an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) which could simply be “taken over” as Students with a specific deficit, developmental disorder or behavioral
disorder, offering them a didactic approach aimed at reducing dysfunctional behaviors or recovering deprived skills without considering all the potential they might offer.

This educational approach involves a paradigm shift, that see the child from a whole perspective and the Portfolio forces the student and the teacher to focus on the positive, enhancing children self-esteem and consequently its motivation to study and achieve.

REFERENCES


