GIFTEDNESS AND TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL CULTURE IN ITALY: A SURVEY ON REPRESENTATIONS FROM SYNECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE
PLUSDOTAZIONE E CULTURA PROFESSIONALE DOCENTE IN ITALIA: UN'INDAGINE SULLE RAPPRESENTAZIONI IN PROSPETTIVA SINECOLOGICA

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ABSTRACT
Inglese
The study investigates knowledge, representations, and attitudes of 5.087 Italian teachers and future teachers toward giftedness, interpreted from a synecological perspective as a resource for the balance of educational ecosystems. The quali-quantitative analysis conducted reveals a theoretical recognition of the specific needs of gifted students, however accompanied by resistance toward structured operational strategies, with significant variations across school levels. Direct experience with high-potential students seems to influence professional dispositions. The results highlight the necessity of systemic training interventions that support the translation of recent Italian legislation into coherent and widespread educational practices.

Italiano
Lo studio indaga conoscenze, rappresentazioni e atteggiamenti di 5.087 docenti e futuri docenti italiani verso la plusdotazione, interpretata in prospettiva sinecologica come risorsa per l'equilibrio degli ecosistemi educativi. L'analisi quali-quantitativa condotta rivela un riconoscimento teorico dei bisogni specifici degli studenti gifted, accompagnato tuttavia da resistenze verso strategie operative strutturate, con variazioni significative tra ordini scolastici. L'esperienza diretta con alunni ad alto potenziale sembra inoltre influenzare le disposizioni professionali. I risultati evidenziano la necessità di interventi formativi sistemici che sostengano la traduzione della recente normativa italiana in pratiche educative coerenti e diffuse.

KEYWORDS
Educational ecosystems; Giftedness; Synecological pedagogy; Teacher's professional culture, Teacher's training;
Ecosistemi educativi; Plusdotazione; Pedagogia sinecologica, Cultura professionale dei docenti, Formazione dei docenti.

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Introduction

Contemporary educational challenges require deep reflection on the nature of learning and the capacity of educational systems to address the complexity and diversity of individual developmental trajectories. Learning is now widely accepted as a dynamic process characterized by continuous adaptation to experiences and contextual changes, rather than a static goal to be achieved (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Rivoltella, 2023). This process-oriented perspective necessitates designing educational environments that foster meaningful interactions and authentic collaborations among students, teachers, and communities, valuing relationships as a constitutive element of the learning experience (Niemi et al., 2018).

In this context, the need for sustainable and inclusive education that can address the social fragmentation and alienation that threaten to characterize contemporary society becomes particularly relevant (Rosa, 2015; Fabbri & Soriani, 2021). The concept of learning ecology, or synecological pedagogy (Allport, 1961; Paparella, 2023), offers a useful interpretative key for rethinking educational ecosystems in terms of interdependence and relational balance, with direct implications for the management and enhancement of giftedness.

Within this theoretical framework, giftedness is considered an emblematic example of cognitive and emotional diversity, requiring flexible and adaptive educational environments based on the valorization of differences as a resource for the overall balance of the system.

Paying attention to gifted students can be interpreted as a form of ecological care, where individual peculiarities are not seen as anomalies to be normalized but as potentialities to be cultivated within an interconnected learning community (Lucangeli, 2019). In this sense, enhancing talents and cognitive differences could be considered a resource for balancing the educational ecosystem.

This perspective aligns with the sustainable development goals outlined in Agenda 2030, which advocate for environments that stimulate curiosity, creativity, and awareness of interdependencies (UNESCO, 2016).

Despite the growing attention of the international scientific community to the issue of giftedness, as evidenced by the intensification of studies dedicated to the need to identify and consciously manage the educational experience of students with high cognitive potential (Dai, 2010; Pfeiffer et al., 2018; Zanetti, 2023), for example through educational support and socio-emotional development activities, a significant gap remains between research and educational practice. This gap is particularly evident in teachers' professional profiles, where scientific evidence often fails to translate into widespread operational skills (Giuliani & Treglia, 2025). Similarly, talent development does not appear to be one of the most common topics in initial and in-service teacher training; even when inclusive methodological

approaches are addressed, giftedness is rarely a central focus (Baldacci et al., 2020; Perla & Martini, 2019). Teachers' training on giftedness is often fragmented, mainly contextualized in schools that already accept students identified as gifted, and characterized by uneven levels of awareness that do not allow for effective participation in the processes of recognizing and managing high cognitive potential (Fiorucci, 2017). This training gap represents a significant obstacle to the cultural transformation of educational ecosystems that synecological pedagogical principles would require. However, recent Italian regulatory developments on giftedness signal a potential turning point: institutional attention finally seems to be shifting toward systemic interventions that could accompany and support the necessary cultural change. This suggests that the issue is gaining relevance in both academic reflection and concrete educational policies.

1.1 Giftedness in educational contexts: Conceptualizations and implications for teachers

The definition and conceptualization of giftedness is complex, as evidenced by the multitude of terms used in scientific literature and educational debates to define it as a conceptual category. As Zanetti (2023) points out, the expressions "gifted", "super-gifted", "talented", "intellectually precocious", "high cognitive potential", and "genius" are often used to clarify the conceptual nuances of the topic. These terms are not strictly synonymous and reflect the evolution of the construct itself and how it is associated with specific situations. While some terms emphasize innate aspects of cognitive abilities, others focus on visible performance or particular modes of cognitive functioning. This abundance of terminology is not just a linguistic problem; it signals the multidimensional and still partly controversial nature of the phenomenon. The most widely accepted international definition is that proposed by the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) and included in the Marland Report (1971). According to this definition, gifted individuals are «those who demonstrate exceptional levels of ability (defined as exceptional capacity and speed of reasoning and learning) or competence (documented by performance at or above the 10th percentile) in one or more domains» (Zanetti, 2023, p. 21). The domains considered include areas characterized by the use of complex symbolic systems, such as mathematics, music, or language, as well as specific sensorimotor skills, such as painting, dancing, or sports. A fundamental aspect of this definition is recognizing that excellence in all areas is not required for giftedness. In fact, as the author states, «a person who shows, or has the potential to show, an exceptional level of performance in one or more areas of expression» can be considered gifted (Zanetti, 2023, p. 21). The conceptual evolution of the construct of giftedness has gradually moved beyond the reductionist perspective that associated it exclusively with a high IQ. The contemporary conception

recognizes giftedness as a multi-component phenomenon, which includes dimensions that are not always easily quantifiable through standardized tests, such as creativity, intrinsic motivation, leadership skills, and perseverance (Renzulli, 2005; Gagné, 2018). Renzulli's (2005) "three-ring model" represents a fundamental theoretical contribution in this regard, identifying the intersection between above-average ability, creativity, and task commitment as constituent elements of giftedness. Cornoldi (2019) has also helped overcome reductive conceptions by emphasizing the distinction between the dimensions of general intelligence, specific talent, creativity, and genius personality, by proposing a model incorporating general cognitive abilities, specific talents, creativity, persistence-passion, and contextual variables. This complexity implies that there is no single profile of a gifted student, and that manifestations of high potential can take very different forms, requiring educators to have refined skills in observing and interpreting learning behaviors. From a theoretical standpoint, the study of giftedness greatly benefits significantly from Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1986), which interprets human development as the result of the dynamic interactions between individuals and the multiple contexts in which they are embedded. The author's ecodynamical model allows us to conceptualize high potential as a process influenced by proximal contexts, such as the family and school, rather than as a static, individual characteristic. The adaptation of the model developed by Zanetti (2023) is particularly interesting.

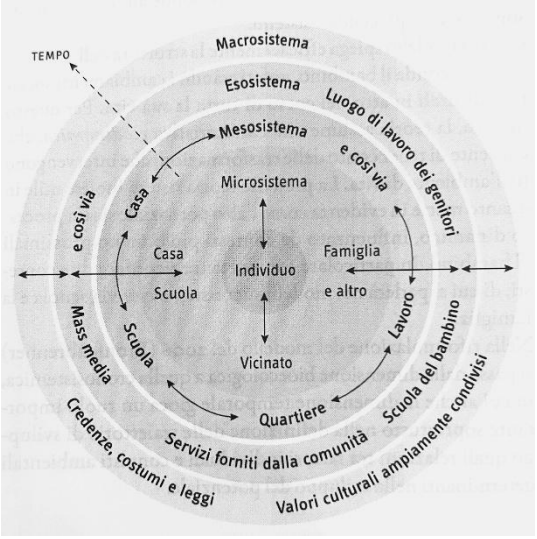

Figure 1: Adaptation of Bronfenbrenner's model (source: Zanetti, 2023, p. 49)

Figure 1 clearly illustrates the connection between considering giftedness as a dynamic construct and applying an ecological approach to educational and training processes. Regarding the topics under discussion, it is important to highlight that

the temporal dimension also has a significant influence on the development of potential. In this sense, the opportunities and constraints that may arise at different points in a person's life trajectory facilitate or hinder the expression of individual abilities. This ecological perspective goes beyond deterministic views and allows for educational interventions that modify contextual conditions to promote development aligned with one's abilities and potential. Consistent with this process-oriented and contextualized view, Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, and Worrell (2011) proposed a talent development paradigm that conceptualizes giftedness not as a fixed state identifiable through static measurements, but as a dynamic process of talent development that requires systematic support, appropriate opportunities, and targeted interventions at different stages of the developmental trajectory.

Complementary to the ecological approach is the "aziotopic model" proposed by Ziegler (2005), which interprets the development of excellence as a progressive expansion of the individual's repertoire of actions. According to this perspective excellence is not innate, but rather the result of a process that begins with the decision to progressively improve skills in a specific area. This process involves continuous adaptation to a dynamic system in which individual actions and environmental opportunities interact with each other. This model emphasizes the importance of individual intentionality and educational opportunities in realizing potential, reducing the importance of IQ as the sole predictor of excellence.

The pedagogical implications of these conceptualizations are significant. From a methodological point of view, effective educational approaches that support gifted students require a high degree of teaching flexibility and include challenging strategies, such as thematic deepening, curriculum enrichment, content compaction, differentiated instruction, acceleration, promoting self-regulated learning, and education through multiple intelligences (GATEItaly, 2014; Rigon et al., 2017). VanTassel-Baska (2018), in particular, developed the Integrated Curriculum Model (ICM), which is widely used internationally for designing differentiated curricula that integrate advanced content, high-level thinking processes, and interdisciplinary concepts.

The perspective of educational personalization, central to the approach to gifted students, is also rooted in the Italian pedagogical tradition, which has progressively emphasized attention to individual differences as a constitutive principle of authentically inclusive education (Chiappetta Cajola & Ciraci, 2013; Ianes & Cramerotti, 2013; Cottini, 2017). As Perla (2013) points out, teaching and inclusion are not separate issues, but represent two sides of the same coin: a quality education that knows how to create suitable environments in which every encounter between teachers and students can be fully realized. Such interventions require specific pedagogical skills and solid methodological training, and cannot be improvised. As Zanetti pointed out in a recent interview, «if they are not supported,

or if their giftedness is seen as a disturbance, these children risk becoming lost. Schools often level out differences, fail to recognize special needs, and thus stifle talent» (Forte, 2025, p. 22).

In addition to the cognitive dimension, when discussing methodological and educational implications related to giftedness, it is also essential to consider the socio-emotional development of students (Alesi, 2020). From a scientific perspective, focusing on these issues is significant because gifted students often face unique psychosocial challenges, such as emotional intensity, perfectionism, discrepancies between their cognitive and socio-emotional development, and sometimes difficulties in integrating with their peers (Pfeiffer, 2013). Studies by Payton et al. (2000) and Zins and Elias (2006) identified self-awareness, social awareness, decision-making, emotional regulation, and relationship management as key areas of intervention for promoting well-being. Effective teaching strategies in this regard include guided discussions about emotional states, reinforcement of positive behaviors, asking students to justify their choices, and peer tutoring in both homogeneous and heterogeneous groups. These practices require teachers to have not only subject-specific skills, but also interpersonal sensitivity and the ability to discern underlying emotional needs from observable behaviors. Such approaches are also scientifically recognized as effective methods for teaching high-potential students (Mangione & Maffei, 2013). Therefore, teacher training emerges as a crucial and unavoidable hub for ensuring that scientific knowledge about giftedness translates into effective and widespread educational practices.

Another aspect to consider when discussing giftedness in education concerns the influence of teachers' conceptions and representations on the educational management of students. Some research shows that teachers with more training and knowledge about giftedness tend to be more inclusive and value creativity and individual potential more highly (Siegle & Powell, 2004; Baudson & Preckel, 2016). In this regard, Brazzolotto (2018) emphasizes that in-service training is a decisive factor in developing aware professional attitudes, influencing teaching practices, and improving the ability to recognize and support high potential.

In light of the cultural transformation of educational ecosystems outlined above, the issue of initial and in-service teacher training takes on particular importance: without adequately trained teachers who can recognize signs of high potential and design differentiated teaching strategies, the synecological approach risks remaining a theoretical ideal with no real implementation. As previously mentioned, teachers' implicit theories and stereotypes about gifted children significantly influence their perceptions and behaviors, directly affecting the educational opportunities offered to students (Cassibba & Semeraro, 2020). Some teachers tend to associate giftedness with social adjustment difficulties or behavioral problems, while others maintain unrealistically high expectations that can generate excessive pressure.

Reflection on teacher training has become increasingly central to the Italian pedagogical debate, with particular attention to the need to develop not only disciplinary and methodological skills, but also the "implicit knowledge" that guides daily professional practices (Atal & Deryakulu, 2021; Capperucci, 2022). Therefore, teacher training cannot be understood as simple technical updating, but must be configured as a constituent element of a broader systemic intervention, capable of accompanying and supporting change in the professional and organizational cultures of schools, also intervening on the implicit representations and attitudes that guide daily teaching practices (Fiorucci & Zizioli, 2022; La Marca & Marzano, 2022). As Lucisano (2014) points out, the image of teachers and investment in teacher training are closely linked to school policies and require a systemic approach that values teaching professionalism as a strategic resource for educational innovation.

At the European level, the Eurydice report (2006) highlighted that the most advanced education systems integrate training on giftedness both in initial and in service teacher professional development programs through modules, conferences, and experiential internships. These countries have recognized that expertise in giftedness cannot be left to individual sensitivity or random professional experiences, but rather must be systematically and structurally guaranteed.

In Italy, despite the efforts of centers of excellence - such as LabTalento at the University of Pavia and Step-Net Onlus (affiliated with the World Council for Gifted and Talented Children and the European Council for High Ability) - specific training on giftedness is not yet systematically integrated into teacher training curricula. Over time, this shortcoming has resulted in fragmented and uneven expertise on the subject, primarily concentrated in schools with direct experience teaching gifted students. Consequently, most teachers lack the tools necessary to recognize signs of high potential and participate effectively in identification and support processes. The result is an education system in which the possibility of receiving an adequate education depends on the luck of encountering a sensitive and prepared teacher, rather than on the institutional guarantees of shared educational standards.

1.2 Policies and legislation: National and international perspectives

The Italian regulatory landscape regarding students with high cognitive potential was marked by a long period of uncertainty, characterized by a lack of explicit recognition and fragmented interventions that were often left to the initiative of individual schools or teachers. A formalization process that could close the significant gap with numerous European and non-European countries has only been initiated in recent years.

The first relevant regulatory reference is the Ministerial Directive of December 27, 2012, regarding Special Educational Needs (SEN). Although the directive does not explicitly mention gifted students, it introduces a personalized teaching perspective that could potentially be applied to this population. Subsequently, Ministerial Circular No. 8, issued on March 6, 2013, clarified operating procedures and emphasized the need to tailor educational interventions to students' specific needs. However, it was only with Ministerial Note No. 562 of April 3, 2019, that was formally and explicitly recognized the right of high-potential students to personalized teaching through Personalized Education Plans (PDPs), granting them the status of students with special educational needs and legitimizing targeted educational interventions.

Law 107 of 2015 also offered partial regulatory support, by allowing for the identification of training courses to enhance merit and talent, though not exclusively for gifted students. In 2020, Minister Azzolina's policy document explicitly included giftedness among the themes of inclusion, recognizing the need for adequate teacher training and specific methodologies. However, until 2025, schools largely operated without clear guidelines: giftedness was included in the scope of SEN, but only a minority of institutions had developed certified skills, in the absence of legislative obligations and relying on the individual will of administrators and teachers.

The decisive turning point came in 2025, with the Senate's approval at first reading of the bill titled “Provisions in favour of pupils and students with high cognitive potential and delegation to the Government for their recognition”. This measure, which must complete the parliamentary process by passing to the Chamber of Deputies, introduces for the first time a comprehensive regulatory framework, aligning Italy with the 1994 Council of Europe Recommendation. Minister Valditara emphasized that the measure represents «a decisive step towards a school system capable of nurturing different talents», affirming the principle that «no one should be left behind, but at the same time no one should be limited in terms of their potential» (Ministry of Education and Merit website, 2025).

The bill provides for the establishment of an interministerial technical-scientific committee responsible for defining multidimensional recognition criteria and national guidelines for school inclusion. The bill also discusses: the role of an High Cognitive Potential representative in each school; compulsory training for this representative; structured training courses for teachers and administrators; personalized PDPs that may include accelerated curricula, enrichment and peer tutoring; the systematic involvement of families; and the integration of the topic into university courses in education and psychology. The compulsory training provision for teachers is particularly significant because it recognizes that effectively managing giftedness requires systemic intervention to ensure consistent professional skills, rather than relying on goodwill or individual sensitivity. Another

strategic element is integrating the topic into initial teacher training courses at the university level is another strategic element because it moves beyond the logic of retrospective updating, ensuring that all future teachers acquire fundamental knowledge about giftedness before they start work.

These regulatory elements constitute an intervention model consistent with the ecological and synecological perspectives outlined in the theoretical premises: transforming educational practices requires new individual skills and structural changes to the system that can support and legitimize the necessary cultural change. These provisions address a specific need: according to the Stuttering Research and Treatment Center's website, approximately 5-8% of the school population in Italy - over 430,000 students - has high cognitive potential (an IQ above 130), but the lack of adequate recognition and support can lead to significant risks, including dropping out of school, which, according to international studies, can affect up to 17% of these students.

Attention to cases of "twice exceptional" individuals, in which high potential is accompanied by specific learning disorders, ADHD, or emotional issues, is also particularly relevant. In these situations, difficulties can mask talent, making identification more difficult and requiring sophisticated diagnostic tools and interdisciplinary skills (Pfeiffer, 2013). The involvement of families plays a fundamental role in this context: parents must be supported in recognizing the signs of high potential, in providing appropriate stimulation, in collaborating with the school, and in helping their child manage problematic issues such as performance anxiety and perfectionism (Lucangeli, 2019; Cinque & Sartori, 2020).

At the international level, the recognition of gifted students is part of the inclusive education policies promoted by major supranational organizations. The aforementioned Recommendation No. 1248 of the Council of Europe (1994) was a fundamental reference point, emphasizing that education is a fundamental right that must be appropriate for each individual and explicitly recognizing gifted children among those who need special provisions. To support this perspective, UNESCO has promoted the principle of quality education for all, talking about differentiated pedagogical approaches. With the Salamanca Declaration (1994), they also established the conceptual basis for inclusive education that addresses the variety of special educational needs.

The OECD has also conducted analyses focusing on gifted students (Rutigliano & Quarshie, 2021), highlighting how their identification and support represent an essential dimension of educational equity and how the failure to value talent constitutes a waste of human resources for society.

Several studies have shown that the most effective education systems combine equity policies with excellence strategies, ensuring personalized pathways that allow each student to reach their full potential (Eurydice, 2006; Hoogeveen, 2017; Rutigliano & Quarshie, 2021). Recurring elements of the most effective policies

include standardized, multidimensional identification procedures, curricular flexibility, family involvement, and systematic monitoring of implemented processes and their impact on students' educational experiences. Another common element is compulsory specialist training for teachers (Reid & Horváthová, 2016): no country that has developed effective policies for gifted students has been able to do so without making a structural and continuous investment in teacher training. International comparisons suggest that the success of policies for gifted students depends on their organic integration into educational equity policies and their articulation through systemic interventions that simultaneously involve regulations, training, resources, and professional cultures. Only through this systemic integration is it possible to achieve the cultural transformation of educational ecosystems that allows to overcome false dichotomies between excellence and inclusion, recognizing the development of talent as a fundamental aspect of a truly democratic school system capable of responding to the complexity of individual development trajectories.

In terms of dedicated legislation, a few international examples include France's publication of specific ministerial guidelines for the education of high-potential students in 2019; the Netherlands has specialized university centers; and Portugal's active national reference association, the Portuguese Association for Gifted Children. The Anglo-Saxon context also has a particularly well-established tradition: the United States, a pioneer in gifted education since the late 19th century, has national organizations such as the National Association for Gifted Children and the Council for Exceptional Children; the United Kingdom has developed specific programs through its Department for Education. On a global scale, the World Council for Gifted and Talented Children promotes the exchange of experiences and the dissemination of shared quality standards.

Overall, recent Italian regulatory alignment and comparison with international experiences make it clear that an educational culture capable of recognizing and cultivating cognitive potential requires a flexible, interdependent, and synecologically oriented school ecosystem, capable of integrating policies, practices, and teacher training with a view to educational balance and sustainability. The challenge lies in understanding how to counteract the risk of those involved in educational and training processes (e.g., schools, teachers, students, and families) failing to implement the opportunities offered by evidence-based good practices and recent legislation, thus risking that the recognition of cognitive potential remains predominantly theoretical. In this context, it becomes crucial to investigate teachers' perceptions and experiences - as they are the central link between educational policies and their implementation in the classroom - in order to understand whether and to what extent knowledge, misconceptions, and/or personal dispositions concretely influence their capacity to recognize and enhance giftedness.

2.Methods and materials

The study, educational in nature and employing a mixed-methods (qualitative and quantitative) approach, explores Italian teachers' conceptions, attitudes, and instructional practices concerning giftedness and gifted education. This exploratory-descriptive investigation pursues two main objectives: (1) to analyze attitudes toward the education of gifted students, with reference to the key factors identified in international literature (Gagné, 2018); and (2) to examine correlations between these attitudes and demographic or professional variables (school level, years of service, prior experience with gifted students), integrating quantitative data with the qualitative analysis of open-ended responses.

2.1 Participants

The study involved 5,087 teachers and prospective teachers enrolled in the 30- and 60-ECTS teacher qualification programs (*Percorsi abilitanti*) at eCampus and Pegaso Universities. Participants represented different school levels and educational stages and came from various Italian regions. Participation was voluntary and had no evaluative implications. Prior to taking part, all participants received detailed information about the research objectives, methods, and data processing procedures, and provided informed consent. Data were collected online via Google Forms, supported by an interactive Padlet — a shared space for communication and reflection — and synchronous discussion sessions for in-depth exploration. Before completing the questionnaire, participants engaged in contextualization and guided discussion activities to foster understanding of the topic and ensure informed participation. Responses were collected anonymously, in full compliance with ethical standards and privacy regulations, ensuring data confidentiality and their exclusive use for research purposes.

2.2 Materials

To assess teachers' attitudes toward giftedness, the Italian version of the *Opinions about the Gifted and their Education* (OGE; Gagné, 2018) questionnaire was used. This instrument has been widely employed internationally to investigate teachers' conceptions, beliefs, and dispositions toward high-ability students. Originally developed within the Canadian research program by Gagné and Nadeau in the 1980s—aimed at exploring the cognitive and value-based factors influencing teachers' opinions on the need for specific educational interventions—the OGE has since been validated across multiple cultural contexts (United States, Australia, Europe) and translated into several languages, consistently demonstrating structural stability and internal coherence. The adopted version comprises 34 items

rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree) and explores six attitudinal dimensions: Needs and Support (recognition of specific needs and required interventions), Resistance to Objections (acceptance or rejection of criticisms toward gifted education), Social Value (perceived social value of talent enhancement), Rejection (feelings of discomfort or distance toward gifted students), Ability Grouping (opinions about grouping students by ability), and Acceleration (attitudes toward grade advancement or class skipping). The questionnaire also included a demographic section (age, teaching level and subject area, years of service, geographic area, specialization in special education, and experience with gifted students) and three open-ended questions designed to elicit deeper insights into: teachers' personal definition of a gifted student, their opinion on the inclusion of giftedness among special educational needs (SEN), and the teaching and assessment strategies considered most effective in promoting gifted students' academic success.

2.3 Procedure

Responses were coded and analyzed using Excel and subsequently processed in a Python environment. Data analysis, structured into descriptive, correlational, and qualitative phases, followed the guidelines provided by the author of the OGE (Gagné, 2018). After reversing the scores for negatively worded items, mean scores were computed for the six subscales, along with an overall index of attitudes toward gifted education (*ATGE_TotalMean*), calculated as the average of all 34 items. Correlations between attitudes and demographic/professional variables were examined using Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (ρ) for teaching experience, treated as an ordinal variable with four levels, and the point-biserial correlation coefficient (r) for direct experience with gifted students. In parallel, the open-ended responses were subjected to a qualitative thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive approach, aimed at identifying the main semantic nuclei related to the definition of gifted students, the relationship with special educational needs (SEN), and the teaching and assessment strategies perceived as most effective. Finally, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to test differences among school levels (primary, lower secondary, and upper secondary) in the mean scores of the OGE subscales.

3.Results

3.1 Participant Profile

The sample consisted of 5,087 teachers and pre-service teachers from various Italian regions, representing all school levels and types. The size and heterogeneity of the group allow for a reliable depiction of the Italian teaching population in terms of demographic characteristics, professional experience, and knowledge of giftedness. The mean age was 44.4 years (SD = 8.7), with a predominance of the 41–50 age group (47.5%), followed by 31–40 years (27.6%) and 51–60 years (20.8%); teachers under 30 accounted for 3.8%, while only 0.3% were over 60. This distribution indicates a prevalence of teachers in full professional maturity. By school level, 49.1% taught in upper secondary school, 27.2% in lower secondary school, and 19.0% in primary education; 3.2% worked in early childhood services (ages 0–6), and 1.5% were not currently employed in teaching. More than half of the respondents (52.7%) held a specialization in special education, suggesting a strong sensitivity toward inclusion and diverse educational needs. Teaching experience (including non-tenured periods) showed a balanced distribution: 34.9% had less than 5 years of experience, 32.4% between 5 and 10 years, 11.9% between 11 and 15 years, and 20.8% more than 15 years, with an overall mean of 9.8 years (SD = 6.1). About two-thirds of participants (67.3%) had fewer than ten years of teaching experience, outlining a generally young population with a solid experienced component. Perceived knowledge of giftedness, measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "not at all", 5 = "very much"), was relatively limited: M = 2.33 (SD = 0.92) for general knowledge and M = 1.94 (SD = 0.88) for knowledge of relevant legislation. Both values, below the midpoint, indicate a partial and unsystematic understanding of the topic, with moderate variability among respondents. Finally, 30.3% reported having taught at least one gifted student in their classroom. This figure, higher than those generally reported in the literature, suggests a growing awareness of giftedness in schools, although the correspondence between teachers' subjective perception and formal identification according to psychopedagogical criteria remains to be verified.

3.2 Analysis of the OGE Questionnaire results

The analysis of teachers' attitudes toward gifted education, assessed through the *Opinions about the Gifted and their Education* (OGE) questionnaire by Gagné reveals an overall neutral-to-positive orientation, with some significant differences across the dimensions examined (Table 1). The overall mean score (ATGE_TotalMean = 3.24, SD = 0.30) indicates that participants generally acknowledge the legitimacy and pedagogical value of educational interventions for high-ability students, although full and uniform agreement is not yet consolidated. The subscale "Resistance to Objections" shows the highest mean score (M = 3.79, SD = 0.61), suggesting that teachers tend to reject common criticisms of gifted education, such as accusations of elitism or social unfairness. This result reflects a mature and aware perspective: teachers recognize that instructional differentiation

for gifted learners aligns with, rather than contradicts, the principles of equity and inclusion. The second most positive dimension, “Needs and Support” (M = 3.23, SD = 0.62), highlights a moderate acknowledgment of the specific educational needs of gifted students and the importance of targeted interventions, indicating openness toward inclusive practices that also encompass giftedness as a form of special educational need, albeit with persisting uncertainties concerning implementation and organization. The “Social Value” (M = 2.91, SD = 0.62) and “Rejection” (M = 3.07, SD = 0.56) subscales show more neutral attitudes. Teachers partly recognize the social value of talent development but do not necessarily view it as an educational priority; similarly, explicit negative attitudes toward gifted students are limited, though subtle forms of discomfort or relational hesitation may remain. The lowest mean scores were observed for “Ability Grouping” (M = 2.33, SD = 0.72) and “Acceleration” (M = 2.79, SD = 0.60), indicating a certain reluctance toward structural differentiation measures such as ability grouping or grade skipping. These strategies are often perceived as potentially divisive or difficult to reconcile with inclusive principles and everyday classroom management. Such reservations may stem from both ideological beliefs (a preference for heterogeneous group composition) and pragmatic reasons (lack of specific training, organizational constraints, or concerns about social implications). Overall, the findings depict a multifaceted attitudinal profile: teachers demonstrate conceptual openness to gifted education and reject elitist objections, yet remain cautious regarding selective instructional practices. This suggests an evolving awareness, in which the theoretical acknowledgment of giftedness as an educational domain coexists with operational uncertainties, underscoring the need for professional development initiatives aimed at clarifying the inclusive potential of gifted education and strengthening the alignment between positive attitudes and effective pedagogical practices.

Table 1: Mean scores and standard deviation for each OGE subscale

Subscale	Description	Mean	SD
A Needs and Support	Recognition of the special needs of gifted students and the necessity of providing specific educational support	3.23	0.62
Resistance to Objections	Rejection of common objections or criticisms toward gifted education (e.g., elitism, unfairness)	3.79	0.61
C Social Value	Perceived social imporance of fostering giftedness for societal progress	2.91	0.62
D Rejection	Negative or rejecting attitudes toward gifted students	2.33	0.72
F Ability Grouping	Opinions regarding grade skipping and acceleration practices	2.79	0.60
ATGE	Overall attitude score toward gifted students	34	0.30

3.3 Analysis of Correlations between Demographic Variables and Attitudes toward Gifted Education

The analysis of correlations between the OGE subscales and demographic variables (teaching experience and direct experience with gifted students) provides meaningful insights into teachers' attitudinal profiles (Table 2). Correlations with years of service were generally weak but, in some cases, statistically significant. A slight negative correlation was found between teaching experience and the overall attitude toward gifted education (ATGE_TotalMean, ρ = −0.03, p = .034), as well as with Subscale B – *Resistance to Objections* (ρ = −0.043, p = .002), suggesting that greater professional experience may be associated with increased caution or reduced agreement with arguments supporting gifted education. This tendency may reflect, on the one hand, a more realistic and prudent perspective, and on the other, the persistence of traditional pedagogical models less oriented toward differentiation. A modest positive correlation emerged between years of service and Subscale D – *Rejection* (ρ = +0.034, p = .015), indicating slightly higher levels of critical or distancing attitudes toward high-ability students. More pronounced correlations were observed for direct teaching experience with gifted students. Teachers who reported having taught at least one high-ability student scored higher on Subscales A – *Needs and Support* (r = +0.037, p = .008) and C – *Social Value* (r = +0.043, p = .002), reflecting greater awareness of the specific educational needs and the social relevance of giftedness. Direct experience thus appears to foster increased sensitivity and understanding of the educational reality of gifted learners. Conversely, negative correlations were found with Subscales E – *Ability Grouping* (r = −0.031, p = .026) and F – *Acceleration* (r = −0.058, p < .001), suggesting that teachers with direct experience tend to favor more inclusive and flexible strategies (e.g., curricular enrichment, methodological personalization) over structural differentiation measures such as ability grouping or grade skipping.

Table 2: Correlations between OGE Subscales and Demographic Variables

Subscale	ρspearman (Years of Service)		$r$point-Biserial (Experience with Gifted)	
A Needs and Support	−0.018	p	−0,037	.008
B Resistance to Objections	−0.043	.000	−0,027	.008
C Social Value	−0.024	.004	−0,043	.002
D Rejection	−0.034	.002	−0,023	–.002
E Ability Grouping	−0.017	.002	−0,023	–.023
F Acceleration	−0.016	.262	−0,010	<0.01
ATGE	−0.030	.034	−0.020	<0.34

3.4 Thematic Analysis of Open-Ended Responses

The thematic analysis of participants' open-ended responses reveals an overall dominant representation of giftedness as intellectual and cognitive, centered on learning ability and general intelligence. However, a substantial group of teachers also introduce motivational and emotional elements, signaling a shift toward a more complex and multidimensional understanding of giftedness. Nonetheless, a portion of simplified definitions remains, indicating the need for more training to distinguish giftedness from related concepts such as "high achievement" or "academic excellence."

Question 1. "Provide your own definition of a gifted student"

Main Theme	Description	Estimated Frequency	Examples of Associated Codes
1.1 Intelligence and Cognitive Talent	The gifted student is described as someone with above-average intelligence, high logical or analytical skills, or rapid learning ability.	High	"superior intelligence", "learns faster", "high IQ"
1.2 Curiosity and Intrinsic Motivation	Giftedness is also understood as a strong desire for knowledge and intellectual curiosity.	Medium	"great curiosity", "thirst for knowledge", "motivated to learn"
1.3 Sensitivity and Emotional Complexity	Some teachers link giftedness to emotional intensity, empathy, and vulnerability.	Medium	"hypersensitive", "emotionally fragile", "empathetic but isolated"
1.4 Potential to Be Nurtured	The gifted student is seen as an educational resource and a talent to be cultivated.	High	"resource for the class", "talent to be developed", "needs appropriate stimulation"
1.5 Ambivalence or Stereotypes	In some cases, vague or contradictory definitions appear, conflating giftedness with academic success or general ability.	Medium	"very good student", "excellent in all subjects"

Question 2. "In your opinion, can a gifted student be considered a student with Special Educational Needs (SEN)? Please explain your answer.

An inclusive and nuanced perspective prevails, acknowledging the need for specific educational responses without rigidly equating giftedness with deficit-based SEN. Increasing references to the Italian legal framework and the "other SEN" category reflect growing institutional awareness. However, a minority still associate giftedness with privilege, revealing lingering meritocratic stereotypes.

Main Theme	Description	Estimated Frequency	Examples of Associated Codes
2.1 Recognition of Giftedness as a Positive SEN	Many teachers state that gifted students also have specific educational needs, though not arising from a deficit.	High	“has special needs for enrichment”, “requires adequate stimulation”, “needs targeted interventions”
2.2 Semantic Distinction (Not SEN, but with Specific Needs)	Some formally reject the SEN classification but acknowledge the need for individualized teaching.	High	“not a SEN case but needs different attention”, “not disadvantaged but has specific needs”
2.3 Total Rejection of the SEN Label	A minority deny any special need, viewing giftedness as a privilege or natural advantage.	Low	“doesn’t need help”, “already advantaged”
2.4 Reference to Legislation	Some explicitly cite the 2012 MIUR Directive or the “other SEN” category as the legal basis for recognition.	Medium	“recognized among other SEN”, “mentioned in the 2012 MIUR Directive”

Question 3. “Which teaching and assessment strategies would you adopt to promote the academic success of a gifted student?”

Main Theme	Description	Estimated Frequency	Examples of Associated Codes
3.1 Personalization and Differentiation	The most frequent idea is adapting content, pace, and objectives to individual abilities.	High	“personalized planning”, “differentiating tasks”, “flexibility in objectives”
3.2 Enrichment and Curriculum Extension	Strategies involving deepening and broadening content, research projects, and thematic workshops.	High	“research projects”, “extension activities”, “complex real-world tasks”
3.3 Creativity and Divergent Thinking	Emphasis on imagination, creativity, and problem-solving.	Medium	“creative challenges”, “project-based learning”, “discovery learning”
3.4 Emotional and Relational Focus	Some teachers stress the risk of isolation or stress among gifted students and propose relational support.	Medium	“peer collaboration”, “mixed-ability groups”, “cooperative work”
3.5 Flexible Assessment Strategies	Proposal to adapt assessment criteria to the student’s cognitive profile.	Medium	“formative assessment”, “personalized feedback”, “self-assessment”
3.6 Training and Collaboration	A minority highlight the need for specific professional development and collaboration with families or colleagues.	Medium	“need for training”, “consulting specialists”, “family involvement”

Teachers’ proposed strategies mainly reflect a personalizing and empowering approach, aligned with the principles of inclusive education and the Universal

Design for Learning (UDL) model. The frequency of references to relational and emotional support shows growing awareness that giftedness is not limited to cognitive performance but also involves socio-emotional dimensions. However, a certain conceptual fragmentation persists, with generic or poorly operational responses from part of the sample—signaling the need for more structured training on specific practices. The integrated analysis of the three questions highlights a potential cultural evolution in Italian teachers' representations of giftedness: moving from a predominantly cognitive and merit-based view toward a more complex, psychoeducational**,** and relational conception. Awareness of the need for personalized education is increasing, though not always supported by systematic knowledge of methods and tools. A significant focus also emerges on socio-emotional well-being and the inclusive role of the school context.

3.5 One-Way ANOVA Results by School Level

The one-way ANOVA revealed that the school level at which teachers work significantly affects certain dimensions of attitudes toward gifted education, although with small effect sizes (η^2 between .03 and .04). Overall, a decreasing trend in mean scores was observed from primary to upper secondary school, suggesting that school level moderates openness and sensitivity toward gifted education. Primary school teachers showed the highest mean scores in the subscales Needs and Support (M = 3.41, SD = 0.58) and Resistance to Objections (M = 3.92, SD = 0.55), both significantly higher than those of upper secondary teachers (M = 3.07 and M = 3.64, respectively). This indicates a greater inclination among primary teachers to recognize the specific educational needs of gifted students and to reject elitist or meritocratic objections commonly raised against gifted education. Such openness likely reflects the pedagogical culture of primary education, which emphasizes personalization, relational sensitivity, and emotional development. Significant differences also emerged in the Acceleration subscale (F = 3.31, p = .038), where primary teachers were relatively more favorable than those in upper secondary school. This pattern suggests that lower-grade teachers are more open to flexible enrichment or individualized advancement, while secondary teachers tend to be more cautious—possibly due to stricter curricula and performance-oriented evaluation standards. The overall attitude score (ATGE_TotalMean) confirmed this trend (F = 4.46, p = .013), indicating a gradual decrease in openness across school levels. No statistically significant differences were found for Social Value, Rejection, or Ability Grouping, suggesting that the more ideological and value-related components of attitudes toward giftedness remain relatively stable across educational levels (Table 3).

Table 3: Differences in mean scores of OGE subscales by teachers' school level

Subscale	*Primary (M ± SD)*	*Secondary I (M ± SD)*	*Secondary II (M ± SD)*	*F*	*p*	η^2
A – Needs and Support	3.41 ± 0.58	3.20 ± 0.59	3.07 ± 0.63	4.21	.016	.041
B – Resistance to Objections	3.92 ± 0.55	3.78 ± 0.62	3.64 ± 0.65	3.87	.023	.037
C – Social Value	2.98 ± 0.60	2.88 ± 0.59	2.82 ± 0.66	1.12	.330	.011
D – Rejection	2.97 ± 0.51	3.06 ± 0.57	3.16 ± 0.60	2.45	.089	.023
E – Ability Grouping	2.27 ± 0.66	2.32 ± 0.73	2.39 ± 0.77	0.82	.442	.008
F – Acceleration	2.85 ± 0.59	2.78 ± 0.60	2.66 ± 0.58	3.31	.038	.032
ATGE – Total Mean	3.32 ± 0.27	3.23 ± 0.29	3.18 ± 0.31	4.46	.013	.043

4. Discussion and conclusion

The study reveals a complex picture of Italian teachers' representations and attitudes toward giftedness, confirming growing conceptual openness alongside persistent critical issues hindering school implementation. Quantitative analysis shows an overall neutral-to-positive attitude toward gifted education, with clear rejection of elitism objections and moderate awareness of high-potential students' specific needs. However, resistance to more structured strategies suggests conceptual openness doesn't automatically translate into willingness to change curricular, organizational, and assessment structures.

Considering the theoretical framework, the data are particularly meaningful. The ecology of learning and synecological pedagogy invite interpreting giftedness as diversity contributing to the educational ecosystem's balance, not as individual exception. From this perspective, talent isn't an anomaly to manage marginally, but a relational and cultural resource requiring adaptive environments, consistent policies, and widespread professional skills. The difficulty translating this vision into action reflects the gap between advanced pedagogical paradigms and established school practices.

Data on direct experience impact is significant: teachers who encountered at least one high-potential student demonstrate greater sensitivity to educational needs and stronger perception of talent development's social value. This confirms direct contact opens minds, deconstructs stereotypes, and bridges the gap between abstract concepts and professional experience. Conversely, seniority appears associated with more cautious attitudes, likely due to established practices and limited exposure to current giftedness training. Overall, the observed correlation pattern aligns with studies indicating direct experience promotes positive attitudes while seniority moderates them, highlighting the need for training policies valuing professional experience while maintaining reflective, updated approaches.

Qualitative data demonstrate a professional culture in transition: while predominantly cognitive representations of giftedness persist, references to motivational, emotional, and relational dimensions emerge, consistent with theories rejecting reductionist approaches. Teachers' definitions show gradual shifts toward multidimensional views of potential, aligning with ecological, dynamic, process-oriented perspectives. However, ambivalent or stereotypical definitions indicate this evolution isn't fully consolidated and requires explicit training distinguishing giftedness from high academic achievement.

Responses regarding giftedness inclusion in Special Educational Needs show generally nuanced, informed positions: most teachers recognize specific needs without rigidly equating giftedness with disadvantage, valuing personalization as guiding principle. This reflects growing familiarity with recent Italian legislation, but highlights risks of interpretative fragmentation where clear institutional frameworks and shared operational tools lack. Instructional strategies indicated confirm adherence to inclusive pedagogy and curriculum enrichment principles, with significant focus on socio-emotional and relational dimensions. However, generic or impractical responses suggest stated awareness isn't always accompanied by sufficiently structured methodological knowledge.

Another significant finding emerged from school level differences. Primary teachers show greater openness to gifted students' specific needs, more decisively rejecting elitist objections and showing greater willingness to adopt flexible measures recognizing cognitive diversity. In contrast, lower and especially upper Secondary schools show more cautious attitudes, likely linked to greater curricular rigidity, assessment pressure, and professional culture oriented toward selection rather than personalization. This difference can be viewed through an *ecological lens* attributing crucial roles to specific practices and contexts in shaping attitudes. Primary school's greater flexibility, oriented toward personalization and relational care, seems to favor more inclusive perspectives, while Secondary school's curricular and assessment logic risks discouraging interventions perceived as exceptional or complex.

Overall, results confirm the cultural evolution necessary to fully enhance giftedness in Italian educational contexts cannot be limited to individual awareness, but must be supported by systemic intervention integrating training, policies, and practices in ecological perspective. Recent regulatory changes represent strategic steps forward, but concrete impact depends on translating principles into sustainable actions, ensuring giftedness recognition doesn't remain confined to theoretical levels. In this perspective, initial and in-service teacher training appears crucial in ensuring widespread, consistent, updated skills supporting required cultural change. Particular attention should address Secondary school contexts and senior teachers, promoting pathways encouraging rethinking of teaching practices through comparison with concrete gifted student experiences.

Results confirm that building an educational ecosystem capable of nurturing talent requires systemic approaches. On a pedagogical level, there's a need to promote giftedness views consistent with synecological learning perspectives, recognizing talent not as individual anomaly but as a dynamic ecosystem component. Professionally, it's essential to strengthen skills related to personalization, socio-emotional management, and flexible practices, overcoming the idea that gifted education is residual or elitist. On a political-institutional level, recent regulatory innovations must translate into stable resources, guidelines, and organizational mechanisms supporting shared culture construction. Finally, in terms of research, this study highlights the need to investigate educational policies' impact on giftedness representation across school systems, examining how attitude changes translate into practice changes over time.

Recognizing giftedness as a resource for balancing the educational ecosystem calls into question the role of schools as interdependent learning communities, capable of redistributing responsibilities and activating shared responsibility among teachers, families, and local communities. In this regard, initial and in-service training are strategic in bridging gaps between emerging awareness and practical application, countering risks that talent development remains dependent on individual goodwill or chance encounters.

Data shows Italian schools are in transition: a growing willingness to recognize giftedness as a legitimate component of educational diversity exists, but this perspective isn't yet fully integrated into professional practices and cultures. Direct experience with gifted students emerges as a factor promoting openness, while seniority acts as moderator that can slow or hinder adoption of innovative perspectives.

To leverage opportunities offered by new regulatory frameworks, it's crucial to promote systemic interventions aligning with ecological learning visions: compulsory continuous teacher training, clear operational guidelines, professional discussion spaces, and institutional support policies. Only thus can giftedness shift from marginal category into resource for balance and innovation in the entire educational ecosystem.

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