

**Review of: Ilaria Tatulli. *Ragazze e donne con disabilità: Percorsi storico-culturali, narrazioni e orientamento formativo [Girls and Women with Disabilities: Historical-Cultural Pathways, Narratives, and Formative Orientation]*. Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2023. 179 pp.**

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### Abstract

Ilaria Tatulli's *Ragazze e donne con disabilità* (Girls and Women with Disabilities) offers a rich and carefully articulated synthesis of historical, cultural, and pedagogical perspectives on the lives of women and girls with disabilities. Rather than uncovering new archival material, Tatulli's project reconceptualizes existing sources to construct an interpretive framework that informs both research and educational practice. Comprising eight chapters, the volume transitions from theoretical and historical foundations to the analysis of narrative testimonies and an empirical study on formative orientation. This structure allows readers to follow the gradual movement from conceptual framing to lived experience and applied research. Particularly commendable is Tatulli's intersectional approach, which foregrounds the interplay of gender, disability, and social context, situating the experiences of disabled women within broader discourses of inclusion and rights. The book's pedagogical value lies in its potential to serve as both a reflective and practical resource. Tatulli demonstrates how established theoretical traditions can be mobilized to foster critical awareness and create more inclusive educational pathways. However, some limitations deserve attention. The discussion engages only marginally with classical and medieval sources that could have enriched the historical narrative, and the empirical chapter would benefit from greater

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demographic transparency and methodological detail. Overall, *Ragazze e donne con disabilità* is a timely and important contribution to the fields of disability studies, feminist pedagogy, and inclusive education. Tatulli's integrative approach not only bridges disciplinary divides, but also invites readers to rethink the historical and cultural constructions of disability and gender. This book is a valuable resource for anyone seeking to deepen their understanding of disability through an intersectional and pedagogically informed lens.

### Keywords

disability, women, family, inclusive education, autobiographical narratives

During a research visit to northern Spain, specifically to Pamplona at the University of Navarra, I observed a cityscape intentionally redesigned to enhance accessibility. Ramps, tactile paving, and modified pavements made mobility visible and achievable, enabling full civic participation for older adults and people with disabilities. This experience highlights the central concern of Tatulli's work: the life trajectories of women with disabilities are inseparable from the societal and built infrastructures that promote inclusion. In her book, Tatulli—a researcher and university lecturer in special pedagogy at the University of Cagliari—constructs an interpretive bridge connecting biography, inclusive education, and the historical evolution of educational approaches to disability.

Tatulli situates her monograph at the intersection of disability studies, feminist scholarship, and historical-cultural analysis. The work has three primary objectives: to reconstruct the historical frameworks that have shaped representations of female disability, to synthesize key theoretical currents, and to highlight autobiographical testimony alongside empirical research on formative orientation.

The volume comprises eight chapters and a programmatic preface, organized as follows:

1. Theoretical frameworks connecting *pedagogia speciale* with disability and gender studies.
2. Classical legacies, particularly Greek ideals of beauty and virtue.
3. Religious and moral responses in late antiquity and the medieval period.
4. The history of educational institutions and early practices concerning girls and women.
5. Identity, corporeality, and adolescence.

6. Legal and political frameworks, culminating in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).
7. Autobiographical narratives and testimonial sources.
8. An empirical study on formative orientation and life-course planning.

The book concludes with an extensive bibliography in both Italian and English. The writing is consistently clear and is enhanced by chapter summaries, a diverse array of source materials—from autobiographical excerpts to legal texts—and pedagogical prompts. These features make the book a valuable resource for postgraduate teaching and for scholars aiming to incorporate inclusive perspectives into educational research.

One of Tatulli's most compelling interpretive moves is her reading of the classical formula *kalòs kai agathòs* (“beautiful and good”), which she interprets as a persistent cultural connection between physical appearance and moral worth. By tracing this aesthetic-moral continuum through various historical periods, Tatulli reveals how bodily differences have long influenced expectations regarding women's social roles and educational opportunities.

However, certain omissions limit the historical depth of her analysis. The book would have benefited from engaging with Seneca's derisive anecdote about Harpastes (Epistles 50, 2–3), which exemplifies Roman ridicule of bodily difference and could have served as a concise classical anchor for Tatulli's discussion of stigma. In this passage, Seneca recounts the story of Harpastes, a female clown in his household who becomes blind, adopting a tone that is both derisive and dehumanizing:

“You know Harpasté, my wife's female clown [*uxoris meae fatuam*]; she has remained in my house, a burden incurred from a legacy. I particularly disapprove of these freaks [*Ipse enim aversissimus ab istis prodigiis sum*]; whenever I wish to enjoy the quips of a clown, I am not compelled to hunt far; I can laugh at myself. Now this clown suddenly became blind. The story sounds incredible, but I assure you that it is true: she does not know that she is blind. She keeps asking her attendant to change her quarters; she says that her apartments are too dark.” (Seneca, 1917, p. 331).

Invoking Seneca here would have provided Tatulli with a succinct classical reference for exploring anticipatory stigma and cultural ridicule. The passage illustrates how elites in antiquity treated bodily difference as a form of comic spectacle—a rhetorical means of reinforcing social hierarchies. While the omission of this text is not a major flaw, its inclusion would have strengthened the book's argument by extending

its analysis of the cultural production of shame and invisibility from antiquity to modernity.

Similarly, a more sustained engagement with medieval and early modern beliefs in “changelings” (*Wechselbalg*) would situate contemporary educational segregation within a long history of ritualized and communal othering. In many European traditions, infants born with visible differences or disabilities were labeled changelings, believed to have been exchanged by supernatural beings such as fairies, elves, or witches. This designation often resulted in social death: children with hydrocephaly, severe congenital defects, cerebral palsy, or congenital deafness were sometimes abandoned, excluded, or even killed. Mothers of these children were frequently socially condemned, suspected of engaging with malevolent forces. This logic intensified during the witch-hunt centuries (15th–17th), and records of infanticide and abandonment extend into later periods (Sawyer, 2023). Recognizing changeling beliefs as part of a long history of othering reinforces Tatulli’s claim that modern educational segregation is rooted in older ritual, legal, and social mechanisms of exclusion.

Tatulli’s readings of Gospel healing narratives are compelling but occasionally overly redemptive. She rightly emphasizes the emancipatory potential of episodes such as the raising of Jairus’ daughter and the healing of the woman with a hemorrhage, demonstrating how early Christian narratives could create spaces of recognition for women with disabilities. However, a more dialectical approach that considers passages like John 5:14—where healing is linked to sin—would highlight that early Christian interpretations of disability evolved gradually: “Look, you are well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse may happen to you” (John 5:14, The New American Bible, 2002). Together, these historical and biblical perspectives reinforce Tatulli’s central argument that contemporary attitudes toward disability are deeply rooted in long-standing cultural, social, and religious frameworks.

While the empirical chapter offers rich thematic insights, its scholarly rigor would benefit from greater methodological transparency. The study does not provide comprehensive details on recruitment strategies, socio-economic and regional diversity, or whether ethical clearance and informed consent were obtained. Including an explicit reference to a methodological framework (e.g., thematic analysis or grounded theory) and discussing data saturation would further enhance the reliability of the findings.

Nevertheless, the chapter draws on interviews with thirteen women aged 18–50, conducted face-to-face, by telephone, and via email, illustrating strategies of

resilience, negotiation, and identity construction. These narratives yield a compelling and diverse set of testimonies. Notably, the prevalence of positive recollections of schooling likely reflects Italy's longstanding tradition of full inclusion in mainstream education since the 1970s. Tatulli effectively situates these lived experiences within broader discussions of educational integration and inclusive pedagogical practices. However, explicitly framing these narratives within the context of national education policies would further clarify their significance while accounting for other contributing factors. Additionally, enduring barriers outside the school context—particularly architectural inaccessibility and workplace discrimination—continue to impede transitions into adult life, despite positive early educational experiences.

Despite some limitations, Tatulli's volume represents a thoughtful, rigorous, and pedagogically actionable contribution. Her recovery of autobiographical voices transforms personal testimony into effective teaching material, while her synthesis of secondary sources provides interpretive tools for both scholars and practitioners. Importantly, the book connects rights-based frameworks—most notably the CRPD (United Nations, 2006)—with practical pedagogical strategies, bridging normative commitments with classroom realities.

*Ragazze e donne con disabilità* offers an invaluable intersectional perspective on female disability, connecting historical patterns of exclusion with modern strategies for empowerment. With its clear interpretations and progressive educational vision, the book serves as a crucial resource for postgraduate teaching, teacher training, and practice-oriented research in inclusive education. Its blend of historical insight, empirical depth, and pedagogical relevance distinguishes it as a significant contribution to disability studies, feminist pedagogy, and inclusive education.

## References

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