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# Special educational needs: The Italian way towards the construction of a special normality

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## Abstract

This article wants to offer a look on the question integration/inclusion considering the topic in connection with those students whose biography is characterized by social, cultural and migrant disadvantaged past or by a situation of disability. In effect, the legislation since the beginning has constituted a "matrix" with wide possibilities of application and a trace/way for experiment new pedagogical and didactic paths to cope with different types of development problems, in other words the Special Educational Needs (SEN). In this perspective, this contribute will try to respond, with a look between past, present and future, to the sense directions of integration and inclusion nowadays, focusing on the centrality of the school in the circularity between school, family, community for promoting inclusion.

**KEYWORDS:** social inclusion, social integration, special educational needs, citizenship, social empowerment, proximity

## 1. Introduction

The inclusion of differences is the theme of school life that, even today, most enliven the world of teachers. The organization that school classes present reflects today's social complexity and, compared to the past, is certainly more articulated and pluralistic. In the classrooms the presence of students with certified disabilities is a varied reality, besides these, there are also students with Specific Learning Disorders (LSD), with psychosocial and/or family problematic situations, children with complex behaviors to manage, or children of foreign parents. Yet it almost seems that, in this difficult scenario, inclusion is the only catalyst of efforts for change, of attempts to make teaching, schoolwork, the emotion of relationships and learning more meaningful. Diversity, even today, is at the heart of an evolutionary movement of quality, certainly difficult problematic, suffered, but real. The continuous and incessant search for quality of

inclusion is, in fact, the search for a quality of daily schooling for all students. The "different" student questions every day and every day asks for quality.

## 2. A brief historical review of the most important regulations

The Constitution of the Italian Republic, already in 1947 in art. 3, so stated: *«All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinions, personal and social conditions»*. This statement defines, de facto, only formal equality, accompanied by substantial equality, which provides for the right to a dignity of the "person", who must be able to fully explain their personal aptitudes. In the second paragraph the Constituent emphasizes that is not enough to enunciate principle, but that everyone must be guaranteed the same opportunities: *«[...] remove the obstacles that prevent the full development of the person»*.

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For a long time, however, this only meant the creation of separate school paths, special schools and differential classrooms, which sanctioned the historical period of “segregation”. Starting from the 1970s, the choice of separate courses began to be questioned and the school also took the first steps towards a progressive opening to reception. In 1975, the document of the parliamentary commission chaired by Senator Franca Falcucci enunciated the basic principles of what today, in Italy, is called inclusive school: collegiality, the role of the family, the integrated management of services, the training of teachers. It was stated that it was not enough to welcome the student, it was necessary to integrate him, to make him become a protagonist.

Law 517 of 4 August 1977 represents a milestone in the history of Italian schools, since it abolished special schools and determined the integration of disabled students in the common classrooms. This legislation has had the merit of abolishing differential classrooms in middle school and of allowing the integration of students with disabilities into normal classrooms, of introducing the figure of the support teacher and the socio-psychopedagogical team into the classrooms council. A few years later, on 5 February 1992, was promulgated law number 104, entitled Framework law for assistance, social integration and the rights of people with disabilities. This law, subsequently updated and modified by Legislative Decree 66/2017, provided, in an innovative way, the list of basic documents to build the school integration path. The family of students with disabilities must produce the following documents to the school:

- the **Functional Profile** – prepared by a specific multidisciplinary assessment unit with a strong medical component, with the collaboration of the disabled student’s family, a representative of the local administration and a teacher of the school attended. It contains the functional description of the student in relation to the difficulties he is facing and the

analysis of the potential development in the short and medium term resulting from the examination of a number of operating parameters, as defined by the International Classification of Functioning (ICF) model;

- the **Individual Project** – drawn up by a commission composed not only of doctors, but of representatives of the local authority, the school and the family. Commits institutions to provide assistance, transport, aids, subsidies, etc., also in collaboration with educational institutions;
- the **Individualized Educational Plan** – is the document that defines the planning, implementation of interventions and evaluation. It is developed and approved by all the teachers of the classroom, with the support of social and health workers and with the participation of parents and specialist professional figures internal and external to the school institution;
- the **Plan for Inclusion and verification of the quality of the school's inclusive processes** – it frames the state of the school's educational and training needs and the actions that are intended to be activated to provide adequate responses to the students with disabilities and the family. The drafting, implementation and evaluation of the Plan is the responsibility of the teachers. The Inclusion Plan aims to: 1) guarantee the unity of the educational and didactic approach of the school community; 2) guarantee the continuity of educational and teaching action even in the event of a change in teachers; 3) allow a collegial reflection on the educational methods and teaching methods adopted in the school.

In the years following the publication of Law 104/92, many problems related to cognitive and behavioral disorders have been highlighted, mainly in subjects of evolutionary age and in school, thanks also to the new knowledge and skills of specially trained teachers, which inevitably also affect the emotional sphere and interpersonal relationships.

Thus the expression “Special Educational Needs” was coined, summarized in the acronym SEN, which historically appears, for the first time, in England in the Warnock Report of 1978. Secondly, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 affirms the need to prevent all forms of discrimination in the admission of SEN pupils to school, to promote their full participation in school life and to involve families in it.

In Italy this definition entered into wide lexical use only after the issuance of the Ministerial Directive of 27 December 2012, entitled *“Intervention tools for students with Special Educational Needs and territorial organization for school inclusion”*, succinctly specified in meaning with this description: *«The area of scholastic disadvantage is much broader than that which can be explicitly referred to the presence of deficits. In each class there are students who require special attention for a variety of reasons: social and cultural disadvantage, specific learning disorders and/or specific developmental disorders, difficulties deriving from lack of knowledge of the Italian culture and language because they belong to different»*.

It is worth pointing out that the desired methodological renewal to meet the “special” needs of students with Specific Learning Disorders successfully applies to all students in the classroom. In this sense, the transformation of teaching and methodology in order to ensure the educational success of particular “categories” of students can become an opportunity for widespread improvement of the quality of teaching.

The presence in the classrooms of multiple problems has therefore made necessary and indispensable a differentiation, indeed an evolution, from the process of mere integration to the broader one of inclusion, which guarantees a full and totalizing acceptance of diversity as a resource to be used for the exclusive benefit of the individual, as well as the entire school community, in constant and continuous becoming pedagogical and didactic.

### 3. The pillars of inclusive teaching

Daniel Pennac (famous French writer and teacher), in one of his most successful masterpieces, described the classroom of students as a large orchestra in which everyone plays an instrument: there is the piano, the guitar, the violin and many other means that produce music. Everyone is important to achieve the final result, it doesn't matter if someone has had the triangle that just jingles or the wind chime that seems to produce imperceptible sounds, what matters is that it is played in the right way and that it gives gratification to those who use it. Well, the classroom is a place made up of people with different aptitudes, abilities and propensities and the teachers' task is to guide everyone on an individualized path suited to their abilities.

The goal is not to surpass your partner, but to work together to grow and be happy with the work done, even if the result is different. From this perspective, school becomes a wonderful reality made of possibilities, personal growth and gratification, where the foreigner does not feel less than the Italian, and the student with disabilities can interact with the class without feeling the weight of his situation. But how to achieve such a result? What are the principles from which to start to create truly inclusive teaching? We could simplify the numerous studies developed around the issue by indicating the six main steps that outline the essential elements for the creation of excellent inclusive teaching:

#### **(1) Know, research and value all the individual differences of students (and teachers).**

This is the first major theme that shifts the focus from integration practices exclusively for students with disabilities to a generally more inclusive school, which responds in a personalized way to all the differences of all students. Compared to the infinite variety of human differences, the first action is represented by awareness and knowledge. In the Italian school there are students who present, more or less visibly, differences of

various nature, which we often do not know. If we use a complex anthropological model, such as that of the World Health Organization's ICF, we know that one person can differ from another due to an enormous number of factors: in the body, in skills, in social participation, in the social contexts in which they live (from the type of family to the religious, cultural, social and economic environments) and in the personal, identity and psycho-affective contexts that characterize it. A systemic goal of the school must be to create an ever greater knowledge and awareness of how the heterogeneity of the pupils and, of course, also of the teachers.. To understand the ever-new differences that populate our schools we must open the field of knowledge well beyond intellectual, learning and behavioral differences, because new cultural, linguistic, psychological and identity dimensions are spreading.

The second action with respect to differences is their research, bringing them to light, for everyone to consider as an ordinary reality of the normality of human beings. In this case, being able to talk openly about even the most uncomfortable or sensitive differences helps to move towards a more inclusive school. Breaking the taboos of «it's better not to talk about this...», openly addressing with pupils and teachers not only the issues of difficulties or excellence or variety with respect to learning, but also those relating to behaviour, emotions, sexual orientation, cultural and religious identities, families, income, social life, etc. An inclusive school is a school that strives to understand and research the highest possible number of human differences, treating them with curiosity and respect.

The third action concerns the "instrumental" valorization of differences, beyond human valorization as an unavoidable principle. A difference is also valued when it is used to improve some learning process and development of skills. The literature on learning in cooperative groups shows us that a heterogeneous group gives better results than a homogeneous one, both in terms of cognitive and interpersonal and

social learning (Fisher, Roach and Frey, 2002; La Prova, 2015), or that set of soft skills that Edgar Morin calls «the well-made head». If we want students with a well-made head (and a heart) we must let them live in a continuous and varied heterogeneity. In this regard, we must not forget that all students benefit from this heterogeneity since they are given the opportunity to learn from others, to care for others and to acquire the inclinations, skills and values necessary to develop self-esteem and respect of others. Students who live in a classroom with disabled classmates develop greater emotional and cognitive maturity. For disabled students, on the other hand, being with "able-bodied" classmates increases the desire to do, to imitate, to emulate and therefore to "learn". From a management point of view, this means elevating heterogeneity to a value and trying to build it as much as possible, avoiding the various forms, more or less disguised, of «ethnic cleansing» with respect to some differences and the illusory search for a quiet homogeneity with level groups, a true anti-inclusive choice. In this regard it is worth remembering the old principle of «natural proportions», introduced for the first time in the pioneering text by Stainback and Stainback (1993), which states that the various human differences should be distributed between classes and schools according to general epidemiological percentages; for example, if the general percentage of disability is 3%, it is not appropriate for there to be classes or even schools where this percentage is double or triple, if not even higher.

An inclusive school also deals with understanding well an interesting phenomenon which appears clearly to us if we assume difference as an object of knowledge and valorization, i.e. the so-called «intersectionality»: how different differences intersect, overlap and are related and how This multiple situation requires greater attention and complexity of interventions from an inclusive school. For example, disability, language, culture, income, or Specific Learning Disability, family, place of living, family composition (Theoharis and Scanlan,

2015). Evidently, the overall situation of a student with a Specific Learning Disorder will be very different depending on the resources of his family, the school, the place where he lives and so on.

**(2) Enrich the principle of "justice as equality" that governs our schools with that of «justice as fairness».**

Eminent scholars of legal philosophy and political philosophy, including a Nobel Prize winner (Sen, 2010; Rawls, 2002; Nussbaum, 2007; Rodotà, 2013; Osio and Braibanti, 2012), remind us that the idea and practices of social justice will truly become such when, alongside equality, and as its evolution, we manage to realize the principle of fairness, that is, «making positive differences» (a kind of reverse, compensatory, supportive discrimination), so as not to fall into mistake denounced by Don Milani (Italian priest and educator) with his «there is no worse injustice than making unequals equal» and we will manage resources differently, to support all students towards substantial and truly real equality of opportunities for educational success and inclusion. The Italian school is founded on a principle of equality: everyone is equal in front of the (same) school. There are no different schools for different students. But in this school of all we must also realize the principle of equity, although to some (or many) it may seem truly unfair. How many times has a teacher, or a parent, or a school director heard the complaints of someone who reported an «injustice» (from his point of view, that of justice as perfectly distributive equality) relating to a student with a personalized test, or to a result considered «given, just because he has the diagnosis»? In Italian schools there are still many teachers who do not make their students follow a path (of course, tiring for everyone) that makes them move from the idea of justice as equality to that of justice as fairness, in which starting from «we are all equal» we move on to «we are all different», to return with fairness to «we are different

and also equal», making differences precisely to create equality.

A difficult path, from a cultural, ethical-political and communicative point of view, but necessary, otherwise many students, families and teachers will feel that they live in an unjust institution. Furthermore, working for a fair institution also means facing – and possibly resolving – challenges of a technical-didactic nature, and in particular in the phases of summative assessment of learning and formal evaluation, such as in state exams. It is not at all easy to construct personalized tests that are not simple «discounts» compared to the contents that a student should demonstrate having learned, but teachers can now have a certain degree of theoretical-practical elaboration at their disposal (Plessi, 2009; Sciapeconi and Pigliapoco, 2015a; 2015b; 2016a; 2016b).

**(3) Read students' needs and understand their individual situation through a global biopsychosocial anthropology.**

It is possible to imagine that the school could be the true director of the various actions of understanding the student's global situation. It is believed to be in the best position to give meaning and "understanding" to the various assessments that different subjects (health services, social services, family, teachers, etc.) make on specific aspects of the student's situation. It is possible to call it "functional diagnosis" or "functioning profile" or simply global knowledge of a student in his individuality, but in any case, it will be a question of including elements of knowledge and evaluation in a significant relationship, through the syntax of a global and trans-professional/transcultural anthropological model as only ICF currently is. The school cannot afford to be self-referential in this interpretative knowledge of a student's situation, but must attempt to make an intelligent synthesis between the various voices that, from different roles, speak about the student. This institution is traditionally less dominated by an individual medical-rehabilitative model on

the one hand, and by family and social considerations on the other: it certainly uses these assessments and can make them dialogue through a global idea of a student who functions in a bio-psycho-social. Schools, health and social services have received various pushes in this direction; furthermore, a rich research and application literature is accumulating on the use of a bio-psycho-social vision based on ICF for the purpose of identifying students with SEN, for the functioning profile, to build a good Individualized Educational Plan (Ianes, 2004; Ianes and Cramerotti, 2009; Ianes and Cramerotti, 2011).

However, we must not think that the idea of person and student that ICF proposes applies only to those who have some difficulties, some problematic differences, on the contrary. ICF shows us how an infinite variety of contextual factors, coming from surrounding environments (physical, relational, cultural, regulatory, technological, etc.) and from “personal” environments (identity-related, psycho-affective, motivational, etc.) can mediate in a positive sense (facilitators) or in a negative sense (barriers) various aspects of any human functioning and can also be expressed in a complex and multi-directional way on our body, on our personal activities and on our social participation. The added value of ICF therefore lies in proposing a vision of the person and of human functioning applicable to everyone, to understand them more deeply in their characteristics and needs.

**(4) Make a wide variety of learning opportunities available to students.**

If we started from the valorization and use of the differences between students, it is now necessary to differentiate the various teaching proposals, so that they can meet positively with the different situations of the students. It would be crazy to offer a single learning opportunity to such diverse students, but that is often exactly what happens. A very useful conceptual framework for articulating ordinary teaching into many different possibilities is the Universal

Design for Learning UDL (CAST, 2011; Meyer, Rose and Gordon, 2014; Savia and Mulè, 2015), which helps us design different forms of activities based on a conceptualization of learning and skill development activities derived not only from cognitive psychology but also from the discoveries of neuroscience. When we learn something we activate three large neural networks, one to receive and understand the various inputs, one to reprocess them and produce some type of action, and one to remain attentive and involved in the task. The differentiated teaching design on a UDL basis therefore produces as many opportunities/materials as possible for the reception-acquisition phase, for the production phase of many different outputs, and for the parallel phase of involvement in the task through various and different formats of work, from cooperative to individual or technological, etc. This didactic differentiation finds natural nourishment in the digital parts of textbooks, where material simplified, made more complex, enriched, etc., finds ever greater space and attention (Scataglini, 2016), but must also be realized in concrete ways of working collective in the classroom, in which this plurality is not only granted, but used structurally, such as in cooperative groups or in open or laboratory teaching (Demo, 2015; 2016). An increasingly inclusive school must progressively break the monopoly of standard frontal teaching for all (one size fits all...) and of standard places of learning: classrooms and unchangeable class groups.

**(5) Ensure students, families and all stakeholders use effective, evidence-based educational and teaching strategies.**

An inclusive school must be able to counteract the various phenomena of marginalization as much as possible and, at the same time, implement effective educational and didactic interventions, or which lead the student to achieve the skills expected for him/her. From students with highly complex situations, and from their families, quite

understandably, there comes a strong request for effective actions, based on the evidence produced by scientific research in the psycho-educational field. Even in Italy, a teaching culture oriented towards the principle of evidence based is spreading (a scientific association, SAPIE - [www.sapie.it](http://www.sapie.it) - has been formed, and the works by the greatest scholar of evidence-based teaching: Hattie, 2016). Particularly delicate situations, such as autism spectrum disorders, require extremely specific interventions, which scientific research and official documents from the Ministry of Health have well defined (SNLG, 2015): the inclusive school must be able to activate them, certainly also in collaboration with external experts who provide continuous support to curricular teachers in the daily and normalized use of these strategies in the context of ordinary work. However, in the case in which the expert enters the school and works directly with the student in question, without transferring his skills to those of the curricular teachers, he impoverishes the school community and effectively works against inclusion. With respect to the issue of the effectiveness of interventions, the director of school, as an educational leader, must keep under control the development of ever-new educational and didactic knowledge in the two fields of evidence-based education and in the equally interesting field of the educational implications of neuroscience discoveries (Rivoltella, 2012; Di Nuovo, 2014; Oliverio, 2015). This second field seeks to reconcile school with the Cartesian error of irrevocably dividing the mind from the body (Damasio, 1995), stimulating forms of teaching that are as aware as possible of what neuroscience has understood about the functioning of the human brain when it learns, reasons, remember, imitate, etc. (Rizzolatti and Craighero, 2004; Rizzolatti et al., 1996; Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia, 2006; Gallese et al., 1996; Vallortigara and Panciera, 2014). In this fifth line of action, the personal professional skills of teachers become essential. It is clear that professional competence such as that of the teacher can be fully expressed in an organizational

dimension and in a *team*. A good, professionally competent teacher must have particularly developed knowledge, skills and competences: but which ones? There are essentially two points of reference on the topic. The first is the *Profile of the inclusive teacher*, developed by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (<https://www.european-agency.org/activities/te4i/profile-inclusive-teachers>), which defines a series of knowledge, attitudes and skills that constitute a good platform for the teacher's long-life professional development, also as a self-help tool. management of their skills. The second is the Profile, which concerns the skills of the specialized teacher for activities to support the integration of students with disabilities, developed by a group of teachers from the Faculty of Education Sciences of the University of Bolzano (Ianes, 2014).

#### (6) Optimize the use of resources in an inclusive sense.

The autonomy of educational institutions allows (and requires) great creative flexibility in activating and using the various available resources and potential, still latent, hidden resources. Some resource development themes are already well known to school directors, such as the involvement of many formal and informal realities of the surrounding community, to increase the potential of resources through networking, or building alliances and partnerships at various levels with families, from the development of new communication strategies and means to direct forms of skills training (parent training) and psychoeducational support. Other strategic issues have been appearing in the Italian debate for a few years, but are already leaving their mark. Particularly important, in my opinion, is what concerns the evolution of the support teacher (Deluca, 2011; Ianes, 2015; 2016) and the so-called «special normality» (Ianes, 2006). A support teacher who passively accepts delegation mechanisms and perhaps takes his student with disabilities out of the classroom works badly and against

inclusion: it is necessary to radically reform the role of the support teacher, freeing him from the bond of certification, making him a teacher curriculum in all respects, which works in inclusive didactic co-presence with all students (Ianes and Cramerotti, 2015) and which, for a limited part of them – those who require greater competence – moves in a network of schools to provide the his methodological competence to his curricular colleagues. This evolution was tested in the field for two consecutive school years and proved not only to be possible, but also to bring benefits to both students with disabilities and classmates (Ianes, 2016); in particular, it was interesting to see how the new operational dimensions of support, namely the total co-presence in the classroom and the itinerant methodological support, have «freed» a series of latent resources, both in the professionalism of the curricular teachers (who for example managed to activate many learning activities in small cooperative groups), and in the availability of mutual help from classmates (for example in many tutoring initiatives). The theme of the «special normality» instead concerns the way in which to optimize in an inclusive sense the external resources of high know-how and specific skills that often enter the school for the most diverse needs, from professional educators expert in working with students with disorders of the Autistic Spectrum - for example ABA technicians - to speech therapists expert in Augmentative Alternative Communication, neurodevelopmental disorders therapists, facilitators of autonomy and communication, pedagogists, psychologists expert in Specific Learning Disorders, experts in Pet Therapy, in multimedia technologies, etc. In all these cases it is possible to use these very precious and essential resources in an anti-inclusive way, accelerating processes of delegation to the expert and shirking of responsibility of the curricular teachers and consolidating the (wrong) idea that for every «specialty» there must be an answer «special», so esoteric and technically inaccessible to normal teachers that it is essential to delegate it to someone expert. The technical resource, on the other

hand, must direct his expertise to normal school situations, transferring his skills to those normally present in teachers. The expert should extract the "active ingredients" that work from his overall approach and to guide normal educational practices with them: in this way normality is enriched with specialties and the latter, entering normality, takes root and it spreads, certainly losing a bit of technique, but gaining in pervasiveness, effectiveness and generalization.

The role of the school director, in this organizational dimension, is of formidable importance: among the many examples that could be given, I will cite just one. The extensive literature on the factors that make co-teaching effective shows that, one of the most important, is the action of the school director, who should support inclusive co-design processes among teachers by ensuring more time (in terms of hours) dedicated to this specific purpose. Without the recognition of this additional time, the potential of co-teaching is greatly diminished. From this point of view, the school director, by giving teachers greater opportunities to meet, can encourage the implementation of good practices in inclusive design.

#### 4. Conclusions

The hope, therefore, is that in the not too distant future, all schools will ban the word «inclusion» from their vocabulary, because a school that no longer needs inclusion is first and foremost a school founded on equity, a school founded on human rights and social justice, a school which, in the name of these values, knows how to recognize the uniqueness of each student.

This perspective seems like an obvious and obvious idea but schools often forget this, ending up giving the same book, the same lesson, the same learning times and the same assessment methods to everyone without distinction. If we want to affirm the principle of universality, we should be obsessed with discovering, understanding and valuing the differences of our students in every way; we should provide innovative

teaching strategies useful for promoting and developing all forms of thinking to ensure that every student feels part of a learning environment that enhances their «special normalities»; we should never forget that differences are normal, they are biodiversity, which enriches the ecosystems where we learn and relate.

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