

# INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY: THEORIES, METHODS AND PRACTICES TO PREVENT EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

## INCLUSIONE E DIVERSITÀ: TEORIE, METODI E PRATICHE PER PREVENIRE L'ABBANDONO SCOLASTICO

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### ABSTRACT

A positive relational climate in the group-class is a prerequisite and an indispensable condition for effective learning. Diversity is a general category that commits the whole school to respecting personal biographies, enhancing talents, and taking into account students' wealth of experience and knowledge. The school is forced to deal with different cultures, with new attitudes, with interactions not experienced before, with different systems of values. Each school is, therefore, called upon to promote the "well-being" of pupils at school, carrying out projects, paths, methodologies aimed at improving the mutual knowledge of children and young people, self-esteem, the quality of relationships, respect for differences, responding to the needs of all children and, in particular, of children with special needs.

Un clima relazionale positivo nel gruppo-classe costituisce un prerequisito e una condizione indispensabile per un apprendimento efficace. La diversità è una categoria generale che impegna tutta la scuola al rispetto delle biografie personali, alla valorizzazione dei talenti, alla presa in considerazione dei bagagli di esperienza e di conoscenza degli studenti. La scuola è costretta a misurarsi con culture differenti, con atteggiamenti nuovi, con interazioni non sperimentate prima, con sistemi diversi di valori. Ogni Istituto Scolastico è, pertanto, chiamato a promuovere il "benessere" degli alunni a scuola, realizzando progetti, percorsi, metodologie finalizzate a migliorare la conoscenza reciproca di bambini e ragazzi, l'autostima, la qualità delle relazioni, il rispetto delle differenze, rispondendo ai bisogni di tutti i bambini e, in particolare, dei bambini con bisogni speciali.

### KEYWORDS

Educational context; School Dropout, Inclusion.  
Contesti educativi; Dispersione Scolastica, Inclusione.

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## Introduction

The diversity of pupils in the school of the 21st century creates numerous challenges for teachers who cannot have known the same diversity when they themselves were students. Among these, the most important challenge is to be able to find a balance between "high" and "low" expectations, satisfying different needs of different students within the same class. In their classrooms, teachers have students with disabilities and specific learning disorders. The presence of these pupils in the classroom, however, is only one of the obstacles teachers face. Every year, in fact, the number of students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and from families in conditions of hardship or poverty increases. The increasing diversity of the student population in schools is therefore a topic of great debate and concern. Differences between students may include language, culture, religion, gender, various abilities, sexual preferences, socio-economic status, and geographical environment. Differences are often approached as a problem rather than an opportunity to learn about the rich variety that exists in the lives of others and how we can be included, valued, respected, and accepted for who we really are in a naturally diverse world.

The phenomenon of early school leaving is, as is well known, one of the most critical issues of the national and international school system. Early school leaving is, in fact, a phenomenon that affects, to varying degrees of incidence, the whole of Europe and which, therefore, constitutes a central issue of the emerging discussions in the field of education policy. In fact, early school leaving, becoming a criterion for evaluating and judging the quality of the school, defines one of the crucial phenomena through which to analyze and understand the degree of effectiveness of the educational systems themselves. Certainly, at the background of this criticality lie multiple causes and reasons that call into question social, cultural and economic aspects. However, there is a theme that represents a key category for the understanding and resolution of the phenomenon in question, since it constitutes both its origin and the main consequence, outlining, in this sense, one of the most important challenges for contemporary education: we refer to the issue of social exclusion.

The ability to "include" is, in fact, a *primary element of civil society* and at the same time the *criterion that qualifies education in its essence*. An education "adapted to the times" must, therefore, necessarily express an inclusive quality (Valerio, Striano, Oliverio, 2013). On the other hand, inclusion becomes a criterion, that is, a *means of judging education*, which is such only to the extent that it realizes and promotes a logic of openness and authentic acceptance towards *diversity*, understood as a trait that distinguishes, in any case, each human being from the other (Sabatano, 2015). The binomial inclusion-education is therefore indissolubly placed, as the pivot of an idea of training that is necessarily aimed at the goal of

unleashing the potential of subjects, substantiating the project of a democracy as a form of associated and inclusive life.

These fundamental acquisitions therefore call into question the educational institutions and the professionals who work in them, with respect to the need and responsibility to build and express skills adequate to the plurality, fragmentation, and complexity that characterize the educational experience in contemporary times. The training of skills *for* inclusion becomes, therefore, a central and unavoidable element in the construction of professional figures who in various ways participate in the configuration and management of training, educational and educational paths.

The profession of educator is, in fact, a social profession; A profession that implies, that is, deep skills in the management of the relationship. Profound skills in the interpretation and knowledge of oneself and of the other and, consequently, in the expression of a consciously regulated and effective dialogic tenor (Lo Presti, 2010). On the level of the training method, this implies a substantial change of perspective: from a focus on students' problems to a re-centering on the subjectivity of the teacher, in the belief that the construction of professional growth in the field of educational skills of an inclusive nature, requires practices that guide teachers in the discovery and analysis of thoughts, beliefs, of the discomforts and doubts that constitute one's personal knowledge (Forlin, Loreman, Sharma, Earle, 2009). Elements, that is, in which behaviors, actions and choices originate which, if not understood starting from the origin of the Self, can implicitly and unconsciously determine the outcome of exclusion.

This type of acquisition in the educational profession is the expression of a precise culture of training that constitutes the most perceived and advanced margin of pedagogical reflection, acting as a barrier to the phenomena of exclusion that generate the structural drift of early school leaving. However, the culture of common sense, but also the culture more widely spread within the educational institutions themselves, still does not show that it has clearly understood this particular approach. The expression of this lack of reception can be read in the educational and didactic practices that still tend to be more widespread, in the training and didactic models and, above all, in the training courses for teachers (Boffo, Fedeli, Lo Presti, Melacarne, Vianello, 2017).

In this sense, reflections on education cannot be separated from a careful and necessary historical and cultural analysis of the contemporary world. Those involved in education must understand themselves and the world in which they find themselves, since this is the only way to be able to articulate a reflection adequate to the issues of the state of the art. Issues that are never detached from a concrete dimension that derives from ideological implications, political choices, fashions,

opportunities, or contingencies. In this sense, pedagogical discourse cannot and must never express a purely interpretative attitude, but rather be actively and concretely "transformative" (Bertolini, 1988). Reflection on the real inclusive dimensions of education cannot, therefore, fail to include cultural, ideological, and political aspects, which refer to the logic that governs educational practices on the sides of political-institutional concreteness: there can be no widespread and effective practices, except against the background of broader cultural reforms that become real viaticum for coherent and concrete actions.

Inclusion as a cultural, social, but also substantially formative revolution implies, in this sense, the central placement of the category of *diversity* in the background of didactic and educational programming (Lo Presti, 2005). Moreover, since pedagogy, as a discipline situated between theory and practice, is constituted as *design* knowledge, the anthropological-cultural challenge posed by plurality is effectively faced only if knowledge is contaminated by practices, producing dynamics of change. Reflection on the category of *diversity* produces, in other words, a frontier of intervention and formation, constantly in motion, which allows inclusion to be experienced not simply through emergency or accommodation strategies, but as a complex process of reciprocal mediation and dialectic between the theoretical level and the strategic-procedural level. Only in this way does it become an effective and complete cultural revolution that acts in the direction of and within a pedagogy of emancipation, which is nourished by dialogic situations, by proximity oriented to listening, by constructive communication.

For pedagogy, accepting the task-challenge of inclusion means, therefore, committing to outlining the use of tools whose educational function is prepared and controlled (Sabatano, 2011). A pedagogy of inclusion therefore starts from the conviction, supported by sociological and anthropological reflections, that the interaction between diversities is "a fact within which reason must prevail over chance. Reason that, in pedagogical language, means mediation and trust in the possibility that each one can learn to know the world of the *other*, to understand their points of view and ways of being. Pedagogy is, in general, a form of mediation" (Favaro, 2004).

Expressing this possibility implies the construction of transversal educational skills, critical-reflexive, communicative-relational (Lo Presti, 2014); skills that allow to enter a relationship with the recipients of the educational and inclusive action starting from a full willingness to dialogue with the subjective sense of experience, constantly and systematically questioning personal beliefs, points of view, structures of consolidated knowledge. In other words, it is a matter of escaping the error of attributing "objective" meanings to experience, acquiring instead that for the purpose of inclusion it is essential to understand the meaning of inclusive or exclusive, deviant or non-deviant actions and behaviors, based on the value and

meaning that they assume starting from the person who generated them, from his or her being in the natural world, from his lived experiences (Bertolini, Caronia, 2008).

In this sense, the fundamental demand that invests the contemporary educational system is based on the need to train teachers capable of including all the students who make up the plurality of living, social and cultural experiences, characterizing the current educational scenarios and contexts. In a nutshell, a good teacher is, therefore, such if he or she is able to include all students, to relate positively to each of them, to make learning interesting and engaging for everyone, to know how and when to support a student in difficulty (Sharma, Forlin, Loreman, 2008).

Succeeding in these fundamental goals for inclusion is the possible outcome of an exercise of interpretative and, consequently, operational skills that find a first opportunity for development in the maturation of theoretical awareness about the fundamental category of diversity, which appears, as mentioned, to be widely involved in the implicit processes that tacitly influence and orient the actions of those who play the role of educator.

In the first instance, the possibility of acting in new *ways of behaving* with respect to the *other*, which is appropriate to a plural society, calls into question, in the first instance, the possibility of revising one's own personal philosophies by integrating them with a theory of diversity that identifies an interpretative and methodological function in the choice of co-operation. The dissemination and sharing of this theory play the role of an argumentative-interpretative system which, as such, orients the interaction between the individual and the *other* in an inclusive direction.

In the following pages, therefore, a point of view on diversity will be outlined that can serve as an interpretative system of the dynamics of encounter and confrontation that characterize the concreteness of educational contexts.

### **1. Diversity as a barrier to social interactions**

Inclusive education for students can only be successful when these same students feel that they truly belong to the school community. This requires an open and honest discussion of difference, and institutional respect for people, regardless of their background and abilities. In inclusive schools, the establishment of such a climate benefit everyone, promoting the realization of a reality in which students and their families are welcomed and valued. All children benefit from inclusive education.

In contemporary times, diversity tends to be a critical element in daily practices, a sort of barrier that hinders interactions and often makes communication

ineffective and fallacious, leading to outcomes in the direction of marginalization and exclusion. This negative outcome derives from common sense conceptions, widespread beliefs, and convictions about the very meaning of diversity, which tacitly condition and guide behavior. Intervening on the methods of construction of knowledge and on the shared systems of representation of the world, which generate the most common ways of relating to *diversity*, is therefore an operation that passes through the reconfiguration of the most general theories on which the psychological, social and cultural life of a community is based.

The basis of common sense and culture overwhelm individuals while at the same time being a product of individuals. The basic demand for the definition of a formative action, which can intervene on the causes of marginality, exclusion, conflict – as outcomes of the confrontation between diversities – is therefore based on the idea that it is possible to act on the construction of universes of meaning. In other words, it is necessary to critically rethink the category of diversity, introducing interpretative elements within professional training courses, such as to be able to remodel and enrich knowledge in the direction of a more refined and complex conception of the concept that this category expresses; A concept to be placed, therefore, as a guide for thought and educational action in a renewed guise.

The arguments that attribute to *diversity* the value of a central category for the understanding and management of one's relationship with reality and with life can refer, then, to the same reasons that explain its negation. These reasons concern, that is, the biological balances between man and nature, the psychological dynamics of the construction of knowledge and, in the same way, social experience. The link between these various levels is represented by the *potential for change*, expressed by the presence of *diversity* as a central element on which the processes of transformation and formation of individuals, as well as of societies and cultures, are articulated. In this sense, *diversity*, as well as the variability and plurality that it expresses, holds an intrinsic value, as the "primary engine" of those mixtures, changes, fusions, and collisions peculiar to life and to the whole of human history. The variability produced by the processes of differentiation is, in fact, an element of richness, allowing us to experience change as an evolutionary dimension. The perpetual dynamism from which life springs finds its thrust precisely in *diversity*, which constitutes the basic patrimony that makes life itself possible as a biological, mental, social, and cultural phenomenon.

According to a constructive and recursive model, every system is "an aggregate of interacting parts or components", related since their "differentiation" (Bateson, 1999). Difference, signaling a change coming from the outside, assumes a *disturbing* role, as it modifies the system itself; the comparison with what is *different* expresses, therefore, a degree of variation, producing a transformative potential with respect to the system that is in front of it, be it an organism, the human mind

or a society. In systems theory, *diversity*, introduced within "circular chains of determination" (circuits where the parts produce effects and modifications on each other in a circular sense) produces that change, which constitutes over time the outcome of a new course for the system and, therefore, its evolution (Bateson, 1976). The possibility of any object, event or difference coming from the so-called 'external world' to constitute a source of information and innovation is connected to the ability of a system to incorporate it into a circuit in which it can, that is, produce changes.

For a system to be able to adapt and survive, it is necessary, therefore, that it be able to welcome *diversity*, present in its own reality, not as a merely disturbing or destabilizing element, but as a stimulus to inclusion and understanding, such as to *reshape* itself in the direction of a capacity for confrontation about this *diversity*. A system incapable of elaborating such strategies of rebalancing contravenes an ecological dynamic of *adaptation to the environment*, showing itself to be inadequate for survival; an individual or a society, incapable of elaborating strategies of understanding and inclusion of the new, therefore risks producing actions of "closure", which make them fragile and fallacious.

On the level of relations between subjects, this inability to evaluate the stranger derives from a psychological, cultural, and social tendency that bases its interpretation on a prejudice of superiority and rejection of the *different*. Well, even from a biological-natural point of view, the reasons that support this tendency are refutable. In fact, the common idea, according to which some organisms could survive at the expense of others, is not attributable to characteristics that make them superior (Dalal, 2002). It is much more correct to say, then, that some organisms are simply better *suited* to the environment than others and that survival is given, not by superiority, but by *the ability to interact cooperatively* with all the parts that make up the system. In this sense, the existence of difference, its perception and elaboration represent the basic elements, which support the dimensions of exchange and cooperation as indispensable elements in the evolutionary process.

The group condition characterizes the life of individuals not only in a cultural sense, but also from a biological point of view: cooperative logic is a *logic of nature* and not simply a cultural construct; according to this statement, every living structure, as such, can only be collaborative.

In nature, in fact, "each individual organism turns out to be the confluence of more primitive levels of life" (Dalal, 2002, p.154). The individual, as an isolated entity, does not exist, his *raison d'être* always finds its origin in being part of a *group*. The notion of group expresses the aggregative dimension and interdependence that characterizes organic life as a system in which each individual organism plays a role and a function, being, in turn, a *collective* in which the parts



must *collaborate* for the survival of the organism itself: "a single animal or a single plant is a vast community of communities contained in interacting layers [...] each individual member of each species is itself a community of communities of domesticated bacteria" (Dawkins, 1995, pp.52-53); even our body and genome "are more like a society than a machine" (Dalal, 2002, p.156).

Life, therefore, is based on the relationship of reciprocity and exchange between interdependent individual units which, in turn, are *societies* in which other parts interact for the collective good. Collaboration is what guarantees the survival of the living structure and of the parts that compose it; in this sense, even a fundamental element such as *DNA* loses its role, if it is not related to particular enzymes that make its duplication possible: *life, even at its most basic level, must cooperate with other entities in order to exist*. Survival and evolution are based, then, on characteristics that casually place an individual in a cooperative relationship with the system in which he is immersed. These characteristics cannot be evaluated as positive or negative, nor can they be described as an expression of an affirmation of the will to survive that crushes the weakest; rather, they represent a *habit of cooperating*, which proves *useful* for proliferation and, therefore, for survival. Therefore, there are no absolute right or wrong actions or behaviors: an action or behavior can always be judged positively or negatively if placed in relation to the actions and behaviors of others. Every organism, therefore, survives in relation to the complex system of relationships that places it in a condition of reciprocity with the other organisms that make up its environment: the *habit of cooperating* represents, in this sense, a survival strategy that becomes *successful* thanks to the role that *diversity* plays in evolutionary processes.

In fact, what makes relationships necessary for survival is the fact that the parties involved separate, each specializing in a mutually useful task. According to Lévi-Strauss (1969), human groups have differentiated themselves in order to build a system of exchange and relationships that constitutes the foundation of communication and social action. This differentiation is exemplified in the concept of *division of labor*: for a community to survive, it is necessary that the interest of the individual be attainable in the common interest and vice versa.

The idea of *society* is therefore based on the concepts of *difference* and *differentiation*. Order emerges randomly from *disorder* and this randomness is linked to the occurrence of a *condition of difference* that makes *the parties in play* reciprocal. The very concept of order expresses *the connection* that allows the parties involved to function through a reciprocal relationship. However, it is not enough to express different roles and functions for this to determine a cooperative structure; in order for this to happen, these roles and functions must be mutually known. In other words, the parts of a system work together only when they can transform strangeness into *familiarity*, recognizing in the latter a specific value



linked to the characteristics of the difference. Cooperation only makes sense if there is a reciprocal relationship, and reciprocity only works if the parties in the relationship are able to recognize each other (Ridley, 1996), to recognize each other in *diversity*. If this does not happen, there are no conditions for a social structure to take on a cooperative configuration. Therefore, cooperation is only a possible outcome of the encounter between entities, and, in the same way, the configuration of a social structure arises from random dynamics, which express a constant tension between order and disorder, between cooperation and conflict.

## 2. Cooperation as a relational strategy

An inclusive educational action is therefore inserted into the *empty spaces* produced by common sense knowledge, filling its gaps and inadequacies through the delivery of cultural tools that support intentional mediation processes. In other words, it is necessary to have a formative *process* and a parallel theoretical-pedagogical awareness that allows us to recognize diversity, accepting to relativize our own system of ideas and values, in order to oppose the risk, always looming, of wanting to explain, interpret and "bend" otherness exclusively through *our own* implicitly consolidated interpretative categories. It is therefore hoped for a process that will give rise to transformations, consequent changes, and integrations, to the expansion of lending experiences and comparison with others (Pinto Minerva, 2002). A process that consists in the willingness to *go beyond* the boundaries of one's own personal knowledge to *enter* into a relationship with other perspectives of meaning, with the willingness to learn and understand reality according to differentiated and multiple symbolic schemes and systems, nourishing a thought capable of *decentralization*, of *moving away* from one's own mental and value references, to go towards the other to recognize and understand their profound reasons. This process also allows one to *review* one's own knowledge by making use of the experience of comparison, being able to evaluate one's own specificity, relativity, strengths and weaknesses with new elements of awareness (Pinto Minerva, 2002). This is equivalent to comparing oneself to *others*, *learning about diversity* through the use of a *relativistic attitude*. In the training of educators, two initial levels of intervention emerge.

The first focuses on self-knowledge through the recognition of the relative status of personal knowledge; the second, on the other hand, refers to the critical management of relational dimensions, as a structuring element of educational skills. The training intervention focused on the first level is carried out by prefiguring reflective paths in which educators can *experience*, starting from themselves, a

*conscious* analysis about the constructive history of their own socio-cultural identity. In this sense, the idea of the world produced by one's own experience-identity-history produces a *personal knowledge* that, on the one hand, builds expectations towards the other, acting on interpretative systems; on the other, it generates knowledge and practice, acting on the relational level. These are the elements that build professional sensitivity, which is above all a personal sensitivity [which] must become a personal knowledge linked to the construction of a life sensitivity that is capable of decoding the emotions and feelings that play in our relationships; but, at the same time, look with equal refined sensitivity at one's own knowledge and the conceptual apparatuses in which one recognizes oneself" (de Mennato, Cunti, 2005).

The second level of intervention, focused on relational aspects, aims instead at the activation of relationship management skills in dialogic and cooperative terms. Specifically, the goal is to overcome communication methods essentially influenced by transmission logics, encouraging instead the side of relationships, which becomes central to the educational process. This implies a training of educators aimed at the maturation of a "meta" level of knowledge and skills, in which the latter are an expression of the person who, through them, manifests himself and his own way of relating. In this sense, competences are understood as "resources of the person" (Alessandrini, 2002), since they guarantee an adequate interpretative capacity with respect to the situation, i.e. relational dynamics, and a cognitive-reflective and not merely executive control of interpersonal exchange and dialogue.

## **Conclusions**

Starting from the dynamics described so far, it is possible to say that the culture to which one belongs preserves the most common ways of facing life and guides people's choices and behaviors. Cooperating or conflicting becomes a cultural choice. However, the reference to conditions of nature, which make collaboration a feature of survival, is a very solid basis on which to consciously build a cooperative *will*, aimed at the individual and collective good. To be a conscious part of a structure based on reciprocity is to recognize one's role and place in the world. If the problems produced by the confrontation with the other are connected to the perception of being threatened within a broader configuration that is the changing context of a community, understanding the cooperative sense of existence constitutes an anchor point on which to mature one's transformative and adaptive capacities. Capacities that constitute, in turn, the prerequisites for overcoming those psychological, social, and cultural conditions that represent the background

of the most common dynamics of exclusion. These considerations, together with the interpretations that substantiate the relative status of *diversity*, support a *re-constructive reflection*, as a basis for an inclusive educational intervention. The activation of processes of reflection allows in formation, as in life, that the implicit abandons its own statute, to reconfigure itself as a known background to guide critical action.

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