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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to reflect on Cooperative Learning as an inclusive teaching methodology. The identification of students' needs requires an increasingly attentive teaching approach to respond adequately to diversity and emerging needs. Starting from scientific evidence and field experiences, we will try to demonstrate how cooperative learning can promote numerous benefits to all students by promoting a real inclusion of pupils with Special Educational Needs.

L'obiettivo di questo lavoro è quello di riflettere sul Cooperative Learning come metodologia didattica inclusiva. L'individuazione dei bisogni degli studenti richiede un approccio didattico sempre più attento a rispondere adeguatamente alle diversità e ai bisogni emergenti. Partendo da evidenze scientifiche ed esperienze sul campo, si cercherà di dimostrare come l'apprendimento cooperativo possa promuovere numerosi benefici a tutti gli studenti favorendo una reale inclusione degli alunni con Bisogni Educativi Speciali.

KEYWORDS

Inclusion, Cooperative Learning, Training
Inclusione, Cooperative Learning, Formazione

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Introduction

The way of education and training must be able to prepare students to face a constantly changing world, capable of adapting to different social situations. The application of Cooperative Learning as a methodological approach in the classroom can offer greater opportunities for students to succeed on a personal, interpersonal and academic level (Comoglio, 1998). In addition, collaboration and mutual help within the group stimulate motivation and foster the acquisition of social skills that are important for the future of young students. Cooperation between students makes it possible to value individual differences and to make resources available for the group. In a cooperative learning environment, each pupil has the opportunity to be both a tutor and an apprentice, to provide and receive support, to actively collaborate and to take responsibility, thus promoting active participation and individual and collective growth (Rosati, 2019). All this fosters a climate of mutual respect, in which each member of the group is considered an essential element for the success of the entire teaching-learning process. This learning modality designed "in the presence of pupils with Special Educational Needs" represents a valid compensatory and dispensative tool. It makes it possible to enhance individual diversities without distorting teaching and without having to think of an individualized path for each student, but through a single teaching activity (Sgambelluri, 2016). It should be noted that the methodological choice by the teacher has a significant impact on the quality of students' learning and their interpersonal relationships. If the goal is to value differences and address the challenges of an increasingly complex society, then it is important to choose a methodology that encourages collaboration, diversity, and inclusion. Cooperative learning can foster collaboration among students from diverse backgrounds, helping them to develop a greater understanding of each other's perspectives and experiences. The choice of methodology is a key factor in addressing the challenges of modern society and promotes differences, perceiving them as a source of riches. A wise choice can "promote collaboration, inclusion, and the development of skills that will prepare students for the world of today and tomorrow" (Brichese, 2022).

1. The inclusive school

The inclusive school aims to welcome and value the individual differences of

pupils, without discrimination of any kind, offering an educational environment that is capable of responding adequately to the different needs of each student. The involvement of curriculum teachers in taking charge of pupils' Special Educational Needs (SEN) is essential to ensure effective school inclusion (Ianes, 2013). It is important that all teachers are trained and prepared to manage the diversity present in their classrooms and to adapt the teaching organization in a flexible and creative way in order to respond to the needs of the whole class group. The teacher, therefore, plays a fundamental role, since he must choose and adapt teaching materials according to the needs of students and encourage the initiative of individuals, even if with possible difficulties (Canevaro et al., 2021).

The special education teacher, who is a professional specialized in assisting people with disabilities in a given educational context, fully enters this process. He has the task of supporting, in particular, the pupil who presents difficulties, but he must also be available to the students of the whole class. The role of the special education teacher, however, is not limited to teaching: he or she will have to help the pupil with disabilities to integrate into the classroom and relate to other students (Hattie, 2016). At the same time, he/she will have to educate the rest of the class to behave correctly with the disabled pupil, without excluding him/her and avoiding discriminatory or harmful behaviour towards him/her (Votta, 2022).

Trained in reception and co-owner of the class on a par with curricular colleagues, the special education teacher is now a teacher who deals with wide-ranging school inclusion and who plays an important transversal role in the field of collegial planning. The training of all teachers on the recognition of new educational needs is the essential premise for the construction of an inclusive school, capable of welcoming all the human components that appear in today's school landscape (Vianello, 2015). The constantly increasing number of pupils with Special Educational Needs calls for the application of inclusive teaching by all teachers, combined with a ability to communicate and understand the individual needs expressed by individuals (Fiorucci, 2019; Favorini, 2015). Inclusion requires a concrete and continuous intervention that must indiscriminately concern the entire teaching staff, involve the socio-educational context and be intended for all pupils without and with disabilities present at school (Pizzato, 2019; Gronchi, 2022). Inclusive teaching qualifies as quality teaching for all, it has long since ceased to be considered as an access lane only for students with disabilities or special educational needs (Perla, 2014). We can increasingly consider it as a teaching style, a daily educational and didactic orientation that aims to respect,

enhance and capitalize on the individual differences present in all students (Portera, 2022). The four pillars of inclusive teaching are explained in Table 1:

Cooperation	Design
The principle of inclusion at school can only be achieved in the presence of a strong collaboration and co-participation of all those involved in achieving this ambitious goal. The inclusive school is a <i>community</i> where everyone, managers, teachers, pupils, school staff, families, local authorities, services, become potential <i>agents</i> of real cultural, methodological, didactic, organizational and structural changes. The collaboration between all these figures is based precisely on their <i>synergistic</i> ability to know how to welcome and value individual differences, as well as to eliminate any physical, methodological, curricular, social and emotional obstacles to social participation and learning.	Inclusive teaching is teaching designed and planned, based on individual variability, capable of being accessible to all students. Designing in an inclusive way means thinking, whatever the content to be conveyed, of personalized, multi-modal and multi-level forms of teaching, thus avoiding "path emergencies" that force, a posteriori, to modify what has been designed, thus avoiding loss of effectiveness of the teaching action itself. Poorly designed and poorly conducted teaching can run the risk of creating barriers to learning. Inclusive teaching is therefore an innovative and flexible teaching "style" that facilitates the participation, enhancement and educational success of all students.
Effectiveness	Relationships and emotions
Inclusive teaching challenges teachers to develop a wide repertoire of effective teaching strategies. These strategies have been shown to be adequate in leading to the desired outcomes in a given student population. This means that each teacher can improve their effectiveness by monitoring and evaluating the best available evidence, so that students can become more effective learners as well. There are numerous studies that show how meta-cognitive, cooperative strategies, the strengthening of social and emotional skills, as well as the creation of a climate of well-being in the classroom, are essential to inclusive teaching.	In addition to the dimension of effectiveness with respect to methodological-didactic choices and actions to be made, an inclusive teacher must possess relational and emotional skills. Emotional closeness and the ability to give appropriate and positive feedback to students are decisive elements for the academic success of pupils and the creation of a good classroom climate. This is crucial for the success of students, who learn best when they are in an emotionally safe and predictable environment, which motivates them and stimulates them towards positive and inclusive goals.

Developing a wide repertoire of effective strategies is essential as long as they reflect knowledge of the characteristics, needs of students and environmental circumstances, as well as teachers' professional and personal skills.	
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Table 1. Four pillars of inclusive teaching are explained (Our elaboration)

2. Inclusion and Cooperative Learning

In recent years, the school has been faced with an increasing demand for answers to the diverse needs of students. Teachers are called upon to respond effectively to these challenges, in order to ensure the maximum possible growth for each student, regardless of their abilities and potential. The perception is that there is an increase and diversification of pupils' problems, not only concerning pupils with disabilities, but the whole class group (Chiari, 2022). Special Educational Needs (SEN) are defined as those needs that arise from physical, cognitive, psychological, emotional, social, or cultural difficulties that may limit students' participation and learning. Their identification takes place through a multidimensional and integrated assessment, which involves the analysis of the pupil's personal characteristics, environmental factors and academic performance (Ianes et al., 2016). The focus on SEN is a major challenge for teachers who need to develop specific skills to respond effectively to the diverse needs of students. According to Comoglio (1996-1999), the promotion of school inclusion, through the adoption of a positive attitude and personalized teaching strategies, represents a concrete and operational response to the challenges of contemporary education. To make learning meaningful, it is crucial to offer students a variety of learning contexts and activities that challenge them and stimulate them to acquire knowledge in a mindful way. In addition, students must be encouraged to cooperate to achieve common goals, but also to develop their autonomy of thought and action (Di Franco, 2020). The diversity of students within the classroom has become an increasingly present reality in contemporary schools and represents a challenge for teachers. Managing such heterogeneous groups requires the ability to adapt

teaching approaches to meet the different needs of students and ensure equal opportunities for all (Cairo, 2007). The aim is to promote inclusive teaching, which recognises and values the diversity of students, whether they are cultural, social, economic or able. To do this, teachers can adopt flexible and plural teaching strategies, which take into account the different ways in which students learn and promote teamwork and cooperation among peers. In this way, the active participation of all students is encouraged, creativity is stimulated and interpersonal relationships within the classroom are improved (Johnson et al., 2005). The teacher, therefore, has the task of promoting the organization and management of group work, providing the necessary indications and guidelines, but also valuing the differences and peculiarities of each one (Jolliffe, 2007). In this way, the teacher becomes a facilitator of learning, encouraging discussion and exchange between students, but also an attentive observer who evaluates the progress and difficulties of each one. It should be emphasized that education is not only about the acquisition of notions and skills, but also about the formation of character, personality and the ability to relate constructively to others (Dewey, 2004). The school thus finds itself in a privileged situation to live the skills of interdependence that are now more than ever required by social evolution for every single person. According to Slavin (1995), Cooperative Learning represents a concrete and innovative solution to address the challenges of contemporary education, promoting collaboration, participation and inclusion of all students. The learning group, given its cooperative nature, ensures that everyone participates with their skills and potential (Rubertone, 2020). Pupils with SEN can compensate for their difficulties through the collaboration and support of their peers and become a source of support for others. Cooperative Learning is a teaching methodology that promotes students' active learning through small group work (Kagan, 1997-2000). Students work together to complete common tasks and receive assessments based on the results of their group work. By working in this way, pupils not only learn actively, but also have to teach their peers. This fosters more meaningful learning and, as pedagogue John Hattie states, puts subjects who are distant in ability in the same group (Hattie, 2012). Cooperative Learning leads students to confront themselves with classmates who are different in terms of gender, ideas, culture and socio-family background, in fact the group can be defined as a "set of several things or people, distinct from each other, but brought together in order to form a whole". Cooperative learning can be very beneficial for students with disabilities as they often have the

opportunity to receive personalized support from more skilled peers, which "can help increase their self-esteem and improve their academic performance" (Cottini, 2008). Cooperative Learning is a rich, versatile, flexible and transversal teaching method, applicable to any context, grade and type of school. In addition, it promotes students' active learning, develops solid study skills, and builds social skills, creating a serene learning environment in which all students can feel calm and comfortable. There are two types of Cooperative Learning: informal and formal. In informal Cooperative Learning, the exercises are short and assigned to non-fixed groups of 2-4 people, while in formal Cooperative Learning, the exercises are longer and more challenging and assigned to groups of students who work together for a longer time even outside the school walls. The teacher has an important role in the management of cooperative learning groups, but at the same time does not prevent the free expression of the students, remaining on the sidelines. Table 2 lists the four key principles of cooperative learning:

Positive interdependence	Individual Responsibility	Social Skills	Work Review
To promote positive interdependence, it is important to provide group members with clear objectives and a task structured in such a way that everyone has to play their part and integration of contributions is necessary to complete the work	Individual responsibility is a fundamental element for the success of teamwork. Each member must be aware of his or her tasks and responsibilities, but also of the consequences of his or her actions on the dynamics of the group	Social skills are an important feature for effective teamwork. Group members must be able to communicate clearly and respectfully, negotiate and manage conflicts constructively, and be empathetic and attentive to the needs of other group members.	Reviewing group work is an important practice to ensure that the group is achieving its set goals. This means that group members must be willing to reflect on their collective work and analyze what worked and what didn't

Table 2. Cooperative Apprentice (Our elaboration)

Cooperative learning, in fact, should not exclude peer competition, but rather integrate them in a context in which the success of the group as a whole is pursued. Developing an integrated and flexible personality requires the ability to work in a *team*, to develop one's self-esteem and to be able to handle competitive situations in a positive and constructive way. The teacher, therefore, should create a classroom environment that encourages collaboration, healthy competition, and student autonomy.

Finally, it's important to consider the importance of students' interest, curiosity, and motivation in learning. Teachers should be able to create activities that are relevant, interesting, and engaging for students, in order to stimulate their attention and motivation during the learning process.

3. Cooperative Learning and the relational sphere

The common thread that unites the heterogeneity of schools, SEN and the Cooperative Learning methodology is the enhancement of personal differences and the active participation of all students in classroom activities. The heterogeneity of students, including those with SEN, requires the adoption of collaborative methodologies that foster mutual interdependence and the active participation of all students, including those with specific needs (Bochicchio, 2020). The inclusion of all students is a fundamental goal that can only be achieved through constant attention to the enhancement of personal differences. Cooperative Learning is a teaching methodology that responds to these needs and that makes it possible to achieve the goal of student inclusion, promoting collaborative learning and the enhancement of diversity within schools. Through Cooperative Learning, the focus is on collaboration between students so that everyone can contribute their knowledge and skills to group work, regardless of their initial level of expertise. In this way, pupils can learn not only from the teacher, but also from the other members of the group, thus promoting a cooperative and inclusive learning environment. Metacognitive cooperative learning, in particular, focuses on promoting cognitive flexibility and motivation to learn, promoting the cognitive development of all pupils, even the weakest ones (La Marca, 2020). The interdependence of roles and cooperation are the main features of this model, which makes it possible to guarantee equal opportunities for all pupils. In addition, cooperative learning can be particularly useful in integrating pupils with disabilities, creating an environment in which they can stay

in the classroom for as long as possible and have the same educational opportunities as others. It is important to involve classmates in supportive tasks, so that they can also learn to collaborate and learn together. Cooperative learning can have a positive impact on students' emotional and psychological well-being (Aranson, 2011). Through cooperation and sharing, pupils can gain a sense of belonging and acceptance, developing greater confidence in themselves and their peers. In addition, cooperative learning fosters collaboration, solidarity, and mutual help, all of which contribute to creating a positive and serene atmosphere in the classroom. This can have a positive impact on students' emotions, reducing stress, anxiety, and loneliness, and improving their mood and motivation. Ultimately, Cooperative Learning can represent a valuable opportunity to develop not only cognitive but also socio-emotional skills, helping to create an inclusive culture that values diversity and promotes participation and mutual respect. In addition, the ability to experience success and solve problems together with others helps students develop a positive mindset and an attitude of resilience in the face of difficulties. Sharing experiences and knowledge with other members of the group can lead to a sense of personal gratification and accomplishment, which in turn fosters a positive attitude towards learning and collaboration. According to Banzato (2002), Cooperative Learning not only promotes the acquisition of skills and abilities, but also has a positive impact on the psychological sphere of students, increasing self-esteem, sense of belonging and motivation towards learning. This promotes the empowerment of students, i.e. the strengthening of their self-esteem and skills, as well as the acquisition of a greater awareness of their strengths and potential. This translates into an increase in motivation to learn, which becomes an active and engaging process, based on a climate of mutual trust and respect for differences. Cooperative Learning represents an opportunity for the teacher to identify and enhance the different abilities of the students and to adapt the teaching activities to their specific needs, thus favoring a personalization of learning. In summary, the use of Cooperative Learning is an effective strategy to promote the culture of inclusion in schools, because it makes it possible to enhance diversity and promote students' psychological well-being, creating a more welcoming and motivating learning environment for everyone (Coggi, 2023).

Conclusions

Cooperative Learning is the tool at the base of the most important educational challenges, aimed at enhancing cultural differences and promoting intercultural competence. This approach, in fact, favors respect for others and constructive confrontation, encouraging students to understand and appreciate cultural and social diversity. However, it is important to emphasize that the success of Cooperative Learning depends on the correct application of the methodology and the training of teachers who must have a good knowledge of the principles and techniques of peer collaboration. In addition, it is crucial that teachers are able to select the cooperative activities that best suit the needs of the classroom and to properly evaluate the work done by students.

The ultimate goal is to create a learning environment where every student feels valued, accepted, and an active part of the educational process.

However, the day-to-day reality of schools could be very different. There are still many challenges to be addressed in order to achieve inclusion effectively and equitably for all students, especially those with SEN. Additionally, some schools may not be able to ensure a safe, welcoming, and inclusive learning environment for all students, due to bias, discrimination, or lack of awareness. This ambiguity in the implementation of inclusive principles can have several causes, including a lack of adequate training for teachers on methodologies and strategies to manage diversity in the classroom, a lack of resources and support at the institutional level, and resistance to change. It is important to underline that inclusion is a complex process that requires a constant commitment from all school actors, starting from institutions and national educational policies, up to teachers and parents. Only through collaborative and shared work can we truly promote quality education for all students. It is important to underline that Italy, in the "theoretical" part, is well organized, while it appears to be lacking in the practical field. We can present inclusion, then, as a goal to strive for, a goal that sometimes still seems very far from being achieved, a path by definition without end. The perspective of inclusion and the adoption of cooperative learning practices are extremely important in the contemporary educational context. The school's primary objective should be to ensure that all students have the opportunity to achieve the highest level of development, even those with special needs. Adopting cooperative learning practices appears to be an effective and efficient way to achieve this.

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