EXPLORING EQUALITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN DIFFERENT CONTEXT: A SENSITIVE APPROACH

ESPLORARE L'UGUAGLIANZA, LA DIVERSITA' E L'INCLUSIONE IN CONTESTI DIVERSI: UN APPROCCIO SENSIBILE.

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ABSTRACT

The heated debate that has been going on for several years now on issues related to the inclusive process in schools is the background from which the idea of this contribution starts and develops. A truly inclusive school must aim to remove all those obstacles that may limit each pupil's opportunity to develop to his or her fullest potential and the place where cultural diversity can best develop, enhancing the socio-emotional development of culturally diverse learners.

The approach to inclusive education must take into account not only traditional special educational needs categories (Ghedin, 2021), but also the unique challenges arising from socio-cultural contexts. The focus is on the basic

principles of school inclusiveness, the benefits it brings, the challenges it can present and strategies for creating authentically inclusive educational environments (Cottini, 2018).

L'acceso dibattito aperto ormai da diversi anni sulle tematiche legate al processo inclusivo nella realtà scolastica rappresenta lo sfondo dal quale parte e si sviluppa l'idea di questo contributo.

Una scuola realmente inclusiva deve mirare a rimuovere tutti quegli ostacoli che possono limitare l'opportunità per ogni alunno di sviluppare al massimo il proprio potenziale e il luogo dove la diversità culturale possa svilupparsi al meglio, migliorando lo sviluppo socio-emotivo di studenti culturalmente diversi.

L'approccio all'educazione inclusiva deve tener conto non solo delle categorie di bisogni educativi speciali tradizionali (Ghedin, 2021), ma anche delle sfide uniche che derivano dai contesti socio-culturali.

L'attenzione viene posta sui principi fondamentali dell'inclusività scolastica, i benefici che essa comporta, le sfide che può presentare e le strategie per creare ambienti educativi autenticamente inclusivi (Cottini, 2018).

KEYWORDS

Inclusion, Learning, Diversity, Educational Contexts
Inclusione, Apprendimento, Diversità, Contesti educativi

Introduction[1]

Today's school, in contributing to the affirmation of inclusive education aimed at the critical review of educational pathways, the recognition of the diversity of each person in their developmental pathway, the reduction of barriers, obstacles favouring marginalisation, isolation, inaccessibility of micro and macro socio-cultural contexts (D'Alessio, 2011), tends to bring about a radical cultural, educational, didactic and institutional change, to make a profound revision of the choices and solutions at a pedagogical-didactic, evaluative and organisational level aimed at all pupils, not only those with special needs, requirements and fragility (Caldin, 2018).

Educational and training inclusion is a fundamental concept that aims to ensure that every individual, regardless of his or her characteristics, abilities or background, has equal access to education and learning. The objective of inclusion is the transformation of educational systems and teaching practices in order to meet the diverse educational needs of learners (Chiappelli & Gentile, 2016), so as to ensure the learning and full participation of every learner. The school's task is to proactively orientate both towards goals to be achieved and competences to be developed, and towards autonomy and independence, self-awareness and identity as well as one's own life project: this process constitutes the ethical dimension of inclusion (Maia, 2020).

It promotes the idea that all people have the right to participate in education and to develop their potential (Cottini,2017). However, in the field of education, various obstacles may arise that bar or, at least, make the road to inclusion impassable. In order to promote effective inclusion, therefore, it is necessary to identify and overcome these barriers, adopting principles and strategies that favour a welcoming and inclusive educational environment for all, which go beyond the idea that an innovation and a step forward in the educational, cultural, political and social field can be promoted by reforms that do not take into account an interdisciplinary point of view and that do not analyse disability as a social, political and cultural construction (Bocci, 2015).

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[1] This paper is the result of the shared work of the authors; however, for the purposes of the attributions of its individual parts it is divided as follows:
[1] Simona Iannaccone: §§ 2 and Introduction
[2] Clorinda Sorrentino: §§ 1.
Conclusions are attributable to the two authors.

School inclusiveness is a core value in education and reflects a commitment to an education that respects and welcomes the diversity of individuals. In a world where differences are the norm, creating an inclusive educational environment is crucial to ensuring that every student can access a quality education and develop to their full potential. School inclusiveness is not just about providing physical access to facilities, but goes beyond that, striving to create a culture and context in which every student feels respected, valued and supported. The main objective of school inclusiveness is to break down barriers and overcome discrimination by providing equal educational opportunities to all students, regardless of their abilities, challenges, cultural, ethnic, socio-economic or other origins. It is an approach that goes beyond the physical adaptation of spaces, involving the design of teaching practices, teaching strategies and curricula that respect and respond to the diverse needs of students. School inclusiveness not only benefits students with special educational needs, it enriches the educational experience of all students. It fosters mutual learning, promotes awareness of diversity and teaches students to collaborate and communicate with individuals who have different perspectives and abilities. Inclusive education prepares students for a multicultural and global society in which empathy, respect and mutual understanding are essential skills.

It is crucial to recognise that Special Educational Needs may also arise from specific socio-cultural contexts. Challenges related to immigration, linguistic and cultural diversity, and the economic situation can have a significant impact on students' learning opportunities. Against this backdrop, it is crucial to provide educational support that is sensitive to students' diverse backgrounds and experiences in order to enable them to successfully cope with the challenges and to enhance the resources of their cultural and linguistic identities (UNESCO, 2017).

Immigration and cultural diversity can create unique challenges for students, such as adapting to new environments, learning a foreign language and integrating into a culture other than one's own. These factors can affect students' emotional well-being and involvement in learning. The socio-economic aspect can also have a considerable impact on access to education and learning opportunities. Students from low-income families may face challenges. Students from low-income families may face challenges in accessing educational resources, extracurricular activities and additional support. Equity in education is crucial to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed (UNESCO, 2017).

1. The importance of contextual factors

Contexts play a fundamental role in shaping individuals' experiences and learning. Whenever we find ourselves in a given context, be it school, family, work or social, we are immersed in a complex network of relationships, norms, values and opportunities that influence the way we think, act and interact with others.

The environments and people we interact with (Zoletto, 2023), in short, have a significant impact on each individual's growth, development and even learning.

In them, one can find the conditions and possibilities for expressing one's abilities, acquiring new knowledge and skills and, in other words, building one's identity. From this premise, it is already possible to consider how much the educational, training and school environments play an important role in learning processes, affecting the quality of the latter (Mitchell, 2014a). Situations, in fact, that create discomfort or are uncomfortable can have a negative impact on individuals' well-being and experiences, generating undesirable consequences both emotionally and cognitively and behaviourally. The arrangement of furniture and spatial organisation within classrooms, then, is an equally significant factor. Research in this field has shown that there is no single, optimal arrangement that can be adapted to all situations, but that it should be adapted to the different activities carried out in the classroom (Fraser, 2014). This means, therefore, that the furniture arrangement should be flexible and modifiable according to the specific needs of the moment. Therefore, it is also important to consider the different ways in which students learn and interact and adapt the physical environment of the classroom accordingly to foster effective learning and a positive experience for all. But besides the importance of the arrangement of furniture in the classroom, the role and position of teachers are also crucial in the learning environment. Indeed, from the perspective of modern, inclusive education, the teacher should not simply sit constantly at the desk, but should adopt a more active and participatory approach, spending a good deal of time in the students' space, supervising and offering support when appropriate (Mitchell, 2014b).

The introduction of elements of a socio-environmental and cultural nature, which can generate discrimination and exclusion, has contributed to broadening the vast number of pupils with 'BES' who require customized and differentiated educational responses (Gaspari, 2014; D'Alonzo, 2016), targeted and contextualized, as well as flexible didactic approaches, the overcoming of uniform and linear organisational-methodological models, the consolidation of learning processes capable of offering functional and effective responses for each and every pupil to guarantee a widespread and substantial educational success. This approach not only makes it possible to intervene promptly in the event of discomfort or difficulties, but also fosters a climate of trust and collaboration within the classroom, promoting effective learning and preventing problematic behaviour (Ciraci, 2019). Within the classroom context, then, inclusion implies the promotion of a network of meaningful and positive relationships. Firstly, each student must feel important and recognised by their teacher. This creates a sense of "belonging" (Cottini, 2017) and makes learners feel valued and listened to. Moreover, the teacher must adopt a courteous and respectful attitude as well as

expect the same behaviour from the learners, even when interacting with each other.

Creating a climate of mutual respect, in fact, facilitates cohesion in the class and promotes the smooth functioning of the group. In addition, it is also important for the teacher to be open and willing to listen to the students, even when they make mistakes or have difficulties. This welcoming and understanding attitude creates a safe space in which everyone feels free to express their opinions and communicate any problems. Active listening and respect for the opinions of others, stimulate the active and responsible participation of each individual in the class, thus contributing to the establishment of an inclusive and participatory learning dynamic (D'Alonzo, 2012a), which aims to stimulate a real sense of belonging of all learners to the class group. To foster, then, the learning of all students, the teacher must take care to adopt methodological procedures that stimulate the educational success of each individual and of the class group in parallel.

Clearly communicating the objectives of the work to be done, therefore, is essential to give meaning to the pupils' personal effort and to emphasise the importance of pursuing collective goals. The idea, therefore, is also to make them realise that teamwork and mutual support are essential to successfully deal with the challenges and difficulties that may arise in the learning process. In this way, students develop a greater awareness of the importance of each individual's contribution within the group, feeling motivated to collaborate and work together to achieve collective success, thus fostering the creation of a spirit of solidarity and interdependence where everyone can experience the concrete perception of feeling important and useful.

To establish effective communication and have a positive impact on students, the teacher must have a strong belief in the potential of each of his or her pupils. Each pupil, with his or her peculiarities and differences, must therefore be considered capable of achieving the essential learning objectives of the educational pathway. On this basis, the teacher's mode of communication must reflect care and sensitivity towards each learner, even when they make mistakes. On these occasions, the educational orientation must be precise and corrective, but at the same time welcoming, avoiding denigrating the person. Learners are able to perceive if they are in an environment where they are allowed to make mistakes and learn from their mistakes. In particular, the school must be a training agency that promotes learning and, therefore, must teach people to recognize their goals and pursue them with determination, allowing them to make mistakes along the way. Mistakes, approached consciously and as opportunities for growth, then become essential tools for learning and understanding the correct path to follow. In this way, students are given the opportunity to learn from experience and develop a greater awareness of themselves and their abilities, contributing to

building an inclusive and motivating school environment (D'Alonzo, 2012b). The classroom, therefore, represents a fundamental environment for the development of meaningful relationships between teachers and pupils, but also among the students themselves. But in addition to relational dynamics, a crucial element for the smooth functioning of the classroom is the presence of shared rules. These should not be imposed by the authority of the teacher, but rather agreed upon, where possible, and understood by the learners through a process of dialogue and confrontation. When learners actively participate in the definition of rules, they feel involved and empowered to respect them. Responsibility, therefore, becomes a key element, both for those who respect the rules and for those who eventually break them. The aim of the teacher, consequently, is not to 'punish', but to make everyone understand the importance of the rules for the well-being of the group and take responsibility for them. The teacher's authority, on the other hand, does not derive from an authoritarian attitude, but from consistency and the ability to show firmness without being aggressive. Moreover, the teacher can exploit the group's dynamism and cohesion to help pupils respect the rules, involving them in self-regulation and maintaining a positive environment.

This systemic approach makes it possible to translate a pupil's inappropriate behaviour as an attempt to change the group's rules, and thus to intervene constructively by involving the entire class and fostering an active role for everyone in compliance with the rules, so that a harmonious and learning-friendly environment can be ensured for all.

1. Barriers to inclusion

Inclusion in learning contexts is an ambitious goal that aims to guarantee equal learning and participation opportunities for all learners (Dell'Anna, Ianes & Tarini, 2022). However, the latter can be hindered by various situations within the school and training systems both at a physical level, with the presence of architectural barriers in the buildings limiting students' access and mobility, and at an organisational level. s Inclusion, in fact, can be defined as a constantly evolving process that requires the involvement and collaboration of all actors within the learning contexts, including families. Focusing, therefore, on the obstacles on which it is possible to intervene directly and cooperate is fundamental to promoting the right of all pupils to have equal opportunities to learn and participate fully. In the school context, in particular, addressing educational difficulties using the perspective of obstacles to learning and participation makes it possible to overcome the approach that labels pupils as BES. Focusing only on the alleged deficiencies or problems of pupils risks diverting attention from the barriers present in the school system as a whole and ignoring the difficulties that can also be experienced by unlabelled pupils. Although many schools make an

ongoing effort to assess pupils fairly (Canevaro, Ianes 2022), the use of labelling categories contributes to narrowing the way of seeing things.

In this sense, it is important to think carefully before assigning someone the label 'Special Educational Needs' or any other acronym that suggests any connotation of abnormality. These labels are often attributed in a superficial manner and can have negative effects, limiting a pupil's perception to his or her presumed difficulties rather than enhancing his or her potential. Therefore, to reduce a pupil to an acronym is to deny his uniqueness and individuality. In responding to educational difficulties, one is often confronted with a widespread stereotype: that of creating individual and separate curricula, entrusting pupils to a support teacher.

However, this approach risks limiting the pupils' ability to develop meaningful relationships with peers and other adults, which are crucial for the inclusion and growth of children. It is, therefore, important that school staff have a say in how educational difficulties are addressed.

In order to do so, it is necessary to use the acronym BES only when expressly required by official documents and to consider alternative ways of addressing barriers to learning (Dovigo 2019; Dovigo & Ianes, 2008) and participation in order to permeate school cultures, policies and practices with a more inclusive approach that respects the diversity of each learner. Reflection on these issues is of paramount importance with a view to preventing traditional ways of thinking from prevailing and continuing to limit the opportunities for all students to grow and learn. Shifting the focus to the obstacles present in the context and promoting more inclusive approaches means creating school environments that are more open, respectful and welcoming for all, allowing everyone to express their potential by feeling an active and valued part of the educational community.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the approach to inclusive education must take into account not only the traditional special educational needs categories, but also the unique challenges arising from socio-cultural contexts. Effective support requires cultural sensitivity, flexibility in teaching, and a commitment to ensuring that every student has access to quality education, regardless of their background. The construction of the inclusive society can, therefore, only originate from an inclusive school, since the latter as an educational community that originates from society and is immersed in it, cannot but return to it as a promoter of innovative and improving change. The school constitutes, once again, a junction of transformation and change: the affinity between the promotion of the school as an inclusive educational community and the development of an authentically aware and welcoming society emerges strongly. The formative role

of the school, which becomes a privileged place for the promotion of inclusive values and skills, placing the person at the centre of its system and taking dialogue, equality and sharing as its educational objective, offers the possibility of achieving, today, a model centred on diversity as a resource and not as a limitation. This evolution refers to the need for reflection on the need to educate to respect personal dignity and differences, but also on the need to provide adequate training opportunities for teachers as responsible agents for the education of future generations.

Teachers are required to make an educational investment that renews their way of thinking and planning, in order to innovate in the creation of increasingly flexible and customisable educational itineraries, which become the anchor of a process of communal and social inclusion.

The picture that emerges sees inclusion no longer connected only to disability and special educational needs but, with a broader outlook, as a principle that places the person and diversity at the centre as a constituent element to be valorised and not contained and reduced. Its range of action expands to embrace all forms of exclusion and isolation, becoming a leitmotif for the promotion of fairness, equality and equal opportunities based on and developing within the framework of human, civil and social rights.

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