

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN IN VULNERABLE FAMILY AND SOCIAL SITUATIONS: THE NARRATIVE APPROACH IN THE INCLUSIVE SCHOOL

BISOGNI EDUCATIVI SPECIALI DEGLI ALUNNI IN SITUAZIONI DI VULNERABILITÀ FAMIGLIARE E SOCIALE: L'APPROCCIO NARRATIVO NELLA SCUOLA INCLUSIVA

Loredana Paradiso
Università degli Studi di Genova
Loredana.paradiso@edu.unige.it

Double Blind Peer Review

Citazione

Paradiso L., (2024) Special educational needs of children in vulnerable family and social situations: the narrative approach in the inclusive school; *Giornale Italiano di Educazione alla Salute, Sport e Didattica Inclusiva - Italian Journal of Health Education, Sports and Inclusive Didactics*. Anno 8, V 1. Edizioni Universitarie Romane

Doi:

<https://doi.org/10.32043/gsd.v8i1.1053>

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gsdjournal.it

ISSN: 2532-3296

ISBN: 978-88-6022-486-6

ABSTRACT

The article provides an insight into the domain of the *Special Educational Needs* by examining the life stories of pupils in child protection, family foster care and national and international adoptions. We observe how the narrative approach supports the processes of inclusion and adaptation of pupils experiencing family and social vulnerability and, at the same time, how it facilitates the exchange with diversity. This perspective represents the basic dialectic for the exploration of subjectivity, the sharing and co-construction of meanings around each individual's story, the understanding of different family and cultural worlds, and the valorization of one's life path.

L'articolo analizza l'exkursus storico e teorico che ha portato a osservare nell'ambito dei *Bisogni Educativi Speciali* le storie di vita degli alunni nei percorsi di tutela minori, nelle situazioni dell'affido familiare e dell'adozione nazionale e internazionale. Si osserva come l'approccio narrativo sostiene i processi di inserimento e adattamento degli alunni che vivono esperienze di vulnerabilità familiare e sociale e, nel contempo, come facilita il confronto delle diversità. Questa prospettiva rappresenta la dialettica di base per l'esplorazione delle soggettività, la comprensione dei diversi mondi familiari e culturali, sino alla valorizzazione di sé e del proprio percorso di vita.

KEYWORDS

Special Educational Needs, adoption, foster care, narrative approach, educational action, ipse-identity, idem-identity

Bisogni educativi speciali, adozione, affido, approccio narrativo, identità *idem*, identità *ipse*

Received 20/11/2023

Accepted 15/03/2024

Published 15/03/2024

Introduction

The school as an educating community is the social and cultural place where every child can grow in a caring environment that pays attention to her education and learning, to her individual story and needs (Cambi, 2005, Baldacci, 2008). A perspective that observes and promotes the child's life path in a welcoming context of good socialization, participation and learning. In this scenario, special attention is offered to pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN), who present particular situations of scholastic and social disadvantage as a result of experiences, conditions and life paths that make entering school and the associated learning and socialization process complex (Ianes, Canevaro, 2008).

This is an approach that considers the bio-psycho-social difficulties of children in the process of learning, socialization and participation, widening the view to all life situations that have a potential impact in terms of special educational needs. In terms of regulatory evolution, the Ministerial Decree of 27 December 2012 and the C.M 8/2013 are central documents for the observation of children and their fragility in relation to their history and life course: they show that there is an area of scholastic disadvantage that is "much broader than the one explicitly referable to the presence of deficits" and that requires "special attention" in the pathways of school enrollment, socialization, participation and learning. It is in this area that the definition of SEN takes shape, describing situations in which pupils "continuously or for certain periods" manifest "Special Educational Needs: either for physical, biological, physiological reasons or for psychological, social reasons, (...)", so "it is necessary for schools to offer an adequate and customized response" (Ministerial Decree, 27 December 2012).

In this scenario, two different universes of observation emerge in the pedagogical and socio-educational debate in the Italian school environment: the first linked to the experience of "specific learning and/or specific developmental disorders, difficulties arising from ignorance of the Italian culture and language due to belonging to different cultures", the second to the experience of vulnerability and risk as a consequence of situations of social and cultural disadvantage that lead to discomfort and/or emotional, psychological and social problems. In this sphere plays a role the pedagogical and didactic attention towards pupils whose life paths are plagued by extreme fragility and precariousness in relation to experiences of relational and social complexity determined by traumatic experiences of neglect, mistreatment, loss and separation that trigger the child protection (Serbati, Milani, 2013). The observation and study of special educational needs and good practices for pupils living outside their family of origin or for those going through the process of custody and adoption has led to the definition of the *The Guidelines for*

facilitating the right to study of pupils who have been adopted (2023) and the Guidelines for the right to education of out of home children (2017).

These are two documents that define the organization of the child's reception and enrollment, the methods for observing needs and the customized project proposal to support learning and, in general, a good integration at school. In both, a vision of pedagogical, didactic and socio-educational work is proposed that stimulates networking between all the subjects involved in the protection project, identifying the school as a central hub of the child protection system. From this point of view, the school facilitates and guarantees a context that welcomes and supports the pupil in his or her learning, socialization and participation pathway in the light of the special educational needs they present in the various stages of their family or social transition. The school becomes a place of meeting, of stories that allows each child to be welcomed and accompanied in his or her path of growth, socialization and learning, paying attention to their special educational needs. This a perspective that broadens the observation of Special pedagogy (Canevaro, 1999; Gaspari, 2012) to the multiplicity of life stories and, once again, calls for a revisitation of the concept of SEN by introducing the observation of special educational needs that emerge from the particular life stories of children in a condition of socio-family vulnerability (Ballarin, Levorato, Medeot, Ventura, 2008). This is an approach that intends to overcome and resolve the risk of categorization processes based on the separation between a sphere of "normality" and "deviance" thanks to the educational gaze (Gaspari, 2016) on the history of each child, in relation to the specificities of family, social and cultural paths. A proposal that develops from the epistemological foundations of Special pedagogy and defines education, care and learning pathways capable of accommodating the specific educational needs of each pupil who enters the school: a process that interrogates complexity (Morin, 1993) to put it at the service of hospitality and inclusion which derives from understanding the Other and enhancing the identities of each child (Biffi, 2012) in the constant exchange with diversity. The process here analyzed stimulates pedagogical reflection on the paths that open to exchange, to the encounter with the Other, to care for the needs of each one and, through inclusive education paths, creates opportunities for exchange in the class group (Meijer, 2003) in which everyone can approach her own story with awareness (Jedlowski, 2000), can tell it in order to give it back to oneself and to others, in the valorization of the peculiarities of everyone's life stories.

1. The school as a protection system: the value of children's history and inclusion paths

Working for the inclusion of pupils who experience protection in its various forms implies a planning look that starts from the observation of the Child's World (Milani,

Serbati, 2018) and outlines a path of reception and sustainable inclusion for the child, for the group and for the class. An approach that reverses the observation of needs by assuming a personalized planning model that intercepts "the response to needs where they are and not the response to needs grouped into categories" (Caldin, 2001). Central to this is the concept that the pupil enters school with a life story that questions social and learning dynamics and stimulates the dialectic of exchange in the class group and at school in general. This is a vision that refers to the principle that difference is the "natural condition of society and of people in which no diagnosis and certification or social stigma responds to the recognition of the originality and uniqueness of each person, who is not a summation of performances and symptoms, but something more, something different because we are all proudly imperfect and different from each other" (Ianes, 2015). In the same vein, the World Health Organization urges operators to observe the child not simply from a perspective of health as the absence of disease, but of bio-psycho-social wellbeing which, in the case of education and instructional pathways, requires the school to work towards the full realization of the child's life pathway while respecting his or her history and potential. A planning process that prompts the school to observe the special educational needs as a function of social, cognitive, emotional and cultural dimensions for the development of *each child's capability* (Sen, 1994).

Awareness of the relational, social and cultural complexity of experiences in guardianship, from family custody to adoption (Palacios, 2007, Brodzinsky, Palacios, 2010), but also to migration paths, particularly without the family of origin, calls for a psycho-pedagogical design that takes into account the value of the family, social and cultural histories experienced by each one: a path that integrates a pedagogical and practical reflection (Baldacci, 2010) of the educational and didactic methods to welcome and value the stories of each pupil that represent the space for the encounter of similarities and differences at school.

In this scenario the school becomes a partner in the child's guardianship pathway as it welcomes the pupil in one of the different moments of family and social transition: respectively the change of family, be it temporary as in custody, or definitive as in adoption (Bombèr, 2012), the migration in the experience of unaccompanied minors. In both situations, the child is called upon to reorganize the internalized World that represents, in a biopsychosocial model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), the basic structure for her orientation in the different psycho-social reference systems of her relational, affective and social life context. An event that determines a process of existential discontinuity and that, in the absence of an accurate psycho-pedagogical planning that respects the needs of children (Paradiso, 2015), activates an experience of disorientation, fragmentation

and loss: loss of internalized relationships, disorientation for entry into new social, cultural and linguistic contexts as in international adoption or migration. The awareness that these events have an impact on the social representation of the self and, in some cases, prompt the transformation of the identity background (Ouellette, Méthot, 2003), makes it possible to work on the educational and didactic level for the integration of different life histories, in a plural space that guarantees a path of hospitality at the foundation of any path of inclusion. An approach that pays attention to the singularity, to the experiences of each child, to the observation of the life course, resisting the attempt to standardize the stories, the characteristics to those of their peers (Bertagna, 2009) or to adhere to stereotypes linked to the social categories of the various life experiences. For this reason, the pedagogical model of an inclusive school that operates as a support network for the child and his or her family (of origin, adoptive or foster family) becomes capable of designing and organizing educational, care (Mortari, 2015) and didactic proposals, at the different levels of education and instruction, according to the plurality of children's stories and the special educational needs it activates. An experience that allows each pupil and the group to look at their own story in a different way, to approach new meanings, to explore identity spaces not yet explored as a text that can be written together and co-constructed together (Smorti, 1997). In this context, we are interested in the role of storytelling in inclusive education, particularly in the care of children who experience family, social and cultural fragility and vulnerability linked to child protection.

2. Comparing identities and stories: narration as an experience of plurality

Working for inclusion in protection paths means, in fact, constructing educational and didactic itineraries that activate the resources and potential of the pupils and the class through the creation of spaces of exchange in which everyone has the opportunity to present themselves, discover themselves, recognize themselves and differentiate themselves. A proposal that works on the integration of life paths and allows children and the class to explore and go through different experiences, increasing their knowledge of themselves, reality and the other (Formenti, Gamelli, 1998).

From this perspective, the elective methodology is the narrative approach (Demetrio, 1996, 1999; Cambi, 2005; Gaspari, 2008; Mortari, 2013), which stimulates the exchange between pluralities in an additive and network logic capable of developing pathways for connecting meanings, experiences, knowledge and knowledge. In this sense, the narrative approach allows each child to narrate her story in a co-educational pathway with the teacher and peers in which the

different daily narrative itineraries develop into inclusive trajectories. It is precisely from the concept that "to educate is to narrate" (Demetrio, 2013) that it is possible to design paths of exploration of life stories in which children have the opportunity to work on the peculiarities of their own identity as an exercise of self-discovery (Batini, 2000) and of the other in a path of education to reciprocity.

Therefore, narration presents itself as a pedagogical mediator capable of opening up to reciprocity and the possible, understood as a space of care, education and learning, in the social exchange between children and in the educational relationship with the adult in a dynamic of acceptance and enhancement of each person's experience (Paradiso, 2018). At the same time, narrative paths become a transformative itinerary that supports the formation of the Self (Smorti, 2007), the representation of the world and the formation of social bonds between peers. An experience that, thanks to the confrontation of words, contexts and universes of meanings in a relational dimension of listening and acceptance, offers each child the opportunity to tell their own story with an eye to the present and the future. In this experience, the school's ability to present itself as an inclusive context capable of welcoming, recognizing and responding to the heterogeneity of the educational needs of all the pupils (Canevaro, 2013) makes it possible to work for the valorization of the person and the integration of experiences and paths that are open to plurality. A proposal that goes beyond a logical - linear project approach (Demetrio, 1992) that relies on the homogeneity of life stories, of the classification of needs in a logic of normalization, in order to open up to a systemic perspective in which one works for the integration of lived experiences that promote participation and belonging in the peer group. The narrative approach aimed at inclusion questions the school as an educational place of openness to the multiplicity of paths of life stories, family experiences, paths of cultural comparison (Rogoff, 2004), respecting the specificities of each one.

A path through which "stories can be effectively understood in the very experience of telling oneself, understood as a cognitive dimension, as a path of self-recognition with and through the other" (Gaspari, 2008, p. 95).

Narrating self becomes the basic process for inclusion paths that promote a continuous exchange of similarities and differences: dialogue becomes the process that allows to present oneself, get to know oneself and confront oneself in the peculiarities of one's own story (Rossi, 2016) and in the exploration of worlds that are transformed into possibilities for sharing. In fact, storytelling is the inclusive path par excellence when the acceptance of everyone's stories allows the exploration of diversity as an opportunity for formation and transformation, a founding element of inclusive education. The school constantly offers narrative spaces in which each person's story (Batini, F., Giusti, 2009) identifies educational needs that are listened to, observed and "interpreted" in an inclusive perspective

that is based on the dialectic of diversity (Gaspari, 2008) as a process of mirroring and comparison of personal and group identities.

In adoption and fostering and/or migration paths without the family of origin, narration represents an elective methodology that revolves around the theme of integrating the diversity of life stories and paths: a process that interrogates complexity (Morin, 1993) in order to place it at the service of understanding the Other and enhancing the identities of each child: a process that is attentive to the care of meanings and that allows for a "new body to experience" (Mortari 2007) through the elaboration and writing of one's own story in function of the desired life project. Narrating self in everyday educational life allows the child and the class to get to know each other, to access the multiplicity of stories and verbal languages to the point of experiencing the emancipative and transformative dimension of the processes of co-construction of meaning (Bruner, 1992). Storytelling also becomes an opportunity to give children a voice from which they can develop pathways that activate reflexive skills that are functional to understanding the self and the other, but also to the co-construction of socialization pathways that work through social belonging. A process that the directing work of the teacher makes possible by connecting networks of communication (Catarsi, 2005), thought and solidarity.

3. Idem and Ipse identities: the relational dialectic of diversity

Within this narrative process, diversity becomes the thread that connects the different existential plots and transforms the class into a *group in narration*: a process that allows each child and the group to come into contact with the events, languages and peculiarities of personal histories in a process of mutual contamination that activates processes of change and resilience (Cyrulnik, 2000) for each child and for the group itself. The starting point of social life at school is the encounter with diversity perceived as a cognitive and emotional dissonance experience (Festinger, 1978) that is activated by getting in touch with exceptional life experiences such as disability, loss, separations, migrations, relational and learning difficulties, different cultural and ethnic affiliations (Demetrio, Favaro, 2004). Each of these stories represents something exceptional for the group, an unknown, incomprehensible universe that, in order to be understood and embraced, requires a decoding process oriented towards the co-construction of comprehensible, sustainable and logical meanings for the whole group. The

pedagogy of narration shows how stories are structured precisely at the moment in which something exceptional arises, a problem, a critical, unexpected event that changes the commonly represented path of life. In this dynamic, one of the fundamental processes of inclusive dialogue is the comparison of identities based on similarity and diversity. In the processes of inclusion that welcome exceptional transgressions (Paradiso, 2018), the comparison of identities emerges continuously in the distinction proposed by Ricoeur of the identity *idem and ipse* (Ricoeur, 1990): the former defining the similar (the *idem*) in the narrative encounter; the latter, on the other hand, develops from the *ipse*, that is, it exalts the peculiarity, the originality of the personal story. The *idem* identity in the narrative plot associates one's own identity with that of others, identifying the perception of similarity with the life story of others; the *ipse* identity, on the other hand, presents itself as diversity, exceptionality with respect to the paths of the Other. *Iipse* identity represents the subjective dimension, the originality of one's history that characterizes the individuality of the person represented by diversity as an expression of uniqueness and subjective originality over time. The identity experience formed by the exceptional events experienced moves away from the known script, from socially recognized plots to approach the exceptionality that defines uniqueness. In narrative work at school, and in particular in inclusion processes, one works on the acceptance of the *Ipse* identity that represents the original path, the unique, peculiar choices made by an individual that characterize and distinguish her from others and that determine the subjective path of life. In inclusive narrative, the text departs from a canonical narrative of family (Paradiso, 2018), social and cultural history to accommodate autobiography (Demetrio, 1992) by valuing deviations and exceptionalities in a narrative that is sustainable for the group. In this narrative process, the class, thanks to educational direction, is confronted with the peculiarity and originality of the stories: what was dissonant, uncertain, contradictory, complex as a function of exceptional events, is transformed into a comprehensible script that welcomes exceptional life stories. In fact, inclusive narrative processes enable children and the group to make sense of exceptionalities, to understand the deviations of stories until they find a narrative balance that embraces diversity, the *ipse* identity. It is in this experience that exceptionality is internalized as a unique and unrepeatable element that defines the *ipse* identity of each pupil in the group. This is why the narrative approach is the process through which identities are revealed, structured, opening up to horizons of meaning and significance that promote knowledge of the self, of the other through the processes of identity comparison in the dialectic of the identity *idem and ipse* (Ricoeur, 1990, Smorti, 1997) of every narrative experience.

4. The directing role of the teacher in inclusion pathways: narratives and identity

Inclusive storytelling represents the elective method for the co-construction of inclusive pathways based on the knowledge and comparison of life stories. It works on the foundational processes of the formation of the Self within a process of interaction in an educational and group learning context (Comoglio, 2005). In the social, educational and learning dynamics in the classroom, the group co-constructs the narrative text that represents the group identity through which the comparison of personal worlds, life paths and related needs is possible. A perspective that observes "the self as text" (Smorti, 1997) and activates a signifying network in which each person brings his or her own voice. The self of the person appears in the narratives as a distributed Self (Bruner, 1992) in a storyboard in which thoughts, opinions, emotions are interwoven, distanced and absorbed in an inclusive dynamic. The Distributed Self appears in the three forms of representation of reality in narratives integrating actions, image and language. A social gymnasium in which narration makes the inclusion of each child/young person possible thanks to the possibility of connecting identities through the scripts, contextual blocks, deviations and transgressions (Bruner, 1992), as a function of the comparison of life stories. In this perspective, narration becomes inclusive when, on the one hand, it connects the different discourse structures that intercept the distributed Self of each child and, on the other, it opens the gaze and examines unusual, uncommon themes that activate divergence, the basis of creativity and integration. In the narrative text, the events of uncommon life stories, bearers of social, health, cultural, emotional and relational vulnerability open up narrative itineraries on complex themes such as separation, loss, perceiving oneself as different, excluded. These are themes that can only emerge when the teacher, performing directing actions, allows a glimpse of 'exceptional' life stories, unknown to the class group as a whole.

Teachers become competent partners (Gaspari, 2016) of children with special educational needs by creating narrative paths in which it is possible for everyone to bring his or her own story and re-signify it through exchange with others (Sclavi, 2003), in a neutral context, beyond positions of evaluation and judgement. A relationship process that is structured as a dialogical space in a dynamic of listening, telling, deconstructing ideas and opinions, suspending judgement (Bertolini, 1999), in order to work on the comparison and encounter of identities in a neutral field, in which dialectical processes of recognition and interpretation of different subjectivities and realities branch off. It is in this dialogical process that experiences of exploration in identity exchange are activated, leading to the valorization of the self and reciprocity that allow for the sharing and co-construction of meanings around different family and cultural worlds. The relational role of the teacher

works towards the co-construction of a space that facilitates narrative work among children and in the classroom: an exercise that relates the different histories and stimulates the coping with critical situations and events (Milani, Ius, Serbati, 2013) in a project dimension aimed at the promotion of capabilities (Nussbaum, 2014). It is in this moment that reflection and personalization of educational and learning proposals that start from the observation of special educational needs become the prerequisites of educational action (Perla, Riva, 2016) to welcome the uniqueness of each child in a perspective that observes his becoming in the future. An experience that feeds on the reflective practice (Schön, 2006) in the continuous identity dynamic of the *Idem* and the *Ipse* and that becomes a gymnasium for the co-construction of knowledge that allows itself to be questioned by possibility and becoming in the process of integrating life stories. In fact, the director succeeds in welcoming the stories of each child, understanding them and making them the heritage of the group through the creation of affective and meaningful bridges that open to inclusion and integration.

An exercise that in the class group allows one to give voice again (Canevaro, Goussot, 2000), to exercise one's agency (Bandura, 2000) starting from the critical and traumatic events experienced and the special needs that emerge. In this perspective, thanks to the work of the director, the process of co-construction of spaces of confrontation and encounter is played out in which all children can feel welcomed and protagonists of their own social, educational and learning experience at school. In this narrative weave, new meanings open up thanks to the re-signification of past experiences: a narrative process that starts from memories, interrogates the past and opens up to the future in a logic of life planning. It is in this process that, through a work of direction that can connect events, thoughts and emotions, one experiences itineraries for the development of coping skills and caring attentions functional to processes of empowerment and resilience (Cyrulnik, 2000).

Conclusions

Working for inclusion means transforming the school into an educating community capable of embracing the stories and life journey of each pupil: a context of relationships in which each person experiences acceptance and belonging that is functional to care, education and learning paths of the individual and the class. This is possible through narrative pathways in which each pupil is offered the space to tell his or her story and give voice to personal and family stories that support the formation of self. In this perspective, inclusive education opens up to life stories as a transversal element of everyday life at school that meets and confronts different educational proposals and knowledge. A scenario that considers each event of

personal history an element that intersects with the paths of care, education and learning in the dialectic of *idem and ipse*, primary resource of the plural and reciprocity. It is in this space of exchange and enhancement of different aspects of identity that school becomes a space of child protection that works for personal and group bio-psycho-social well-being in the awareness of the value of each child's story.

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