

PROGETTARE PERCORSI PER LE COMPETENZE TRASVERSALI E L'ORIENTAMENTO PER UNA SCUOLA CHE PROMUOVE L'INCLUSIONE DEGLI STUDENTI CON DSA

DESIGNING PATHWAYS FOR TRANSVERSAL SKILLS AND ORIENTATION FOR A SCHOOL THAT PROMOTES THE INCLUSION OF CHILDREN WITH SLD

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ABSTRACT

The essay addresses the topic of learning disorders, i.e. those specific disorders that can impair the acquisition of the fundamental skills of reading, writing and calculation. Some useful teaching strategies for dealing with learning disorders are analysed, including the construction of customised pathways and the use of concept and mind maps, which help students learn more easily, highlighting their strengths and allowing them to visualise information and represent concepts with key words, pictures or essential sentences. Finally, the article points out that there is still much to be done regarding soft skills and guidance pathways, since the objective of developing the promotion of inclusion of students with specific learning disorders through this tool has not yet been achieved.

Il saggio affronta il tema dei disturbi dell'apprendimento, ovvero quei disturbi specifici che possono compromettere l'acquisizione delle abilità fondamentali di lettura, scrittura e calcolo. Si analizzano alcune strategie didattiche utili per affrontare i disturbi dell'apprendimento, tra cui la costruzione di percorsi personalizzati e l'utilizzo di mappe concettuali e mentali, che aiutano gli studenti ad apprendere più facilmente, valorizzando i loro punti di forza e permettendo loro di visualizzare le informazioni e rappresentare i concetti con parole chiave, immagini o frasi essenziali. Infine, l'articolo sottolinea come ci sia ancora molto da fare per quanto riguarda i percorsi per le soft skills e l'orientamento, dal momento che l'obiettivo di sviluppare la promozione dell'inclusione degli studenti con disturbi specifici dell'apprendimento attraverso tale strumento non è ancora stato centrato.

KEYWORDS

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1. Introduction

The term “SLD” is used to identify specific learning disorders that can affect some learners and that concern a type of disorder that impairs adequate acquisition of the fundamental skills of reading, writing and mathematical calculations. These disorders do not necessarily presuppose the coexistence of intellectual deficits.

From a neurobiological point of view, the abnormalities, which underlie the aforementioned disorders, may be hindering with respect to the normal process by which reading, writing and calculating skills are acquired. They may intersect with elements from family, school and social environmental contexts, determining what the specific characteristics of the disorder itself are.

As a result, students with SLD (specific learning disorders) also manifest impairment in phonology, mnemonics and in writing tasks.

During the 2020/21 school year, the number of pupils diagnosed with a learning disorder stood at 326,548, accounting for 5.4 percent of the total number of those attending (MIUR, 2022). Very often, they, until they are certified, are regarded as listless, intelligent, but unable to want to apply themselves continuously and consistently.

Specific learning disorders include dyslexia, dysgraphia, dysorthographia and dyscalculia.

2. Specific learning disorders

Dyslexia specifically relates to reading disorder and is the one that is most prevalent at the SLD level, either taken individually or associated with other disorders. A dyslexic student, trying hard, can also read and write but manifests early fatigue compared to their peers and incurs errors more easily. From an early age, reading aloud is particularly difficult for a dyslexic learner, in addition to being characterised by slowness, lack of rhythm, and the presence of errors, as they are more focused on deciphering letters than on understanding the content of the text (Vio et al., 2021).

For a dyslexic, therefore, reading is not an automatic process as it is for the so-called “normed”, but requires that they engage in a continuous effort of concentration, first in deciphering the letters, then in reading the words, as they may also present difficulties in memorising words.

The disorder most frequently associated with dyslexia is dysorthographia, which implies a difficulty in written encoding and involves a deficit in the phonological domain of language and thus, is also related to spelling errors.

Dysgraphia, on the other hand, which more frequently and commonly is associated with dyslexia, is a disorder that, unlike dysorthographia, specifically concerns the spelling of writing.

For those with dysgraphia, as well as for all those with specific learning disorders, there are specific programs that can support them to make their learning process less difficult and allow them to acquire, as best as possible, the skills related to the deficits they manifest (Riccardi Ripamonti, 2013).

Dyscalculia, in contrast, is a disorder that concerns difficulty in learning to calculate. This disorder is usually divided into:

- primary dyscalculia: related to numerical and arithmetic skills;
- secondary dyscalculia: related to association with other problems affecting learning such as the disorders of dyslexia, dysgraphia and dysorthographia.

Didactically, a few strategies are used to help learners with dyscalculia that have shown their usefulness, such as:

- building a network of synergistic interventions aimed at the learner's well-being;
- using very simple language while conducting lessons;
- reviewing what has been learned before a new topic is addressed;
- use of puzzles or graphic tools to perform operations or to memorise mathematical formulas;
- using a calculator to perform calculations (Lucangeli et al., 2014).

A valuable support tool for learners with SLD is concept/mental maps as they facilitate understanding and memorisation of a topic by highlighting only key information. These tools enhance students' strengths by allowing the visualisation of information and representation of concepts with key words, pictures or essential phrases.

It should be noted that despite various studies and research, the causes of SLD are still not completely clear. It is believed that dyslexia may result from genetic factors and is more common in males. Other possible causes include environmental and socio-cultural deficiencies.

Individuals with SLD, despite having an average or higher IQ, tend to have low academic performance, which can lead to failure, frustration and a tendency toward isolation. Emotional disturbances can make it difficult to cope, so early diagnosis can help address related problems.

The main goal of teachers, educators and psychologists is to provide support that facilitates cognitive acquisition, considering the student's difficulties and allowing them to learn like everyone else. Students with SLD do not have organic damage and are not sick, but they have a different neurological functioning that slows down activities related to writing, reading and calculation. This requires a longer time and more attention while performing these activities (Tressoldi & Vio, 2022).

3. Ministerial directions for learners with SLD

Regarding such learners, the current Ministry of education and merit intervened with the enactment of Law 170 of 2010 in Italy, which recognises dyslexia, dysorthography, dysgraphia and dyscalculia as specific learning disorders (SLD). This law led to significant changes in the educational system, with schools becoming an educational agency to define and implement educational interventions and assessment methods appropriate for students with SLD.

The law also emphasised the importance of accurate diagnosis to develop individualised learning pathways. Efforts were made to improve communication between school, family and health services, ensuring that students with SLD have the same opportunities to develop skills and competencies in a social and professional context.

It was necessary to establish standards and criteria for early identification of SLD so that students could receive the appropriate support from schools and universities. The law specifies that students with SLD are not referred to as having a disability, but as having a disorder, since their situation is different from that of people with disabilities who benefit from Law 104/92.

The SLD certification, issued by the appropriate facilities, must be submitted to educational institutions to enable students to benefit from dispensatory measures and compensatory tools. Students who have reached the age of majority can also apply for certification at the university level, allowing them to access admission tests with more time, the use of a calculator and/or the assistance of a tutor for reading. If college students manifest difficulties in oral or written exams, the tests can be adapted to their actual learning and performance potential.

On July 12, 2011, Ministerial Decree No. 5679 was issued, which sets out how teachers should be trained to support students with SLD through appropriate instructional measures. This decree applies to all schools, from preschool to university.

According to Article 6 of the guidelines, the SLD referral teacher has an important role to play in investigating SLD-related issues and supporting colleagues, thanks to their specific training acquired through institutional training courses.

Article 5, paragraph 2, of Law 170/2010 provides for the introduction of compensatory tools, including alternative means of learning and information technology, as well as dispensatory measures from certain performances that are not essential to the quality of concepts to be learned.

The legislation also provides for the preparation of a Personalised Learning Plan (PLP) for pupils with SLD, a mandatory document for those pupils who have SLD certification, which is valid throughout the school year. The PLP is prepared in the first quarter and is subject to updates and modifications throughout the year, but must be rewritten at the beginning of each new school year and then approved.

The plan consists of:

- master data and information about the pupil;
- intended objectives;
- planning of educational activities;
- individualised forms of verification;
- ongoing and final evaluation;
- school-family relations;
- type of disorder.

The PLP also provides for:

- personalised teaching;
- use of compensatory tools, information technology and alternative means of learning;
- dispensatory measures;
- indication of personal writing, reading and calculation skills;
- different learning times.

The Personalised Learning Plan (PLP) for students with specific learning disorders (SLD) is created by the teachers of the class, with the participation of family and specialists. Teachers have the freedom to choose the most appropriate teaching methods for each student, including compensatory tools and dispensatory measures.

Compensatory tools are educational and technological resources that help students with SLD perform activities in which they have difficulty. These tools can be specific, to support reading, writing and calculation, or functional, to support memory or other difficulties. The tools include audiobooks, computers/tablets, digital dictionaries, word processing programs with spellcheckers, recorders, speech synthesis, math programs and an interactive whiteboard.

Dispensatory measures, on the other hand, are interventions that allow students with SLD to avoid particularly difficult activities, reducing fatigue and discomfort. These measures help the learner achieve class goals by dispensing with particularly complex activities (Fogarolo, 2014).

4. PTSO and pupils with SLD

School-work alternation was introduced into the school system in the early 2000s with Law 53/2003. However, it became mandatory only with Law 107/2015 for all Grade II institutions, and no longer only professional institutes, but also for technical institutes and licei (Nespoli, 2017; Donato et al. 2019).

In the model envisaged by Law 107, it was planned to enter into conventions with both public and private companies, as well as with sports and cultural associations

and professional orders that declared their willingness to host students. At least 400 hours of alternance activities were planned for professional and technical institutes and 200 hours for high schools. The school was left with full autonomy to design pathways characterised by effectiveness and efficiency, in ways that each class council deemed appropriate based on effective teaching for the development not only of additional knowledge but also of specific skills. The institute was widely criticised (Orilia, 2017) and in 2019, just two years after the reform of Law 107, it underwent major changes. These changes were made by Ministry Note 3380 (Miur, 2019a), which included a reduction in the number of hours (210 hours for vocational institutes, 150 hours for technical institutes and 90 hours for high schools) and the renaming of this activity to Pathways for Transversal Skills and Orientation (PTSO).

Competencies related to PTSOs, such as those in the orientation guidelines (Miur, 2019b) are focused on those that the Council of Europe has delivered as key competencies.

In the New Skills Agenda for Europe, changes are made to previous recommendations in the sense of providing everyone with skills considered basic for citizenship seen in a European key. The Council of Europe's recommendation of May 22, 2018, regarding "key competencies for lifelong learning" specifies that the term, "key competence", is intended to summarise a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes that are proper in every individual and where the term, "attitude", is defined as "disposition/mentality, mind-set to act or react to ideas, people, situations" (Council of Europe, 2018).

The eight competencies provided at the European level are interdependent and all have their own specific importance. In the perspective of the PTSO discussed here, particularly relevant are personal and social skills, as through their characteristic of doing, they make transversal skills transferable. They, moreover, induce an interactive and collaborative relationship with others, such as developing the ability to solve problems, gain awareness, develop creativity, critical thinking and identify orientation paths to deal with changes in their aspect of complexity and uncertainty.

During the course of study, learners develop experiences that foster the attainment of goals related to a real context. They enact activities that prompt action by achieving learning outcomes in their doing in concrete and real projects. What constitutes learning outcomes can be measured as competencies and is a tool for comparing degrees and qualifications across national systems.

The ways in which PTSOs are implemented are codified (as mentioned above) within the dedicated guidelines. It seems curious, however, that within those guidelines, there are no provisions for children with special educational needs. For disability, there are sporadic references, while for children with SLD and other special educational needs, there is no reference in the PTSO guidelines. In the case of disability, the Ministry has (albeit belatedly) remedied the lack of specific references with the introduction of a specific section of an individualised educational plan model approved by ministerial decree. For children with other special educational needs and with SLD, on the other hand, this lack has not been remedied: there is no reference to alternation in the Guidelines for SLD and the Ministry of Education's 2019 clarification circular on SLD (Miur, 2022). Even in the PLP models proposed by the Ministry, the focus of the document is rather on the acquisition of basic skills and little or no attention is given to transversal and guidance skills.

The fact that there is no specific attention to the subject does not mean that schools and class councils, in their autonomy, cannot independently define pathways that provide specific teaching attention oriented toward self-directed skills for students with SLD. The absence of specific provisions in this regard, however, is an indicator of a lack of institutional attention to PTSOs and to children with SLD, which rather betrays a centering on the assessment of learning, and only from an exemptive / dispensatory and compensatory perspective rather than the promotion of the student as a person who should be “thought of as an adult”.

Considering that PTSOs are developed within the three-year framework of secondary school, learners with SLD have the opportunity to be able to build and strengthen both their basic transversal skills and orientational skills. Both should aim to enhance the child as a person and allow for further empowerment to develop skills that will put them in a position to make informed choices throughout their lives. Such pathways, in their implementation, must ensure that every student, whatever their cognitive, intellectual, social, emotional-affective, behavioural condition, arrives at an effective formative and orientative condition.

However, it is possible to trace some elements that are considered central in the design of PTSO activities in relation to the needs of children with specific learning disorders.

An indispensable starting point is knowledge of the learner and their needs, both at the level of training and the specificity of their condition. Only in this way, in fact, can the activities that pupils of this type can carry out within the PTSOs be

considered as an effective opportunity for inclusion and relationships within a work context, operating in such a way as to foster:

- school learning in a context that is actually real;
- the possibility of experiencing one's location within environments in which very different relationships are established;
- an enhancement of social skills;
- the possibility and opportunity to acquire, but also consolidate, skills related to a work context;
- the capacity for autonomy and self-determination;
- the ability to orient oneself in the choice of study paths or work contexts;
- the ability to establish relations and relationships with the different territorial realities in which one is placed.

A crucial aspect for these goals to be effectively achieved relates to the collaboration of various actors within the school community who are committed to the individual child and the class group the child is a part of.

Although the design of PLPs is the class council's task, it should be conceived whenever possible in close collaboration with the actors responsible for the contexts in which the PTSOs take place, trying to define in advance whether and to what extent the contexts are capable of responding to the orientation needs of the children.

Third, the design of PTSOs, as with any aspect of the PLP, must be carried out in collaboration with families and community resources. Collaboration between schools, families and area resources is essential to promote activities that are effective for the children.

Finally, PTSOs should help students with SLD develop a greater awareness of their abilities and potential. Through meaningful experiences, students can gain a better understanding of their abilities and interests, thus facilitating orientation toward future educational or vocational paths. In conclusion, PTSOs for children with SLD should be inclusive pathways that value diversity and promote autonomy and integration. Through a personalised and collaborative approach, it is possible to offer these students the keys to open the doors to their future.

5. Conclusion

The consideration of a school as “an educating community, which welcomes each pupil in the daily effort to build conditions, relationships and pedagogical situations such as to enable his or her maximum development” (MIUR, 2019, p. 3), highlights the particularly important role a school plays in an educational context. This, in fact, is deputed in order to develop the process by which personal identity is built and structured, acquiring particular skills, but also those civil and moral principles that constitute the basic elements on which a society that is defined as effectively democratic develops. In recent decades, school organisation has undergone a real revolutionary process, brought about mainly by the granting of functional autonomy to school institutions. This aspect presupposes that schools have been vested with the freedom to design and implement educational, training and instructional interventions aimed at enabling the development of each pupil as an individual: a person capable of adapting flexibly to varied and diverse contexts, which applies to the pupil, both able-bodied and not, who thus achieves their own educational success. This has contributed to making a school an institution capable of interfacing with the territory, interacting with all representatives of various institutions and entities, as well as cultural or voluntary associations, for synergistic collaborations in the various diverse projects that the school intends to carry out. On the basis of this view, within the PTOF (Three-Year Plan of Educational Offerings), all collaborative methods with the territory are outlined in adherence also (and above all) to what the needs and interests of the students are who benefit from such collaboration and synergy between the different educational agencies deputed to the person’s development. Even the most recent regulations emphasise the connection between school and territory, paying particular attention to the integrative and inclusive aspect of those pupils who manifest, within the school context, problems related to their situation of deficits, disorders and hardships. Based on these perspectives, the need arose to elaborate, design and implement PTSOs (Pathways for Transversal Skills and Orientation), which is nothing but a way of defining previous School-Work Alternation projects. These are paths intended for a training internship that students carry out in extracurricular contexts and is compulsory for all secondary school students, starting in the third year and continuing until the fifth, establishing the number of hours in which students are engaged. It is indispensable that to carry out this training internship, the school, observing the territory, enters into agreements with businesses most suited to the typology of the institute, respecting the needs of the students. Obviously, this entails the consideration, in particular, of those who, not being among the able-

bodied, the path constitutes a fundamental element for the individual's life project. In fact, from birth, each individual develops through experiential activities in which they actively participate, gradually building their own identity, taking advantage of all the resources they have the opportunity to encounter in the context of life and that nurture their aspirations, with a view to constant renewal. For such learners, moreover, attendance at PTSOs constitutes an important element of inclusion and development of relational relationships, through which takes place, not only a mutual exchange at the cognitive level, but also a confrontation that fosters individual growth. Ultimately, PTSOs are aimed at fostering the implementation and consolidation of basic transversal skills, of those of orientation, contributing to raising the level of maturation of the students, but above all, of their ability to consciously make responsible choices throughout their lives.

¹ Author of paragraphs: "1. Introduction", "2. Specific learning disorders", and "5. Conclusion"

² Author of paragraph: "3. Ministerial directions for learners with SLD"

³ Author of paragraph: "4. PTSO and pupils with SLD"

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