### INCLUSIVE SCHOOL: STRATEGIES FOR AN EQUITABLE AND MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOM

#### SCUOLA INCLUSIVA: STRATEGIE PER UN'AULA EQUA E MULTICULTURALE

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#### ABSTRACT

School inclusion of foreign students is a key challenge for an equitable educational environment. This experimental study evaluates the effectiveness of innovative teaching strategies, such as classroom cooperation and culturally responsive pedagogy, though a qualitative-quantitative approach on a sample of primary school students. The results obtained show significant improvements in terms of inclusion and self-esteem.

L'inclusione scolastica degli studenti stranieri è una sfida fondamentale per un ambiente educativo equo. Questo studio sperimentale valuta l'efficacia di strategie didattiche innovative, come la cooperazione in classe e la pedagogia culturalmente responsiva, attraverso un approccio quali-quantitativo su un campione di studenti della scuola primaria. I risultati ottenuti evidenziano un miglioramento significativo in termini di inclusione ed autostima.

### **KEYWORDS**

Inclusion, Foreign Pupils, Primary School Inclusione, Alunni Stranieri, Scuola Primaria

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# Introduction

School inclusion represents one of the main objectives of fundamental importance in contemporary educational policies, especially in the current global context characterised by increasing migration flows and the need to promote harmonious multicultural coexistence also and especially within schools. The increase in the number of foreign students in schools and the growing cultural and linguistic diversification have created an urgent need for innovative teaching strategies aimed at ensuring equity in learning and equal opportunities for all students (Banks, 2019). Equal access to education for all students, regardless of their cultural or linguistic background, is not only an ethical and social imperative, but also a key strategy for promoting educational success and active participation in society (Ainscow, 2020). According to the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994), quality inclusive education is essential to ensure equal opportunities and to combat systemic discrimination that can negatively affect the school experience of many students. The primary goal of inclusion is not only to provide access to education, but also to promote a welcoming educational environment in which each student can feel valued and supported in his or her growth path (Booth & Ainscow, 2011). Several studies have highlighted how school inclusion can positively influence students' academic performance, emotional well-being and social skills development (Schleicher, 2018). In particular, Geneva Gay's (2018) culturally responsive pedagogy highlights the key role of valuing students' cultural experiences as a means of enhancing learning. This approach allows for the creation of learning environments where cultural diversity is recognised as an asset rather than a barrier (Ladson-Billings, 2021). The approach of culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018) is emerging as an effective strategy for addressing the educational needs of students from diverse cultural backgrounds. This approach is based on valuing cultural differences as an educational resource and adapting teaching practices to meet the specific needs of students. As Ladson-Billings (1995) points out, effective teaching in multicultural contexts must integrate students' cultural experiences into the curriculum, promote their active participation and enhance their sense of belonging to the school community. Numerous studies have shown that the use of culturally responsive pedagogy has a positive impact not only on students' academic performance, but also on their psychological well-being and self-esteem (Banks, 2019; Sleeter, 2011). Indeed, when students identify with the school content and methods used by teachers, they develop greater motivation to learn and a stronger school identity (Gorski, 2020). A key strategy is intercultural education, which includes reading multicultural texts, sharing personal experiences and celebrating different cultural holidays (Nieto, 2017). These practices help to create an educational environment in which each student feels respected and valued, while promoting diversity awareness. Another effective methodology to promote inclusion in schools is cooperative learning, an approach that values teamwork and collaboration among students (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1994). Research suggests that cooperative learning environments promote the development of social skills and improve interpersonal relationships between students from different cultural backgrounds (Slavin, 2015). In addition, cooperative learning allows students to support each other, reducing the sense of isolation that often characterises the school experience of international students (Gillies, 2016). Peer interaction is a key element in the success of inclusive practices, as it allows students to learn from each other in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust (Cohen & Lotan, 2014). This type of active learning contributes to reducing educational inequalities and promoting greater equity in access to educational opportunities (Dewey, 1938). Besides specific teaching strategies, another crucial element for school inclusion is the creation of a positive and welcoming school climate. Research shows that students learn best in environments where they feel safe and respected (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). Teachers play a key role in modelling inclusive attitudes and fostering a sense of community among students (Bryan et al., 2012). Schools that adopt inclusive practices tend to perform better in terms of foreign student participation and academic achievement (OECD, 2018). Furthermore, school environments that celebrate cultural diversity help to reduce discrimination and bullying by promoting values of empathy and solidarity (Espelage et al., 2013). The adoption of inclusive teaching strategies has been shown to have a positive impact on both migrant pupils and the wider school community. According to a study conducted by García and Wei (2020), students who participate in inclusive education programmes show an increase in self-esteem and greater motivation to learn. In addition, teachers who adopt inclusive teaching practices report a reduction in classroom conflict and an improvement in the overall school climate (Ainscow, Dyson & Goldrick, 2016).

# **Research Objectives**

- To educate students to be inclusive of all forms of cultural and linguistic diversity.
- To promote the well-being of students, especially international students.
- To raise students' awareness of diversity.
- Strengthening inclusion, self-esteem and interpersonal skills.
- To Recognise the cultures of international students as a teaching resource.

# 1. Methods and Tools

The study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, in which both quantitative and qualitative data were collected simultaneously but analysed separately and compared during interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). This approach was chosen to enable a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of inclusive pedagogical strategies on student outcomes. The integration of data sources allowed the researchers to triangulate findings and validate emerging themes. The quantitative component focused on changes in inclusion and selfesteem, operationalised via validated psychometric tools—the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). These instruments were selected for their reliability and widespread application in educational research. Pre- and post-intervention scores were compared using paired-sample t-tests to determine statistically significant differences within and between groups. The qualitative component consisted of semi-structured interviews and systematic classroom observations. These data were coded using NVivo software and analysed through thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase methodology. This enabled identification of latent themes that complemented the statistical results, offering insights into students' subjective influencing experiences and contextual factors the intervention. Special care was taken to ensure internal and external validity. Internally, the random assignment to control and experimental groups, alongside the use of control variables (e.g., age, prior academic performance), helped mitigate confounding factors. Externally, the use of real classroom settings and heterogeneity in the sample's cultural backgrounds supports ecological validity and generalisability to similar school contexts. The study sample consisted of 100 fourth and fifth grade students selected from schools with a significant presence of foreign students. Participants were divided into two groups:

- 1) Experimental group: The experimental group of the study consisted of 50 fourth and fifth grade students selected from schools with a significant presence of foreign students. This group actively participated in teaching strategies based on cooperative learning and culturally responsive pedagogy. The main characteristics of the experimental group were: - Heterogeneous composition: students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, with equal gender representation and different levels οf academic achievement. - Participation in targeted interventions: The group followed a structured 12-week programme with activities focused on inclusion, valuing cultural differences and strengthening interpersonal - Active monitoring: Participants were observed and assessed at various stages of the intervention using tools such as the Index for Inclusion and
- 2) Control group: The control group consisted of 50 students with similar characteristics to the experimental group (age, school level, cultural and linguistic diversity). However, these students did not actively participate in the innovative teaching strategies and followed the traditional curriculum. The characteristics of the control group were:

  Homogeneous composition compared to the experimental group: students with similar characteristics in terms of age, gender and cultural background.

the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale.

- Traditional teaching method: the students continued to follow the lessons without any particular changes in the teaching strategies.
- Parallel monitoring: they were subjected to the same assessment tools as the experimental group, allowing a comparison of the results before and after the intervention.

Participants were selected according to strict criteria to ensure that the results obtained were representative and valid. The heterogeneity of the experimental group made it possible to analyse the effectiveness of the inclusion strategies in a realistic context, while the control group provided an essential benchmark for assessing the impact of the intervention. The results obtained show that the strategies adopted had a significant positive effect on the school inclusion and self-

esteem of the students in the experimental group compared to the control group. To ensure the consistency and validity of the study, specific inclusion and exclusion criteria were adopted for the selection of participants.

### Inclusion criteria:

- Be enrolled in the fourth or fifth year of primary school.
- Attend schools with a significant presence of foreign students.
- Have obtained informed consent from their parents to participate in the research.
- Demonstrate a sufficient level of understanding of the Italian language to participate in educational activities.

#### Exclusion criteria:

- Students with special educational needs who required an already structured, personalised curriculum (to avoid disruption to study outcomes).
- Prolonged absences that could have affected regular participation in planned activities.
- Lack of parental or guardian consent for data collection and analysis.

The intervention took place over a six-month period, divided into twelve weeks of planned activities and a period of pre- and post-intervention data collection. The work plan followed a weekly schedule that included:

- Week 1-2: Awareness raising and inclusion activities
- Week 3-4: Intercultural storytelling and reading of multicultural texts
- Week 5-6: Art and music workshops for cultural expression
- Week 7-8: Celebrating international cuisine and cultural traditions
- Week 9-10: Mindfulness techniques and peer tutoring for emotional support
- Week 11-12: Monitoring of progress and evaluation of the effectiveness of the intervention

The measurement of the impact of the intervention has been the subject of both quantitative and qualitative tools:

## • Quantitative tools:

- Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2011) to assess perceptions of school inclusion.
- o Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) to measure changes in students' self-esteem.

#### Qualitative Tools:

- Semi-structured interviews with pupils and teachers
- Direct classroom observations to assess levels of participation and social interaction.

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and pre-post comparison tests (t-test for dependent samples). Qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis using NVivo software, which allowed coding and identification of recurring patterns in student and teacher responses.

# 2. Teaching Strategies and Weekly Schedule

The educational intervention was designed around two main approaches:

1) Cooperative learning (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1994): structuring group work to promote collaboration and mutual support between students.
2) Culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018): adapting the curriculum to enhance students' cultural experiences.

The main activities carried out were:

- Inclusion education: guided discussions, readings and sharing of personal experiences.
- Multicultural activities: storytelling workshops, international cooking and music, art projects based on cultural traditions.
- Emotional and relational support: mindfulness techniques and peer tutoring to improve psychological wellbeing and social cohesion in the classroom.

The proposed weekly schedule integrates theoretical and practical approaches to foster school inclusion by combining cultural, artistic, emotional and collaborative activities. This model is designed to promote respect and appreciation of cultural diversity, thus creating a more equitable and welcoming educational environment for all students.

T	D
	Personal narrative:
· ·	Each student tells a
an educational resource.	story, anecdote or
	tradition from their
To encourage empathy	own culture.
•	Reading multicultural
•	texts: Teachers select
	texts representing
	different cultures,
	followed by group
	discussions to analyse
	the main themes.
	the main themes.
	Creating a class book:
	Pupils work together to
	create a picture book of
	shared stories and
	traditions.
To encourage personal	Art workshop: Students
and collective expression	create works of art
through art and music.	representing the
Ü	cultural traditions or
To oncourage	landscapes of their
	origins.
· ·	
creativity.	
	Music workshop: Each
	student presents a song
	or rhythm from his or
	her own culture. The
	activity ends with a
	joint performance.
	through the sharing of stories.  To encourage personal

music in arts education helps students to develop a sense of agency and belonging.		Exhibition: The artworks are displayed in a special area of the school to highlight the cultural contributions.
7-8: Celebrating international cuisine and cultural traditions  Food is a key element in building a sense of community, as demonstrated by Heldke's (2019) studies on cooking	To celebrate culinary traditions as a vehicle for inclusion.  To strengthen bonds between pupils through sharing.	International cooking workshop: Students, with the help of their families, prepare and share traditional dishes from their culture.  Cultural Festival: Organisation of an
as an intercultural practice. Gay (2018) highlights how cultural events increase student engagement and motivation in multicultural		event where each student presents an aspect of their culture (e.g. dances, customs, food).
classrooms.		Culinary Journey Day: Students taste the prepared dishes and note the similarities and differences with their own cuisine.
9-10: Mindfulness techniques and peer tutoring for emotional support  Mindfulness is effective in reducing stress in	To promote psychological well-being and reduce any anxiety related to cultural adaptation.	Mindfulness exercises: Activities such as guided breathing and positive visualisation to

students. according To strengthen the sense help students relax and studies bν Kabat-Zinn of belonging to the focus. (2018) and Semple et al. school community. (2017). Peer tutoring, as Circle time: Sharing highlighted by Topping personal experiences (2019),improves selfreflecting and on esteem and peer individual and group relationships, particularly progress in a circle. in multicultural contexts. Peer tutoring: Pairing up students to support each other's learning, strengthening collaboration and friendship. 11-12: Monitoring To assess the impact of Questionnaires and progress and evaluation of the activities on the level interviews: Students the effectiveness of the of inclusion and wellcomplete the Index for intervention being of students. Inclusion and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale to assess their To gather feedback to Monitoring school progress. inclusion through improve future validated tools such as the implementations. Index for Inclusion is Final reflection: Each student writes a short recommended by Booth & letter about what they Ainscow (2011).Metacognitive reflection is have learned and how essential to consolidate they feel compared to learning, as suggested by the beginning of the Flavell's (2019) studies on programme. metacognition in education. Sharing the results:

Sharing the results with

students, teachers and
families through a
presentation and final
exhibition.

Table 1. Weekly Schedule

### 3. Results

The results of the study were obtained through a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis. The method of data collection and interpretation is described below, and two tables are presented to illustrate the comparison between pre- and post-intervention outcomes.

## 3.1 Quantitative Results

Group	Tool		Post (Average)	Difference	p- value
Experimental	Index for Inclusion	3.2	4.1	+0.9	<0.01
	Rosenberg Self- Esteem Scale	24.5	30.2	+5.7	<0.01
Control	Index for Inclusion	3.3	3.4	+0.1	0.35
	Rosenberg Self- Esteem Scale	25.0	25.3	+0.3	0.41

Table 2. Comparison of Pre and Post Intervention Quantitative Data

The Index for Inclusion and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale were administered to both groups (experimental and control) before and after the intervention.

• Scholastic Inclusion Index: The experimental group showed a significant increase in mean scores from a pre-intervention mean of 3.2 to a post-

- intervention mean of 4.1 (on a 5-point scale). In contrast, the control group showed no significant change.
- Self-esteem: The average score on the Rosenberg scale rose from 24.5 to 30.2 (out of a maximum of 40) in the experimental group, indicating a significant improvement. Again, the control group scores remained almost unchanged.

### 3.2 Qualitative Results

Semi-structured interviews and classroom observations provided valuable information about pupils' and teachers' experiences. The most significant responses were coded and analysed using a thematic methodology. The main responses were coded and analysed using NVivo, following a thematic methodology. Main topics were:

- Improved social cohesion: Pupils reported feeling more integrated into the class group. One participant stated: "I like working in groups because now I understand my classmates better and they understand me.
- Improved self-esteem: Foreign students expressed an improvement in their self-perception. A representative comment: "I now feel important to the group and am not ashamed to talk about my culture.
- Mutual learning: Teachers emphasised how cooperative learning promoted collaboration: "Pupils learn to respect and help each other, regardless of their differences.

Category	Frequency	Quote
Improved cohesion	45	"Now I feel closer to my classmates."
Increased self- esteem	32	"I'm no longer afraid to fail or to share what I've got to say."
Cultural Recognition	128	"My tradition has been received by others with enthusiasm and curiosity."

Category	Frequency	Quote
Mutual learning	36 l	We learned a lot from each other, not just from the teachers.

Table 3. Frequency of Qualitative Categories Identified

The quantitative results indicate that the intervention, based on culturally responsive pedagogy and cooperative learning, produced significant improvements in students' school inclusion and self-esteem. The experimental group reported significant progress compared to the control group, which did not change significantly. The qualitative evidence supports the numerical results and shows how participation in the activities contributed to a more welcoming and inclusive school environment. The evidence reflects increased cultural awareness, strengthened social relationships and personal development of pupils. These results confirm the effectiveness of pedagogical approaches that value cultural diversity as an educational resource and promote equity and well-being in the school context.

### 4. Discussion

The results obtained in both the quantitative and qualitative phases of the study offer robust evidence of the effectiveness of inclusive teaching strategies in multicultural classroom settings. In line with Hammond's (2015) theory of culturally responsive teaching, students in the experimental group demonstrated significant increases in self-esteem and perceived inclusion. This supports the hypothesis that pedagogical alignment with students' cultural identities promotes both academic and socio-emotional growth. The substantial improvement in the Index for Inclusion scores among the experimental group (+0.9 points, p < 0.01) reflects not only increased perceptions of fairness and belonging but also an enhanced sense of student agency, consistent with Banks' (2019) emphasis on transformative multicultural education. The qualitative feedback—e.g., "Now I feel closer to my classmates"—corroborates this shift, revealing that inclusive practices foster not only cognitive engagement but also affective bonds within the classroom community. Moreover, the increase of +5.7 points on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem

Scale within the experimental group represents a notable psychological impact. This resonates with Sleeter's (2011) findings that culturally relevant instruction significantly enhances students' self-worth, particularly among minority learners. These effects were absent in the control group, which followed conventional didactics—underscoring the added value of intentional inclusive strategies. However, it is essential to contextualise these findings within broader systemic and methodological considerations. Firstly, while the observed gains are statistically and educationally meaningful, the intervention duration (12 weeks) may not capture long-term retention or deep behavioural change. Longitudinal follow-ups would be necessary to assess whether observed benefits persist over time (Banks, 2020). Secondly, the subjectivity inherent in self-report tools, while mitigated through triangulation, may introduce social desirability bias. Pupils may report improved self-esteem or inclusion due to perceived expectations. Nevertheless, the convergence of qualitative and quantitative findings lends credibility to the data. Another point of reflection concerns equity in implementation. While the programme succeeded under favourable conditions—including teacher training and adequate resources—the scalability of such interventions in underfunded schools remains uncertain. Darling-Hammond et al. (2019) caution that effective implementation requires systemic support and sustained professional development. Without institutional commitment, even the most evidence-based practices may falter. Finally, while peer collaboration and culturally responsive content proved beneficial overall, the success of cooperative learning hinges on careful group composition and teacher facilitation (Cohen & Lotan, 2014). As noted in classroom observations, imbalanced group dynamics can lead to dependency or exclusion if not properly mediated. Future studies could explore differentiated grouping strategies or teacher scaffolding techniques to enhance equity within student interactions. In summary, the evidence affirms that inclusive strategies, when thoughtfully designed and rigorously implemented, can meaningfully enhance students' educational experiences. Yet the findings also underscore the complexity of translating these models into everyday practice. Thus, ongoing teacher preparation, resource allocation, and policy advocacy are crucial to sustaining and scaling inclusive education. The results show that the use of teaching strategies based on classroom collaboration according to Johnson, Johnson and Holubec's (1994) model and Geneva Gay's culturally responsive pedagogy led to significant improvements in perceptions of school inclusiveness in the experimental group. Compared to the control group, the experimental group reported increases

in scores related to perceived fairness, quality of student interactions, and appreciation of cultural differences. These data confirm the effectiveness of targeted interventions that promote inclusion through active and participatory methodologies. These findings are echoed in more recent literature. For example, a study by Slavin (2015) showed that collaborative strategies improve not only academic performance but also social relationships, particularly in contexts characterised by marked cultural diversity. Similarly, Hammond's (2015) work highlights how culturally responsive pedagogy helps to narrow the opportunity gap between students from different backgrounds, thereby promoting greater educational equity. Further food for thought relates to the importance of teacher education. As highlighted by Gay (2018), educators play a crucial role in creating an inclusive classroom climate, but to do so they need specific skills, including knowledge of intercultural dynamics and the ability to implement differentiated teaching practices. In our study, the support provided to teachers during the training and implementation of the strategies probably contributed to the positive results observed. However, some limitations of the study need to be considered. Firstly, the sample size may not be sufficient to generalise the results to a wider context. In addition, the duration of the intervention, although sufficient to detect significant changes, may have been too short to observe deeper and more lasting changes. Finally, the use of self-assessment tools such as the Index for Inclusion and the Questionnaire for the Survey of the Inclusive Quality of the School System Perceived by Pupils may have introduced a bias related to the subjective perception of the pupils. It is therefore crucial that future studies consider more diverse data collection methods, such as classroom observations and in-depth interviews, in order to triangulate findings. Another challenge that emerged relates to the implementation of strategies in school settings with limited resources. As pointed out by Darling-Hammond et al. (2019), the success of inclusive interventions also depends on the availability of material and human resources. A lack of adequate support could hinder the effectiveness of the proposed strategies, especially in schools located in disadvantaged areas. Finally, an aspect that deserves further attention is the influence of group dynamics. As reported by Gillies (2016), cooperation in the classroom can sometimes be hindered by interpersonal conflicts or excessive dependence of students with difficulties on other group members. These factors highlight the need for careful group management and continuous monitoring by teachers.

# **Conclusions**

This study demonstrated how cooperative and culturally responsive teaching strategies can represent a concrete opportunity to promote equity, diversity and inclusion in school settings. The proposed interventions not only improved the quality of relationships between students, but also contributed to a more inclusive and welcoming learning environment for all. These findings are consistent with evidence reported in recent literature that highlights the value of inclusive educational practices in promoting the well-being and success of all students, regardless of their individual characteristics. In light of the findings, it is suggested that the research be extended by replicating the study in different school contexts and with larger samples. In particular, it would be useful to include schools in rural areas or in disadvantaged socio-economic contexts in order to assess the effectiveness of the strategies under more heterogeneous conditions. It would also be interesting to analyse the impact of long-term interventions and to investigate the influence of variables such as the socio-economic and cultural background of the pupils. As suggested by Banks (2020), a longitudinal approach could provide valuable information on the sustainability of observed effects and their potential for systemic change. Future research could also explore the implementation of these strategies in other educational contexts, such as higher education or vocational training. For instance, a study by He et al. (2021) showed that cooperative practices can be successfully adapted to university courses to improve the participation and inclusion of international students. Similarly, the application of culturally responsive pedagogy in vocational training could foster greater inclusion of migrant workers, as highlighted by a survey conducted by UNESCO (2022). Another interesting opportunity concerns the integration of digital technologies. Recent studies, such as that of Hrastinski (2022), have shown that digital tools can facilitate collaboration and personalised learning, amplifying the impact of inclusive strategies. However, the use of technology also poses new challenges, such as the need to ensure equitable access to devices and internet connections, especially for learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. In conclusion, the integration of cooperative and culturally sensitive approaches is a fundamental step towards building truly inclusive schools, capable of responding to the challenges of the new global scenarios. To achieve this, a collective effort involving not only teachers and students, but also families, school leaders and policy makers is essential. Only through a shared vision and concerted action will it be possible to create a more equitable education system, capable of valuing diversity as a resource and preparing new generations to live and work in increasingly intercultural and interconnected societies.

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