

DISABILITY MANAGEMENT FOR THE DESIGN OF ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

GESTIONE DELLA DISABILITÀ PER LA PROGETTAZIONE DI AMBIENTI DI APPRENDIMENTO ACCESSIBILI E INCLUSIVI



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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a reinterpretation of *Disability Management* from a pedagogical perspective, with particular attention to the strategic role of *middle management* in the design of inclusive learning environments. Starting from the recent introduction of Decree 62/2024 and the reference to the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), the work highlights the need to overcome organizational models centered on administrative management alone, promoting an integrated and systemic vision of school inclusion. An exploratory qualitative study conducted in secondary schools in Sicily and Calabria is presented, with the aim of investigating the perceived contribution of intermediate figures – collaborators of the headmaster, instrumental functions and referents – in organizational, relational and teaching processes. The thematic analysis of the interviews highlights the pedagogical value of Disability Management as a lever for cooperation between school actors, the personalization of interventions and the construction of a culture of inclusion, reiterating the urgency of recognizing and enhancing middle management in contemporary educational governance.

Questo contributo propone una rilettura del Disability Management in chiave pedagogica, con particolare attenzione al ruolo strategico del middle management nella progettazione di ambienti di apprendimento inclusivi. A partire dalla recente introduzione del Decreto 62/2024 e dal riferimento ai principi dell'Universal Design for Learning (UDL), il lavoro evidenzia la necessità di superare modelli organizzativi centrati esclusivamente sulla gestione amministrativa, promuovendo una visione integrata e sistemica dell'inclusione scolastica. Viene presentato uno studio esplorativo di tipo qualitativo condotto in scuole secondarie della Sicilia e della Calabria, con l'obiettivo di indagare il contributo percepito delle figure intermedie – collaboratori del dirigente scolastico, funzioni strumentali e referenti – nei processi organizzativi, relazionali e didattici. L'analisi tematica delle interviste mette in luce il valore pedagogico del Disability Management come leva per la cooperazione tra gli attori scolastici, la personalizzazione degli interventi e la costruzione di una cultura dell'inclusione, ribadendo l'urgenza di riconoscere e valorizzare il middle management nell'attuale governance educativa.

KEYWORDS

Disability Management, School Middle Management, school inclusion, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), educational governance, inclusive learning environment

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Introduction

This paper aims to offer a reinterpretation of Disability Management from a pedagogical perspective, with particular attention to its implementation in school settings. The introduction of Decree 62/2024 – which initiates the trial of a new model for assessing disability – provides an opportunity to reconsider the traditional approach focused solely on diagnostic labeling and standardized psychoeducational or rehabilitative responses. This regulatory change aligns with Article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which emphasizes the right to self-determination, inclusion, and independent living. In line with this perspective, it is crucial to reflect on how these changes can concretely impact school planning and educational governance.

However, the effectiveness of these transformations depends on the education system's ability to adopt a coherent, integrated, and supportive school organization. "Authentic inclusion" cannot result from isolated individual good practices; rather, it requires systemic planning, supported by conscious and intentional school governance in education.

Within this framework, school middle management emerges as a strategic hub for building a "learning organization" capable of addressing the challenges of heterogeneity and contemporary educational complexity, a sort of learning community that co-designs and co-evolves. By operating on solid theoretical and methodological foundations, such an organization must equip itself with a strong pedagogical core, effective in guiding students toward the acquisition of robust knowledge while providing adequate support tailored to students' needs within inherently inclusive, accessible, and personalized environments.

In line with the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda and the School 4.0 Strategies—which promote the adoption of innovative pedagogies and related teaching methodologies—make it essential to design learning environments that integrate both physical and virtual dimensions. These transformed and reimagined spaces require pedagogical leadership capable of fostering a culture of learning and innovation at a systemic level, engaging the entire school community (Paniagua & Istance, 2018, p. 64).

For these transformations not to remain mere statements of principle, they must be embedded in current school policies and, more importantly, translated into a concrete demand for different types of spaces—spaces that support the overall development of students. As highlighted by accredited studies (Siegel, 2014), there

is a strong connection between physical space, learning processes, and student well-being. This implies that designing a learning environment requires a multidimensional approach, capable of addressing a wide range of interrelated factors, from the organizational aspects of space management to the relational and instructional dynamics of teaching.

Such design must be shared and participatory—crafted, as we might say, "with many hands and many voices"—and attentive to the needs of all those involved in the knowledge-building process. It should promote adaptive functioning in response to the changes generated by each student's lived experience within a well-designed educational environment.

A well-cared-for environment also depends on conscious, intentional teaching: educators who have a clear project to implement *with* students, through action-oriented pedagogy and transformative teaching practices. These approaches foster self-directed learning, participation, and collaboration, ultimately encouraging the transformation of the school into a true "learning ecosystem."

1. Rethinking Disability Management from a pedagogical point of view

According to Boehm, Baumgärtner, and Kreissner (2016), quality inclusive education requires well-organized environments that value individual strengths and support the specific needs of each student. However, achieving such quality also necessitates the establishment of an efficiently structured learning context—one that views middle management as an essential component for promoting a school governance model centered on the concept of a learning organization. In this model, intermediate figures play a pivotal role by exercising effective distributed leadership, positioning themselves at the core of managerial competence, and indirectly contributing to the improvement of student learning outcomes (Masci et al., 2019).

To make this possible, strong, well-trained, and self-aware middle management is essential—capable of fostering distributed leadership, encouraging teacher collaboration, adapting curricula, and building truly accessible physical and pedagogical learning environments (Debasu & Yitayew, 2023).

The educational function must therefore be understood as generative and transformative: not merely the transmission of knowledge, but the critical reconstruction of existing knowledge in response to an increasingly fluid, uncertain,

and interconnected social reality. School can no longer be conceived as a rigid container, but rather as a dynamic context capable of guiding individuals toward empowerment, in line with a person-centered pedagogical perspective.

Within this framework, Disability Management—as conceptualized by Amatori (2020) not only as a tool to support entry into the workforce but also for its broader educational potential—is revisited here. It offers the possibility of activating proactive networks between educational institutions and local services, thereby fostering personalized life and learning pathways.

The design of inclusive environments must be grounded in a systemic perspective: this includes physical accessibility, flexible teaching materials, personalized strategies, and, above all, a shift in the epistemological paradigm of teaching itself. Such a rethinking finds practical support in well-established educational models that already provide concrete guidelines for inclusive planning.

2. Universal Design for Learning and inclusive educational innovation

Universal Design for Learning (UDL), a foundational theoretical and operational model for structuring inclusive learning environments, fits well within this framework. The three core principles of UDL—multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression—foster active participation, acknowledge diverse cognitive styles, and value individual strengths. UDL thus serves as a guide for designing engaging and meaningful activities: hands-on projects, multimedia works, artistic creations, and reflective portfolios that amplify each student's potential.

However, the mere availability of advanced technological tools (e.g., artificial intelligence, augmented reality) does not in itself guarantee educational progress. What is required is an integrated pedagogical vision—one that guides the critical and intentional selection of technologies, so they become instruments of inclusion rather than superficial additions to instruction. Only through this approach can education be transformed into a process capable of addressing the demands of an ever-evolving labor market and the complexities of contemporary society.

UDL is grounded in the science of learning variability and exceptionality, rather than in a deficit-based view of disability (Ok et al., 2017). By applying UDL, educators increase flexibility in how they (a) present information, (b) allow students to respond or demonstrate knowledge and skills, and (c) engage learners- It also

enhances teachers' ability to proactively remove barriers to learning, provide appropriate supports and challenges, and maintain high expectations for all students, including those with exceptionalities (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008).

3. Disability Management and Middle Management: a strategic alliance

The pedagogical relevance of Disability Management in optimizing educational management within schools is a crucial factor in enhancing the quality of both education and learning outcomes.

According to Boehm, Baumgärtner, and Kreissner (2016), quality inclusive education requires well-organized environments that recognize individual strengths and support the specific needs of each student.

In this context, Disability Management and Middle Management—established under Law No. 107/2015, known as the “Good School” reform—emerge as essential and strategic components. Their effectiveness relies on the complementary collaboration of all actors within the educational system, aimed at developing a *shared vision*: a common framework of strategies designed to achieve student-centered goals.

The exploratory study, conducted in schools across Sicily and Calabria, addressed one of the major challenges currently faced by educational systems worldwide: identifying effective strategies to support the adaptive functioning of individuals with difficulties and/or disabilities. These challenges underscore the growing interest of both scientific research and educational policy in fostering a more inclusive and equitable education system (Aiscon, 2016; 2020).

Numerous studies (Limone, 2017; Dainese, 2018; Cottini, 2017; Agrati, 2018) have emphasized the importance of effectively designing learning environments—no longer to be seen as rigid, neutral spaces, but rather as dynamic, stimulating, and responsive contexts. These environments extend beyond the physical classroom to include the organization of space, the integrated restructuring of activities, the thoughtful selection of materials, and the adoption of inclusive strategies. The aim is to create learning experiences that recognize and enhance each student's uniqueness, promoting both well-being and academic achievement, in accordance with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

Disability Management is invoked here to emphasize the importance of adopting an organizational approach aimed at achieving better inclusive outcomes by

managing the distinctive qualities and needs of individuals in a diversified, effective, efficient, and equitable manner.

The management of services—particularly school services—aligns with the social model of disability, which shifts the focus away from treating an individual's impairments toward adapting learning structures and processes to facilitate inclusion, regardless of the type or severity of disability (Shakespeare, 2018).

Disability Management emphasizes the personalization of teaching, the empowerment of educators, the efficient management of resources, and the creation of a supportive learning environment. It is not solely the responsibility of the school principal but requires the collaboration of all members within the school system—stakeholders such as teachers, administrative staff, students, families, and the local community—thus underscoring the strategic role of Middle Management. Assa (2022) highlights that, fundamentally, school education management aims to improve learning quality, develop relevant curricula, and implement innovative teaching methods.

From a pedagogical standpoint, *Disability Management* is deeply intertwined with the concept of Middle Management. In this context, collaboration among the various actors involved in educating students with disabilities is shown to promote inclusion and academic success (Friend & Cook, 2017; Hargreaves et al., 2021; Heras et al., 2021; Kisbu-Sakarya & Doeniyas, 2021; Vlcek et al., 2020). These complementary collaborations contribute to the development of a shared vision: a common strategic framework aimed at defining and achieving student-centered educational goals (Cloninger, 2017, p. 20).

4. Collaboration and holistic approach in school settings

A key aspect of this model is the systematic sharing of knowledge and information among members of the educational, therapeutic, and family teams. This synergy ensures consistency in support strategies, particularly with regard to the specific needs of students with disabilities, by aligning school-based, therapeutic, and home interventions (Vlcek et al., 2020). The outcome is a holistic, genuinely student-centered educational approach.

Disability Management and Middle Management look at the interconnected management of a series of functions of functions, each of which plays a specific role in achieving training objectives. These features include:

- teacher empowerment): education management aims to empower teachers by providing relevant training, supporting their professional development and creating a positive work environment;
- efficiency in resource management: education management also includes the efficient management of resources, including school budgets, physical facilities and teaching equipment;
- The development of a supportive learning environment: Education management is responsible for creating a safe, inclusive, and motivating learning environment for all students.

To realize this vision, a strong, well-trained, and aware Middle Management is an essential one that can promote distributed leadership, foster collaboration among teachers, adapt curricula, and create truly accessible physical and pedagogical environments (Debasu & Yitayew, 2023).

The educational function of Disability Management must therefore be understood as generative and transformative: no longer simply the transmission of knowledge, but the critical restructuring of existing knowledge in response to an increasingly fluid, uncertain, and interconnected social reality. From this perspective, the school can no longer be seen as a rigid container but rather as a dynamic context capable of guiding each individual toward processes of empowerment, in line with a person-centered pedagogical approach.

Disability Management represents a concrete opportunity to activate proactive networks between educational institutions and local services, fostering personalized life and learning pathways. The design of inclusive environments must necessarily adopt a systemic perspective, encompassing not only physical accessibility, the use of flexible teaching materials, and the implementation of personalized strategies, but also a profound epistemological shift in teaching practices.

From this standpoint, the teaching-learning process can no longer focus solely on content structuring but must be articulated through a wide range of possibilities regarding timing, tools, methods, and instructional approaches, in accordance with the principles of differentiated instruction (D'Alonzo, 2017).

The reflections outlined thus far have direct implications for the design of learning environments, which constitute a crucial element in ensuring effective inclusion.

5. Design inclusive learning environments

Structuring Learning Environments

It is evident that in designing any learning environment, the removal of barriers to participation is fundamental, alongside the reinforcement of enabling or “facilitatory” elements. This necessitates careful organization of the factors that regulate classroom dynamics and guide learners’ actions.

For a teaching environment to be truly inclusive, every activity must be accessible and usable by all students, while also encouraging the active involvement of learners themselves, who should have opportunities to express and apply their skills.

In essence, the learning environment should be structured across social, metacognitive, affective, emotional, and strategic dimensions, fostering an educational community where everyone can collaboratively construct knowledge. In this context, students learn to engage with and respect the opinions of others, reflect on their own cognitive processes, develop effective strategies for task completion, experience the satisfaction of success, and build confidence both in themselves and in others.

Learning environments, understood in their broadest sense, can no longer remain static, rigid, or predetermined structures; they must continuously evolve, adapt, and reshape themselves in response not only to the changing needs of society but, more importantly, to the unique characteristics and specificities of each individual learner.

It is precisely within this scenario of profound and complex change that Universal Design for Learning (UDL) emerges not only as a deeply innovative theoretical framework but, above all, as an essential and indispensable practical approach.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) aims to guide the creation of genuinely inclusive and inherently effective learning environments for all students. Its ultimate goal is to provide every learner with concrete opportunities to expand their knowledge and fully develop their potential within rich, stimulating contexts designed to foster holistic personal growth—not limited to cognitive development alone.

In these dynamic and responsive environments, the following are naturally and deeply fostered:

- constructive interactions among peers;

- the establishment of a strong community network based on mutual support and collaboration;
- opportunities for continuous and meaningful growth aligned with individual inclinations, preferences, and interests.

All of this contributes to fostering genuine educational self-realization, grounded in inclusion, active participation, and the recognition of everyone's unique potential. The learning environment in which a student is placed plays a crucial role, acting either as a protective factor or a risk factor. When the design and organization of the environment fail to consider the diverse and specific needs of students with disabilities, there is a risk of exacerbating existing difficulties, thereby significantly increasing the likelihood of problematic behavioral manifestations.

In other words, an unwelcoming and non-inclusive school setting can quickly become fertile ground for frustration, anxiety, and stress, which may in turn lead to dysfunctional behaviors and a gradual disengagement from the educational process.

6. Disability Management and shared strategy

From a pedagogical perspective, Disability Management requires the activation of effective middle management based on structured collaboration among all stakeholders involved in the education of students with disabilities. Such cooperation is essential to promote school inclusion and ensure the academic success of these pupils (Friend & Cook, 2017; Hargreaves et al., 2021; Heras et al., 2021; Kisbu-Sakarya & Doenyas, 2021; Vlcek et al., 2020).

The complementarity among the various educational roles enables the construction of a "shared vision" and a common strategic framework focused on achieving student-centered objectives (Cloninger, 2017, p. 20). A key element of this model is the systematic sharing of knowledge and information among members of the educational, therapeutic, and family teams, ensuring consistency in support strategies across the different contexts of the student's life: school, home, and individual interventions (Vlcek et al., 2020).

This approach allows for the creation of a holistic and truly person-centered framework, capable of responding to each student's educational needs in an integrated and personalized manner.

To assess the validity of these assumptions and explore the role of middle management in fostering inclusion, a qualitative study was conducted, which is described in the following sections.

7. Empirical research

The aim of this work is to explore whether and to what extent Disability Management and Middle Management can serve as strategic policies for identifying variables that rationalize learning environments. The goal is to prevent the marginalization of individuals with diverse learning potentials by constructing learning environments where each person, regardless of their challenges, can exercise their right to access, actively participate, and benefit from the educational opportunities offered by the school context (Walker, 2014; Limone et al., 2022). Achieving this depends on the school system's capacity to adopt a coherent, integrated, and supportive organizational framework, in other words, systemic planning underpinned by conscious and intentional educational governance.

Objectives

The objectives of the research are to:

1. Explore the perception of the roles of various figures (instrumental functions, collaborators of the headmaster, contact persons) within the school organization;
2. Identify the activities and functions carried out by school middle managers in relation to the quality of teaching, organizational, and relational processes;
3. Investigate the degree of awareness these figures have regarding their contribution to improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the school;
4. Analyze the perceived difficulties in performing their roles (e.g., lack of autonomy, workload, relationships with the manager or the board);
5. Identify the conditions that facilitate or hinder a positive impact of middle management on the school (e.g., leadership of the manager, collaborative culture, training).

Methodology

This exploration is designed as a qualitative and exploratory study, aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of school middle management figures' perceptions of their role, organizational impact, and internal relational dynamics. Due to the scarcity of specific empirical research on this subject within the Italian context, a descriptive approach oriented towards interpretative analysis was chosen. This approach allows for capturing the complexity of individual experiences, even through a single significant case. This choice aligns with the objective of preliminarily exploring a relatively understudied phenomenon, laying the groundwork for future, broader, and more generalizable investigations.

The focus is on the subjectivity of the participants' experiences and perceptions, particularly in relation to organizational processes and the enhancement of school quality.

Instruments

Semi-structured interview

An interview protocol was built divided into 4 dimensions, aimed at bringing out the experiences, opinions and reflections of the figures involved on Disability Management and system figures. The questions concern:

- Description of their role and the activities carried out;
- Perception of the impact on organizational quality;
- Relations with the school principal and the college;
- Main difficulties encountered;
- Conditions considered favorable or limiting.

The dimensions investigated include:

- Enhancement of the role;
- Contribution to organizational quality;
- Collaboration and internal relations;
- Perception of autonomy and support.

Sample

The convenience sample was identified by including teachers who, in one or more schools, hold Middle Management positions, such as collaborators of the school principal, instrumental functions, coordinators or contact persons.

The number of participants is 30, belonging to secondary schools.

The heterogeneity of the profiles made it possible to detect a plurality of perspectives, useful for grasping the complexity of the phenomenon studied.

Procedure

Data collection was carried out through a semi-structured interview, conducted in person and lasting approximately 60 minutes. The interviewee holds the role of instrumental function for inclusion in a secondary school and has four years of experience in this position. The interview was recorded and fully transcribed with informed consent. Although the time available for the interview was limited, it was sufficient to explore in depth the dimensions outlined in the protocol.

Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic coding, identifying recurring themes and core meanings (e.g., perceived impact, challenges, relationships).

8. Results

This section presents the main findings from the semi-structured interview conducted with a teacher serving as the instrumental function for inclusion in a secondary school. The aim of the interview was to explore, through the direct perspective of a key figure in school middle management, their perception of their role, the activities performed, and the organizational impact regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities.

The qualitative data analysis was organized around thematic nuclei corresponding to the dimensions under investigation: the role and operational functions of the interviewee; the perceived impact on school functioning; the degree of institutional recognition of the role; the main challenges encountered in carrying out their duties; and finally, proposals for improvement. Each dimension was examined through a detailed textual analysis of the responses, with the goal of highlighting recurring themes, critical issues, and potential related to inclusive management within school contexts.

Although the evidence is drawn from a single case, it provides valuable insights into the internal dynamics that characterize middle management and its contribution to building a more equitable, accessible, and person-centered school environment.

Example of the respondent's textual answers to questions of the semi-structured interview	
Question	Text answer of the interviewee
1. Can you describe your role and the main activities you perform?	<i>"As an instrumental function for inclusion, I mainly deal with the coordination of IEPs, the management of relationships with support teachers and with the families of pupils with disabilities. I also interface with local services (neuropsychiatry, social workers) and support colleagues in the classroom when there are particularly complex cases. In addition, I collaborate with the manager and the secretariat for everything related to certifications and documentation"</i>
2. How do you think your work affects the organization of schools?	<i>"I believe that my work has a rather significant impact, because it helps to make internal communication processes more fluid, especially between teachers and the secretariat. But above all, it fosters a more concrete culture of inclusion. I am often the one who mediates in critical situations and this, in my opinion, avoids escalation and improves the climate between colleagues"</i>
3. Do you feel valued in your role? Do you think it is recognized?	<i>«I would say in alternating phases. On the part of the manager, yes, I feel that there is confidence. However, the work we do behind the scenes is not always perceived in the college. Sometimes it seems to me that we take it for granted. Perhaps also because there is no real culture of middle management in Italian schools: there is no specific training, nor adequate formal recognition"</i>
4. What are the biggest difficulties you encounter?	<i>"Lack of time is the first problem. Managing all this work in addition to curricular hours is complicated. Then there is the difficulty in coordinating colleagues who may have different visions on inclusion: it requires a lot of interpersonal skills, patience and sometimes even resistance to stress. In addition, there is a lack of technical resources and structured time to discuss"</i>
5. What would you improve to make your role more effective?	<i>"First of all, the possibility of having dedicated hours, not only on a voluntary basis. Then targeted training: educational leadership, group management, effective communication. Finally, a stronger network between schools, to share good practices and feel less isolated"</i>

Table 1. Emerging topics from the interview: thematic summary of perceptions of middle management

Thematic category	Brief description	Examples from the text
Role and functions performed	Main activities, operational tasks, management responsibilities	EIP coordination, management relationships, support for colleagues
Impact on the organization scholastic	Perceived contribution to improvement, climate, organizational processes	"It contributes to improving the climate between colleagues"
Role recognition and visibility	Perception of the value attributed to the function by the DS and colleagues	"The work behind the scenes is not always perceived"
Critical issues and obstacles	Structural or relational difficulties, limits in management	Lack of time, stress, lack of resources

Table 2. Connection between categories that emerged and textual evidence from the interview

Thematic category	Description	Textual evidence (examples)
Role and functions performed	Operational activities and management responsibilities	"Coordination of IEPs", "Management of relations with families and territorial services"
Impact on the organization	Contribution to internal communication and school climate	"It fosters a more concrete culture of inclusion", "It avoids escalation among colleagues"
Role recognition	Perceived evaluation of one's work by the DS and the college	"The director recognizes my role, but in the college, it is not very visible"
Difficulties encountered	Structural and relational obstacles	"Lack of time", "Coordinating colleagues with different visions is stressful"
Proposals for improvement	Tips to make the role more effective	"Dedicated hours", "Training on educational leadership", "Network between schools to share"

Table 3. Emerging topics from the interview: thematic summary of perceptions of middle management

9. Limits

As with any qualitative study, it is important to consider that the subjective nature of the perceptions collected may influence participants' responses. Additionally, the sample was selected based on convenience and purposive criteria and is not statistically representative of the entire school population. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized but provide valuable insights to deepen the understanding of the phenomenon within the specific contexts studied.

Although this study is based on a single interview, the qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of complex and subjective dynamics that often elude large-scale surveys. This method captures the richness of individual perceptions and experiences, offering meaningful interpretative insights even with a small sample size.

Conclusion

In light of the above, there is an urgent need for a comprehensive rethinking of management within the school environment—one that transcends its purely organizational role to reclaim its pedagogical and social significance. School middle management must be empowered to spearhead inclusive, integrated, and coherent initiatives, supported by a systemic approach that genuinely values and activates students' personal resources.

Disability Management thus emerges as a pedagogical tool for creating inclusive learning environments that promote autonomy, self-determination, and participation among all students. The goal is to cultivate a school culture where diversity is no longer viewed as a problem to be managed but as a valuable asset to be embraced—one that enriches both the educational community and society as a whole.

Reestablishing the central role of middle management figures is not merely an organizational concern but a vital step toward building a school capable of welcoming, transforming, and innovating.

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