

**SYSTEMATIZING FLEXIBILITY IN INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN:
ASSESSING INCLUSION IN PCTOs: RESEARCH IN SCHOOL SETTING WITH STUDENTS WITH
DISABILITIES**

**VALUTARE L'INCLUSIONE NEI PCTO: UNA RICERCA NEI CONTESTI SCOLASTICI CON
STUDENTI CON DISABILITÀ**

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ABSTRACT

The question arises as to whether PCTOs are actually suitable for students with disabilities. This research analyses the effectiveness of PCTOs in terms of inclusion, particularly for these learners in upper secondary school: through a questionnaire administered in five hotel management schools in Naples, accessibility, personalisation, support, skills development and inclusion are assessed. The aim is to propose suggestions for more inclusive and effective pathways that respond to the special needs of these students.

Ci si chiede se i PCTO siano effettivamente adeguati per gli studenti con disabilità. La presente ricerca analizza l'efficacia dei PCTO circa l'inclusione soprattutto di questi discenti impegnati nella scuola secondaria di secondo grado: attraverso un questionario somministrato in cinque istituti alberghieri di Napoli, si valutano accessibilità, personalizzazione, supporto, sviluppo di competenze ed inclusione. L'obiettivo è proporre suggerimenti per percorsi più inclusivi, efficaci e rispondenti alle esigenze speciali di questi studenti.

KEYWORDS

Accessibility, personalisation, support, skills, inclusion.
Accessibilità, personalizzazione, supporto, competenze, inclusione

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Introduction

In recent years, the Italian educational debate has focused increasing attention on the assessment of Pathways for Transversal Skills and Orientation (PCTO), especially in relation to students with disabilities. In an increasingly inclusive school environment, the issue of authentic and meaningful assessment of these pathways represents a crucial challenge, not only in terms of teaching, but also in ethical and social terms. As Fabio Dovigo (2019) pointed out, inclusion is not a starting point, but a continuous process that requires tools for interpretation and intervention capable of grasping the complexity of educational situations. In this context, Pathways for Transversal Skills and Orientation represent a strategic opportunity to promote the autonomy, orientation and job placement of students with disabilities, provided that these pathways are designed, monitored and evaluated in a manner consistent with the principles of inclusion and personalisation. In fact, the Guidelines for the new PEI (Interministerial Decree 182/2020) devote a specific section to PCTOs, emphasising the importance of individualised planning that takes into account the student's functional profile, according to the ICF's bio-psycho-social model. From this perspective, the PCTO is not only a training experience but a real tool for transitioning to adult life, which must be built in a participatory and shared manner through the work of the Operational Working Group for Inclusion (GLO). Law 107/2015, which systematically introduced work-study programmes, later renamed PCTO, into secondary education, laid the foundations for a cultural and methodological change in teaching, promoting integration between schools and the world of work. However, it is Legislative Decree 66/2017, in particular Article 7, that clearly states the obligation to ensure the effective participation of students with disabilities in PCTO, through the definition of personalised tools within the Individualised Education Plan (PEI). At supranational level, European Directive 2000/78/EC reinforces the principle of non-discrimination and equal opportunities in access to employment and training, providing a further legal basis for inclusion in school-to-work transition pathways. Although the regulatory framework is clear and well-structured, the real effectiveness of PCTOs for students with disabilities depends on the ability of educational institutions to implement planning and monitoring tools that are consistent with the individual educational needs of students with disabilities. In this regard, current legislation provides for

the use of specific forms for the planning, monitoring and evaluation of pathways, which include:

- The PEI, which, according to Legislative Decree 66/2017, Article 7, paragraph 2, letter e), must contain specific information on PCTOs, including how they are carried out, personalised objectives and the necessary support measures;
- The Experience Assessment Form for students, provided for in the MIM Guidelines (pursuant to Article 1, paragraph 785, Law No. 145 of 30 December 2018), which, thanks in part to the support of the support teacher, allows for the collection of qualitative and quantitative feedback on the perceived effectiveness of the programme.

In addition, individual educational institutions may independently adopt additional tools such as:

- The Initial Assessment Form, useful for gathering information on the student's previous skills and expectations;
- The Skills and Progress Register, which allows the evolution of the transversal and professional skills acquired to be documented on an ongoing basis;
- The Pathway Monitoring Form, the Interim Reports and the Final Report, tools aimed at promptly identifying any critical issues and adapting the pathway to emerging needs.

When used systematically and in an integrated manner, these tools allow for a multi-level assessment of the PCTO experience, involving not only the internal tutor, who, at the end of the activities, completes both the skills certification form and the final assessment form, as well as the company tutor, who completes the attendance register and assesses the student's activity, but also the student themselves, who -alone or with support- submits the logbook at the end of the activities and, where possible, the family. In particular, for students with disabilities, the assessment must take into account not only the educational outcomes, but also the degree of inclusion, the quality of the relationships established, the accessibility of the environments and the consistency between the activities carried out and the objectives of the PEI. Therefore, even though, as we have seen, there are various documents that can be used to gain an idea of the actual performance of the activities carried out by students, especially those with disabilities, the available

empirical evidence still shows a certain lack of consistency in the application of these tools and in the quality of the programmes offered to students with disabilities.

In many schools, in fact, the assessment of PCTOs is limited to formal reporting, without an in-depth analysis of the real impact on the autonomy, guidance and social inclusion of the students involved. On the other hand, as mentioned above, even though the PEI includes a specific section dedicated to the design of PCTOs and aspects concerning the assessment of skills, there is a gap in the guidelines on how to design and evaluate the programmes: this issue becomes even more urgent when designing PCTO experiences “to promote school-to-adult life transition pathways for students with intellectual disabilities” (Taina and Lascioli, 2023).

A key issue concerns the definition of assessment criteria that are both rigorous and flexible, capable of capturing individual progress without resorting to normative models. Recent literature, from Corsini (2023) to Galliani (2022), insists on the distinction between measurement and evaluation, emphasising that the latter must be based on a pedagogical judgement that takes into account the context, resources and personal trajectories. In other words, it is not a question of “how much” the student has done, but “how” and “why” they have had that experience. In light of these considerations, this paper aims to gather feedback from students involved in PCTO programmes in order to understand, from their point of view, which aspects are rewarded and which ones deserve to be reviewed, and thus propose criteria and indicators for a more rigorous and meaningful assessment, capable of guiding school policies towards real educational equity.

1. Evaluation of an inclusive PCTO

When evaluating the effectiveness of Pathways for Transversal Skills and Orientation (PCTO) aimed at students with disabilities, it is essential to consider a series of factors that go far beyond the simple acquisition of technical or professional skills. Inclusion, active participation, accessibility of environments, tutor support and the consistency of activities with the student's life plan are fundamental dimensions for a truly pedagogical assessment. As Elisabetta Pala (2022) points out, if well designed, PCTOs can become a concrete opportunity for emancipation and the construction of adult identity for students with disabilities,

provided that they are rooted in a solid and inclusive pedagogical framework. The aim here is to identify the main factors that influence the success of PCTOs for students with disabilities. The main objective is to assess the extent to which these programmes meet the specific needs of these students and whether they effectively promote both the development of transversal skills and orientation towards their professional future. One factor is certainly the level of inclusion of the context in which the practical activities are carried out, insofar as it is possible to value the differences of each individual and, above all, of students with disabilities (Cottini, 2018). Inclusion, in this context, cannot be reduced to the mere physical presence of the student in the internship locations: rather, it implies the possibility of participating meaningfully in the proposed activities, of feeling part of a community, of contributing one's own skills and of receiving recognition for one's commitment. Luigi d'Alonzo (2016) reminds us that authentic inclusion is measured by the quality of relationships and the possibility for each person to express their potential in real and meaningful contexts. In other words, it is not enough to "be there": one must be able to "do" and "be" fully. Consequently, another aspect to monitor is the ability to effectively personalise the paths designed as set out in the PEIs in order to respond concretely to specific individual needs with the same commitment with which personalised teaching is implemented (d'Alonzo, 2016). Participation, therefore, becomes a key indicator in the evaluation of PCTOs: it is not just a matter of observing whether the student has completed the required hours, but of analysing the extent to which they have been able to interact, learn, contribute and grow. This requires environments that are accessible not only from a physical point of view, but also from a sensory, communicative and relational point of view: this leads us to focus our attention on another factor that is inextricably linked to the previous ones, namely the level of accessibility, both physical and sensory, which must be taken into high consideration when students with cognitive, physical or sensory disabilities participate in PCTOs. Another crucial element is the role of the tutor, a bridge between the school and the host context. The tutor is not only a supervisor but also a facilitator of learning and participation: they must be able to read the student's needs, mediate relationships with colleagues, adapt activities and provide constructive feedback. In this sense, the tutor is a key figure, requiring specific skills and a clear pedagogical vision, insofar as they can act as an expert guide for learners with disabilities in the process of performance scaffolding (Canevaro, 2022), thanks to which they can "take a look at

the world of work and life” (Pala and Mura, 2022). The acquisition of transversal skills – such as the ability to work in a team, time management, effective communication and flexibility – is one of the main objectives of PCTOs. However, for students with disabilities, these skills must be tailored to their individual characteristics and potential. It is not a question of “lowering the bar”, but of building realistic and motivating pathways that enhance strengths and accompany the development of autonomy. Finally, the perceived usefulness of the proposed activities is another fundamental parameter. If the student fails to grasp the meaning of what they are doing, if the activities are disconnected from their life plan or too far removed from their abilities, there is a risk of turning the PCTO into a frustrating or, worse, stigmatising experience. It is therefore necessary for the activities to be designed in a manner consistent with the PEI (Individualised Education Plan), actively involving the family and other local stakeholders.

2. Evaluation of the PCTO experience - Methodology

The study is based on an anonymous questionnaire administered to students in their final three years at five hotel management schools in the city of Naples, with the aim of collecting qualitative and quantitative data on their level of satisfaction and perceptions regarding the PCTO experience. The questionnaire explores various dimensions, including accessibility, assessing the physical and sensory accessibility of PCTO environments and activities; the level of personalisation through an analysis of the personalisation of courses based on the individual needs of students with disabilities; the quality of support provided by tutors, teachers and school staff during the PCTO experience; the perception of the usefulness of PCTOs in the development of transversal skills (communication, problem solving, teamwork) and in career guidance; finally, particular attention will be paid to assessing the level of inclusion and participation of students with disabilities in PCTO activities.

To evaluate the experience of Pathways for Transversal Skills and Orientation (PCTO), a structured questionnaire was developed and administered digitally via Google Forms so that students could complete it at their convenience and using their preferred devices, while learners with disabilities were assisted by support teachers in responding to the questionnaire items. The questionnaire was

accompanied by a privacy policy in accordance with EU Regulation 2016/679 (GDPR), which guaranteed the anonymity of responses and the possibility of discontinuing participation at any time. Data collection was conducted under the responsibility of the author of this paper.

Questionnaire structure:

The questionnaire consists of 17 items, divided into three main sections:

- Personal and contextual section:

Name of educational institution

Year of study

Gender

Area of experience (e.g. Kitchen, Dining room, Tourist reception, Reception, etc.)

- Evaluation section (5-point Likert scale): Students were asked to express their level of satisfaction or evaluation on a qualitative scale (from “unsatisfactory” to “very good” or from “useless” to “very useful”) with regard to:

Physical and sensory accessibility of PCTO environments and activities

Personalisation of the programme based on individual needs

Quality of support received from internal tutors, company tutors, teachers and school staff

Perceived usefulness of the PCTO for career guidance

Level of inclusion and participation of students

Development of transferable skills (communication, problem solving, teamwork, autonomy) (4-point Likert scale)

- Open section (final question):

Free comments or suggestions on the PCTO experience

The sample consists of students from five professional hotel schools in the city of Naples, located in different areas of the city. More than 600 responses were collected, providing a solid basis for statistical and qualitative data analysis.

3. A possible interpretation

With regard to physical accessibility to the environments provided for PCTO activities, 73% of students rated accessibility as good or very good, while only 10% expressed negative opinions (insufficient or very insufficient). The positive perception of sensory accessibility was slightly lower (approximately 68%), with 15% rating it as insufficient or worse. On the other hand, the personalisation of activities was highly appreciated, with over 80% responding that it was good or very good. Therefore, students generally perceive a good level of physical accessibility, while there is greater criticism of sensory accessibility, suggesting the need for targeted interventions for students with sensory disabilities. The personalisation of the programme emerges as a strength of the PCTO for the students interviewed.

With regard to the support received from the internal tutor, the company tutor, teachers and school staff, all these figures receive predominantly good or very good ratings from over 75% of respondents, but the internal tutor and the company tutor are the most appreciated figures, probably because they are more involved in specific activities, so much so that even the support from teachers and school staff is also positive, but with a slight decline towards adequacy. Therefore, the tutoring system works effectively, with good synergy between school and company. However, the involvement of school staff could be strengthened to improve the overall experience.

With regard to the transversal skills acquired during the course offered by their school, those most developed according to the students are the ability to work well in a team, with over 85% indicating it as useful or very useful, and autonomy; communication and problem solving also receive very positive ratings, with over 80% of positive responses. The PCTO is therefore perceived as a highly formative experience for the development of soft skills, particularly those related to collaboration and operational autonomy: this confirms the effectiveness of the experiential model offered to them.

With regard to the usefulness of the PCTO for their career guidance, 90% of students consider the PCTO useful or very useful, while 75% of those surveyed consider the inclusion of students in cross-curricular skills and guidance activities to be good or very good. Similar percentages also characterised students' perceptions of their level of participation in PCTO activities. It can therefore be

argued that the PCTO is recognised as an effective tool for guidance and inclusion. However, a minority of students (around 10-15%) report room for improvement, especially in terms of active involvement.

Finally, with regard to the qualitative part of the research, it can be said that the comments confirm the quantitative data and offer valuable insights for improving the experience. Actively listening to students' voices can help us to guide targeted interventions to make PCTO even more effective and inclusive. Through the open comments provided by the students, it was clear that the positive aspects certainly include the recognised educational value of the experience, a concrete improvement in their practical skills and an appreciated direct contact with the world of work, which in one case also led to obtaining a fixed-term job. Conversely, the critical points of their PCTO programme included, among other things, a desire for greater personalisation of activities in relation to their needs. They also expressed the need for activities that were more practical and consistent with their chosen field of study, and finally, they requested greater involvement from tutors in the development of the various stages of their programme for transversal skills and guidance. Finally, with regard to the suggestions made by the students surveyed, they called for PCTO activities to start at the beginning of the school year, for a greater variety of host companies that are more relevant to their chosen field of study, and, lastly, they hoped that there would be more opportunities to participate in experiences of this type abroad.

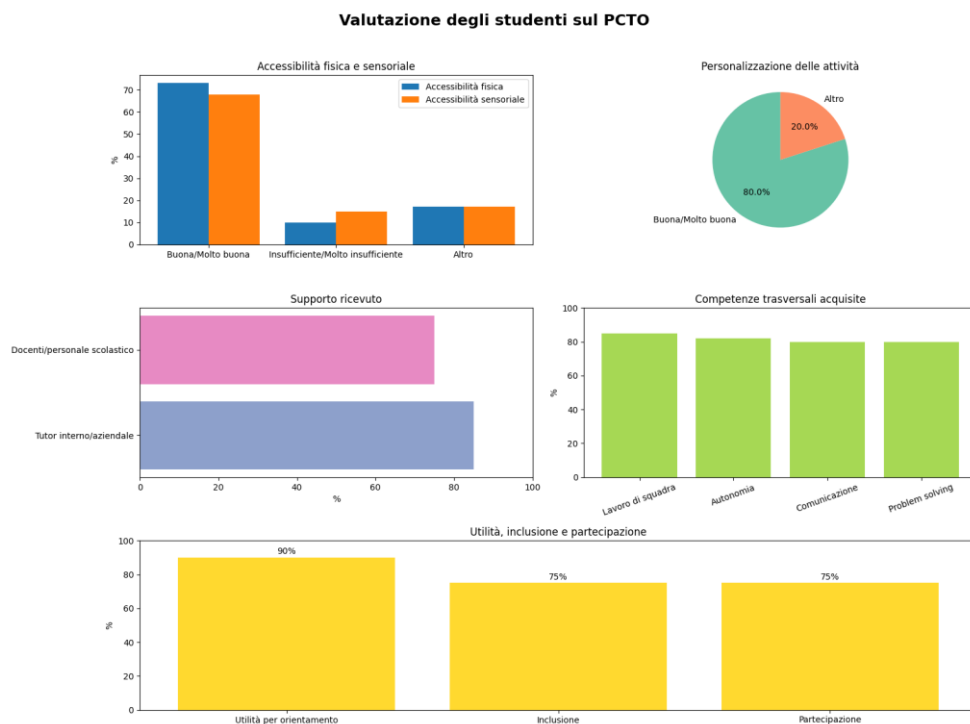


Figure 1. Summary graphs of students' responses regarding the evaluation of the PCTO

Conclusions

After listening carefully to the students' voices and analysing the data collected, it is clear that if we want to make PCTOs truly inclusive and educational for everyone – and in particular for students with disabilities – we must also rethink the way we evaluate them. It is no longer enough to ask ourselves “how many hours they have done” or “whether they have completed the activities”. We must start asking ourselves: how did they experience that experience? What did they really learn? Did they feel part of something? Did they have the opportunity to express their potential?

With this work, we have proposed indicators that can help build assessment tools that are more sensitive to the complexity of the pathways and more capable of guiding school policies towards real educational equity. Furthermore, after

identifying these factors, which we believe are essential for evaluating the effectiveness of the activities carried out in a PCTO, and taking into account the feedback collected, we would like to propose some practical suggestions, such as:

- starting PCTO activities earlier, perhaps in the first months of the school year: this would allow for better organisation of activities, a more relaxed experience and more time to reflect on what is being learned;
- ensuring that the experiences offered are more consistent with the students' field of study, so that they feel truly involved and can see a concrete link between what they learn in class and what they do during the programme. This would also help to give more meaning and value to the entire project;
- another aspect that emerged from the students' comments suggests offering a greater variety of companies and experiences: the idea is to be able to choose between different realities, closer to each individual's interests and aspirations, so as to make the programme more personalised and stimulating;
- finally, it is suggested that students be allowed to carry out part of the PCTO abroad: an international experience, even a short one, could greatly enrich their programme, offering not only professional skills but also a unique opportunity for personal growth and openness to new cultures.

These observations, far from being mere complaints, are instead valuable suggestions for improving the quality of PCTOs. Listening to the voices of students – especially those with disabilities – is a fundamental pedagogical act, because it allows us to design paths that are more tailored to their needs, more motivating and fairer. On the other hand, the identification of possible good practices and factors that appear to be most conducive to the growth of students and their career choices, as well as the provision of information derived from research, can be useful to schools, host institutions and policy makers in order to offer PCTOs that are increasingly targeted at supporting students, especially those with disabilities, in the transition from school to work or to tertiary education. In fact, in recent decades, a virtuous practice of collaboration between the world of educational research and that of public policy has gradually established itself, in particular through what is commonly referred to as informed policy, a term that is now widely used in Italian. Policy makers are paying increasing attention to research results, recognising their value in guiding more informed and well-founded choices. In this

scenario, reporting – both in social and economic terms – is taking on an increasingly central role, becoming a point of intersection between the needs of politics and the responsibilities of research. The latter, in fact, can no longer avoid confrontation with the public and collective dimension of its work, but is called upon to actively contribute to the construction of more equitable, effective and sustainable educational policies.

In conclusion, evaluating a PCTO for students with disabilities means adopting a complex and multidimensional perspective, capable of capturing not only the results, but also the processes, relationships, emotions and transformations that the experience generates. It is a delicate task that requires competence, sensitivity and, above all, a deep belief in the educational potential of each person. Because, as Stefania Pinnelli (2015) reminds us, special education is, first and foremost, an education of possibility.

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