

THE INCLUSIVE EDUCATION: SOME REFLECTIONS L'EDUCAZIONI INCLUSIVA: ALCUNE RIFLESSIONI

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to reflect on the construct of inclusive education. In today's school contexts, characterized by an increasingly heterogeneous training needs, the promotion of inclusive education has become a priority. If we talk so much about inclusion, it is because today there are still many people who fail to enjoy the benefits deriving from the enormous progress made, in recent decades, in all fields of human activity. The issues of inequality and discrimination are certainly not new problems but compared to the past we observe a changed sensitivity, with regard to the issue of human rights. The proposed reflection crosses some definitions of inclusive education in the main international documents as well as the different theoretical perspectives that decline inclusive education recognizing the central role played by teachers for the promotion of an authentically inclusive education that requires a reflective posture.

Lo scopo dell'articolo è riflettere sul costrutto di educazione inclusiva. Negli attuali contesti scolastici, caratterizzati da una sempre più alta eterogeneità di bisogni formativi, la promozione dell'educazione inclusiva è divenuta una priorità. Se si parla così tanto di inclusione, è perché ad oggi sono ancora molte le persone che non riescono a godere dei benefici derivanti dagli enormi progressi fatti, negli ultimi decenni, in tutti i campi dell'attività umana. I temi della disuguaglianza e della discriminazione non sono certamente problemi nuovi ma rispetto al passato osserviamo una mutata sensibilità, in merito al tema dei diritti umani. La riflessione proposta attraversa alcune definizioni di educazione inclusiva nei principali documenti internazionali nonché le differenti prospettive teoriche che declinano l'educazione inclusiva riconoscendo il ruolo centrale svolto degli insegnanti per la promozione di una educazione autenticamente inclusiva che richiede una postura riflessiva.

Key – words: inclusive education, disability, participation, learning, reflexivity.

Parole – chiave: educazione inclusiva, disabilità, partecipazione, apprendimento, riflessività.

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Introduction

In today's school contexts, characterized by an increasingly heterogeneous training needs, the promotion of inclusive education has become a priority that requires commitment to the provision of adequate training courses for all teachers. In this regard, the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2012) offers a tool for the coordination of European policies on teacher training. The profile is articulated around four general values – valuing the differences of the student; support pupils; work with others and continuous professional and personal updating – to which specific areas of expertise are connected. In this sense, the idea expressed by the first value that the difference between pupils is a resource and a wealth rests on areas of competence that call into question the opinions of teachers precisely on these differences and those related to the processes of inclusion and integration. Supporting pupils means first believing in the scholastic success of each one and for this reason the second value refers to the areas of competence related to the promotion of disciplinary, practical, social and emotional learning and the adoption of effective teaching approaches for heterogeneous classes. The construction of an inclusive school also, as the third value reminds us, through the ability of teachers to collaborate with each other, but also with families and other education professionals. Teachers, as is finally emphasized with the fourth value, must also be responsible for their training, taking care of both the initial training path and continuous professional development, also becoming able to reflect on their role and their own practices. Of course, as the Agency itself is keen to emphasize, these are values and competences that must be made to dialogue with the specific national realities. As far as Italy is concerned, in relation also to the expansion – expressed by the introduction of the macro-category of Special Educational Needs – of the audience of students who can experience particular needs during their school career, in the last decade the training of teachers has been characterized by a growing attention to inclusive practices. In 2017, with Legislative Decree no. 66, it is provided, in art. 13, in-service training on inclusion issues for all school staff, although, in the same article in which it is said that it is addressed to all teachers, it is specified that it is "in particular" dedicated to those of classes in which there are pupils with disabilities. In fact, if in theory the data for which "inclusion concerns all pupils" is acquired, there is often a certain difficulty in transposing the principle into daily practices in which, not infrequently, sets of not well defined specialized technical skills are chased for the "management" of the problematic nature of some pupils. The "all" is used in an ambiguous way because it refers only to some weak or deficient categories, or considered as such (Medeghini, 2018, p. 208). The introduction of multiple acronyms to refer to the students – who often no longer even have a name (let alone potential!) – instead of helping to improve the responses offered by the school to overcome the difficulties that they may encounter in learning processes, has contributed to radicalizing those distinctions and separations that, as d'Alonzo points out (2015, p. 35), oppose both the theory and the practice of inclusion. In spite of the same ideas that have spread in the health sector regarding an idea of health as well-being emerging from the complex interactions between the organic dimension and the contextual dimension (ICF, 2004) – a widespread tendency to the medicalization of learning difficulties that originates from a prescriptive and non-indicative use of clinical diagnoses and that leads to believe in the need for hyperspecialized teachers is growing – in spite of the same ideas that have spread precisely in the health sector regarding an idea of health as well-being emerging from the complex interactions between the organic dimension and the contextual dimension (ICF, 2004) – a widespread tendency to the medicalization of learning difficulties originates from a prescriptive and non-indicative use of clinical diagnoses and that leads to believe in the need for hyperspecialized

teachers when instead the specializations are different and distributed in the professional networks that should be learned to activate.

1. Inclusive education: some definitions in the main international documents

If we talk so much about inclusion, it is because today there are still many people who fail to enjoy the benefits deriving from the enormous progress made, in recent decades, in all fields of human activity. The issues of inequality and discrimination are certainly not new problems but compared to the past we observe a changed sensitivity, compared to the past, regarding the issue of human rights. During the nineties of the twentieth century a different look made its way into the education of children with special educational needs. Specifically, we start talking about 'inclusive education' with The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Education. This document has played a crucial role because it is with it that for the first time the idea of inclusion in the educational field is declined, responding to the need to "create a terminology that includes both the broader meaning of the inclusive approach and the links with school inclusion (Caldin, 2013, p.13). An educational turning point is therefore introduced that changes the course traced up to that moment, sanctioning that all children, regardless of their conditions, have the right to an education that must be carried out in common contexts and that it becomes the task of all (UNESCO, 1994). UNESCO proposes common paths and personalized strategies through support interventions that allow to operationalize the principle of 'one school for everyone and for each'. Another document in which this principle acquires greater substance is the Luxembourg Charter (1996) in which inclusive education 'adapts to the needs of the individual and not vice versa. The individual is placed at the heart of every educational plan. This is achieved through the recognition of the potential and special educational needs for all' (Commission of the European Communities, 1996). Subsequently, in the Madrid Declaration (2002), it is emphasized how much and how non-discrimination is not a sufficient condition for achieving inclusion where its implementation and promotion can be made possible by concrete and positive actions by the educational system that plays a central role as it becomes a central place that must ensure personal development and social inclusion so that children and young people can achieve their autonomy. In 2006 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities – ratified by Italy in 2009 with Law No. 18 of 3 March – highlights how the full development of human potential, the development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and potential, as well as the concrete possibility of enabling people with disabilities to effectively participate in a free society must provide:

- reasonable accommodations;
- the provision of adequate support and individualised support;
- environments able to optimize socialization processes and school programs;
- the use of languages and tools tailored and functional to the different conditions of disability;
- ad hoc training of all school staff

2.Observing education from a plurality of perspectives

Parallel to the enucleation of the inclusive principles through the documents mentioned, in the educational field inclusion has taken shape also thanks to the change of perspective that has come to be configured in the definitions of disability, health and disease, terms that have experienced the reflection of the transition from the medical to the social paradigm, up to the bio paradigm -psycho-social. For a long time, the condition of disability has been identified with a state of illness, putting in the foreground the organic dimension of people with disabilities. In this perspective defined in terms of the medical model, the disabled person is considered a sick person whose care is the exclusive prerogative of health professionals. In this perspective, it is the person with disabilities who must adapt to the pre-existing contextual conditions. During the second half of the twentieth century, especially by the movements of people with disabilities, a different vision was opposed to the medical vision that overturns the medical model, that of the social model (Oliver, 1990; 2013) as it identifies society as the cause of disability. This approach marked a crucial turning point, as demonstrated by *Disability Studies* (D' Alessio et al., 2015; Medeghini et al., 2013; Medeghini, 2015) and the Index for inclusion in schools (Booth, Ainscow, 2008; 2014). In this scenario, an approach has been developed that places the social and organic components in dialogue and interaction, giving rise to the bio-psycho-social model from which the International Classification of Functioning, Disability was prepared. , and Health – ICF (WHO, 2004). This classification has promoted a radical transformation compared to previous WHO classifications, attributing to the geographical, social and cultural context a fundamental role, which can facilitate or hinder the functioning of people, favor or restrict activities and participation. The ICF promotes a lexical novelty where the terms functioning and disability are used as umbrella terms: the first "includes all bodily functions, activities and participation", while the second refers to "impairments, limitations of activity or restrictions of participation" (ibid., pp.13-14). The ICF also focuses attention on the dimension of well-being, " a general term that encompasses the whole universe of the domains of human life, including physical, mental and social aspects, which constitute what can be called a good life " (ibid., p.180). Only recently, through numerous references starting from the implementing decrees of the reform law known as La Buona Scuola, with the Interministerial Decree n.182 of 29 December 2020, the ICF has become a reference for drawing up the Individualized Educational Plan (Ianes, Cramerotti, 2019; Lascioli, Pasqualotto, 2021). However, the ICF to date remains a health tool, adopted to describe the functioning profiles of only some subjects. Within the various perspectives that have followed one another over time, worthy of particular attention is the Capability Approach, introduced by Amartya Sen (1985) and then also developed by Marta Nussbaum (1992). According to Lorella Terzi (2005; 2010) this approach allows both to overcome the causality and dichotomy of the medical model and the social model and to disengage from an idea of functioning as proposed by the ICF "to welcome an idea of well-being declined in terms of the possibilities that everyone has to choose what he can and wants to choose" (Manno, 2022). The attention, according to Terzi, focuses on this approach in terms of possible functions reverberating on the renewal of teaching practices allowing, in her opinion, to support a reformulation of functional difficulties (Norwich, 2010^o) in educational terms. As Ghedin points out (2021, p.58) the approach to capabilities must be understood as a "structure of thought" that allows a rethinking of "issues concerning the definition of differences between students within a fundamental normative structure that aims at justice and equality". The different theoretical perspectives that conceptualize the condition of disability inevitably influence the definitions of inclusive education itself. In this direction, the six different meanings of inclusion enucleated by Ainscow , Booth and Dyson (2006, pp. 15-26) following a research work conducted

in the British context in order to understand how teachers, politicians and local authorities thought about inclusion are interesting.

These meanings have been summarized by Daniela Manno (2021, p.31) and reported below.

- 1) Inclusion as a concern for disabled people and for other categories to which 'special educational needs' are recognized: the authors criticize this approach, among other things very widespread, as they believe that the focus by the school exclusively on students with specific difficulties and who need special interventions, lead to underestimate several factors that could prevent or also favor the participation of others students. Rather, the authors call for a focus on 'barriers to learning and participation' and 'resources to facilitate learning and participation'.
- 2) Inclusion as a response to exclusion for disciplinary reasons: with this meaning inclusion as well as connected with students with disabilities, relates to students who do not have good conduct. Here the authors criticize the very origin of disciplinary problems that need to be contextualized within a complex system involving relationships and approaches to teaching and learning. Attention should be focused on the possibility of reducing all those conditions that lead to discrimination and devaluation of certain students, favoring processes for their participation.
- 3) Inclusion in relation to all groups seen as vulnerable to exclusion: the authors note a particular attention to different groups of students considered fragile, as if there were forms of exclusion that are 'social' and others that could appear 'natural'. The authors invite to investigate those factors underlying the different forms of exclusion - linked to disability, behavioral problems, fragility - to verify their relationship with the social structures in which they mature and any negative influences exerted by them.
- 4) Inclusion as a development of the school for all: the authors are against any form of separation, whatever the condition of the pupils in favor of an inclusive education understood as the development of the school for all with the elaboration of appropriate learning and teaching strategies.
- 5) Inclusion as Education for All (EFA): this is the UNESCO approach that the authors consider useful to rethink the school especially in the most disadvantaged countries by enucleando new forms and tools for education within the communities of reference.
- 6) Inclusion as a principled approach to education and society: in this perspective it is necessary to consider the values underlying the actions and the values that are affirmed with them. In fact, if the values to which reference is made are not made explicit - and which should be those of equity, participation, respect for diversity - schools will hardly be able to guide the transformation of their cultures, policies and practices in an inclusive sense.

3. Inclusive education as a realization of the right of all children to receive quality education in common contexts

It should be taken into account that the different conceptions concerning inclusive education are closely connected not only to the different theoretical frameworks adopted, but also to the socio-cultural and political peculiarities of the different national realities. Despite the difference in definitions, as highlighted in the report on the evidence of the links between inclusive education and

social inclusion, prepared by the European Agency for Special Educational Needs, there is a certain confluence that is embodied in the recognition of an inclusive education understood as closely linked to the realization of the right of all children to receive an education – quality in common contexts (Manno, 2022). We find this assumption in terms of the objective set by the 2030 Agenda (EASNIE, 2018). However, by analyzing and reflecting on daily educational practices, often inclusive education becomes 'exclusive' – that is, aimed at specific categories of pupils and we could say 'presumptuous' not recognizing either the breadth and specificity of the macro-category of Special Educational Needs (Aiello, 2018; Dovigo, 2019; Ianes, 2005; 2019; Isidori, 2016 ; Manno, 2022; Musello, Sarracino, 2017), nor the variety of factors that can make learning paths problematic and negatively influence (d' Alonzo, 2018). If we look at the Italian context, we realize the resistance to deconstructing the logic of integration in favor of the logic of inclusion because stereotypes and prejudices still remain fueled by the promotion of adaptation processes to the detriment of the promotion of paths of differentiation of strategies and paths that can make possible the full self-determination of each and every one 'educating the differences in equality (Bochicchio, 2017). The logic of integration has as its sole objective to identify means, tools, methodologies aimed at extending the educational services, already present, to subjects who are excluded; therefore, the problem of revisiting and transforming services and practices that have produced exclusion does not arise. This logic focuses on the question of how to assimilate those outside a given institutional set-up through a set of practices thus promoting equality, but not respect for diversity. At the base of the logic of integration there is the paradigm of assimilation based on the adaptation of the pupil in condition of disability to a school organization that is structured fundamentally according to the "normal" pupils, and in which the design for the "special" pupils still plays a marginal or residual role. This involves the use of strategies to bring the pupil in a condition of disability to be as similar as possible to others. The level of integration is measured starting from the degree of normalization reached by the pupil and the quality of school life of the person with a condition of disability is evaluated on the basis of his ability to fill the gap that separates him from normal pupils (Striano, 2010). Unlike the static nature that characterizes the logic of integration, the logic of inclusion is of a procedural type as it supports not only the integration of the excluded, but urges the modification in the first place of the training systems themselves, problematizing the status quo and promoting the question, by the institutions, concerning the procedures to be transformed, through a work of sharing and co-construction with those who are excluded, so that this exclusion is overcome. Inclusive processes are therefore not limited to mobilizing only technical skills (such as those provided for by integration), but a commitment to foster educational contexts that know how to welcome and promote the realization of a project of independent living and active citizenship. The logic of inclusion is in fact based on the paradigm of collaboration that recognizes the relevance of full participation in school life by all subjects; offers a framework within which pupils – regardless of ability, gender, language, ethnic or cultural origin – can be equally valued, treated with respect and provided with equal opportunities (ibid.). Therefore, the notion of inclusion does not only concern pupils with disabilities, but involves all forms of exclusion that may originate from cultural, ethnic, socio-economic, gender and sexual differences; recognizes that there is a risk of exclusion that must be actively prevented and recognizes the importance of the involvement of all pupils in the creation of a truly welcoming school (Striano, Cesarano, Capobianco, 2017). In this sense, inclusive teaching is the didactics "for" and "of" everyone (Meijer, 2003), which is concerned with personalization and individualization through active, constructive and participatory methodologies (Ianes, 2005). The quality of inclusive teaching is, therefore, determined by reflexivity and educational intentionality (Strollo 2008), by the ability to

change the various perspectives of meaning and to produce not a type of informative learning but a transformative learning, as Mezirow (2003) would say.

4. The role of teachers in promoting genuinely inclusive education

The promotion of inclusion starting from the school context represents a multidimensional and complex process that implies, as highlighted by Both and Ainscow (2008; 2014) a constant 'setting out' where inclusion can never be said to be concluded once and for all because it requires a certain professional posture, which implies, in Deweyan terms, a transaction between subjects and situations, functional to the creation of those conditions that favour the learning and participation of all pupils. In this scenario, teachers play a crucial role because they are first and foremost privileged observers of the students' workings and who can therefore more easily detect the obstacles they encounter in their learning paths and that they can act from a didactic and educational point of view to improve problematic situations. The school today cannot but be inclusive and it is important to go in the direction of a teacher training that prepares to face all situations through accessible, differentiated, and integrated educational and didactic designs. What teachers believe about their professional role, teaching-learning processes and the very nature of education significantly affects their professional action even more when it aims to contribute to the development of inclusive processes (Domovića, Vlastab, Bouilleta, 2017). Such beliefs mature in relation to multiple variables and profoundly affect the attitudes of teachers. With reference to inclusive attitudes, Fiorucci (2014) through a meta-analysis of publications on the subject, allows us to identify some variables including:

- 1) the perception of inclusion and the educational relationship;
- 2) the severity and type of deficit;
- 3) ways of considering the difference between curricular teachers and support teachers;
- 4) factors such as gender, age, years of service but also the discipline taught and the order of school
- 5) the consideration of the dynamics of collaboration between teachers.

There are different scales for assessing teachers' inclusive attitudes (see: de Boer et al., 2012; Lübke et al., 2018; Saloviita, 2018) mostly, however, referring to those contexts in which separate training, unlike Italy, has been set aside relatively recently, but there is no lack of research and training activities that, with a different methodological system, focus on the perception of teachers with respect to specific professional figures involved in inclusive processes or on the relationship between attitudes, values and practices and that, in general, are aimed at bringing out the implicit underlying professional action (Aiello, Sharma, Sibilio, 2016; Bocci, 2009; Caldin, 2009; Camedda, 2016; Camedda, Santi, 2016; Covelli 2015; Perla, Agrati, 2018).

The professional identity of teachers is to be understood as a "social object, modifiable and reinterpretable by a community and its members" in whose construction the dominant social representations in a certain context play a fundamental role (Fabbri, Striano, Me-lacarne, 2008, p. 81). Examining the implicit assumptions to become as aware as possible is the path that Dewey (2006) had already indicated by outlining the characteristics and process of that particular type of thought that is reflective thinking, which, by activating itself in situations of doubt and uncertainty, allows us

to (re)establish a disturbed balance. Reflective thought is an "essential and constitutive element of educational action" considered as "a theoretical-praxis dimension in which experience is investigated and new knowledge is built functional to [its] adequate interpretation and management" (Striano, 2001, p. 154). It is this type of thought that Schön (2006) places at the base of the training of a professional, who resorting to a reflective rationality (Fabbri, Striano, Melacarne, 2008; Perillo, 2012; Striano, 2001) can enhance the awareness that accompanies action. Through observation and reflection, the professional "can realize a description of the tacit knowledge implicit" in his actions, discovering both how much this influences them and determines their effectiveness, and how sometimes the "original models" underlying them, "represent the limit to be overcome" (Schön, 2006, p. 55). The reflective posture should be assumed by every teacher and proves to be particularly appropriate to the promotion of inclusion, if the latter is considered as an always ongoing process that requires, in the words of Schön, a continuous "conversation with the situation", so that those obstacles that prevent someone from participating can always be identified and removed.

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