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ABSTRACT

Global trends such as demographic changes, migration crises, and growing inequality lead governments to reflect on how to promote equity and inclusion. The OECD Strength through Diversity Project (OECD, 2023) shares definitions of equity and inclusion from 34 different education systems and identifies six dimensions of diversity: migration; ethnic groups, national minorities, and Indigenous peoples; gender; LGBTQI+; special education needs (SEN); giftedness.

Tendenze globali come i cambiamenti demografici, le crisi migratorie e la crescente disuguaglianza inducono i governi a riflettere su come promuovere l'equità e l'inclusione. Il progetto dell'OCSE Strength through Diversity (OCSE, 2023) condivide le definizioni di equità e inclusione di 34 diversi sistemi educativi e identifica sei dimensioni della diversità: migrazione; gruppi etnici, minoranze nazionali e popolazioni indigene; genere; LGBTQI+; bisogni educativi speciali (BES), talento.

KEYWORDS

Equity, Inclusion, Comparative analysis, OECD
Equità, inclusione, analisi comparativa, OCSE

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Introduction¹

The OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) highlights phenomena that concern and influence the social systems of countries (OECD, 2019 a, 2019b), i.e., megatrends, such as globalization, digitization, and the aging of the population, which they profoundly modify the structure of countries, the functioning of societies and human relationships; to these must be added the migratory phenomena, climate change and growing inequalities (OECD, 2023). These phenomena also have an impact on the world of Education, and this is why the OECD (2023) launched the Strength through Diversity project to reflect on the issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in education.

Starting from the OECD Strength through Diversity project, this contribution reflects, in a comparative key, on the changes that have affected education systems to identify strategic solutions that can be implemented in Italy, concerning the aspects of equity and inclusion of the system of education.

The OECD (2019a) has recently highlighted some weaknesses of the Italian system compared to that of other countries and international comparative analysis can broaden understanding of the national context by providing a broader framework within which to interpret Italian results. The comparative analysis provides countries with information to assess their areas of strength and weakness and to monitor any progress; furthermore, it can provide information and data on which to reflect in order to direct national educational policy (OECD, 2004).

Educational systems around the world present different conceptualizations on the issues of equity and inclusion and the purpose of the OECD's Strength through Diversity project (OECD, 2023) is precisely to reflect on these differences, to identify those educational systems that they can define themselves as equitable and inclusive, adopting a holistic approach; moreover, the project aims to highlight those changes that have improved the systems of equity and inclusion in education, highlighting the "good practices" implemented.

The Project is structured on a survey divided into four modules: three modules were content (definitions, information on data collection, and the policy framework of the education system), and the last one contained some follow-up questions on the survey. The countries that participated in the survey considered lower secondary education (ISCED 2) as the reference level of education (UNESCO-UIS, 2012).

^{1 1} This paper is the result of the shared work of the authors; however, for the purposes of the attributions of its individual parts it is divided as follows: Author1: §§ 1 and 3; Author2: §§ 2 and 4; Author3: § Introduction; Conclusions are attributable to the three authors.

The 34² education systems participating in the survey answered an online questionnaire between March and August 2022.

The OECD Strength through Diversity Project (OECD, 2023) shares definitions of equity and inclusion from 34 different education systems and identifies six dimensions of diversity:

- migration;
- ethnic groups, national minorities, and Indigenous peoples;
- gender;
- LGBTQI+;
- special education needs (SEN);
- giftedness.

The project asks participating countries if there is a specific term in their educational jurisdiction to indicate the diversity; the terms differ between countries, which poses a challenge for the comparative analysis (Damiani et al., 2018).

Education systems have been asked to give their definition of equity and inclusion in education. Definitions can come from the legislative framework or documents published by the national authority.

Regarding the definitions of equity and inclusion, not all countries have provided a national conceptualization, but the textual analysis of the different definitions given highlights the points in common between the different education systems.

On the topic of equity, 23 of the 30 education systems that provided the definition argued that education should not be influenced by bias about students' backgrounds, origins, or characteristics. 12 countries made clear the need to prevent discrimination in education and 15 of them declared the importance of ensuring equal opportunities among students.

On the topic of inclusion, 20 of the 30 education systems underlined that for them inclusion concerns all students. The definitions of inclusion of 8 countries make clear the importance of valuing and respecting diversity. 11 countries consider inclusion as an issue mainly affecting students with special educational needs (OECD, 2023).

1. Learning Strategies to support SEN students

² Australia, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Czech Republic, Denmark, England (United Kingdom), Estonia, Flemish Community (Belgium), Finland, France, French Community (Belgium), Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Northern Ireland (United Kingdom), Norway, Portugal, Scotland (United Kingdom), Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Türkiye and the United States.

In most OECD countries, schools can decide how they use the money to best meet the needs of students in their schools. As a result, schools are responsible for resource policy issues, including concerns relating to an equitable and inclusive allocation of available resources. Support staff can play a key role in supporting the work of teachers and ensuring that all students can achieve their educational potential (OECD, 2022). With an extra professional in the class, students are more likely to receive one-on-one help and attention, which means their learning needs will be more likely to be met. This contributes to improved learning outcomes. A study showed that learning support staff at the high school level can be effective at improving attainment when used to support specific students in small groups or through structured interventions (Masdeu Navarro, 2015). Students learn better when classmates from different learning backgrounds are educated together: diversity leads to more collaboration, innovation, and engagement in classrooms (Masdeu Navarro, 2015; Mezzanotte, 2020). In addition to attention to class size, which is not always possible based on the organization of Educational institutions in different OECD and European countries, and work on classroom climate, this research highlights how co-teaching proves to be particularly effective and beneficial in terms of improving student motivation, participation, and cross-cultural understanding (Guthrie et al. 2019; Mezzanotte, 2020). Expanding learning time and extending "school time" is also considered a possible benefit. Time is closely related to space (Cerna et al, 2021), the school's physical infrastructure may be more or less inclusive and should be set up so that every person can actively participate in all activities planned at school. In this sense, we could take a cue from the paradigm of the ICF by the WHO model concerning the context understood as a place, an occasion, an opportunity that should always be set up as a facilitator by eliminating every possible barrier (architectural, cultural, social, to learning). The research paper presents clearly how essential it is to work on school climate. When students are more engaged they feel and perform better (Author1, 2016). But what about School Climate? Based on the OECD (2023):

“School climate is a broad and multidimensional concept that encompasses virtually every aspect of the school experience. School climate is typically perceived and described as being either positive or negative. In a positive school climate students feel physically and emotionally safe; teachers are supportive, enthusiastic and responsive; parents and guardians engage in school life and activities voluntarily; the school community is built around healthy, respectful and cooperative relationships; and all stakeholders collaborate to develop a constructive school spirit”.

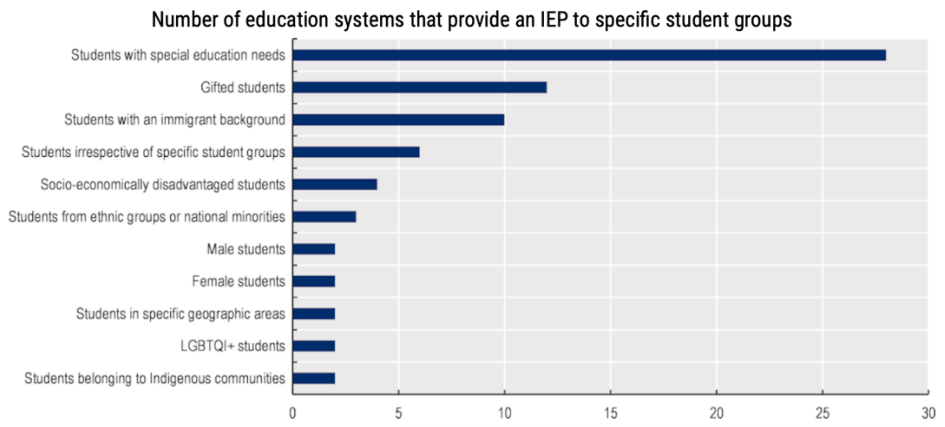
While there is not a general consensus on the elements that make up school climate, OECD (2023) has identified four spheres that emerge from existing research:

- Safety;
- Teaching and learning;
- School Community;
- Institutional Environment.

School climate is the result of many educational policies and best practices, the results of the relationships between students but also teachers and students, and the team of teachers and experts who work with them. The practices and strategies used in the classroom play a fundamental role in promoting not only inclusion but also well-being, especially considering the classrooms' complexity (not only special educational needs but also disadvantages, marginalities, giftedness, or others). There are a variety of ways in which teaching formats can be adapted to provide targeted support to particular learners (Brussino, 2020):

- Individual education (one-to-one);
- Small groups.

A flexible curriculum turns out to be the best answer to promote teaching that can ensure inclusion and equity and adapt to students' needs. This certainly requires pre-assessment and assessment competencies in teachers. One of the research questions during this OECD survey on inclusion asked participating countries about: *“Does the education policy framework in your jurisdiction require teachers at ISCED 2 level to provide diverse students with any of the following? [Provision of an Individual Education Plan (or a similar document)]”*. An Individual Educational Plan represents the way and the key to promoting inclusion and contains a specific program created based on the diagnosis of students' needs. The following chart (Graph.1) allows us to summarize the responses collected below:



Graph. 1 Number of Education Systems that provide ad IEP to specific student groups. Source: OECD (2023).

There are differences between countries, but it remains clear that this tool proves to be an appropriate way of inclusive planning on which to base educational activities to include all students, without exception: it is a way to meet the specific needs of students and create accessible curricula to everyone. In order to design inclusive learning processes, a pedagogical approach is needed that knows how to keep all the needs present in complex classes together.

The theoretical framework presented in the research is based on the:

- UDL (Universal Design for Learning);
- Differentiation Instruction (by Tomlinson);
- Digital and Assistive Technologies;
- Intercultural Education;
- Pedagogical knowledge of Teachers.

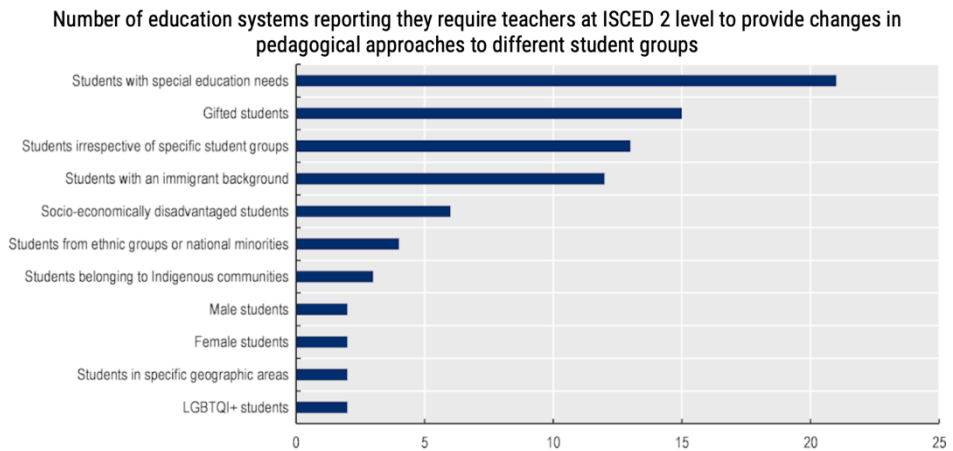
The UDL is particularly helpful in increasingly diverse classrooms, as it provides the flexibility necessary to support diverse learning needs and styles. Differentiated instruction has been defined as a philosophy for teaching that is grounded in the idea that students learn best when their teachers effectively address variance in their readiness levels, interests, and learning profile preferences (Tomlinson, 2005). Using Differentiation, teachers, according to student readiness, interest and learning profile, can differentiate:

- Content;
- Process;
- Product.

Both UDL and Differentiation instruction use technologies as a tool to promote equity and inclusion. Nowadays technologies are part of daily life, and many activities are required to use of them in some cases, they represent an accessible way to allow all people to take part, first of all, in classroom activities and, secondly, in society in general (Author1, 2021).

In the Strength through Diversity Policy Survey, a number of Education Systems reported that teachers at the ISCED 2 level must adapt their pedagogical approaches to accommodate different learners. To support students with immigrant backgrounds, 12 education systems required teachers to change their pedagogical approaches.

The following figure is based on the question: *“Does the education policy framework in your jurisdiction require teachers at ISCED 2 level to provide diverse students with any of the following? [Changes in pedagogical approaches]”*:



Graph. 2 Changes in pedagogical approaches. Source: OECD (2023).

2. Inclusive assessment practices

Research finds that the type of assessment administered has a considerable influence on student performance and motivation (OECD, 2023). Poorly designed and implemented assessments can act as a barrier to motivation for both students and teachers, ultimately leading to educational inequity. Diagnostic assessment is typically used to determine the starting point for learning, uncover individual student needs as well as identify students at risk of failure (Author2, 2022). It also serves to inform future program planning, design differentiated instruction, and deliver remedial programs for at-risk students. This has been put into practice across many countries, including those that have implemented early diagnostic

assessments to develop IEPs for refugee children or those in Canada that offer specialized counseling services to immigrant students to detect and address SEN with consideration for their migration experiences. Furthermore, diagnostic assessment can be implemented to identify students' SEN. Teachers often play a role in this identification process by evaluating academic knowledge and language skills through assessments that are offered in the student's native language in order to remove language barriers. Assessments should enable students to demonstrate their understanding, without being hindered by individual characteristics unrelated to what is being assessed. Assessment tools should be suitable for students of all abilities and sensitive to the requirements of special groups, including ethnic minorities, non-native speakers and those with SEN (OECD, 2023). In order to guarantee fairness in examinations across all student groups, it is essential to develop frameworks which provide clear limits but also offer flexibility at local and school level (OECD, 2023). The International Principles for the Fairness of Assessments proposed by Educational Testing Service (2016) are recommended as they set out key principles that provide guidance when creating evaluation guidelines. These include: focusing on relevant content; avoiding cognitive challenges unrelated to assessment objectives; preventing emotional issues from impairing performance; accounting for physical limitations; ensuring teachers are aware of potential biases from diverse backgrounds. In order to ensure equitable assessment that does not favor any particular student group, it is vital to incorporate a diverse selection of assessment formats, contents, and methods. The OECD (2023) recommends that more weight should be given to multiple data points instead of depending on the outcomes of one test alone. Drawing on research and evidence on effective approaches for all students can help inform appropriate format and design; this is especially true in cases where there is limited evidence available, such as inclusive assessment for students from ethnic minorities. Furthermore, providing various assessment tasks and styles gives students an opportunity to showcase their capabilities in different contexts, allowing them to receive recognition for their knowledge and skills. Finally, including various types of assessments can also build up motivation, confidence, and achievement among learners.

3. Parents' Engagement and Communities Welfare Network

The involvement of all members of a school's community is essential to promote an inclusive atmosphere that encourages learner success (Cerna et al., 2021). Research has clearly indicated how parental and community engagement supports educational advancements and the overall well-being of students (Germani, Author2, 2022). It is therefore essential for schools to create such environments

through the implementation of governance structures, initiatives, and mechanisms (Cerna et al., 2021), which will enable them to solve issues in an equitable manner and respond to diverse contexts within the school. Such strategies are paramount in order to foster growth in individual achievement and feelings of belonging among learners (Cerna et al., 2021). Parental or guardian involvement in the school community and their children's educational journey can teach us invaluable lessons about how to foster inclusion in the classroom and beyond. Studies show that collaboration with families can bring new perspectives and help schools embrace a wider range of diverse identities (Guthrie et al., 2019). Moreover, research has clearly demonstrated that family engagement leads to more positive academic outcomes for students as well as improved overall well-being (Germani, Author2, 2022). When it comes to SEN specifically, engaging parents or guardians can make a huge difference; leading to increased academic performance, better behavior in class, and an overall greater sense of appreciation for students. In practice, schools can play an important role in helping parents and guardians support their child's learning and connect with other social services that may be relevant to their progress and development (Guthrie et al., 2019).

4. Monitor and evaluate equity and inclusion

Evaluation is essential to deciding whether policies are having the desired results and determining if any changes need to be made. Such assessment can help policymakers decide if programs should be stopped due to unintended consequences, or if extra backing is necessary.

Programs to promote equity and inclusion in education can be implemented at both the local and school levels, making it crucial to monitor progress toward these goals. Evaluation from both internal and external sources could provide helpful insights when attempting to advance equity and inclusion in education. It has been demonstrated that monitoring and evaluation frameworks can be used for accountability and improvement (Author2, 2022). Among the accountability objectives are to inform the public about the quality of the education system, including the quality of education for diverse groups. OECD (2023) also aims to provide feedback on education reforms so that all students can benefit from improved educational outcomes and processes. Such evaluation can help policymakers decide if programs should be stopped due to unintended consequences, or if extra backing is necessary. Programs to promote equity and inclusion in education can be implemented at both the local and school levels, making it crucial to monitor progress toward these goals. Education systems offer a variety of ways to make evaluation data available. This includes the production of written documents such as annual statistical reports, governmental reports and audit reports. Additionally, databases and dashboards make the information

accessible to stakeholders including the public. There is a general acknowledgment of the importance of evaluation in this field, but it differs from country to country (OECD, 2023).

In 2022, 11 OECD countries included equity and inclusion in their evaluation policy frameworks (OECD, 2023). The establishment of reference standards with a focus on equity and inclusion can support school evaluation processes. Benchmarking key indicators related to equity and inclusion allows schools to compare themselves to broader averages (OECD, 2023). In Portugal, for example, the Equity Indicator measures the success of disadvantaged students in completing each school cycle within the expected time and with positive scores in national examinations. Every school cluster and municipality can compare their index score against the national average, which is regularly monitored by the school inspectorate (OECD, 2023). External evaluators need to be trained in equity and inclusion assessment so they can evaluate a school's performance effectively. This ensures that the evaluators possess the skills to provide guidance, advice and support to facilitate school development. School self-evaluation is a long-established process in OECD education systems. In some, the practice is required by law, while in other countries it is recommended or required only indirectly (OECD, 2023). Index for Inclusion could be a useful tool for self-evaluation to help the school in identifying the barriers that are presented in.

The dimensions of the Index for Inclusion are:

- Creating inclusive cultures;
- Producing inclusive policies;
- Evolving inclusive practices.

Improving equity and inclusion allow to development of the school for all, no one excluded.

Conclusions

What really works to promote inclusive education? This was the pilot question that guided our reflections on the 2023 OECD project. The 2023 OECD report helps to reflect on the different actions to be taken to promote increasingly equitable and inclusive schools. While it is difficult to compare very different situations in the different countries involved in the research, it is possible to identify 6 key steps that, across the board, are useful and fundamental to fostering equity and inclusion in education:

- Develop a policy framework on equity and inclusion and embed it in all areas of education policy.

- Ensure that the education system is flexible and responsive to the needs of students.
- Include equity and inclusion as principles of both the main resource allocation mechanisms and targeted funding of the education system.
- Engage all relevant stakeholders in implementing the policy framework in schools and classrooms, strengthening coordination.
- Prepare and support teachers and principals in developing the competences and knowledge areas for promoting equity and inclusion.
- Identify students' needs, support them, and monitor their progress.

In conclusion, we can affirm that inclusion and equity fit, as processes, within specific contexts and are aligned with the individual country's welfare policies, and legislation on the subject, while respecting its history and culture. While internal differences require flexible approaches, it is still possible to identify some good practices regarding pedagogical approaches, methodologies for conducting monitoring and evaluation of inclusive processes (internal, and external), the contribution of digital as a potentially inclusive tool, and the importance of openness to the other, to diversity as an opportunity and with as an obstacle.

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