

THE OPERATIONAL WORKING GROUP,  
THE FAMILY AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL ACTION FOR INCLUSION

IL GRUPPO DI LAVORO OPERATIVO,  
LA FAMIGLIA E L'AGIRE EDUCATIVO SPECIALE PER L'INCLUSIONE

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ABSTRACT

The operational working group, through the IEP, plans the specific educational action for the inclusion of the disabled student according to an inter-institutional pedagogical network logic. This requires the family to play a fundamental and strategic role. However, this educational agency, which is not always ready to assume the required role, is inevitably trained in the issues concerning the strategies, actions and pedagogical tools foreseen in the school to promote such action in a horizontal curriculum and inclusion perspective.

Il Gruppo di Lavoro Operativo, attraverso il PEI, progetta l'*agire educativo speciale per l'inclusione* dell'alunno con disabilità, secondo una *logica di rete pedagogica* interistituzionale che richiede alla famiglia di assumere un ruolo fondamentale e strategico. È ineludibile che questa agenzia educativa, non sempre pronta per assumere il ruolo richiesto, sia però formata sui temi che riguardano le strategie, le azioni e gli strumenti pedagogici previsti a scuola per promuovere tale agire in un'ottica di curriculum orizzontale e di inclusione.

KEYWORDS

Working group; Inclusion; Disability; Family; Educational act  
Gruppo di lavoro; Inclusione; Disabilità; Famiglia; Agire educativo

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## **Introduction**

With Legislative Decree no. 66 of 13 April 2017, the Italian school legislator prescribes rules to promote and improve the school inclusion of students with disabilities. To achieve this, the school is required to set up and organise inclusion Operational Working Groups (OWG), one for each disable student. The OWG is made up of the team of class teachers of the student with disabilities, his/her parents or those who exercise parental responsibility, the social workers and the local multidisciplinary assessment units, and finally other professionals outside the school - identified by the family - who interact with the student in extracurricular activities. The main task of the OWG is to design the IEP (based on the ICF) through an inter-institutional network logic, organised and developed to interact with the complexities and specificities that characterise the different contexts of the student's life.

Through the IEP, the OWG plans and organises the educational action to be implemented for the student with disabilities, which can be defined as special education for inclusion. As a matter of fact, a rather complex action, enriched by a synergic interchange of «specific competences that correspond to the need to qualify the educational and social intervention on the enhancement of individual and collective resources, on the (re)construction of formal and informal networks, on community work and on overcoming rigid categorisations and inter-professional barriers, in favour of a more integral and flexible approach» (V. Iori, 2018, p. 9).

While this collaborative synergy satisfies longstanding needs in the school world, it also raises some doubts at the organisational and training level, about the communication and relational dynamics between the different components of the ow, and about the design and organisation of Special Education Action for inclusion. In order for the inter-institutional network to operate, it is necessary to guide, support and train the family, which may not always be ready to take on the role of design partner, at least with respect to the strategies, actions, pedagogical tools and models (such as the ICF) that the school intends to use to promote special educational actions for inclusion.

### **1. School inclusion and the inter-institutional network logic**

The Italian school legislation establishes rules to promote and improve the school inclusion of students with disabilities, with Legislative Decree no. 66 of 13 April 2017. The main objective is to valorise every student, regardless of his or her educational needs, as an active protagonist in a civil and democratic society, founded under the banner of shared values and increasingly oriented towards adopting a broad ecosystemic perspective, inclusive (Canevaro, 2013, p. 17). After about forty years, starting with the law of the 4th of August 1977,

no. 517, which started a long process in which the school became a protagonist committed to the different, multiform and complex conditions of disability, «the term inclusion began to narrow» (Canevaro, 2013, p.119). Now, the main objective is to promote the active participation of each student in a global way and as a protagonist of his or her own life project, rather than constructing processes to bring students with disabilities closer to the conditions of 'normality' required by the context.

Canevaro's analysis, even before the approval of the aforementioned decree (no. 66/2017), showed that the limitation of inclusion almost always relates to the idea that the atypical subject needs to adapt to the specific context in which he or she enters, an adaptation that often takes place by giving him or her differentiated tasks, even if only differentiated in quantity: While the other students study a certain amount of content, the subject with special needs has the same, but less, therefore with different amounts and with elements of simplification that are not necessarily appropriate, and progress towards common learning, maybe with the idea that it will be sufficient to maintain a low level of learning for a subject that will not progress very far. Working at school to promote inclusion means imagining «a broad ecosystemic system into which a subject enters and from which he or she derives benefits, even those that are not immediate, that come from afar and therefore have a wide physical and temporal space that recalls the project of life» (Canevaro, 2013, p. 119). The logic of inclusion does not consider students with disabilities, or even those with other special educational needs, as «guests in the classroom, perhaps welcome, but called upon to fit in and adapt to a model of schooling designed for those who appear to be typical» (Cottini, 2022, p. 81).

The promotion of inclusion at school implies an educational action that enables every student regardless of his or her special educational needs, to achieve educational success through the enjoyment of educational offers designed and implemented in a context structured to welcome everyone, organised according to a logic of shared and inclusive pedagogical and didactic design, characterised by the dissemination of values and underlying principles, the reorganisation of school contexts and the use of methodologies and teaching tools that have proven effective (D. Capperucci & G. Franceschini, 2019). School inclusion aims to achieve a clear and challenging goal: to promote the educational success of all students, so as to foster their growth process consisting of the widest expression of their potential (Dainese, 2019, p. 11). It is therefore a matter of promoting specific educational and didactic practices for inclusion, consciously designed by professionals, inside and outside the school, according to an inter-institutional network logic, in order to put into practice the values for which the educational action is conceived

and designed. Article 1 of the Legislative Decree on the school inclusion of students with disabilities, quoted above, states in paragraph 2 that school inclusion «is achieved in the cultural, educational and design identity, organisation and curricula of the school institutions, as well as by defining and sharing the individual project between schools, families and other public and private entities operating in the territory».

In order to put this principle into practice, the Italian education law has stipulated that the school, in the presence of students with disabilities, must set up and organise working groups for inclusion, called Operational Working Groups (OWG): one for each student with a disability.

Article no. 9 "School inclusion groups", paragraph 10 of this decree states that «operational working groups for the inclusion of individual students with identified disability conditions for the purpose of school inclusion shall be established in each school institution». These are groups within which the team of teachers of the classes of students with disabilities, together with their parents or those who have parental responsibility for them, the social workers and the local multidisciplinary assessment units, but also with other professionals outside the school institution who interact with the student, can and must work in a perspective of systematic cooperation and educational co-responsibility (Mulè, 2022).

In the guidelines for the definition of the modalities for the distribution provision of the support measures referred to in article 7 of D. Legislative Decree 66/2017 and the IEP model to be adopted by educational institutions, it is stated that, in addition to the professionals working in the school, including the persons providing specialised support for autonomy and communication appointed by the Local Authority, the following may participate in the OWG: ASL/ASP specialists and therapists; proven specialists and therapists referred by the family; professionals from the Local Authority, especially when an individual project is active; and members of the Territorial Inclusion Group (GIT) (MIUR & MEF, 2020, p. 9).

It is therefore necessary for schools to set up pedagogical settings, understood as contexts in which it is possible to integrate cultural, normative and technological artefacts and specific human actions that are considered to be conducive to acquisition processes (Calvani, 2002; Bonaiuti, Calvani, Ranieri, 2016; Castoldi, 2020). It is a matter of promoting school contexts designed and set up to enable the synergic work of the figures of the OWG system, through a logic of inter-institutional networks designed and organised to interact with the complexities and specificities that characterise the different life contexts of students with disabilities. The aim is to promote a different and specific educational action designed and implemented for the inclusion of students with disabilities. It is an action multiplied by a synergic exchange of «specific

competences that correspond to the need to qualify educational and social interventions in the valorisation of individual and collective resources, in the (re)construction of formal and informal networks, in community work and in the overcoming of rigid categorisations and inter-professional fences in favour of a more integral and flexible approach» (V. Iori, 2018, p. 9). This is an action that, while primarily addressed to the educating subject, in this case the network of the student with disabilities, involves all professionals, school and out-of-school, whose educational action becomes extremely complex because it constantly mutates, connecting this professional, including the family, in a work that can be said to be heuristic and hermeneutic (G. Dalle Fratte, 2001, p. 19).

This type of action, which could be defined as special for inclusion, inevitably presupposes the (in-service) training of all those who are part of the OWG, including the parents of students with disabilities, who, in synergy with the other system figures, contribute to the promotion of inclusive processes and the quality of students' life projects, with a view to a horizontal curriculum (Giacconi, 2015; Franchini, 2011; Ianes & Cramerotti, 2009).

## **2. The family and the Operational Working Group for Inclusion**

Article 3 of the Interministerial Decree no. 182 of 29 December 2000 defines in more detail the composition and the functioning of the OWG. It is clear from the above-mentioned normative act that the OWG is established mainly to draw up and approve the new Individual Education Plan (IEP), based on the ICF, of the student with a recognised disability. It is a document that, as stated in article 2 of the above-mentioned interministerial decree, «takes into account the assessment of the condition of the disability at the age of development for the purpose of school inclusion, in accordance with article 12, paragraph 5, of law 104/1992 and the functional profile, paying particular attention to the indication of facilitators and barriers, according to the bio-psycho-social perspective based on the WHO ICF classification». It sets out the educational and didactic objectives to be achieved by the disabled student during the school year, as well as the tools and strategies to be used to create a learning environment capable of providing pedagogical responses to his special educational needs.

The family of the disabled student has to work systematically with the school and the other actors of the OWG system. This synergy of cooperation, although on the one hand it seems to meet the needs already mentioned elsewhere (Muscarà, 2022), on the other hand it also raises some questions on the level of organisation and training, on the dynamics of communication and relationships between the different actors involved in this complex process, as

well as on the quality of the special educational action for inclusion that is designed and planned.

A disabled child's enrolment at school is an important but also delicate moment for parents. If, on the one hand, such a moment generates expectations about the child's education and training, on the other hand, it can also evoke states of anxiety, fear, uncertainty, mistrust and even the reappearance of stages that the family has struggled to overcome, such as feelings of guilt, fear of not being up to par and, in many situations, even intense shame and stress (Ramaglia & Pezzana, 2004). Parents, more than teachers and other members of the OWG, experience the special normal condition of the student with disabilities. Some years ago, Cottini pointed out that: «on the whole, relations between school and family can be considered satisfactory, although parents are often seen as antagonists and not as partners in education» (Cottini, 2008, p. 34). There are families who rely on the school. Others do not believe in the school system and doubt even the teachers. There are also situations in which parents only have contact with the support teacher, who is often seen as their child's exclusive and personal teacher. There are also situations in which the family mistrusts the services offered by the ASP/ASL of reference, as well as other services to support autonomy and/or communication, generally offered by the local authorities.

The contribution of the family proves to be an enrichment for the value of the disabled student's life project already from the operational profile. The involvement of the parents is considered by the school legislator as an great opportunity and a way to improve not only the relations with the school and the other services that revolve around the disabled student, but above all to optimise the quality of the inclusion processes, to the extent that the family is able to provide all those elements that are useful to have a clear picture of the functioning of the personal factors of the health conditions, activities and forms of social participation in the life of the student, for whom it is necessary to draw up an individual educational plan, understood as a life project structured according to a scientifically shared perspective (adoption of the ICF model) (Fedeli & Munaro, 2022). The new school organisation on the theme of inclusion requires the family to assume the role of planning partner (Pavone, 2009, pp. 165-188), of systematic collaboration, of pedagogical co-participation, whose aim is the realisation of a joint education and training project described in the IEP. Both the school and the family, in collaboration with the other members of the OWG, have a duty to establish a relationship of co-participation and pedagogical co-responsibility in the face of the identified conditions of disability. This relationship is essential for the education and training of the disabled student. If it is built in a congruent way, the results are evident and transferable (Grasselli, 2008, p. 20).

For this reason, the family cannot be left alone in this difficult task of becoming realistically aware of the situation and of the possibilities for progress, in order to avoid »falling into extreme attitudes of closure or, on the contrary, of delegation« (Cottini, 2008, p. 35). It is essential that this educational agency is oriented to play its role as a partner for inclusion, with responsibility, a collaborative attitude, trust in its own choices and actions, in those of the educational institutions of its child with disabilities.

Through the OWG, parents of students with disabilities participate in a series of programmatic activities, ranging from the distribution of hours of educational support, personal assistance (autonomy and/or communication assistance), sharing methodologies and teaching strategies, to systems of verification and evaluation of planned educational activities, characterised by mutual exchange of knowledge, skills and co-responsibility (Mulè, 2022). These are duties, forms of sharing, in which the family has to share resources, knowledge, skills, tools, but above all languages that are sometimes not decipherable; in these situations the family is 'forced' to share a school vocabulary that is complex and not easy to understand. In these situations, the family is thus "forced" to share a school vocabulary that is complex and far from easy to understand. This is a "special" school vocabulary. It presupposes at least a minimum understanding of the concepts and knowledge that fall within the scope of special pedagogy and didactics for inclusion (Bocci, 2021; Galanti, Gioconi & Zappaterra, 2021; de Anna & Covelli, 2021; Lascioli, 2021; Gaspari 2021; Murdaca, Dainese & Maggiolini, 2021; Ghedin 2021; Cottini, 2021).

At this stage, the family may begin to feel the first sensations of disorientation, confusion, but above all of 'diversity' in relation to other families. As soon as their child is enrolled in school or is ascertained to be disabled, the family comes across terms such as functional diagnosis, functional dynamic profile, functioning profile, individualised educational plan, special teaching strategies, ICF, RIWG, IGW, OWG, etc.

While waiting for the OWG to be convened, the first requests on the part of the school begin to indicate any external professionals/experts, those who privately or under a convention system take care of the child during out-of-school hours, involving him/her mainly in activities of a rehabilitative-therapeutic nature. In these moments, the family seems to be "launched" into a school dimension where it may experience feelings of disorientation, characterised by states of mistrust regarding the possibility of success or improvement in the child's activities and participation in school life. On the contrary, it may nurture positive expectations. There may also be episodes of resistance, with negative consequences for the processes of cooperation, co-participation and co-responsibility, to the educational offers proposed by the

school and the actors that form part of the child's school network. The situations can be many and varied. Each one can, of course, present different phenomenologies.

Usually, in the first step of the inclusion protocol, the family interacts with the teachers and, subsequently, with the professionals working in the territorial services (social services, child and adolescent neuropsychiatry services), also to provide some useful data to elaborate the functioning profile of the disabled student. The family therefore 'comes across' a lexicon characterised by terms such as, for example, 'human functioning' and others provided for in the ICF model, which are not always known to the 'non-professional'. The requests, from the school and the services involved, to provide data, indications, etc. on the life of the child with disabilities, place the family in the position of having to answer questions that are not always comprehensible, leading to the first situations of disorientation, but also to possibly erroneous answers, in the attempt to draw up a picture of the main aspects and dynamics of the child's life.

It can also happen that the family becomes 'resisting'. In fact, as various research studies have pointed out: «the creation of a meaningful alliance is a difficult task because of the often negative perceptions that parents have about their child's chances of success and improvement, as well as a certain resistance to the proposals made by the operators» (Macchia, 2013, p. 274). The family may be in difference with the other members of the OWG with regard to the pedagogical and didactic methods to be adopted, the pedagogical design aspects and the creation of situations for the implementation of special educational measures for inclusion.

### **3. Families trained to provide high quality Special Education for Inclusion**

If special education for inclusion is characterised as a pedagogical action that presupposes the collaborative synergy of all those who work together in the design, implementation and organisation of pedagogical and didactic pathways aimed at the special education of the disabled student (Gaspari, 2021), the training of the family, especially in matters relating to the strategies, actions and pedagogical tools provided for inclusion, certainly assumes a strategic and fundamental value due to the intentional nature of such action.

The family has already had the opportunity to interact with other non-teaching professionals before their child with disabilities arrives school. The family will certainly have had experience with medical professionals, especially specialists in child neuropsychiatry, and in some cases other experts in psychomotor rehabilitation techniques and/or the like, after the identified conditions of disability have been identified. When the family enters the world



of school, they first interact with the teachers and then with the other members of the OWG in order to form educational alliances. The aim is to share educational objectives, didactic choices and school life, which are certainly not the same as those of a non-disabled child.

The OWG synergistically determines the special educational action for inclusion to be taken in the school and also in the out-of-school contexts, with a view to change, suggesting possibilities for transformation on the basis of an experiential field and requiring a constant anchoring in the context and openness to change. However, horizontal continuity with the family and other professionals involved in the student's special educational needs outside the school is essential in order to reveal the multiple characteristics and didactic implications of this educational action, as conceived and planned.

In this sense, the family, together with the school (Zollo & Galdieri, 2022) and the other members of the OWG, must be supported, guided and trained to understand and share the educational measures to be adopted. In fact, the family does not always have the tools and the cultural and even economic resources to implement, especially at home, the specific educational action for inclusion imagined and shared in the individual educational plan, according to scientific criteria and in agreement with the school and the other extracurricular actors involved.

A continuous exchange of knowledge, skills and, above all, co-responsibility and pedagogical co-participation characterises special educational measures for inclusion. And this presupposes, on the part of the family, the ability to understand and share knowledge, resources and, above all, the acceptance and implementation of educational and didactic tools. These tools are characterised, above all, by a "school language" which is not always comprehensible. It is, in fact, a language that is in decline as a result of recourse to knowledge of didactics and special pedagogy for inclusion.

The school should organise training in an inclusive perspective, through forms of structural and mental accessibility, so that the family understands and shares the special educational action for inclusion, of which the OWG is the promoter and guarantor, as provided for by the reference legislation. Schools should organise a training system that is able to offer parents, together with teachers and other professionals in the OWG, educational pathways through which they can acquire the basic knowledge of didactics and special pedagogy for inclusion. It would be desirable to have a training course structured in theoretical and praxis activities, also through the organisation of workshops, thus training activities characterised by moments dedicated to teaching and learning the main themes of disabilities and special educational actions, models to be shared with the school (such as the IEP on an ICF basis), and by other moments through which parents can acquire the skills necessary for the

implementation of special educational actions for inclusion - thought out and structured at OWG - at home and in the various contexts provided for the special educational care and harmonious growth of their child with disabilities. This involves training the family to understand terms such as, for example: functional diagnosis, functioning profile, customised educational plan on the ICF model, strategies for managing problem behaviours (prompting and fading), compensatory tools and dispensatory measures, evaluation systems.

It is also possible to organise research-action pathways through which teachers, parents and other professionals who are part of the OWG can work together to identify and understand any problematic situations and, at the same time, to resolve them through a circular process, sharing and interacting in the co-construction of an educational action that becomes specific for inclusion, insofar as it brings about a change, a pragmatic act that takes place in a relational, symmetrical and certainly inclusive space.

The training could also orientate the family to the different services offered by the school and also by the local community. These services can be used to improve the quality of life at home for the student with disabilities and at the same time for the family. Parents could be trained to help them acquire the skills needed to cope with the whole range of situations affecting their child, seen as a whole, and how to live at school and at home. Training could be useful for parents to understand how to take care of their children from an educational point of view, providing them with useful tools to know how to build or rebuild, also together with teachers, authentic, meaningful and emancipative relationships, thus improving their quality of life (Gaspari, 2021).

The desired training could facilitate relations between parents, teachers and all the other professionals involved in the delicate and arduous work of networking. It could improve the processes of negotiation - mediation, involvement, helping to solve the problems identified, facilitating agreements and sharing objectives and methodological choices (De Serio, 2010).

However, in order for the special educational action for inclusion to be effective for the educational care of the disabled student, it would also be desirable for the school to organise and structure training in a targeted way, tailor-made for "those" phenomenologies that are relevant to the specific inclusive organisations, in which the uniqueness, singularity and unrepeatability of the individual student cannot be pedagogically "managed" by adopting and sharing standardised models that are the same for all, but by pedagogical logics that are rigorously designed for this situation. It is therefore necessary to promote a training model that is structured in a circular way, according to the research-action model adopted in the field of educational sciences. This model provides for the study and the modalities of intervention strategies that are adapted to this situation, which may also be problematic for

the purposes of inclusion, and that are oriented towards the implementation of good inclusive teaching and educational practices, in the school and in the various contexts of the education of the disabled student, and that make it possible to put into practice the special educational action for inclusion that has been conceived and designed.

## **Conclusions**

The institutionalisation of the OWG is certainly a strategic operation aimed at guaranteeing the pedagogical quality of the life project of students with disabilities. As we have tried to explain, it is a group made up of teachers and other professionals working within the school in other roles, as well as others working in the social care and various socio-psycho-educational services for children and adolescents (such as the multidisciplinary assessment units of the neuropsychiatric services for children and teenagers). They also include the parents of the disabled student or those who have parental responsibility for the student. By drawing up the IEP (according to the ICF model), the OWG defines the educational action to be carried out in a synergetic way for the disabled student. It is an action designed and organised for the development of a person with special educational needs, in order to promote and guarantee his or her integration in the school world and, at the same time, in the world of extracurricular activities. For this reason, it can be defined as a special educational action for inclusion.

Implementing this action, which is designed according to an inter-institutional network logic, requires specific training - on didactics and special pedagogy for inclusion - aimed not only at teachers and other operators, but above all at the family. Usually, the latter do not always have the necessary tools and cultural resources to understand and share the educational action to be taken, nor to provide the useful data needed to design such action, compared to the other members of the OWG. Special pedagogical action for inclusion is characterised by a continuous interchange of knowledge, of competences and of pedagogical and didactic tools, in which a "language" prevails that is often rejected by the knowledge of didactics and of special pedagogy for inclusion.

Educational institutions should therefore organise a training system that enables parents to acquire the necessary skills to share, synergistically and with pedagogical criteria, the educational action planned and organised for the harmonious growth of the child/student with disabilities. This should also provide the useful data required for individualised educational planning, as envisaged by the new IEP model based on the ICF.

However, it would be desirable for this training system to be organised and structured in a targeted manner, adapted to the individuality, distinctiveness

and unique nature of the social network of the student with special educational needs, and not, as is often the case in the school training sector, through the sharing of standardised models that are the same for all. The proposal is to promote a training model structured according to a logic of research-action, understood, as Scurati would say, as a pedagogical modality that allows those involved to have positive experiences in the training sector (1991, p. 73): therefore not only teachers and other social professionals, but also the parents of the students who are the recipients of special educational measures for inclusion.

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