TEACHING/LEARNING PROCESSES AND INCLUSION: PSYCHO-PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

PROCESSI DI INSEGNAMENTO/APPRENDIMENTO ED INCLUSIONE: PROSPETTIVE PSICO-PEDAGOGICHE

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ABSTRACT

The international scenario is moving rapidly towards the promotion of an inclusive school. In Italy, this reality has been faced for many years, but the transformations and international discussion have raised new questions and critical reflections. In particular, the focus of research in the pedagogical and psychological fields is now placed on what are considered the key factors of integration and inclusion processes, namely teacher training, the development and monitoring of educational contexts, as well as the production and increase of inclusive teaching practices. The heated debate that has been open for several years now on issues related to the inclusive process at the national level, represents the background from which the idea of the research presented in this work starts and develops.

Lo scenario internazionale si sta muovendo rapidamente verso la promozione di una scuola inclusiva. In Italia, questa realtà è affrontata da molti anni, ma le trasformazioni e il confronto internazionale hanno sollevato nuove domande e riflessioni critiche. In particolare, l'attenzione della ricerca in ambito pedagogico e psicologico viene posta oggi su quelli che sono considerati i fattori chiave dei processi di integrazione e di inclusione, ossia la formazione degli insegnanti, lo sviluppo ed il monitoraggio dei contesti educativi, nonché la produzione e l'incremento di pratiche didattiche inclusive. L'acceso dibattito aperto ormai da diversi anni sulle tematiche legate al processo inclusivo a livello nazionale, rappresenta lo sfondo dal quale parte e si sviluppa l'idea della ricerca presentata in questo lavoro.

Introduction[1]

The avoidance of the development of inequalities, the containment of marginality, the elimination of social exclusion are fundamental tasks to be accepted and addressed for a society that wants to constitute itself as democratic and inclusive (de Anna, 2014). As is well known, the recognition in society of increasingly pluralistic needs and of common and individual needs is a real challenge for all agencies involved in education, as they have the task of making it an advocate of the values that govern both reception and coexistence. The construction of an inclusive society cannot fail to originate from an inclusive school, since the latter, as an educational community that originates from society and in it is immerses, can only return to it as a promoter of innovative and improving change. The school is, once again, a hub of transformations and change. The affinity between the promotion of the school as an educational and inclusive community and the development of an authentically aware and welcoming society emerges strongly (Ianes, & Canevaro, 2016).

The educational role of the school, which becomes a privileged place for the promotion of inclusive values and skills, placing the person at the center of its system and assuming dialogue, equality and sharing as its educational objective, offers the possibility of achieving a model centered on diversity as a resource and not as a limit. This development refers to the need to reflect on the need to teach respect for dignity and personal differences, but also on the need to provide adequate training opportunities for teachers as agents responsible for the formation of future generations. Teachers are required to make an educational investment that renews their way of thinking and designing, in order to innovate for the creation of increasingly flexible and customizable educational itineraries, which become the anchor of a process of common and social inclusion (Fiorucci, 2019).

The picture that emerges sees inclusion no longer connected only to disability and special educational needs but, with a broader view, as a principle that places the person at the center and diversity as a constitutive element to be valued and not to be contained and reduced. Its range of action expands to embrace all forms of exclusion and isolation, becoming a *leitmotif* for the promotion of equity, equality and equal opportunities based on and developing in the field of human, civil and social rights (Suzic, 2009).

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The realization of an inclusive society and school brings with it the inescapable need for cultural renewal, which draws its origins from pedagogical studies and scientific research, offering clear and responsible definitions for the promotion of change in policies and practices. The goal of inclusion is the transformation of educational systems and teaching practices, in order to meet different educational needs of students, so as to ensure the learning and full participation of each learner. The school's task is to proactively guide both towards goals to be achieved and skills to be developed, and towards autonomy and independence, awareness of oneself and one's identity as well as one's life project: this process constitutes the ethical dimension of inclusion. Its realization, however, requires a deeper change of perspective that cannot stop at the dissemination of policies and practices, but that concretely develops a new cultural and social paradigm, which takes the name of inclusive education (Pugnaghi, 2020).

Inclusive schooling is everyone's right and participation in it is an expression of dignity, individual autonomy, and freedom. The prospect of full inclusion is based on indispensable aspects such as organizational procedures and their functioning, coordination and collaboration actions, methodological-didactic actions, which requires constant participation and reflection. The school has the specific task of pursuing educational and learning goals, its very survival is linked to its ability to read changes and to self-train to adapt to the changing and constantly changing context in which it operates. In order to become inclusive, the school needs to conceive itself as a "learning community" (Ruzzante, 2017), meaning an organization that has developed the ability to learn through processes of reflection, directed inwards and outwards, and that uses what it has learned intentionally to promote innovative potential, functional to the improvement of individual and organizational performance tag. In this way, the school promotes and enhances learning as a process of continuous, active, and collaborative dialogue between all the actors who interact within it (teachers, pupils, headmaster, families, technical and administrative staff), to improve the quality of learning and life in the school. It is a community in which the main condition for belonging is that a person is always willing to learn, regardless of the role he or she holds within the school institution (manager, teacher, student, parent, technical-administrative staff) (Camedda, & Santi, 2016). The school, in fact, is characterized by the ability to self-reflect on the professional performance of its members. In the school environment, inclusion is not an easily achievable goal but a slow and gradual process to strive for which has been achieved over time and that involves changes and modifications in contexts, approaches and teaching strategies, trying to give answers to diversity, differences, and the needs of all students through greater participation in the community and the elimination of all forms of exclusion. Many authors have underlined how the transformation of schools into inclusive contexts implies specific attention to the needs of pupils and the development of educational

proposals capable of improving and encouraging the participation of all students (Sandrone, 2019).

Compared to the traditional concept of inclusion, the theoretical perspective adopted in the present work does not refer to disability or to students who are identified with special educational needs, but has a much broader scope. Inclusion is what happens when everyone feels that they are appreciated and that their participation is welcome. The notion of inclusion recognizes that there is a risk of exclusion that must be actively prevented and, at the same time, affirms the importance of the involvement of all pupils in the creation of a truly welcoming school, also through the transformation of the curriculum and organizational strategies, which must become sensitive to the different profiles of diversity present among pupils (Vianello, & Again, 2015).

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to clarify: (i) whether through the analysis of inclusive practices it is possible to build a set of pedagogical "good practices" that allows to build an inclusive teacher profile enabling teachers in service and future teachers in training to develop analytical skills on their actions; (ii) how, through the identification and analysis of the psychological factors underlying the processes of inclusion, it is possible to lead teachers and future teachers to reflect on the values that determine a truly inclusive educational action in order to create an inclusive community in the school that allows everyone to feel welcomed.

1. The profile of the inclusive teacher

The training and updating of teachers on issues related to Special Education influence the didactic effectiveness and the educational relationship: teachers who have adhered to specific training courses appear, in fact, more inclined to experiment with paths oriented towards school inclusion. Training becomes that important and, often, the only opportunity to guide future teachers to reflect, evolve, and change their attitudes towards disabilities and inclusion (De Angelis, 2021).

The Profile of Inclusive Teachers (EASNIE, 2012) takes as its own the paradigm of inclusion, a paradigm that some authors have also defined as a "systemic model", emphasizing its implications in terms of reform of the entire school system, to make it more open and adequate to accommodate all possible forms of diversity. In this paradigm, inclusive teaching is nothing more than teaching for all, impartial, fair, and responsible, which concerns all teachers and not only support teachers, and is aimed at all pupils and not only at students with disabilities. Therefore, a teacher can be defined as inclusive if he is able to grasp and value the many diversities present in his classes: from multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1989; Goleman, 2013; Stenberg, 1988) to learning styles (Cornoldi, 2005), from specific learning difficulties to disabilities, from cultural and religious differences to differences in

cognitive and experiential background, also taking into account any diversified socio-family life environments.

In this regard, it is important to remember that an inclusive school is built on the quality of the staff who work there, with particular reference to the teachers. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2005), in this regard, suggests that improving the professionalism of teachers is the action that is most likely to produce an increase in the well-being and academic performance of pupils and their ability to live the educational experience in a serene and socially profitable way. In addition to this, preparing quality teachers, able to respond to the diversity of didactic and educational demands and needs that they will encounter in the classroom, is the initiative that is most likely to have a positive impact on the development of more inclusive communities with a view to a school "for each and every one", a school capable of placing inclusion and educational success at the center of its planning (Castillo Escareño, 2016). Teaching is a rapidly evolving profession and there are many areas of competence of the teacher, who must guide learning activities, carry out consultancy/learning functions in favor of students, be a cultural mediator, act as a link between school and social community, collaborate in the management of the classroom and the institution.

So how can teachers be prepared and trained for such a complex task? Clearly, effective training involves appealing to personal dispositions and beliefs about what is meant by diversity, as this largely reflects the individual's level of sensitivity. Different levels of sensitivity determine a different degree of complexity in the perception of diversity and explain why different teachers choose different approaches to interacting with the diversity that is increasingly present in their classrooms. Using different relational modalities implies personalized training support based on the level of sensitivity shown by each teacher (Zanazzi, 2018).

Training teachers from an inclusive perspective means, therefore, training people who are asked to take on the responsibility of educating young people so that they become able to actualize their relational skills, as well as learning skills, in the best possible way and act as aware and active citizens. This difficult and delicate role requires competence, it requires them to become thinking and creative professionals, capable of generating conceptual revolutions in their teaching practice (Cajola, & Ciraci, 2018). However, it is also true that the presence of cultural differences in the classroom can put a strain on the teacher's ability to relate to their students, as misunderstandings and dysfunctional dynamics can be triggered, more or less intentionally, with a consequent negative impact on the learning of all students. Therefore, it becomes necessary to build and refine inclusive skills in the teacher in order to facilitate a broader reflection on their attitude towards diversity and make their teaching practices more flexible and integrated (Escareño, 2017).

Therefore, a teacher training intended as a way of working that leads to an increase in one's competence in the field through a continuous and shared reflection on one's own educational practices, aimed at shedding light on situations of uncertainty, starting both from one's own experience and from the knowledge and possible re-elaboration of educational practices considered effective. In fact, knowing how to effectively manage and include diversity, with a view to quality inclusive teaching, presupposes in the teacher a positive attitude towards diversity, such as a propensity to meet and dialogue, to change perspective and to adapt flexibly, adapting behaviors and communication to different situations (Dewsbury, & Brame, 2019).

According to Filkenstein, Sharma and Furlonger (2019), inclusive teachers should be competent in five areas, in particular:

1. teaching practices;
2. organizational practices;
3. social-emotional and behavioral practices;
4. practices that affect students' progress;
5. collaborative practices with colleagues.

At the center of this path there must be the role of teacher training which, on the one hand, must aim at the development of specific enabling skills and, on the other, at the practical application of these skills in an inclusive key that aim at the design of innovative and inclusive educational activities at the same time, favoring inclusion and learning processes in a meaningful relational context. In the face of these urgent issues, the Profile of Inclusive Teachers has been developed, one of the main results of the project "Teacher Training for Inclusion" carried out by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2012), whose main values, each pertinent to specific areas of relevance are:

1. valuing the diversity of the pupil;
2. supporting pupils;
3. working with others;
4. professional development and updating.

According to Canevaro, & Ianes, (2023), this Profile today takes on several values that help to conduct pedagogical reflection in three different directions:

1. To better define the profile of inclusive skills and actions that can be expected from curriculum teachers, given that the fundamental axis of our proposal for the evolution of the support teacher passes through the increase in inclusiveness of curricular teachers;
2. Intervene from an inclusive perspective in the processes of redefinition and correction of university training courses for future teachers;

3. Support various forms of self-assessment of inclusive competences, both at the individual level, as self-management of one's professional development and skills portfolio, and at the school level, as a systemic self-assessment of the heritage of inclusiveness present in one's teaching staff.

Therefore, the need for a paradigmatic, structural, and practical change that opens up to the inclusive perspective and makes it become the heritage of all and not just the few, including in this perspective of change also and above all the training of teachers.

2. Analysis of the psychological factors underlying the inclusion processes

Although the skills necessary for adequate teacher training in inclusive educational contexts are now known, many experts still discuss which essential skills must be integrated and recognized as effective indicators of expertise within the school context. As central actors in the educational process, teachers play a key role in addressing diversity effectively and constructively. In fact, they are called, together with the entire school system, to guarantee equal opportunities both in access to training-education and in the preparation of all students to live in globalized, pluralistic, and culturally heterogeneous societies regardless of their cultural and/or social background (Sisti, 2020).

In the academic literature, numerous studies (Fiorucci, 2019b; Montesano, & Straniero, 2019; Schwarz, & Bless, 2013; Vergani, & Kielblock, 2021) investigated teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards inclusion, showing how these influence daily practices and teaching strategies, coming to consider the value dimension as one of the strongest predictors of the success of an inclusive culture. Other studies have focused on the relationship between experiences of direct contact with disability, knowledge, and attitudes towards inclusion, highlighting how a sense of adequacy/inadequacy, comfort/discomfort, tranquility/worry affect respectively perceived and real effectiveness/ineffectiveness in the management of inclusive classrooms.

What follows is an invitation to reinterpret teacher training in more "participatory" terms, taking into account the psychological mechanisms that underlie the encounter with diversity, as well as the specific skills in terms of sensitivity and attention to diversity, which can inevitably condition relational dynamics in a multifaceted context such as the school. This would make it possible to identify opportunities for reflective learning and critical reasoning about the practice and the processes that regulate it in the school (Wiebe Berry, & Kim, 2008).

There are factors that can foster the success of inclusive practices from both the teachers' and learners' perspectives. One of these is motivation, which determines human behavior by directing the individual towards a goal. Within the

school context, it can be understood as the set of beliefs, values and perceptions of teachers and students, which stimulate and direct the teaching-learning processes. Motivation within inclusive teaching is even more important because it affects the way in which teacher and student interact during lessons. It is also linked to learning outcomes, cognitive and affective processes. In addition, there is a strong relationship between motivation and success or failure: high motivation corresponds to high levels of success (Bodhi, Singh, Joshi, & Sangroya, 2022)

However, the key point is that the teacher must be aware of these processes and the difficulties that their incomplete implementation could pose for students. A vigilant and conscious attitude is, therefore, the starting point.

Another aspect that should not be underestimated is the fact that, despite the presence of a quality training system in terms of school inclusion, the culture of inclusion constantly needs to be reinvigorated in the practice of everyday school life, to understand whether in the professional experience of a teacher that encounter with diversity generates fears and uncertainties, avoiding early renunciations and rigid relational closures. In this direction, alongside teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, the literature also indicates teachers' fears and concerns as equally incidental (Venema, Otten, & Vlaskamp, 2015). From the various studies conducted, there is substantial agreement that relatively positive attitudes towards inclusive education, supported by an increase in didactic mastery and knowledge of legislation and policies related to inclusion, are met by less marked teacher concerns. However, it is not enough to have a positive attitude to resolve the worries and stress associated with the presence of students with different diversity profiles at school. As can be seen from the analysis of the literature, in fact, the concerns of teachers are many and very diversified. There are fears in dealing with fairly impaired physical disabilities and particularly complex behavioral difficulties (Pijl, & Meijer, 2002). On the organizational and didactic level, on the other hand, there are concerns related to the size and composition of the class, the design of specific but at the same time inclusive educational interventions, and educational responsibility. Finally, from a psychological and professional point of view, there are concerns about work stress, the fear of being poorly prepared and being abandoned by the educational institution. In line with these aspects, the decisive role played by the experience of contact with disabled people must also be considered, another important variable that positively influences teachers' attitudes and concerns.

In addition, recent studies (Gulisano, 2023; Letzel, Pozas, & Schneider, 2023; Turano, 2023) have identified a series of variables considered indispensable in teacher training with respect to inclusivity. In particular, the development of emotional aspects is of increasing importance for those involved in inclusive education. Significant synergies emerged between certain components of the self, such as self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills, and

inclusive teaching skills. Specifically, emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize one's own and others' emotions in order to adequately regulate one's emotional expressions in relationships with others. Emotional intelligence is about a constellation of emotions related to self-perception, unrelated to the general construct of IQ. This factor is positively associated with extraversion, conscientiousness, job satisfaction, prosocial behavior, and sensitivity, and are negatively correlates with introversion, anxiety, maladaptive coping styles, and job stress. Additional studies (Herman, Sebastian, Eddy, & Reinke, 2023; Orozco, & Moriña, 2023) have shown that individuals with adequate levels of emotional intelligence manifest a better degree of quality of life and well-being and are less frequently exposed to social deviance, anxiety, and depression. In addition, they tend to establish higher-quality social relationships, as well as experience greater professional success. The emotional aspects that are activated in the teaching/learning process influence students' performance and the quality of the relationships that are triggered in the classroom (Aiello, Pace, & Sibilio, 2023; Gibbs, 2007).

From this perspective, several other studies (Larios, & Zetlin, 2023; Schladant et al., 2023) have shown that the development of an inclusive culture does not depend only on the dissemination and sharing of principles and values, but also rests on the acquisition of solid methodological and didactic skills capable of making teachers strategic agents and levers for change (Anello, & Pitingaro, 2020). The studies carried out so far show that many teachers, even the most up-to-date, believe that they do not possess the necessary and suitable skills to respond to the different needs of students with disabilities and often do not feel adequately supported by the educational institution. Real and/or perceived preparation can strongly influence teachers' attitudes, which are a fundamental factor in the creation of truly inclusive cultures.

Conclusions

School inclusion starts from the recognition of differences between pupils. The development of inclusive approaches to teaching/learning processes is built on these differences. This can lead to profound changes in the management of the classroom, in the relationships between teachers and in teaching methods. Therefore, bringing more methodological competence to all teachers should make normal teaching more inclusive, spreading the functions of support and facilitation of learning and social participation. In fact, a school that wishes to become a valuable inclusive pedagogical reality of quality must be based on the teaching skills of its teachers, so that they are able to intervene with a valid and motivating training proposal, the only one capable of promoting the learning of all students.

In this perspective, the figure of the inclusive teacher assumes a problem finder function that allows us not to close ourselves in the self-referentiality of what is already known, but leads to problematize what has been acted on for some time, in an improving and change-oriented perspective.

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