

## School inclusion and teacher education: an exploratory study

### Inclusione scolastica e formazione docente: uno studio esplorativo

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abstract

Inclusion is an unending process of increasing learning and participation for all children, reducing all exclusionary pressures and supporting educational settings to become more responsive to the diversity of children's backgrounds, interests, experience, knowledge and skills. The aim of the study is the evaluation of the processes related to the quality of school inclusion, by identifying strengths and weaknesses in promoting inclusive cultures, policies and practices. The methodology is based on the analysis of the School Self-Evaluation Report. This analysis was compared to direct observation in 84 Apulian preschools and primary schools. In particular, we administered a questionnaire drawn by the Index for Inclusion to a two groups of perspective support teachers who participated to a course of teaching specialization organized by the University of Bari and the University of Foggia in 2017. These results demonstrate the need of an effective networking, to avoid the risk of a narcissistic mirroring or of a lazy resignation that can involve the school when it works in a self-referential direction, far from other educational contexts.

**Keywords:** school inclusion, teacher education, self-evaluation, observation skills, networking

L'inclusione è un processo continuo volto a promuovere l'apprendimento e la partecipazione di tutti i bambini, contrastando ogni forma di esclusione e aiutando i contesti educativi a prendere in carico la diversità degli ambienti di vita, degli interessi, delle esperienze, delle conoscenze e delle competenze degli alunni. La finalità dello studio è la valutazione dei processi correlati alla qualità dell'inclusione scolastica, identificando i punti di forza e di debolezza nella promozione di culture, politiche e pratiche inclusive. La metodologia si basa sull'analisi del Rapporto di Autovalutazione, comparata con le osservazioni dirette in 84 scuole dell'infanzia e primarie pugliesi. In particolare, è stato somministrato un questionario tratto dall'Index per l'Inclusione a due gruppi di futuri docenti partecipanti a un corso di specializzazione organizzato dall'Università di Bari e dall'Università di Foggia nel 2017. I risultati sottolineano la necessità di un efficace lavoro di rete, che possa scongiurare il rischio di un rispecchiamento narcisistico o di una apatica rassegnazione che può correre la scuola quando opera in modo autoreferenziale rispetto agli altri contesti educativi.

**Parole-chiave:** inclusione scolastica, formazione docente, autovalutazione, competenze osservative, lavoro di rete

## 1. Inclusion as challenge for general education

Inclusion is an unending process of increasing learning and participation for all children, reducing all exclusionary pressures and supporting educational settings to become more responsive to the diversity of children's backgrounds, interests, experience, knowledge and skills (Armstrong, Armstrong, Spandagou, 2009). The 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, among its objectives, pays explicit attention to the dignity of life for all, without leaving anyone behind.

The focus on children and their needs is fundamental to create high-quality educational systems, that provide equality of opportunity and high achievement for all. In this perspective, a revision of the relationship between special and general education seems to be necessary, considering that the construct of *special educational need* is not associated anymore to separated contexts. On the contrary, for decades in Italy children with SEN are active part of the mainstream classes. As we know, the Law 517/1977 abolished special school and special classes for students with disabilities and subsequently the Law 104/1992 ensured inclusive education for all children, starting from the preschool.

Surely, inclusive education is not incompatible with special strategies addressed to those students who present difficulties in learning and socialization. Simply, these strategies have to be included in a general (but enhanced) educational perspective carried out in the common contexts. In fact, the UNESCO Report (2011) defines *special needs education* as

education designed to facilitate the learning of individuals who, for a wide variety of reasons, require additional support and adaptive pedagogical methods in order to participate and meet learning objectives in an educational programme. Reasons may include (but are not limited to) disadvantages in physical, behavioural, intellectual, emotional and social capacities. Educational programmes in special needs education may follow a similar curriculum, however they take individuals' particular needs into account by providing specific resources (specially trained personnel, equipment, or space) and, if appropriate, modified educational content or learning objectives.

Italy faced this challenge already with the Law 53/2003 and the Law 170/2010, requiring that every teacher and the whole team – and not only the support teacher – have to take care of the pupils with SEN through

a personalized education. In 2012 and 2013, others important documents redefined the traditional approach to school inclusion, based on the certification of the disability, extending the field of intervention and responsibility of all the educating community to the whole area of the Special Educational Needs, including social and cultural disadvantage, learning disabilities, linguistic difficulties consequential from the condition of foreigner.

Reforming the national educational system, the Law 107/2015 expanded the inclusive dimension of the Italian school (Ianes, Canevaro, 2015), and it was no longer limited only to students with disabilities, but considered as ethic value and educational purpose in school and society.

In fact, according to art. 1 D. Lgs. 66/2017 *school inclusion* “concerns pupils and students, responds to different educational needs and is realized through educational and didactic strategies aimed at the development of the potentiality of each person in respect of the right to self-determination and reasonable accommodation, in the perspective of the best quality of life”.

Nowadays, after more than forty years of social and health policies oriented to the full inclusion, Italian school has to deal with two important issues: the first concerns the knowledge and the assessment of students with disabilities/SEN, and the second refers to the application of school inclusive strategies.

With regard to the first point, an important step was the introduction of World Health Organization’s ICF, the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, occurred in 2001. The ICF anthropological model, as a comprehensive bio-psycho-social conceptualization of health and functioning, examines the relationships among bodily, structural and functional dimensions, personal activity areas, environmental and personal (psychological, motivational, emotional, etc.) factors. In this perspective, disability is the effect of a social relationship, in which the individual health conditions and the environmental and social factors have the same importance.

The use of ICF model allows to redefine the concept of Special Educational Need, that represents a difficulty in the development and in learning not strictly related to the individual characteristics, but to a complex set of health conditions. In this perspective, the child is not labeled anymore and merely reduced to its special need, and the line that divides the *diversity* from a presumed *normality* gets thinner according to many situations, transitory or permanent, visible or less visible.

Another fundamental pillar that sustains the inclusion approach is represented by the Index for the inclusion, that reformulates the language and the concepts of inclusion according to the *disabilities studies* model, focusing on the barriers to learning and participation that students experience in the physical, cognitive, cultural, organizational, relational areas. As we know, the Index for Inclusion is constituted by a structured set of indicators that supports a methodology of auto-evaluation to recognize the points of strength and the critical issues and to develop plans of school improvement.

The increasing participation of everyone implicates the development of systems and educational conditions able to deal with the diversity in order to *treat all children as equally important* (Booth, Ainscow, 2014).

In this way, it is possible to modify the concept of support, that represents the activities that increase the ability of the school to answer to the pupils' diversity.

So, inclusion concerns a change in cultures, policies and practices that cannot be limited to the *special education*, because it involves the school system, the educational agencies and therefore the whole society.

Regarding the second point, there is currently general agreement in identifying two important areas in order to design effective inclusive strategies: the implementation of operational evaluation measures of the quality of inclusion, and the education of support teachers to foster their observation skills.

Generally, the quality of inclusion is measured by a set of indicators useful to verify single situations, but it misses an empirical research of effectiveness inclusion practices, over that of longitudinal studies on the long-term results.

We are conscious that school must invest in the governance of inclusion (increasing human, technological and economic resources), but at the same time we think that any investment can adequately be exploited without a proper preparation of the teachers – who are the main actors of inclusion – in the pedagogical and didactic field.

So, the aim of the study is the documentation of the levels of the quality of school inclusion, by identifying strengths and weaknesses, as well as the critical issues in promoting inclusive cultures, policies and practices at school, through the eyes of future teachers. Undoubtedly, future teachers' perspective is partial and incomplete, but it can be useful to identify the representation of inclusion in comparison to what each school officially declares.

Linking professional training and reflection on practice, the research has the dual purpose of promoting the professional empowerment of future support teachers (Forlin, 2010) through processes of knowledge, direct observation and reflection about the school inclusion, and also highlighting the complexity and variety of existing representations of inclusion at school.

The study is based on the idea that a full inclusion is possible only starting from a monitoring of the inclusive processes that are realized in the contexts of common experience (Rossini, Zappatore, Loiacono, 2015). Nevertheless, a deep difference exists between the theory, what is declared, and the practice, what really is being done. So, in order to make the inclusion a substantial and not only formal aspect of the educational system, it is necessary to investigate as the inclusive approach is thought, realized and evaluated by all the school practitioners. In this direction, all the teachers, and in particular support teachers, have to acquire a set of observation and evaluation skills useful to describe and bring out the real needs of inclusive education, for an effective improvement of the school quality.

## 2. The exploratory study: methodology and first results

The exploratory study has involved 84 Apulian preschools and primary schools accredited for the training activities of teachers. The research is based on a quantitative and qualitative study of multiple cases. For each case, specific data were collected through the analysis of the School Self-Evaluation Report (Rapporto di Autovalutazione, RAV)<sup>1</sup> with particular attention to the section dedicated to inclusion: “Strategies adopted by the school for the promotion of inclusion processes and respect for diversity, guidance of the teaching and learning processes to the training needs of each student in the classroom work and in other educational situations”. This area is divided into two subareas:

- Inclusion: Strategies for inclusion of students with SEN. Actions to valorize and face the differences.

1 Direttiva Ministeriale 18 settembre 2014, n. 11 – Sistema nazionale di valutazione triennio 2014-2017.

- Recovery and Expansion: Strategies to adapt teaching to educational needs of each student.

In this first part of the study, we took over the strengths and weaknesses that emerged from the self-evaluation, through the analysis of the judgment assigned in the area “Quality indicators: The school takes care of the inclusion of students with special to educational needs, enhances cultural differences, adapts the teaching each student’s training needs through recovery and reinforcement courses”, and other measures and related sources.

We paid a special attention to the adaptation of the educational strategies to the different students’ needs (students with disabilities and learning disabilities, immigrant students, but also gifted students). For each school, the measures used were along a range 0 = “very critical situation” and 7= “excellent situation”.

Clearly, the indicators represent a profit informative tool, if used inside a reflection and wide interpretation of the school inclusion. The indicators allow the school to compare its own situation with external values of reference. Insofar the indicators contribute to support the self-evaluation team for the expression of the judgment on every area in which the RAV is articulated. The expression of the judgment should not derive from the simple reading of the numerical values furnished by the indicators, but from the interpretation of the whole situation. On the other hand, it is necessary that the judgments are expressly motivated, in order to highlight the connection with indicators and data.

For the data analysis of the open section of RAV we used the T-Lab software, which was useful to analyze the textual content of the School Self-Evaluation Report.

In particular, we considered the co-occurrences (word associations), and we noted that the most used words are referred to the stakeholders of inclusion.

The analysis of the Self-Evaluation Reports was compared to direct observation in the classroom through the Index questionnaire. In particular, we administered a questionnaire drawn by the Index for Inclusion to a two groups of perspective support teachers who participated to a course of teaching specialization organized by the University of Bari (90 teachers) and the University of Foggia (109 teachers) in 2017. The sample consists of 97% of women and 3% men. Moreover, 77.50% of the sample has already had teaching experience while 22.50% have never had teaching experience (Fig. 1).

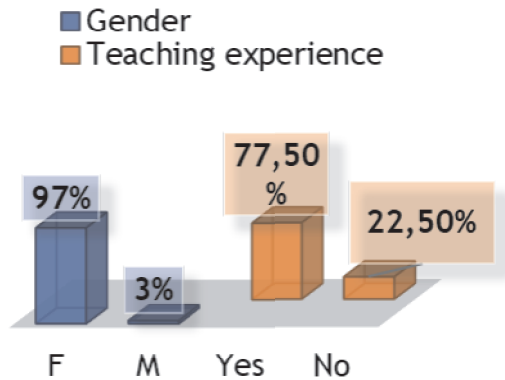


Fig. 1: Sample description

The first analysis of the results shows that schools evaluate positively the quality of inclusion in their classes (Fig. 2). The 54% of the 84 schools examined declares that the level of inclusion is positive (score 5). No school evaluated itself in a very critical situation (scores 1 and 2). Only 3% were rated with a score of 3 and 5% were rated with a score of 4. The scores of 6 and 7 were chosen respectively by 33% and 5% of schools.

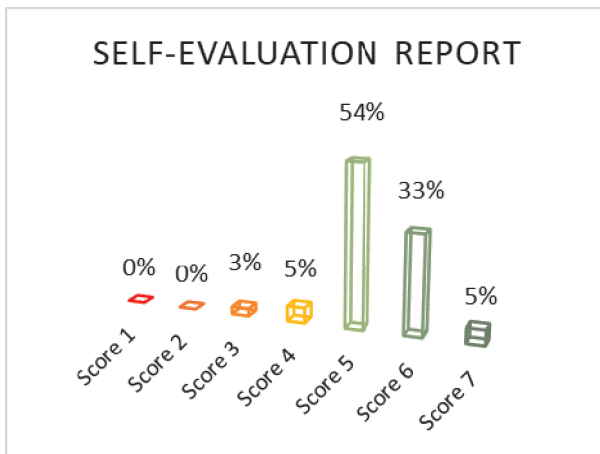


Fig. 2: Scores of quality of inclusion

Through the T-Lab software we elaborated the content of the self-evaluation report of the schools that participated to the research. The T-Lab therefore provided us a vocabulary of words (Fig. 3) that can represent both the strengths and weaknesses of schools. For example, the word “foreigner”, which is very common, represents both a resource to be exploited within the school community, and a weak point due to the lack of inclusion policies (as a protocol of reception) in some schools.

At the same time, the word “family” can be read positively because it represents a point of reference for the children education, but also negatively because the teachers report a lack of cooperation from parents.

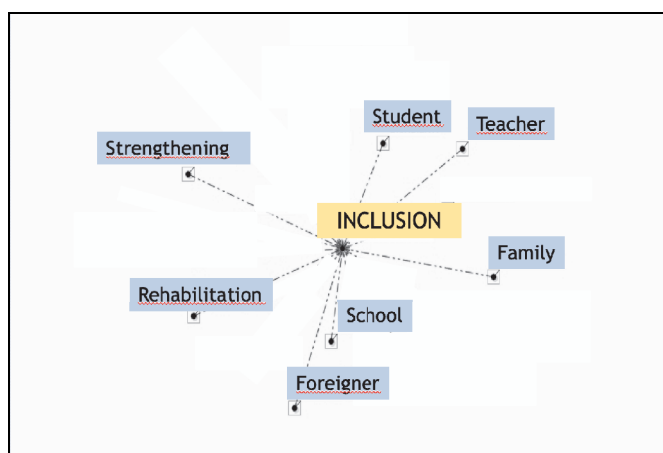


Fig. 3: The T-lab chart

After the collection and the reading of the RAV, for the respective schools where they did the internship, teachers have considered the three Index dimensions of *cultures*, *policies* and *practices*, using a Likert scale to specify their level of agreement or disagreement for a series of statements about inclusion. A very important section of the questionnaire was the one referred to the priority for an inclusive school development.

Let's analyze the results of direct observation. Referring to the first area of the Index Questionnaire “Creating inclusive cultures”, the first section “Building community” contains the questionnaire items that investigate the relationship between school and community and the level of participation of students and staff in school life. For example, an item investigates how the school is a model of democratic citizenship (Fig. 4).



The second section “Establishing inclusive values” shows how the school develops shared inclusive values (Fig. 5). The data show that teachers perceive a great commitment of the school in these areas.

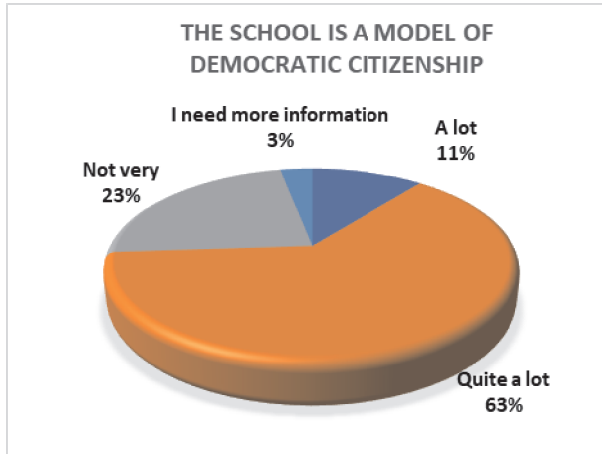


Fig. 4: Building community

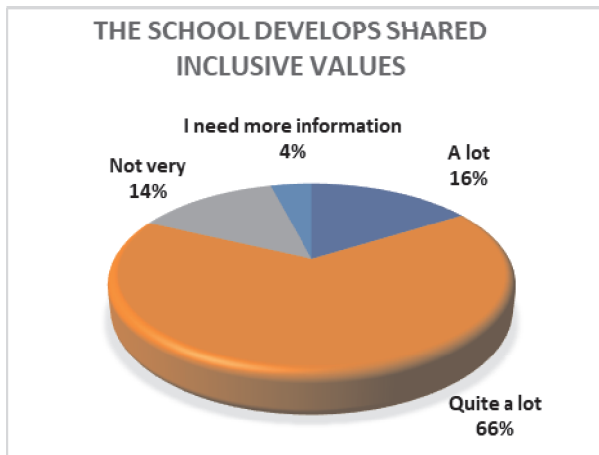


Fig. 5: Establishing inclusive values

Referring to the second part of the Index Questionnaire “Producing inclusive policies”, the first section “Developing the school for all” shows that the classes are well enough organized to support the learning of all the students (Fig. 6). The data on the second section “Organizing sup-

port for diversity” show that less diffused is the coordination of support practices (Fig. 7) because of a low involvement of the school, low economic funds, inadequate structures.

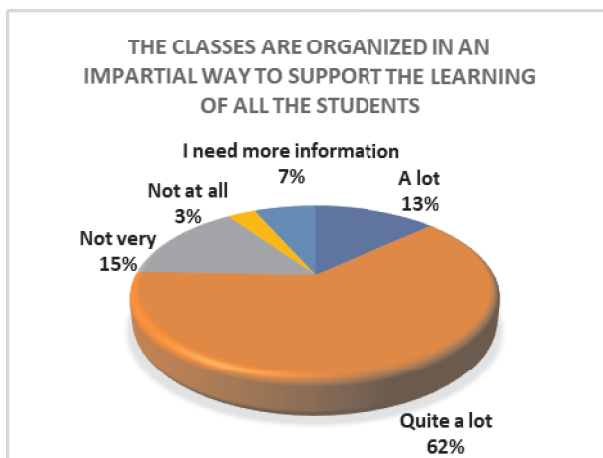


Fig. 6: Developing the school for all

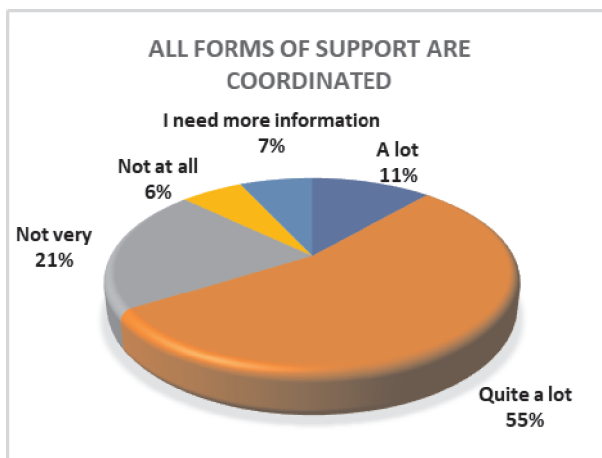


Fig. 7: Organizing support for diversity

Referring to the third area of the Index questionnaire “Evolving inclusive practice”, the first section “Orchestrating learning” shows how much attention is paid to ecology, energy sources, art, literature, health and the issues of ethics and democracy (Fig. 8). The scores (33% “not very” and 10% “not at all”) underline the need for greater educational investment

by the school to improve these aspects. According to the second section “Mobilising resources”, the results show a high enough level of cooperation learning in the classes (Fig. 9), although 32% of sample answered “not very” and 11% “not at all”.

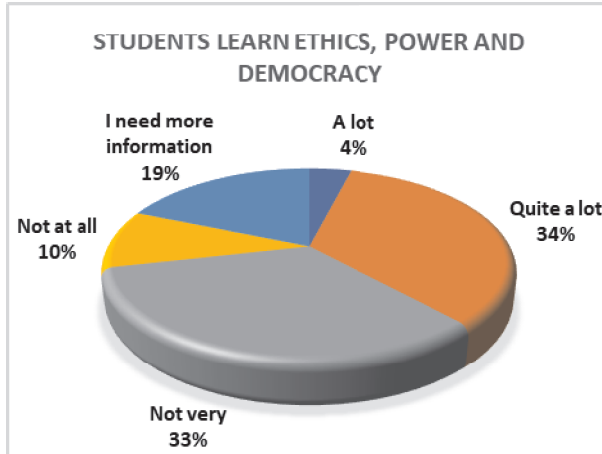


Fig. 8: Orchestrating learning

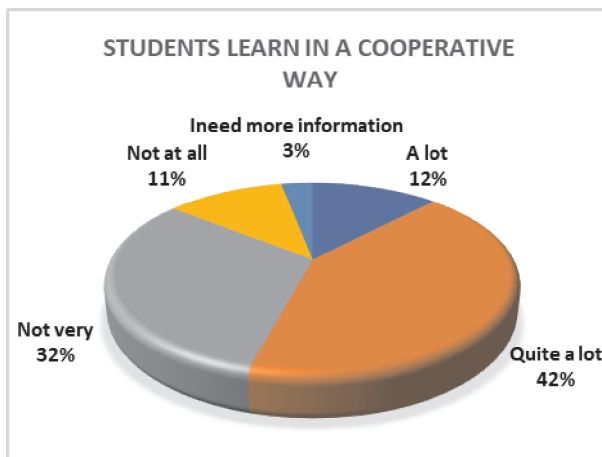


Fig. 9: Mobilising resources

In conclusion, our research raises critical aspects that need more in-depth analysis, in particular, for what concerns the evaluation of the quality of interventions, the monitoring of inclusive practices and the promotion of collegiality among colleagues.

This study highlights the need to improve self-evaluated practices to promote more structured and shared practices in the field of inclusive education. Among the main evidences it emerges that the geographic location of the schools involved in the research is a very important characteristic that differentiates the student population in each school and, consequently, the inclusive actions that the schools propose to activate. The main weaknesses are the lack of funds, human resources and adequate learning spaces, as well as the teacher training.

Among the strengths, the results demonstrated a great commitment to implement projects related to disability and diversity. However, although all schools seem to be very sensitive and attentive to the themes of inclusion, direct observation brings out a more fragile reality. These discrepancies may be due to the fact that what constitutes *quality* in classrooms is possibly more multifaceted than what current measures describe.

Considering the differences between preschools and primary schools, the results show a higher level of positive relationships among the children in the preschool. Another interesting finding is that preschool teachers are more prepared and used to cooperation. In primary school, the complexity of the curriculum causes difficulties in the application of a real and effective personalized education.

It becomes therefore important to investigate as the teachers operates collegially to diversify the teaching methodologies and to create a flexible and motivating learning setting. According to this analysis, pedagogical research in inclusive education has to foster specific teachers' training on observation and evaluation to avoid the risk of a narcissistic mirroring or of a lazy resignation to a reality that needs to be helped to change in any case.

### 3. Conclusions and future perspectives

The exploratory study we conducted is an initial research on the quality of inclusion documented by the school practitioners. The study presents a lot of limitations, due to the not representativeness of the selected sample. The perspective teachers who participated to the research would have needed more time and more information to analyze the level of school inclusion. Moreover, it would have been necessary a specific training about the observation skills essential to fulfill the questionnaire.

Anyway, some limitations may be attributed to the general difficulty of evaluation of such an ample and complex construct, as that of inclu-

sion. This difficulty had made hard, at least up to that moment, the creation of assessment tools for the school context, and particularly for teachers and school leaders (Dovigo, 2007).

Pedagogical research should not pay attention only to the minimum levels of inclusion. Even if it is an essential goal for combating the territorial inequalities in resources and results, the quality of inclusion first of all requires a sense of co-responsibility of all the school actors in the promotion of human differences.

“The different sets of indicators developed for SNE and inclusion cover the aspects of *input*, *process* and *output* as well as the *macro* (legislation, political and administrative framework), *meso* (school, community services), *micro* (classroom) and *person* (teachers, students) levels” (Kyriazopoulou, Weber, 2009, p. 18).

In many European countries there are a number of indicators developed to monitor SNE/inclusive education at different levels, mainly at school and classroom level. However, the literature has acknowledged that none of the existing sets of indicators are suited to transfer and use in other national educational contexts or at the European level.

There are different reasons for this, such as their focus, and the difficulty to clearly define what inclusion is. In addition, none of the sets of indicators reviewed are used to monitor policy conditions of inclusive education at the national level.

“National education policy then, needs to resolve the debate around standards, accountability and equity in education to further improve inclusive practice and ensure that the next generation of teachers are brought up in inclusive settings which develop appropriate attitudes and values” (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2010, p. 19).

To link all the dimensions of inclusion in a coherent framework, an essential task is attributed to the school leader, who can coordinate best practices at macro-organizational and micro-organizational level.

At the first level, it is important to carry out a systemic analysis to highlight the approach to diversity that each school has. In this direction, Italian schools use two working procedures. The first is the Annual Plan of Inclusion (PAI - Piano Annuale dell’Inclusività), that is an important document that helps schools to identify strengths and weaknesses of inclusion’s policies and strategies. This document is approved by the College of Teachers at the end of the school year, and provides a plan for supporting pupils’ reception during the coming school year.

According to the Ministerial Note n. 1551/2013, “the PAI should not be understood as a further bureaucratic fulfillment, but as an instrument that can contribute to increasing the awareness of the entire educating community on the central and transversal importance of inclusive processes in relation to the quality of educational «results», to create an educational context where to concretely improve the school «for everyone and for each person»”.

The second macro-organizational tool is the Team Work for Inclusion (GLI – Gruppo di Lavoro per l’Inclusione), that is a group of school operators with different competencies involved in the allocation, distribution and evaluation of resources for inclusion.

Nevertheless, its work is not sufficient because the full inclusion is only realized through the effective educational practices in the classroom. So, the school leader has to promote an effective plan of teacher education aimed to motivate all the teachers to work together to reach the goal of the full inclusion. At this micro-organizational level, all the team has to collaborate in order to personalize the curriculum, the activities and the assessment methods in theory for each student.

“The concept of inclusion wants therefore to put again to the center the idea of a school for everybody, starting in first place from the attention towards the differences. «To do differences» at school for many teachers is still a taboo: in the class there are not preferences, the pupils are the same” (Dovigo, 2007, p. 22).

However, we know well that the pupils are not the same and that the teachers must learn to manage their differences without hiding them in name of an *equality* that essentially becomes *homogeneity*. In other terms, the inclusive education cannot be submitted to single groups or activities, because it invests the totality of the school experience, particularly referring to the contents of teaching, the school climate, the learning setting, the support to learning and the development of team working. This is a task for all the teachers, and not only for support teachers, because they should engage with learning diversity arising from age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic, cultural, socio-economic, linguistic and religious background, health condition and disabilities.

Observing and evaluating these processes is really hard, because some of their results (such as responsibility and independence, citizenship skills, personal and social well-being, satisfaction) cannot be evaluate only from a quantitative point of view. So, the inclusion sets new challenges to the curricular planning, inviting to consider it on different bases.

The curriculum is not addressed, therefore, to a middle student, who needs a particular personalized education, but it is conceived, since the beginning, as a learning plan for everybody, surely keeping in mind the differences, and at the same time directing to promote for everyone the best opportunities for a personal growth (Cottini *et alii*, 2016).

Building an inclusive curriculum means to provide for dynamic assessment strategies, attentive to the monitoring of individual progress, based or not to a comparison with standardized achievements. This is a great challenge for teacher education, considering the undeniable precariousness that characterizes the teaching career. In fact, recognizing and highlighting the diversity, not only of intelligence styles and profiles, but also of different rhythm and existential trajectories, requires a lot of time and a deep knowledge of pupils, conditions more probable for those teachers who spend many hours in the classroom (Tuffanelli, 2013).

Another question concerns the need of a networking in which pupils and their families are actively involved. The construction of an inclusive school does not depend only to the teachers' expertise: it is the result of a co-responsibility between all the educational institutions. These institutions have a different representation of inclusion: for someone inclusion may be reduced to socialization, for others to rehabilitation, and for yet others to support in literacy.

As can be seen in the previous paragraphs, pedagogical research has to continue to rethink inclusion not as a *special issue*, but as *key concept* for the educational and social coexistence.

In this direction, the future perspectives of this study aim to:

- investigate pupils' and families' representations of inclusion;
- analyze the quality of inclusion in the perspective of vertical continuity (including the secondary school);
- test various research instrument (in particular gets from the qualitative research as focus group and interviews) to evaluate beliefs and attitudes towards inclusion in school and society.

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