Dis(tinctive)-Abilities in English for Educators: a Foreword– fo[u]r word(s) on Special Educational Needs

Dis(tinte)-Abilità nell'Inglese per Educatori: una premessa - (per/mettete) quattro parole sui Bisogni Educativi Speciali

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The School Disadvantage Area should not be viewed solely as a matter of deficit: it is the result of the complex interweaving of several physical/biological factors, and – more often than not – of psychological and social issues. The school system should respond by providing adequate individual as well as common strategic solutions taking into account both the personal and social development of each student, and the role of teachers in a perspective of life-long learning and intercultural identity. This paper seeks to explore some possibilities that teachers of English-as-a-second-language/foreign language have of coping with and even taking advantage of the peculiarities of Special Educational Needs (SEN), using their lessons to build an inclusive environment providing the help necessary to enable everyone to achieve common goals and develop skills.

abstract

Key-words: SENs, English as a second language, teacher's awareness, inclusion, interculturality.

Riflessione teorica
(A. incontro con la storia; B. questioni epistemologiche; C. temi emergenti)

1. Special Educational Needs: a Foreword – fo[u]r word(s)

Special Educational Needs are a challenge to all teachers who often perceive them as both a danger to their effectiveness in working with the whole class, and a difficulty to tackle when teaching individual pupils. Numerous studies have been carried out regarding the attitude of teachers towards the inclusion of pupils with SEN in regular English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) classes, and the results are by no means univocal[1]. Moreover, teachers of foreign languages often lack training and do not know how to adapt teaching methods to the needs of pupils with SEN enrolled in regular EFL classes. As Russak points out (2016), the gap between the institutional position and everyday practice in the classroom represents a hurdle for EFL/ESL teachers. In the *Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe 2012* (EACEA/Eurydice 2012), a comprehensive report on the status of language learning, ESL teacher training and qualifications, as well as educational programmes for teaching languages in European countries, "any mention of language learners with SEN or attention to teacher training in order to meet the needs of these pupils is conspicuously absent. […] The paradox is that, in practice, neither inclusion laws nor language-learning policies specifically address the language learning needs of pupils with SEN" (2016: 1188-1189).

What are the characteristics teachers of English should enhance, and what is required of them? A foreword, four words, or food for thought.

2. School Disadvantage Area

When we speak of the School Disadvantage Area (Special Educational Needs), we refer to a complex interweave of situations, which have been broken down into three main sub-areas:, Disability, Special Learning Disorders (such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dysorthography, dyscalculia), and Socio-Economic/Linguistic/Cultural Disadvantage[2]. Studies on these situations have been undertaken comparatively recently[3], shifting the main focus from the concept of disability as a pathology to

1 For an account on recent outcomes, see Russak (2016: esp. 1197-1199).

2 With the 2012 Ministerial Directive and the 2013 Circular no. 8, the Italian Ministry of Education introduced the new macro-category of Special Educational Needs. The new macro-category for SEN includes three micro or sub-categories of SEN:
   1. Learners with severe physical or intellectual impairments diagnosed by a local health unit and provided with an Individual Educational Plan according to the Law 104/1992;
   2. Learners with learning difficulties, such as dyslexia and dyscalculia, diagnosed by a private or public clinical centre and provided with a Personal Didactical Plan according to the Law 170/2010;
   3. Learners with cultural, linguistic and socio-economic disadvantages, who are identified internally by class teachers according to the most recent SEN circulars and provided with some forms of personalised support and planning.(See Migliarini V., D'Alessio S. & Bocci F. 2018:.4-5).

3 Disability Studies began in the 1970s in various English-speaking countries (the UK, and North America) as well as the north of Europe. Their main aims and focuses are the re-interpretation of the idea of disability from a sociological perspective, which takes into account the protection of human rights, the development of emancipatory research, and the creation/promotion of a Disability Movement favouring the empowerment of disabled people through the transformation of existing power-relations. The aim of Disability Studies is pre-eminently political: promoting social change favouring the establishment of a system where disabled people actively take part in collective

the idea that different needs – including those relating to differences of language, culture and identity, which fall into the Special Educational Needs category – are not a medical issue, but disorders impeding the exercise of the civil and social rights of individuals. These should, therefore, always be taken into account at decision-making level, in order to promote the active participation of all individuals in the socio-political development of education policies[4].

The Italian Ministry of Education (MIUR) officially states that "Every pupil, continuously or at certain moments, may present Special Educational Needs: whether these be due to physical, biological or physiological reasons, and/or to psychological or social reasons, Schools are required to offer an adequate and personalized response"[5].

As has been pointed out, in order to create inclusive schools such as to enable all students to access the resources provided by the education system and therefore fulfil their potential, the cultural aspects of conditions of disadvantage require appropriate attention and response on the part of the institutions, as

planning and organization (Barton and Armstrong 2001) [on Barton's pivotal ideas, see Oliver and Barnes, 'Disability studies, disabled people and the struggle for inclusion', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol. 31, no. 5, The sociology of disability and education (September 2010), pp. 547-560)]. For a thorough review of the evolution of Disability Studies in the UK context, see Marra (2009), Ripensare la disabilità attraverso i Disability Studies in Inghilterra, *Intersticios: Revista Sociológica de Pensamiento Crítico*: http://www.intersticios.es vol. 3/1 2009 https://www.2001agsoc.it/-materiale/introduzione.pdf. For a perspective on the development of the field in the Italian context, see AA.VV. (2019). *Disability Studies e Inclusione. Per una lettura critica delle politiche e pratiche educative*. Trento: Erickson; Bocci F. (2015). (a cura di). Disability Studies e Disability Studies Italy. Una voce critica per la costruzione di una scuola e di una società inclusive. *L'integrazione Scolastica e Sociale*, 14 (2): 93-157; Bocci F. (2019). Disability Studies. In L. d'Alonzo (Ed.). *Dizionario di Pedagogia Speciale*. Brescia: Scholé.

4 Mike Oliver and Len Barton, leaders of the British movement, have theorized the social model proposed by the UPIAS (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation). Oliver's *Politics of Disablement* (1990), which presents a sociological study of disability as a phenomenon, is based on a few simple but meaningful principles: a distinction between deficit (impairment or biological condition) and disability; a theoretical distance with the medical/clinical model (individual model of disability); a connotation of disability as a condition of social oppression experienced by people who differ from the 'norm' (see D'Alessio, Marra, Onnis, Vadalà and Valtellina 2010). People with disabilities have long been excluded from decision-making; they are often asked to choose within given options (usually set by doctors and welfare professionals), not having a chance to sit at the discussion tables or to take part in the whole process, beginning with brainstorming about ideas. This condition excludes them also from active citizenship, and leaves them doomed as "dependent" on the "enabled" groups (Oliver 1990). Disability becomes an interdisciplinary issue, involving experts in many fields such as history, education, sociology, psychology and philosophy, with the concept itself seen as a social construction: persons experiencing a condition of disability are "dis-abled" because the society they live in presents elements of un-accessibility that oppress and discriminate against them (Abberley 1987). To deal with the concept of disability as social oppression, then, scholars should investigate their own field of expertise, trying to pinpoint specific obstacles to inclusion such as poverty, dis-abling social/education policies, barriers in architecture/communication/social behaviours, while exploring proposals to overcome them. Thus, research should acquire an ethical role that is socially and politically significant, becoming a potential source for change and responsibility of all participants (D'Alessio S., Marra A.D., Onnis S., Vadalà G. and Valtellina E. 2010).

5 [Ogni alunno, con continuità o per determinati periodi, può manifestare Bisogni Educativi Speciali: o per motivi fisici, biologici, fisiologici o anche per motivi psicologici, sociali, rispetto ai quali è necessario che le scuole offrano adeguata e personalizzata risposta] http://www.miur.gov.it/web-/guest/bisogni-educativi-speciali. (my translation)

> The School Disadvantage Area is much vaster than that explicitly referring to deficit. In each classroom there are pupils requiring special attention for a variety of reasons: social and cultural disadvantage, specific learning disabilities and/or specific developmental disorders, difficulties deriving from their not knowing the Italian language and culture because they belong to different cultures[6].

The concept of inclusion goes beyond (maybe even outstrips) the purpose of integration, re-defining education as a continuous process of equality research and a relationship of help (cfr. Capperucci & Franceschini 2020). Differences are the central idea, as they represent original, personal ways of establishing relationships, whether they be of a social or learning-related nature. In these terms, inclusion becomes a theoretical, cultural, and operational background against which to modify premises and assumptions regarding the whole system, making the school an institution capable of welcoming and embracing differences while offering all pupils/learners a chance of actively participating in and contributing to the creation of knowledge. Planning for the inclusion of everyone in the class and in the school system becomes, therefore, one of the fundamental guidelines to follow when designing teaching/learning pathways like the PEI (Piano Educativo Individualizzato – Individualized Educational Plan) and the PDP (Piano Didattico Personalizzato – Personalized Didactic Plan) so that these may play a meaningful role within the POF (Piano di Offerta Formativa – Educational Availability Plan) and make sure that inclusiveness concerns all the organizational, pedagogical, didactic, assessment and curricular aspects of education[7]. Interculture should be organically grafted onto the processes of inclusive learning and teaching, with cultural issues at the heart of approaches to both language acquisition and SENs[8].

Things become even more complicated when we focus on pupils with multi-SEN conditions trying to acquire a second language – like English – at school; for example, pupils attending Italian schools whose first language is not Italian and who are also bearers of language disorders: "cultural, linguistic and [dis]ability characteristics are integrally intertwined; this interface requires careful attention when planning instruction" (García and Tyler 2010: 115)[9]. Moreover, difficulties expe-

6 [L'area dello svantaggio scolastico è molto più ampia di quella riferibile esplicitamente alla presenza di deficit. In ogni classe ci sono alunni che presentano una richiesta di speciale attenzione per una varietà di ragioni: svantaggio sociale e culturale, disturbi specifici di apprendimento e/o disturbi evolutivi specifici, difficoltà derivanti dalla non conoscenza della cultura e della lingua italiana perché appartenenti a culture diverse.] (*ibid*.) (my translation).

7 For the state of the art of literature on inclusion in Italy, see http://www.superando.it/2015/07/14/-la-differenza-fra-il-paradigma-inclusivo-e-quello-integrativo/, by the GRIDIS group. On new perspectives concerning the Sustainable Development Goals – SDGs - in Agenda 2030, the right of education for all, and the educational success in the perspective of the New Index for Inclusion (and the tools available) see Isidori M. Vittoria (ed.) (2019). *La formazione dell'insegnante inclusivo. Superare i rischi vecchi e nuovi di povertà educativa*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

8 As for some recent developments regarding the topic in Italy, see Roberta Ferrarini (2014). 'Quale spazio per l'intercultura nei bisogni educativi speciali? Una lettura problematizzante delle recenti indicazioni ministeriali italiane sui bisogni educativi speciali secondo la prospettiva inclusiva dei Disability Studies', *Italian Journal of Disability Studies* (IJDS), May 2014, n.2.

9 For an in-depth analysis and innovative perspective of the nexus of special education and migration, the combination of the research agenda on migrant education and on disability studies in the Italian context, and "the underpinnings, tensions, and discrepancies of Italian SEN policies through the intersectional and interdisciplinary framework of Disability Critical Race Theory (DisCrit)", see Miglia-

rienced by [English Language Learners] ELLs functioning in English can mimic characteristics of [Language Disorders] LDs (Salend 2008), so that it may prove difficult for teachers to attribute pupils' difficulties to learning disabilities or other causes.

SEN children difficulties come to the fore in particular when dealing with linguistic skills like reading and writing, sometimes even listening and speaking; in more serious cases, their struggles can be increased by comorbidity (Tressoldi, Vio, 2006), that is, simultaneous occurrence of several disorders affecting the receptive and productive linguistic areas simultaneously. In addition, the opacity of the English language, with its irregular phoneme-grapheme correspondence, making it next-to-impossible to read and pronounce a word correctly unless one has already heard it before, complicates the introduction of reading and writing at school[10]. So much so that, especially when teaching English at primary school-level, the accent is placed preferably on the aural-oral skills, which appear to function better with small children, even more so with those affected by SEN. To ask children with specific learning disorders, especially during the early phases of schooling, to memorise how to write a word whose graphic-phonetic correspondence is unclear or appears not to exist at all, or to remember the pronunciation of a word simply by seeing it, means exposing them, in most cases, to likely failure and consequent frustration. In fact, the difficulties already encountered when reading and writing in their mother tongue will be further accentuated by the difficulties involved when asked to deal with the complex graph-phonemic system of the English language.

Furthermore, notwithstanding positive attempts at inclusion, educators (and families) should always consider that coping with diversity implies dealing with mechanisms of power relating to identity and social inclusion/exclusion – if only for the fact that educators are the product of their own cultural, ideological environment, and that the school system reacts and acts almost always *a posteriori*, trying to solve problems after they have arisen. According to Cummings,

> No classroom or school is immune from the influence of the coercive power relations that characterize societal debates about diversity and national identity. On a moment-to-moment basis educators, in their interactions with culturally and linguistically diverse pupils, sketch their ideological stance in relation to issues of diversity, identity and power. The science and practice of pedagogy is never neutral in relation to these issues in spite of its frequent self-portrayal as innocent and focused only on 'learning outcomes' (1997: 107).

3. What to do

Inclusion should be based on respect of autonomy; education should aim at fostering the growth of individuals in a situation of mutual respect.

rini V., D'Alessio S. & Bocci F. (2018). SEN Policies and migrant children in Italian schools: micro-exclusions through discourses of equality. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*. At https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2018.1558176; on DisCrit see Ferri B.A. (2018). DisCrit: l'approccio intersezionale nell'educazione inclusiva, in AAVV. *Disability studies e inclusione. Per una lettura critica delle politiche e pratiche educative*. Erikson.

10 Rescio (2015) investigates the issue; she underlines the essential role of FL (foreign Language) learning, and proposes efficacious operative strategies to deal with the complexity of teaching/learning English as a foreign language.

People are characterized by different abilities, which constitute "an exceptional merging point among distant disciplinary fields, with different methodological devices, epistemological systems, theoretical structures. A challenging merging point, constituted of the body of persons" (Besio & Caldin 2019:16)[11], so that working on what we *can* do is more important and effective than focusing on what we *cannot* / *are not able* to do. At school level, this idea applies to both pupils and teachers. To start with, we can reinforce teachers'/educators' skills, knowledge, and self/other assessment abilities, by supporting them during their teaching traineeship and by providing them with frequent opportunities for confrontation, in a life-long learning perspective[12]:

> Studies show that teacher training alone may not have an impact on teacher attitudes regarding inclusion of pupils with SEN in regular education settings […]. Personal contact and teaching experience with special needs populations have been found to contribute more significantly to teacher attitude and perceptions […]. In addition, educational settings, such as class size, and support networks, such as availability of teaching assistants and professional support, may also contribute to teacher attitude and perceptions regarding inclusion of pupils with SEN in the regular class […]. Further, teaching pupils with SEN in small groups allows these teachers to give more personal attention to each pupil and to get to know their strengths as well as their weaknesses (Russak 2016: 1199).

Surveys conducted in different countries all lead to the same conclusion that classes should contain fewer students, and that strategies for engaging SEN pupils in classroom activities are mandatory:

> The results indicate a limited degree of cooperation and coordination between general and special education. This, in turn, means a lack of adequate adaptation and an academic standardisation of the general education, which reduces the potential to meet the needs of pupils with SEN. Teachers find that pupils with SEN have a greater tendency than other pupils to fall by the wayside and be left to their own devices when participating in general education. It particularly seems to affect pupils who are quiet and withdrawn. Teachers point out their challenging work situation with a large number of pupils to follow up, which can lead to them not having enough time for and not giving enough attention to those pupils who need additional support (Nielsen 2018: 1).

SEN students may experience a condition of emotional, psychological, instrumental and procedural fragility; when children feel anguish and worry in having to face a new situation, especially in the case of learning disorders, the feeling makes them very reluctant to take part in school activities, even in games with their peers. In some cases, during L2 learning, this block may result in the so-called *silent period*. Emotional reassurance, positive feedback, the stimuli provided by the teacher, and

11 (My translation). Caldin applies the definition to the topic of disability; here it has been borrowed to expand the idea to 'different abilities'.

12 Bocci (2018:144) aptly underlines how the profile of the inclusive teacher, as well as the need to act in a critical way, are part of a "never-ending process involving [us]all" in a reflection which "must be situated within the present historical context" (my translation).

relationships involving the entire class can effectively reduce this stage which, often underestimated, is nevertheless rather fruitful, as it allows the learner to formulate important hypotheses regarding what is being presented in the classroom or in extracurricular L2 contexts.

Language competences – and the lack of them – are a key factor to take into account when devising inclusive strategies. In Italy, the majority of the Italian-mother-tongue child population is not communicatively competent in English; on the other hand, the cradle tongue of non-native-Italian-speaking children who attend Italian school is seldom English, and when these pupils are native speakers of other languages, they are generally not proficient in English. This permits teachers to use ESL lessons as a privileged moment to build a comfortable inclusive school environment, where most pupils experience a similar degree of non-competence that lowers levels of defensiveness and aggressiveness in the classroom, fostering the personal and social development of each individual as an active member of the community. The relationship the teacher builds with the whole class and their management of errors can play a fundamental role in lowering the *affective filter* (Krashen 1981), therefore contributing to avoid children to lose their self-esteem and their trust in their intellectual capacities[13].

4. Observing, developing strategies, acting

Teachers should choose the learning outcomes they wish to achieve, as well as the means they intend to employ to assess teaching/learning; they should then focus on identifying potential barriers to both learning and valid assessment. García and Tyler (2010: 117) suggest that teachers "review the lesson content and instructional approaches to identify the cognitive and linguistic demands that will be placed on ELLs with LD as well as ways in which the lesson will (or will not) increase their motivation to engage with the content"; they also provide some indications of the potential barriers they are most likely to encounter:

- The reading levels within and across texts and other materials, which may interfere with understanding of, or attention to, the concepts being taught;
- Words and concepts that will be unfamiliar to ELLs even though they are basic for native English speakers, including those with LD;
- Aspects of the lesson that require ELLs to learn academic concepts and English terminology simultaneously, doubling cognitive demands;
- The specific forms of oral, written, verbal, and nonverbal expressions required for success at school and which are socio-culturally unfamiliar to students; and
- Forms of bias in the portrayal of people from diverse groups, including, but not limited to racism, classism, ableism, and sexism (*ibid*.)

13 As Rescio points out in describing dyslexic children needs, although they do not suffer from cognitive deficits, "they need to be explicitly educated about the most appropriate learning strategies according to implicit difficulties related to [Foreign Language] FL orthographic and phonological features. FL is a crucial subject if it is used correctly, because it can also compensate for dyslexic children's lack of motivation and self esteem" (2015:102), the which applies to both SEN and non-SEN children.

According to Gass (2003) and Pawlak (2014), the conditions that have to be put in place for successful acquisition of an additional language include "the availability of an adequate quantity of high quality exposure to target language samples and abundant opportunities to engage in the production of output, especially such that entails the use of linguistic resources in real-time communication" (Pawlak 2014: 39). Oral and written interaction, and active participation in conversational exchanges – especially with more proficient interlocutors – should result in a stimulating context providing "the positive evidence, negative evidence and abundant opportunities for output production, with the last two implicating the necessity of correction" (*ivi*: 86), thus provoking "the provision of corrective feedback by native speakers, teachers, or more proficient peers" (*ivi*: 42).

In this respect, the language used by the teacher in a second or foreign language classroom is a variable to be borne in mind, especially at spoken-language level. The input[14] learners receive from the teacher, some of which will be processed further as intake (Gass 2003), is usually considered better than that of learners because of its quantity and quality; however, teachers tend to "produce simplified ungrammatical speech when addressing language learners – foreigner talk (FT)[15] – and that FT often contains ungrammatical structures" (Sato 2015: 308).

Responsibility on the part of the pupils needs to be fostered, so that they become aware of the actions required to structure their acquisition and transform it into knowledge and engage in proactive cooperation with a view to building up their own skills in a shared context. Learners should be taught how to cope with their own mistakes as well as with those the teacher may make, by availing themselves of two different strategies: *negotiation of meaning*, which "is connected with genuine communication breakdowns or incomplete understanding", and "*negotiation of form*[16], which covers responses to inaccurate use of target language features, both when the error impedes the flow of conversation and when it is addressed for pedagogic purposes" (Pawlak 2014: 54). Corrective feedback is an effective means by which to improve learners' awareness of their own language acquisition process. Due to the wide array of variables related to the nature of correction itself, but also to the type of error being treated[17], it represents a complex task; nevertheless, learners tend to demand correction (and teachers tend to provide it, in any case). The effort of accompanying correction with proper, circumstantiated feedback, structured so as not to impede the flow of communication or put learners on the defensive, is pedagogically positive: "thanks to its capacity to simultaneously serve as positive and negative evidence and to generate output, corrective feedback, whether it occurs in the oral or written mode, fosters second language development

14 The psychologically-grounded interactionist approach "describes the processes involved when learners encounter input, are involved in interaction, and receive feedback and produce output [but it also] attempts to explain why interaction and learning can be linked, using cognitive concepts derived from psychology, such as noticing, working memory, and attention" (Gass and Mackey 2007: 176; see also Pawlak 2014: 53).

15 Sato provides an accurate historic review of the concept of Foreign Talk (see 2015: esp. 310-312).

16 Italics are mine.

17 Among others, "the psycholinguistic readiness to acquire a specific form, the task in hand, the objectives of the lesson, the instructional setting, and individual variation which manifests itself in such factors as age, level of proficiency, aptitude, learning styles, motivation, anxiety levels or learning goals" (Pawlak 2014: 88).

and there are good reasons to utilize it in the course of both controlled exercises and communication-based tasks" (Pawlak 2014: 87). Moreover, "error correction is hypothesized to activate the microprocesses of attention, cognitive comparison and noticing the gap, to assist the transformation of declarative knowledge into automatized procedural knowledge, to act as a priming device, to augment the relevance of input, to ensure instructional counterbalance as well as to promote internalization and the move to the stage of self-regulation through stimulating social interaction in the zone of proximal development" (*ibid*.).

Corrective Feedback may prove particularly useful when helping SEN students in particular, as its effects are shown by both psycholinguistic and sociocultural accounts of second language acquisition to be durable as it contributes to the development of both explicit and implicit knowledge (see Pawlak 2014). Learners – including SEN pupils – are called on to be active in the process, something which may also be enhanced by peer-to-peer collaborative activities.

Reviewing his own language acquisition theory, Krashen underlines the need for an active role on the part of the learner in a life-long learning perspective: "I now think it is very important to make a strong effort to inform students about the process of language acquisition, so they can continue to improve on their own" (2009: introduction). Cooperation between teachers/educators and their class will enable them to go MILeS together: Multiple Intelligences and Learning Styles, conveniently observed, taken into account in combination, and adopted as a practical strategy by both teachers and students, can help individuals – in particular SEN pupils – to learn a new language, as well as to retain and enhance notions and skills they have already acquired.

Everyday practice should lead to peer discussion, which is a fundamental resource for building and reconstructing teaching strategies on the basis of shared experience. A habit of devising and advising on more than one strategy may prove to be helpful in times of need, especially when coping with SENs, as they present teachers with issues beyond those which they generally expect to have to deal with in the classroom. The same applies to summarizing results, especially if they work, and proposing a rationale of activities, which should be structured according to some basic steps:

- Analyse the context
- Identify activities and propose them repeatedly
- Vary the activities proposed.

Disability Studies can be converted into Different Ability Studies, by focusing on any learner considering him/her as a particular, therefore 'different', individual, endowed with skills, abilities and issues of his/her own. The space provided by the second/foreign language classroom, as a domain 'free' from some of the content and restrictions regarding other subjects, can enable teachers to effectively defuse some potentially harmful social perceptions and behaviours, while improving life competences (transferable soft skills such as interpersonal, communication, language, teamwork, self-confidence and self-awareness abilities) and identity-building in an intercultural perspective:

> As an educating community, the school generates a diffused relational conviviality, interwoven with affective and emotional languages, capable of

promoting the sharing of those values which enable the members of society to feel they are part of a real community. "Teaching to learn" is paired with "teaching to be", aimed at nurturing the uniqueness and individuality of each student's cultural identity (MIUR, Indicazioni Nazionali per il Curricolo: 6) (my translation)[18] .

5. In conclusion: Four Words to suggest for SENs

Support. All children need and have a right to support, to help them along their educational pathway. At the same time, teachers need support to find ways of coping with ever-changing situations. Since we ask our pupils not to be ashamed to ask for help, as teachers we too should be able to ask for and provide support to colleagues.

International research shows how the challenges to be faced when seeking to guarantee the inclusion of pupils with SEN cannot be addressed as individual difficulties alone, but primarily as difficulties to be tackled by schools as communities (Nilsen 2018). As inclusion is a responsibility that needs to be shared by all teachers, it requires collaboration; teachers need to and should cooperate to coordinate their actions, though the system does not often seem to provide many opportunities for fostering team-skills among teachers. Peer-collaboration, instead, enables teachers to improve the way they teach pupils with and without SEN, also by reflecting positively on the children's learning outcomes. A similar collective approach fosters exchanges of experiences and ideas, thus encouraging mutual support and common follow-up practices, especially among all the teachers called upon to deal with pupils with SEN.

To achieve this, Empathy is one of the main attitudes we need to enhance, as it becomes Empowerment when adequately endorsed by a Network, generating power in interpersonal/intergroup collaborative relations, and boosting self-efficacy and self-esteem on the part of both teachers and pupils:

> In other words, participants in the relationship are empowered through their collaboration such that each is more affirmed in her or his identity and has a greater sense of efficacy to create change in his or her life or social situation. Thus, power is created in the relationship and shared among participants. The power relationship is additive rather than subtractive. Power is created with others, rather than being imposed on or exercised over others. Within this framework, empowerment can be defined as the collaborative creation of power. (Cummins 1997: 112)

Furthermore, this supportive approach positively affects the mechanisms of identity negotiation which educator-pupil interaction fosters the chances that children engage academically. Teachers, whether willing or not, aware or not, are

18 [In quanto comunità educante, la scuola genera una diffusa convivialità relazionale, intessuta di linguaggi affettivi ed emotivi, ed è anche in grado di promuovere la condivisione di quei valori che fanno sentire i membri della società come parte di una comunità vera e propria. La scuola affianca al compito 'dell'insegnare ad apprendere' quello 'dell'insegnare a essere'. L'obiettivo è quello di valorizzare l'unicità e la singolarità dell'identità culturale di ogni studente."

models of role-definition in relation to all pupils and communities; they (we) ought to feel the weight of this responsibility even more when dealing with individuals with special needs. We should be aware, therefore, and critical of the way we structure all kinds of interaction in the classroom – top-down, peer-to-peer and bottom-up –, as it depends on us to decide in which terms to establish them. "While we operate under many constraints, we do determine for ourselves the social and educational goals we want to achieve with our pupils" (Cummins 1997: 113).

We should always bear in mind that the provision of education is a collaborative Service, performed by, directed towards, and involving the whole community. Education is a matter of knowledge, to be acquired first, bestowed later. Life-long learning, updating, self-assessment, and self-efficacy are vital to the improvement of quality as well as the efficacy of teaching. Teachers with a greater sense of self-efficacy and knowledge about SEN are those most likely to develop more positive attitudes and fewer concerns about their pupils; this enables them to try out more effectively, and implement more successfully, inclusive instructional practices in their classrooms (Nijakowska 2019).

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