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Inclusive education:
genesis and challenges of a great ethical and educational imperative!

Inclusione educativa:
genesi e sfide di un imperativo etico e pedagogico sostanziale!

Fuori Call

ABSTRACT

School inclusion strives to meet the educational and training needs of all students within a shared learning environment. The goal is for every individual to be fully integrated into the school community as they are, recognized and valued by the school, and able to benefit from this opportunity in an active, appropriate, normal, and equitable manner for themselves and others. The article examines the evolution of educational institutions and the ethical and pedagogical concepts that have guided the development of compulsory schooling from its inception to the present day. Since the Salamanca Statement, education and training systems have been required to create high-quality, inclusive schools that serve all students. The author emphasizes that local educational systems evolve over time, gradually breaking away from previous models as they respond to changing circumstances and new evidence. The evolution of the educational inclusion movement has been a gradual process, characterized by a culture of difference, and has progressed through several phases, including ghettoization, segregation, integration, and inclusion. The main objective has been to create school environments capable of overcoming barriers and providing equitable and accessible education for all students, including those with disabilities Inclusion has become a universal principle that informs the development of education and training systems worldwide. In the final section, the author observes that this commitment to inclusion has a direct impact on the core pedagogical practices of each school. As with every previous phase of educational evolution, the move towards inclusion demands a consistent and coherent rethinking of pedagogy and teaching practices that considers the needs of all students, not just those with special educational needs and disabilities.

Inclusion: A Continuous Ethical and Educational Process Shaped by Culture and Science

In its broadest sense, social inclusion has been defined as «the reception of singularity within a truly common social space and a common access capable of compensating for the weaknesses of some by making available to them, by analogy with what is made available to others, what is necessary to be, as they are, in this common space» (Ravaud et al., 2000, p. 13, our translation).

However, this definition limits the concept of inclusion to people with specific characteristics of inter-individual diversity and focuses on compensating for weaknesses. Inclusion should be a general principle that concerns every citizen, regardless of their origin, race, gender, age, language, social position, lifestyle, religious, philosophical, or political beliefs, physical integrity, mental or psychic capacities. As many democratic nations emphasize in their constitutional declarations, equal opportunities should be available to all (European Commission, 2013).

In conclusion, inclusion should not only focus on compensating for weaknesses but on providing equal opportunities for everyone. As the European Commission (2013) notes, inclusion «is a fundamental right, a central value, and a shared responsibility for all in society.»

Key contextual meanings of inclusion

Inclusion is a multifaceted concept that encompasses several dimensions. Firstly, it is a right, an instrument, an ongoing process, and a condition for the realization of other rights. Secondly, it denotes the status of a person, as in exclusion or inclusion from something. Thirdly, it is a priority among the aims of school education and training.

However, the implementation of inclusion within compulsory schooling faces arguments in favor of the exclusion of some students from mainstream education, despite their own and others' levels of education and training. This has become an increasingly important issue for academics involved in inclusive education, people with disabilities, and their families and friends due to the considerable empirical evidence, historical context, and institutional implications involved (Davis, Gillett-Swan, Graham et al., 2020).

The United Nations advocates for accessible education and training that enables children to develop the skills necessary for full and meaningful participation in modern society, yet many stakeholders resist the ongoing global process. They argue that segregation of students with disabilities in special schools and classes is in fact inclusive, using the language of inclusion (Davis, Gillett-Swan, Graham et al., 2020).

It is therefore fair to say that the concept of school inclusion «everywhere» is primarily associated with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEN&D). In the past, personal characteristics, either biomedical or cultural, have sometimes justified the systematic exclusion of SEN&D pupils from mainstream compulsory education at the level of individual school systems. Nonetheless, inclusion should not be limited to SEN&D pupils, but should encompass all pupils, regardless of their background or characteristics (UNESCO, 2009).

School inclusion, special educational needs and disabilities (SEN&D)

The movement towards educational inclusion originated from the discrimination and exclusion of students with disabilities from mainstream education. It has gradually evolved over time, addressing, and overcoming obstacles to create inclusive school environments. This evolution has primarily focused on the educational needs of individuals with disabilities, which has coincided with the development of new paradigms for understanding disability and recognition of special educational needs. The goal is to promote equity and accessibility for all students within the school system (Mainardi, 2012; Ebersold, 2021).

From the ghettoization to the inclusion regime: the main phases of a transition

The solutions that have been adopted over time reflect the evolving culture of difference, as well as the underlying pedagogical principles and beliefs. They clearly demonstrate the structural and didactic differentiation that has characterized the development of schooling, as well as the responsibility of societies and schools towards all individuals, regardless of their backgrounds. These solutions include:

a) Considering childhood with or without exclusion,
b) The postulate of educability, which is based on the belief that all individuals can learn and grow,
c) The development of special attention, such as specialized pedagogies,
d) The decision to provide care in separate and distinct school environments or not, and
e) The development of inclusive provision in the broadest sense, including universal design for teaching and learning (Mainardi, 2012; Ebersold, 2021).

Each of these solutions has played a crucial role in shaping the educational inclusion movement and its ongoing development. By continually identifying and addressing obstacles to inclusion, societies and schools can work towards creating truly inclusive environments where all individuals have access to education and can fully participate in society. The evolution of formal educational settings can be traced through several phases:

Phase 1: *Ghettoization* involved forced confinement and exclusion of individuals, including those with disabilities. This approach was still present during the Nazi regime and was characterized by a wall that separated those considered worthy of education from others.

Phase 2: *Segregation* occurred when education became recognized as a universal right. Although the wall of exclusion came down, structural differentiation was considered necessary to provide separate and segregated educational environments. Education was provided based on characteristics such as age, gender, and abilities, with limited attention given to individuals with disabilities. Special pedagogical segregation promoted the development of knowledge and skills on the specificities of deficits and needs of people with disabilities.

The current phase of the school segregation regime is characterized by two distinct positions. The first position recognizes structural segregation as a logical consequence of the observation that equal teaching conditions do not provide equal learning opportunities for all. Those who adopt this thesis initially work to prepare suitable school environments outside the mainstream, assuming that this choice allows for the best adaptation of educational attention in relation to the types of pupils that can be grouped on the basis of a distinctive trait. This leads to the development of specialized pedagogical and didactic knowledge and skills, creating particular pedagogical universes that open up specializations and specialized pedagogies. France provides an example of this approach, where Binet and Simon developed the first intelligence test in 1905 on a national mandate to allow for the orientation towards specific classes of pupils who can be distinguished from others based on a mental age higher than their chronological age.

The principles of the time, concerning the desirability of structural differentiation, gradually imposed themselves everywhere, leading to the development of separate school sites for the education of selected pupils.

The second position rejects the principle of positive segregation and identifies structural differentiation as negative, with more counter-indications than advantages. This approach is exemplified in Italy, which adopted school integration as a constitutive principle of education and training systems in 1971 through Law 118. This law decreed the end of peer separation at school and opened integration as a principle: «(...) *the compulsory education of pupils with disabilities must take place in the normal classes of the state school, except in cases where the subjects are affected by serious intellectual deficiencies or physical impairments of such severity as to prevent or make it difficult for them to learn or to be included in the aforementioned normal classes*" art.28, our translation). This led to the development of forms of accompaniment designed to promote integration, such as home-school transport, accessibility of school

buildings, and assistance during school hours for certain pupils. The incorporation (insertion) imposed by this approach is the expression of a precise vision of society and a political will to avoid segregation.

These two positions have led to the development of specialized pedagogical and didactic knowledge and skills, and at the same time at the opening of mainstream educational and training systems to pupils with disabilities. The convergence of them on a single goal, the overcoming of the segregative regime, led to an exponential amount of empirical evidence directly from the mainstream proving that many of the special cares that specialised pedagogies had defined and regulated could have been applied immediately for the benefit of all outside the special education circuit as well. This process predisposed and prepared the transition to the next phase.

Phase 3: *Integration* emerged in the 1970s as a concept and practice, driven by the Principle of Normalisation introduced by Nirje in 1969. This approach considered physical, social, functional, personal, and societal integration as the principle of education, accepting individuals with disabilities as members of any normal society. While mainstream venues were not yet the norm, it was becoming increasingly negotiable and viable as an exception. Schools opened up to less prescriptive solutions, allowing for new experiences and empirical evidence within traditional school environments.

It is increasingly common for scholastic institutions to reject structural differentiation as a naturally positive approach and instead adopt «bottom-up» integration as a means of constituting an inclusive identity based on probative and irrefutable empirical evidence, which prepares the way for formal decision-making and «top-down» decrees in support of integrative schools. In contrast, some institutions, such as those in Italy, have already declared their support for this position a priori.

However, not all states have adopted this approach uniformly or at the same pace. One example among others is suggested by what has been observed over time in Switzerland: although united to each other by a federal constitution, it has always been the individual canton-states that have been the sole authority for individual school realities. In this respect, there are those who since the 1970s have adopted strongly integrating basic principles, which is the case for Ticino, while other cantons such as Basel-City have been more inclined and more permanent over time towards a clear and important structural division of tasks between mainstream and special schools.

It follows that locally the evidence from education systems regarding the possibility of bringing special education into mainstream environments is diverse and uneven. This applies to Switzerland, but also to all the states and all the different school realities affected by the paradigm shift.

Not all schools have the ideological necessity, political will, or practical preparedness to support integration at the same level. Educational beliefs and professional customs and practices also play a role in shaping the degree of preparedness.

Inclusion emerged as the dominant option for public opinion and school policy in the 1990s. States and schools are committed to activating and supporting processes and reforms that are attentive and open to accommodating pupils with special educational needs in ordinary school environments, with a view to making school accessible, appropriate, and beneficial for all students. This commitment is supported by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994).

Phase 4: *The school inclusion regime* denotes a shift from negotiability to the norm. The mainstream participation of pupils with special educational needs is no longer seen as a negotiable exception, but as a crucial indicator of the quality of education and training systems. The special and the regular approach are called to meet within the mainstream. Special pedagogy must further emancipate itself from special education to go and support the school's momentary weaknesses in order to generate valid and inclusive (neo) customary environments (Ebersold, 2021; Bocci, 2021) and supporte the "dialogic of special normality" (Ianes & Demo, 2023). This phase consists of two distinct moments:

Moment 1. The integration of the ethical imperative of accessibility: the explicit adoption of inclusion as an ethical goal (the inclusive will as a deontological and pressing objective of schooling and the rethinking of the conditions and requirements for new schooling qualities) and the appropriation (in the Vygotskian sense of the term) of ethics at the center of the emerging concerns of education and societies

(Felder, 2022). Note: «*Placing a pupil on the autistic spectrum in a busy classroom with a pair of noise-cancelling headphones and an aide to deal with the inevitable meltdowns is often done in the name of 'inclusion', but this is integration, not inclusion*» (Graham, 2020).

Moment 2. The accommodation (in the Piagetian sense of the term) of the accessibility imperative: the realization of truly inclusive and high-quality school environments, which involves seeking and replicating good pedagogical practices based on didactic research, empirical evidence, and improving the educational quality of non-segregating school environments. A truly inclusive and high-quality school environment necessitates that teachers and schools create and/or adopt conditions and situations that best suit the needs of each student without excluding any student from appropriate growth and development expectations and class membership. The principles of accessibility and welcoming should be integral to any discussion concerning the "pedagogical core" of school environments (OECD, 2013).

Developing and multiplying truly inclusive school environments

Just as the pedagogical assumptions of the previous two phases (Phase 2 and Phase 3) gave shape and substance to the results, so a new approach to diversity, the emergence of fluid societies and the rise of inclusive ethics will influence research, educational practice and the development of coherent and effective conditions and practices that are increasingly evidence-based and purposeful*.: -"Since the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO 1994), a widespread political will formally encourages school stakeholders to remove that which excludes and marginalizes. Professional ethics therefore recognizes as essential: (1) the possibility for pupils to attend the local school (the school of the neighborhood); and (2) the adoption of a "zero rejection" policy for school admission (Forlin et al., 2013, pp. 7-8). (…) In the first instance, the imperative of accessibility redefines the conditions of access to school; in so doing, it directly influences the grouping of learners and of professionals. It forces us to specify how pedagogical and didactic choices, the planning of the forms and timings of learning, and the practices of skills assessment would comply with the imperative itself. (…) Educational accessibilization coincides with the desire to remove a priori that which excludes and marginalizes in schools (Ainscow et al., 2011). Loreman (2009, p. 43) describes the main targets for shaping this as ensuring the following: 1) care and development are priorities for every child; 2) pupils learn in regular and heterogeneous classes with peers of the same age and follow substantially similar curricula; 3) the modes of teaching are varied and suited to the needs of all; 4) all children contribute to regular learning activities; 5) all children are encouraged to make friends with their peers. The pedagogical accessibilization of classroom situations is not equated with the individualization or personalization of learning experiences. It refers to: (1) the attention paid to each student's school experience; (2) the situations predisposed for the acquisition of the skills provided for by the study plan and by the personalized plan of one or the other child; and (3) the pedagogical mediation of school environments for each member of a school class without exceptions or conditions (Ainscow, 1991; Forlin, 2010; Ainscow & a., 2011; Prud-'homme & a., 2016)"*- (Mainardi, 2021, pp. 67-68).

How can these concepts be put into practice in everyone's school?

According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2013), every education and training system is structured around a specific pedagogical core that can be defined on the basis of four core elements and the relationships and implications that these entail at a general level in every moment of the school: 1) the grouping of pupils, 2) the grouping of school professionals, 3) the planning of forms and time placement of learning, 4) pedagogical choices and assessment practices.

The relationships between these constituent elements go far beyond the bilateral relationship of one to the other. For a school to be consistent with its objectives, each element of the system must be thought of in its relationship to every other element and to the legislator's declared intentions. Only a critical re-

interpretation of the practices in use can create the necessary conditions first of all for the acceptance of the idea of innovation and then for the activation of a general project of rethinking the constituent elements of the pedagogical core of school environments as a whole and not reviewed separately from one another (Mainardi, 2021). Paying attention to educational differentiation without questioning the adequacy of the practices and assessment tools in use to certify competences is something unacceptable today in the quest for a school that wants to be less homologating and increasingly inclusive.

Between ideologies, beliefs, and evidence

The concept of school inclusion aims to prioritize the educational and training needs of all individuals, by designing and organizing learning environments and activities that facilitate each person's active, autonomous, and effective participation in classroom life and learning. The commitment to not depriving anyone of access to educational and training resources, or any other prerequisite for individual development, creates an environment of equality and inclusion.

Over time, this commitment has led to the development of attention towards individuals who were previously excluded from formal education. This is particularly evident in the case of persons with disabilities, where the initial phase of special education has shifted towards a more systematic integration approach. Structural differentiation between special and regular teachers within separate places is being rejected, and inclusive environments are being created for all students.

Outdated and controversial assumptions are being replaced with declared wills and evidence-based practices. The goal is to create truly inclusive and high-quality school environments for all individuals. Practicing an inclusive school today means providing conditions that do not discriminate against anyone and benefit everyone and the community in terms of social sustainability.
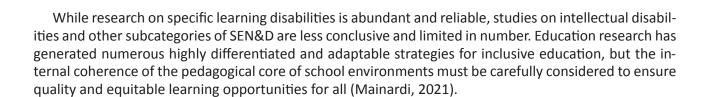
From the assimilation of an ideology to its accommodation in children's school environments and experiences

This dynamic and exponentially growing process of inclusive education must face the resistance that achieving results aligned with the stated goals may entail. Even if the ideology is shared and assimilated, school habits, beliefs, and traditions may challenge the effective accommodation of this goal, which necessarily implies innovative teaching choices to be «normally inclusive» (Ebersold, 2021).

Comparative indicators between countries and states consider the condition of temporary or permanent exclusion or inclusion from mainstream school environments as one of the main aspects (EASIE, 2020, p. 12). An interesting case study, involving several states and showing similarities with other regions of Europe and the world, concerns the internal comparison of Swiss cantonal school systems. Although these systems are united by the same constitutional provisions, they are autonomous and distinct in their executive, legislative and administrative aspects of schooling. Although they adopt the federal basis of education, they may differ in the timing and forms of assimilation and adaptation of educational priorities emerging over time (Mainardi, 2022a).

While for some countries, the accessibility imperative has led to a radical reorientation, for others, it has been a continuous evolutionary process that continues today in line with earlier intentions and choices. Alongside significant differences between countries, the chronological data also illustrate the general trend of ongoing evolution (EASNIE, 2021).

A recent meta-analysis by Bless (2019) highlighted empirical evidence that supports inclusive schooling. One important finding is that having students from the same municipality attend the same school is crucial for social inclusion. Another key finding is that inclusive education strategies benefit not only students with disabilities, but all students in the classroom. However, attitudes towards inclusion among teachers and parents vary depending on the type of special educational needs and disabilities (SEN&D), and comparative studies of inclusive and segregated education do not always consider all categories of SEN&D.

While research on specific learning disabilities is abundant and reliable, studies on intellectual disabilities and other subcategories of SEN&D are less conclusive and limited in number. Education research has generated numerous highly differentiated and adaptable strategies for inclusive education, but the internal coherence of the pedagogical core of school environments must be carefully considered to ensure quality and equitable learning opportunities for all (Mainardi, 2021).

Unlocking the Power of Scientific Research Tools for Inclusion: The Crucial Role of Images and Representations

Kielblock and Woodcock (2023) argue that there is an urgent need to revise research frameworks that do not view inclusive education as education for all. Their analysis of 225 studies suggests that studies aligned with this intention must focus on the attitudes and practices of quality education for all, by recognizing elements such as access, attendance, participation, and success of all students in school and the conditions that enable this. They recommend a closer and more direct dialogue between researchers advocating for inclusive education from a theoretical perspective and those conducting empirical studies, including critical peer reviews.

Their conclusions are based on the observation that almost all empirical studies on teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education are rooted in the framework of inclusive special education (students with SEN are distinct from others). This «drift» can lead to institutional policy development that neglects the promotion of educational practices for all students because it is guided by research that emphasizes inclusive education for some (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015).

According to Kielblock and Woodcock (2023), the research orientation also has direct implications for practice. According to them, – «*The large number of surveys on inclusion, which teachers are asked to complete, might affect what teachers believe inclusion is about. Questionnaires, that claim to be on inclusion, that ask questions pertaining to teaching students with SEND in regular classrooms might make it difficult for teachers to think beyond inclusion as being the placement of particular (groups of) students (e.g., with SEND) in regular classes*» –.

Biased thinking about inclusion, even if conveyed unwittingly through research tools that could be described as anachronistic or partial to an open vision of inclusion, risks increasing exclusivity in schools and classrooms (Slee, 2013).

The act of welcoming students into the classroom does not automatically lead to a positive outcome. Inclusion, as an action, is not always successful and can also lead to exclusion. The process and outcome, as well as the underlying ideology and competences, depend on various factors such as pedagogical beliefs, professional training, resources, possibilities, and responsibilities. These contingencies operate within each school system, and nationally and internationally, school inclusion will involve school networks and academia to build on experiences at micro and macro levels, share empirical evidence, encourage projects, and stimulate comparative studies of the factors that contribute to the quality and effectiveness of increasingly accessible and high-quality school environments for the benefit of all.

The concept of inclusive education for all must guide school leaders, other school professionals, and researchers in the development of the vision and mission of the 21st-century school. It is, therefore, important to establish a school that is consistent with inclusive values.

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