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# Financing inclusive Education: Critical Reflections on the Italian Model of Resource Allocation for Inclusive Education

## Finanziare l'educazione inclusiva: riflessioni critiche sul modello italiano di allocazione delle risorse per l'educazione inclusiva

Call

Inclusion-related educational research requires a critical and reflective analysis of educational (in)equity and, thus, also a critical view on policies, legislation, and governance dynamics. Policies of education funding, on both international and national scales, provide important backgrounds for knowledge discourses and organisational cultures on the school level. Data show that many European countries are currently moving towards funding models where the latter is detached from the identification of so-called "special educational needs" for specific individuals, and it is potentially considered less at risk of enhancing inequity via labelling. This article focuses on the policy of inclusion-related education funding in Italy and discusses it critically. Moreover, drawing upon a comprehensive international comparative analysis of three educational systems (Norway, Ireland, and Italy) we aim to bring to light some implicit cultural and structural taken-for-granted choices. In doing so, we analyse the power-related dynamics behind inclusion-related funding strategies by shedding light on the constructions of cases, the concepts of normalcy and difference within the framework of funding strategies, as well as their relevance for educational equity.

**Keywords:** difference | educational inequity | normalcy | governance | financing

La ricerca educativa sull'inclusione richiede un'analisi critica e riflessiva della (in)equità educativa e, quindi, anche una visione critica delle politiche, della legislazione e delle dinamiche di governance. Le politiche di finanziamento dell'istruzione, sia a livello internazionale che nazionale, forniscono un contesto importante per i discorsi sulla conoscenza e le culture organizzative a livello scolastico. I dati mostrano che molti Paesi europei si stanno attualmente orientando verso modelli di finanziamento in cui quest'ultimo è svincolato dall'identificazione dei cosiddetti "bisogni educativi speciali" per individui specifici, ed è potenzialmente considerato meno a rischio di rafforzare l'inequità attraverso l'etichettatura. Questo articolo si concentra sulla politica di finanziamento dell'istruzione legata all'inclusione in Italia e la discute criticamente. Inoltre, basandosi su un'ampia analisi comparativa internazionale di tre sistemi educativi (Norvegia, Irlanda e Italia), ci proponiamo di portare alla luce alcune scelte implicite, culturali e strutturali, date per scontate. In questo modo, analizziamo le dinamiche di potere alla base delle strategie di finanziamento legate all'inclusione, facendo luce sulle costruzioni dei casi, sui concetti di normalità e differenza nell'ambito delle strategie di finanziamento e sulla loro rilevanza per l'equità educativa.

**Parole chiave:** differenza | disuguaglianza educativa | normalità | governance | finanziamento

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## 1. Introduction

Inclusion-related educational research requires a critical and reflective analysis of educational (in)equity on different levels. On one hand, this entails a transformative entitlement regarding educational organisations and institutions, on the other, a critical observation of policies and legislation, respectively, as well as of the dynamics of governance. Research on inclusive education informed by sociological underpinnings, aims particularly at empirical analyses and reflections on dispositifs of normalcy and difference and their impact on the different levels of educational practice within institutions (Benadusi, 2021; Benvenuto, 2022; Bocci & Guerini, 2022; Budde & Hummrich, 2014; Ferri, 2015; Seitz et alii, 2024). Based on the assumption that policies on international and national levels concretise themselves via legislation and regulative frames and, thus, provide important backgrounds for knowledge discourses and organisational cultures on the level of schools, in this article we focus on and critically discuss policies of education funding. We also shed light on inclusion-relevant aspects of funding, critically questioning the power-related dynamics involved in the social construction of normalcy, (dis)ability and difference along with their relevance to educational inequity. In doing so, we refer to a completed internationally comparative analysis (Banks et alii, 2023) and draw connections between its findings and our in-depth-reflections on the Italian system of inclusion-related financing of education in schools, and its meaning within a theoretical framework of educational (in)equity and governance.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Norming, Steering and Governing

Inclusion-related educational research has been described as a critical and reflective analysis of dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within the different levels of educational systems (Peters & Besley, 2014; Slee, 2011; 2018). Taking a closer look at the scientific discourse on inclusive education what becomes evident is that, over the last decades, the inclusion-related discourse has become more and more interwoven with in-equity-critical research as well as approaches from intersectionality research, post-colonial studies and reflections on ableism, classism, and racism (Boger, 2019; Riegel, 2016). The critical perspective on educational (in)equity inherent in inclusion research was thus decisively strengthened. This means that inclusion-related educational research can be seen as situated in the vicinity of the critical educational theory tradition (Klafki, 1976; Mollenhauer, 1977) and Frankfurt School (Adorno, 2016; Katzenbach, 2015). Therefore, it draws on a theoretical framework that is not only limited to the observation and reflection of educational practice, but that also reflects social conditions within which this takes place. Based on these assumptions, legal regulations and rules about the financial resources of educational practice are understood, here, as the political expression of norms and dispositifs (Foucault, 1977) which are processed in political and scientific discourses. This way, they not only shape the framework conditions of educational practice at the school level but also have a powerful impact on knowledge discourses and school cultures (Helsper, 2008). In concrete terms, they determine – at the level of mutual understanding – which practices of inclusion and exclusion are regarded as legitimate, and which are not (the “do’s and don’ts”) and how “inclusion-relevant” individual cases are constructed within knowledge discourses (Labhart, 2019; Kaiser & Seitz, 2020). It can be assumed that these dynamics are meaningful not only for the knowledge discourses in schools but also for social practices of education (Machold & Wienand, 2021), particularly regarding the habitual patterns behind (e.g. Kabel, 2019). Thus, it is of high interest to see to what extent – and in what way – concepts of difference, (dis)ability, and (dis)advantage shape strategies of financing and underlie hegemonic concepts of normalcy, as this can be seen as crucial for the enhancement of educational inequity.



### 3. Inclusion related educational research on financing inclusive education

In the scientific discourse, there is a general consensus that the presence, participation, and achievement of all students are decisive quality references for inclusive classrooms and schools. Therefore, they serve as guiding principles for school-related conceptions (Ainscow, 2016; Slee, 2018). The tension between the need to treat all learners as essentially the same and, at the same time, the equal and opposite intention to treat them as unique and individual is also described as a structurally given antinomy of teachers' professionalism in general (cf. Helsper, 2020). This is seen by some as necessarily endowing the educational practices of teachers in inclusive classrooms with paradoxes (Ianes & Demo, 2022) while, by others as generating individually challenging learning opportunities for each child within the class community and securing equity precisely this way. The latter is also described as egalitarian difference (Prenzel, 1993), which has been shown as *the* decisive aspect of inclusion-specific teachers' professionalism (Scheidt, 2017; Seitz & Simon, 2021). The associated action-guiding pedagogical orientations of teachers regarding (in)equity and difference, are integral to the orientation framework at each school level. At the same time, educational policies, understood both as legislation and structures of the educational systems, are recontextualised in specific ways within this framework (Altrichter, 2010).

Internationally comparative analyses have shown how, following a general trend, policies related to inclusive education have expanded their focus beyond "disability" and "special educational needs" – which are seen as essentialising and stabilising concepts – and now also encompass a broader focus on the improvement of quality education for all learners (Meijer & Watkinson, 2016). Nonetheless, this expansion does not detach itself from categorical orders of difference. The implementation of quality inclusive education is, however, challenged by the fact that, in many countries, the implementation of inclusive education has grown out of debates around specialist segregated provision which has produced a contradictory overlapping of policies (Donnelly, 2010; Opertti, Walker & Zhang, 2014). The ambivalent regulations and directives – recontextualised at the different school levels – imply diffusivity for educational practices. This can be illustrated, among other things, by Individual Education Plans (IEP's), which are used in many countries when a child is diagnosed – on an administrative level – as having special educational needs. IEPs are often seen as instruments that empower quality of education by means of ensuring specific support to an individual. A closer look, however, reveals that, at the institutional level, social practices of Individual Educational Planning for only specific children administered in advance, have an impact on orientation frameworks as they reinforce the essentialisation of difference related to concepts of normalcy, potentially masking inequity-relevant habitual dynamics behind the diagnostic practices (Seitz & Hamacher, 2022; Richter & Sufryd, 2020). On a concrete level, this could mean, for example, planning 1:1 learning situations based on lowered learning expectations (Alves, 2018; Auer, Bellacicco & Ianes, 2023). Such social practices of "doing difference" (Machold & Wienand, 2021) essentialise and stabilise the case-constructions behind the administrative decision to the individual – whereas a possible lack of quality of inclusive teaching in terms of addressing diverse learners within an open learning environment, characterised by social coherence, is overlooked. At the same time, the hegemonic patterns of thought regarding concepts of normalcy that shape dynamics of case-constructions and diagnostic practices "behind the scenes" (also described as institutional discrimination; Gomolla & Radtke, 2002) are excluded from closer reflections. It remains unclear how these dynamics manifest differently in variously structured educational systems.

As critical observers of discourses on the different levels, including policies, legislations, and organisations, we analyse the following documentations and regulations regarding funding. Additionally, we discuss their potential connections to discourses and notions on the level of schools and school cultures in Italy.



#### 4. The relationship between models of financing and inclusive education practice

It is obvious that high quality education is dependent on appropriate frame conditions, structures, and financing. Therefore, it is of interest how much money a state is willing to spend on education and how this money is distributed within the system.

In the context of the large-scale assessment studies (OECD, 2019; 2023) and the normative agreements at the level of the United Nations (2015), many OECD countries have reflected on their investments in education and in some cases deliberately increased them (Statista, 2021). This is justified, on one hand, in terms of achievement and the national economy, on the other, the establishment and strengthening of social and educational justice is drawn into the argumentation. Due to different levels of stratification with specific dynamics of (re)production of inequity within the educational system, related discourses highly differ at national level.

Thus, when it comes to the financing of education, in school systems with tracking, it is particularly significant to discuss and reflect on how differently the individual school types are equipped and how these differences are justified. In an inclusive school system, such as the Italian one, it is rather crucial to ask about which levels of education are deemed relevant and how this is reflected financially. Additionally, it is important to explore whether – and in what form – specific funding is allocated for the inclusion-related quality of education at the different levels.

In short, within an inclusive school system, if there is a specific funding allocated for “inclusion” – in addition or alongside the general funding of the entire educational system – it is crucial to define the concept associated with this particular area of focus, and to what extent this is interwoven with narratives relevant to inequity. The question of funding is, therefore, meaningful for both the teachers’ educational practice and professional behaviour. Simultaneously, this is deeply intertwined with the structure of an educational system and with policy-related discourses.

A brief look into the financing strategies of different European countries shows that most of them provide for a type of a specific funding for inclusion-related aspects of educational practice. However, they show a general trend towards a focus on the development of quality of education for all learners (Meijer & Watkins, 2016). At the same time, in many European countries, the contradictory nature of laws that focus on the education system as a whole coexisting alongside measures for specific groups of students, which stabilise the concept of specificity, results in obvious tensions (EASNIE, 2016, 2018; Ebersold et alii, 2019; Meijer & Watkins, 2019; Parrish, 2014). In fact, regulations that concern the whole system have more potential for change and transformation towards an inclusive quality of schooling. These tensions are reflected as a noticeable dominance of special needs education within discourses on inclusive education, which can be described as masking (Foucault, 1988) and – at the implementation level – as confusing. In some countries, this is sometimes seen as a contradictory overlapping of policies (critically Banks et alii, 2023).

In literature, funding policies and structures based on case-constructions and following identifications of learners as having specific needs are known as the Input Model of Funding (Meijer, 1999). For, at least, a decade, data in different European countries have shown that this funding model implies risks related to both quality and equity (Ebersold & Meijer, 2016). Moreover, it implies an individual understating of difference characterised by demands of subjectivations for children and their families as “persons in need” (Treille, Caritas & Agnelli Foundation, 2011), whereas the categories for the construction of cases remain on a diffuse level and – as demonstrated many times – are shaped by habitual patterns and concepts of normalcy (Diehm, 2020; Kramer & Helsper, 2010). In this framework, prevention and intervention have become a powerful dispositif within the education system (Kelle et alii, 2017), which can lead to patterns of pathologisation of habitual aspects (Hamacher, 2020). This is particularly controversial because countries with such a model document more requests for funding by means of growing identified “specific” needs, a phenomenon called “search for pathology”, “strategic behaviour” or “diagnosis for dollars” (Pijl, 2014; Schuck, Rauer & Prinz, 2018; Winter et alii, 2006; Ysseldyke, 1987). Moreover, funding based on individual labelling is often used for “outsourcing” strategies: identified students are delegated to specific professionals or, in some systems, are placed in special classes or schools (Ebersold et alii, 2019).



Due to all these limitations, many countries are currently moving towards funding models that combine the described input model with the so-called throughput model of funding (Meijer, 2003). These are based on stable formulas and allocated as long as specific services will autonomously be organised by a school, a municipality, or a local region, using – in a subsequent step – a needs-based indicator. In this model, the amount is allocated via a lump sum with possible adjustments for socioeconomic composition or disadvantage (Meijer, 2003). This way, funding is independent from the identification of so-called “special educational needs” of specific individuals and it is potentially considered less at risk of enhancing inequity via labelling. It is also seen as more supportive for school autonomous choices under the aim of developing high quality inclusive education practice (Ebersold *et alii*, 2019). One possible risk of this funding model is seen in the difficulty of monitoring to what extent and in what way funding has been used to tackle equity and inclusion-related issues as planned (Meijer, 2003).

## 5. Current Italian policies and structures - implications of a comparative analysis

A comparative perspective can encourage a critical rethinking of the way inclusive education is conceived and funded, especially in putting it in relation with the institutional, socio-cultural, and educational context (Merkens, 2011). Comparative studies in the field of inclusive education have contributed to unveil the ways in which key-concepts like “ability”, “disability”, “need” or “disadvantage” have been culturally constructed and, in that way, have opened the room for critical reflection of taken-for-granted conceptualisations (Powell, 2011; Scott, 2014).

Based on a synoptic analysis that contrasts Italy with Norway and Ireland, and, therefore, making some cultural and structural assumptions explicitly visible, we provide critical reflections on the way inclusive education and inclusive funding policies are conceptualised in the Italian legislation.

### 5.1 Synopsis of three different educational systems and strategies of financing

In order to critically discuss current policies and structures of funding in the Italian educational system, the funding of inclusion-related resources in close relation to educational and inclusive policies in three different countries and the comparative analysis was conducted in three steps. The first one was a literature review that took into account more than ninety documents around the topic of the funding models for inclusive education in Europe. The main basis of that first task were the reports of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education on financing special needs education and/or inclusion (2011, 2014, 2016).

Drawing on this, it was possible to map different countries in Europe whose funding system addresses one or some of the specific challenges regarding Italy and which offers some impulses for alternative approaches and strategies. For the purpose of this paper, and considering diversity in terms of inclusive education policies and funding models, Norway and Ireland were chosen. Moreover, in both countries the resource allocation systems are completely or partially independent from diagnosis and students’ categories, and in that sense, represent an interesting contrast to the Italian funding system. In the second phase, one scholar per country was involved as an expert of the connection between inclusive education and inclusive funding models. This was inspired by the Delphi method where a heterogeneous range of experts on a certain topic can contribute to a deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Green, 2014). In a third step, the data was synthesised and analysed according to the three-pillar model by Scott (2014), that describes how institutions are built on cognitive, normative, and regulative structures, where the regulative dimension explicitly describes formulated rules and laws, whereas the normative and cultural-cognitive dimensions refer to internalised norms and values to shared conceptions of social reality.

For what concerns the regulative dimension, the following aspects were considered, leaning on a previous comparative analysis conducted by the European Agency of Special Needs and Inclusive Education





(2016): 1) inclusion-related educational policies, the structure of the education system from age 3 to age 18, and the percentage of students formally recognised as having “special educational needs” (“SEN”); 2) resourcing and funding, with the types and access of provisions and supports, the sources of funds, the accountability in terms of reports to track the amount, the level of decisions for provisions and the use of funds (centralised or decentralised).

The fact that the investments in education in these countries vary greatly must be taken into account for a comparative interpretation of the data presented. In 2018, Norway spent 6.6 %, Italy 4.1% and Ireland 3.3 % of their GDP in education (Statista, 2021) which means that Norway invests twice as much as Ireland and approximately 1.5% as much as Italy. The countries also differ for their history in inclusion-related policies: Norway shares with Italy a long history of renunciation of special schools, while in Ireland there is a co-existence in terms of dual track policies of inclusive schools and special settings (schools and classes). In Italy and Ireland there is a school system with a common primary school and lower secondary school, where tracking, in terms of different choices and orientation, starts at the age of 14 or 15 from upper secondary school. In Norway, this kind of choice is required later (17). In Italy, the definition of “SEN” is based on medical defined categories and is the responsibility of the healthcare system, whereas in Norway and in Ireland there is an a-categorical approach, mainly based on situational concrete needs instead of fixed categories.

About the funding model, Italy has a standard input model, while both the countries involved in this analysis have combined models: Norway input and throughput model, while the Irish system combines input, throughput, and output models, making some of the funding dependent on the evaluation of the achieved results.

|  |   | Italy  | Norway  | Ireland  |
|--|---|--|---|--|
| Regulative dimension                       | <b>Placement: Mainstreaming / Special education</b>         | Mainstreaming from the 1970ies   | Mainly mainstreaming from the 1970ies   | Mainstreaming and special classes or schools   |
|  | <b>Tracking</b>   | From the age of 14   | From the age of 17  | From the age of 15   |
|  | <b>Definition of “SEN”</b>                                  | (Mainly) medically defined categories  | A-categorical definition of entitlement to special education  | A-categorical definition of SEN  |
|  | <b>Numbers of “SEN”- diagnosed children</b>                 | 3.6-4.1% students with a disability (MIUR 2022, ISTAT 2022); 5.4% students with a learning disability (MIUR 2022)  | about 8% of students is entitled to special education, large regional differences (Banks et alii, 2023)   | about 25%-28% of students identified as having SEN (Banks et alii, 2023)   |
|  | <b>Funding model</b>  | Input model  | Combination of throughput- / input model  | Combination of throughput-, input- and output model  |
|  | <b>Level of decision for allocation of resources</b>        | level of individual student  | level of school community   | level of school community  |
| Normative and cultural-cognitive dimension | <b>Conceptualisation of inclusive education</b>             | On one side, the general education system is expected to respond to the principle of equity for all, on the other side inclusive policies affirm the individual right of students identified as having “SEN” to get the barriers they encounter compensated. | Inclusive Education is conceived as a contribution to democracy and equality in society. No identification of “SEN”, adapted education is granted to all those that do not seem to benefit from “standard” education. | Placement of learners with diagnosed “SEN” can take place in mainstreaming, but also in special classes and special schools. The choice is discussed also in terms of students’ achievement. |
|  | <b>Conceptualisation of the funding model for inclusion</b> | Input model based on a category-based medical understanding of “SEN”. Decisions of funding follow national funding rules and are mainly related to medical diagnosis.  | Funding for general education, no specific funding for inclusive education. At the level of single schools, on the basis on autonomous decisions, provisions for single students are allocated, if needed.            | Input and throughput model, based on medical understanding of “SEN”. Output model based on learners’ assessment also plays a role. Decisions on funding are taken at school level.           |

Tab. 1: Synopsis of the comparative analysis



## 5.2 Critical reflection on the Italian funding model in the light of the comparative analysis

In Italy diversity is structurally ensured throughout the entire basic education: the Constitution and legislation guarantee everybody's presence in the first eight school years in general schools (lanes, Demo & Dell'Anna, 2020; Marsili, Morganti & Signorelli, 2021). At the same time, current laws ensure compensatory measures and resources in relation to individual children in case they are identified as having a "disability" (law 104/1992), "learning disability" (law 170/2010) or "other kinds of SEN" (ministry communication 2013) and the allocation of resources is strictly related to labelling.

With this kind of compensatory approach, an understanding is established by law which has been the subject of criticism for long (Bernstein, 1971[2022]). In particular, the hegemonic notions of normalcy that this entails, have been criticised as powerfully reinforcing inequity (Seitz & Hamacher, 2022) as the categories used for "vulnerability" or "more in need" can only be thought of in terms of a deficit compared to normalcy (Kelle *et alii*, 2017) and carry high risks of habitually influenced categorisation practices, as it has been shown at both national and international levels (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1971; Kramer & Helsper, 2010; Treillle, Caritas & Agnelli Foundation, 2011).

The hegemonial concepts of normalcy, which are pursued by compensation, are closely connected with dynamics of racism, ableism, classism, and gender inequity (Migliarini, 2019; Riegel, 2016) and the inherent idea of an effective "decoupling" of education and family affiliation is thus negatively marked as disadvantaged and called for corresponding subjectivation processes (Akbaba, 2017).

This is compounded in Italy in a specific way by the fact that the assignment of the corresponding diagnoses is under the responsibility of the medical system. This structural condition implies processes of pathologisation applied to the individual as a meaningful part of case-constructions. As medical diagnoses can hardly be questioned, this aspect can be seen as powerfully essentialising conceived social distance in the shape of a deficit, applied to individuals and their families, this way stabilising "behind the scenes" concepts of social normalcy and masking social diversity which implies high risks of enhancing social inequity (Seitz & Hamacher, 2022).

Summarising, Italy is facing some specific challenges related to ambivalent inclusion-related funding policies. Referring to the synopsis presented above, in the following, we discuss two issues that emerge in the comparison and that can put forward the discourse on resource allocation in the Italian system.

### 5.2.1 The relationship between case-construction and resource allocation

Italian funding policies make resource allocation dependent on the construction and identification of individual "SEN", where this is seen as a mainly medically defined category. Instead, both selected countries for the comparative analysis use non-medical definitions of "SEN".

The Norwegian normative framework states that all students who do not seem to benefit from the "regular" education in schools are entitled to special education. There is a service, the pedagogical and psychological office (PPO), located outside the school, which is responsible for supporting schools in the pedagogical assessment, evaluating students' needs and a possible entitlement for support resources. Thus, the guiding perspective here is not medical, but pedagogical. Furthermore, the definition of "SEN" is a-categorical in the sense that no definition of entitled groups exists *a priori*. It's the specific interaction of single students with their life and learning contexts which are assessed, instead. As in Norway, also Ireland adopts an a-categorical broad definition of "SEN", defined in terms of "a restriction in the capacity of the person to participate in and benefit from education on the account of an enduring physical, sensory, mental health or learning disability, or any other condition which results in a person learning differently from a person without that condition" (EPSEN Act, 2004). This definition is based on a construction of difference and some medical categories are still named, but, at the same time, passed in reference to any condition that constitutes a barrier to learning and participation, regardless of the causes.

It seems that a non-medically defined allocation to special education resources in a country like Norway with inclusive placement settings, might open the door for resource allocation based on individual needs. However, this might mitigate the described risk of "pathologizing" possible mismatches between the



habitus of schools and families (Kramer & Helsper, 2010) in relation to the individual child, although in this system it still seems possible for the labelling practices to be normality-driven along inequity-relevant categories.

In Italy, an inequity-reinforcing bias of diagnoses can be clearly seen in the over-representation of students who experienced migration within the “SEN” macro-category of being “disadvantaged” (Migliarini, D’Alessio & Bocci, 2020). This is linked with a compensative approach. The diffuse concept of “disadvantage” which is also related to the child’s family can only be seen as oppositional to normalcy and, therefore, it opens the described normalcy-led dynamics of discrimination masking social inequity via pathologizing, while also stabilising and enhancing it via subjectivation demands to the individuals and their families. This way “SEN”-policies might reinforce inequity despite discursive normative promises of equity within an inclusive education system.

### 5.2.2 Resource allocation for inclusive education

A characteristic that differentiates the Italian funding policies for inclusive education from those in Norway and Ireland is that the type and quantity of resource allocation is defined on an individual basis. Although teachers for inclusive education are assigned to the class, the authorization of resources for inclusion are an integral part of the Individual Educational Plan of particular students having been identified as having “SEN”. This is the reason why – at the level of schools – additional personnel resources of teachers or assistants are often in relation to individuals and not to the group. On the level of educational practices, these types of recontextualization processes might lead to social practices of “doing difference” and of such of othering in the classroom, moreover, they are meaningful for the collaboration of the professionals (Seitz et alii, 2023).

Both in Norway and Ireland, decisions on and planning of inclusive resources take place on higher levels that make them more systemic and less individual-related. In the Irish system, schools receive a baseline component of additional teaching supports; secondly, through a “school educational profile”, additional resources are allocated to schools using a weighted funding formula based on the number of students with complex needs, the results of standardised tests, and the social context of the school. Schools then have a great autonomy and school principals have the responsibility to allocate resources.

In Norway, decisions on inclusive resources are taken at the level of school community. In this case, school autonomy does not only regard the internal allocation of resources received. Schools, in fact, are funded by municipalities and counties and the type of resources and their amount are defined locally. This is particularly interesting for a country like Italy that, in the Educational Act, states the principle of Adapted Education that applies to all students (Art. 34). It follows that, education is supposed to be adapted to different life situations and be focused on the potentials of all individual students.

It can be considered as a strategy that focuses on benefiting all learners. This would mean that principals (and teachers) would be taking decisions on the distribution of resources within the school and on how to manage them. However, inclusive education would have to take place within the regular schools, thus setting requirements for open didactic settings and critically reflected pedagogical practices regarding diversity, participation and equity in classrooms. In this way, also differentiation and open learning environments based on social coherence could easily be understood as a general demand for high quality in teaching and learning and not as an additional instrument which applies to just some students. The stressed school autonomy and highly local-oriented way of budgeting might open the space for a very flexible allocation of inclusion-related resources.

In Italy, the assignment by means of the IEPs, an individual document, hinders the understanding of resources for inclusive education as means for a systemic enrichment of the learning context and the quality of teaching in general. Rather, differentiation seems to be interpreted quite often as a compensative instrument directed only at specific students who are associated with difficulties in relation to a socially constructed idea of “normal” requirements of learning and achievement. Therefore, it is not surprising that research has shown micro-exclusion taking place with some students working in separate rooms (so-called support rooms) or staying in the common classroom but without collaborating with





peers (D'Alessio, 2011). This has long been criticised as an inadequate quality of inclusive teaching and learning (Nes, Demo & Ianes, 2018).

Besides the issue of allocating resources to individuals or learning contexts, another interesting aspect regards the way inclusion-related resources are conceived. In fact, in the Italian school system the main resource for inclusion consists of additional personnel (teachers and assistants, mainly). At the level of practices, this has two important consequences. First, this may lead to so-called “strategic behaviours” (Ebersold et alii, 2019) where the need for missing personnel resources on a general level is met by means of a strategic use of diagnoses related to individuals. Literature describes such phenomenon of increased severity of diagnoses related to the perceived need of co-teaching (Ianes & Augello, 2019). Consequently, the above-mentioned strong link between the diagnosed student and the allocated specialized personnel can become a barrier for a responsibility shared by all adults for a high-quality inclusive teaching and learning and stabilise the idea of normalcy and difference by reinforcing the essentialisation of the diagnose with all the reflected inequity-related problems. Research has pointed out practices of “delegation” (Mura, 2015) that occur in some classes where the specialised personnel recourse is seen as linked to diagnosed students, thus not available for the rest of the class. This kind of understanding of separate responsibilities has also led to imbalances on the status of the teachers (Treille, Caritas & Agnelli Foundation, 2011) which also hinders high-quality co-teaching.

Within the Norwegian school system, the pedagogical and psychological office (PPO), already mentioned in relation to the pedagogical assessment, is also responsible for supporting schools in the planning of inclusive learning environments. This is the first activated inclusive resource, implying the development of the context. Only subsequently, and if useful for the planned pedagogical and didactical context, extra (specialised) personnel resources are assigned. It could be hypothesized that, this way, high quality inclusive teaching based on the assumption of participation, diversity and communality might counteract against a binary simplified understanding of a group made of a homogeneous group of “normal” learners and a second group of learners assessed as having “SEN”.

## 6. Concluding reflections, implications, and limitations

Finally, we cautiously pose inquiries and seek for possible conclusions regarding the system of funding practiced in Italy that arise from the conducted comparative analysis.

In undertaking this task, it is important to consider that the conducted analyses of similarities and differences in the funding strategies of various countries are influenced by cultural patterns of interpretation given the research group’s connection to a particular location (Mannheim, 1980). This is also discussed as insider-outsider perspective in comparative research (McNess et alii, 2015; Milligan, 2016) and implies a careful reflection on one’s theoretical traditions and cultural-bound specificity (Cappai et alii, 2010). Therefore, the limitations of our analysis are evident in the varying meanings of normalcy regarding labelling within different educational systems or the diverse understandings of inclusive education in the different contexts described here. In order to avoid naïve nostrifications (Parreira do Amaral, 2015), and considering the afore-mentioned structural differences between the education systems, drawing possible conclusions cannot merely be a matter of transferring quality-promoting strategies from vastly different countries into the Italian system. However, acknowledging this limitation, it can be stated that the system of funding practiced in Italy comprises regulations that do not seem to be consistent with each other at all levels.

Adherence to a medically based, seemingly clear and distinct assessment of individuals, albeit based on diffuse categories within an overall inclusive education system, carries the risk of transforming a lack of habitual fit into individual deficits. This process powerfully compels affected children and their families to subjectify themselves as deficient with regard to expectations of normalcy.

By juxtaposing the proclaimed clarity of a medical diagnosis with the lack of clarity of the referred indicators, the diagnosis renders itself immune to questioning. The diagnostic process is thus endowed



with a high degree of power, and the underlying dispositif of compensation for normalcy is no longer the focus of critical consideration (Seitz & Hamacher, 2022). This may hinder further quality-related transformations towards inclusive educational practice based on equity and, simultaneously, stabilize inequity via dynamics of discrimination behind the scenes.

In interaction with this, specific ambivalences of teachers' professionalism become relevant. While these ambivalences are not the primary focus of our discussion here, they remain significant, because the transmission of regulations into educational practice occurs within school cultures via teachers and their orientations (Kaiser & Seitz, 2020). The structurally unclear role of teachers in relation to inclusion – having a responsibility for the class on the one hand but justified by an individual case-construction within a class – challenges the necessary, continuous development of inclusion-related quality in schools. This leads to diffuseness of the fields of activity, which results in uncertainty of action for the actors involved and hinders professional collaboration (Ianes et alii, 2020). The activation of reflective processes within school cultures can thus be a valuable resource for school communities to consciously deal with these ambivalences, although not dissolve them (Chapman & Ainscow, 2021).

Regarding the regulative dimension, Matucci proposes a new interpretation of the Italian Constitution concerning inclusive education. It should not be reduced to the *ex-post* compensation of disadvantage, but also encompass preventive actions that reduce *ex ante* the very formation of inequities (Matucci, 2020). This could be understood as a shift from specific resource allocation for certain students identified as disadvantaged to resources fostering an overall development of a learning environment where, ideally, inequities will not be produced. However, a currently internationally dominant prevention-oriented approach, asserting that preventive practices are not only necessary to avoid individual risks, but also societal risks, is not without contradictions. This is because this approach relies on the ascription of future risks to justify interventions in the present. The dispositif of normalcy, to which prevention must necessarily be aligned, is not resolved this way (Seitz & Hamacher, 2022).

In this context, we cautiously present two concrete ideas for rethinking resources allocation in Italy.

First, it can be assumed that a new wave of investments in education, in general, could reduce the pressure for the strategic activation of specific resources for inclusive education, along with all the connected risks described above. Over the last 20 years, the country has experienced a constant and systematic reduction of expenditure for education (Bianchi, 2020). Italy is the country with the lowest expenditure of public investments for education in Europe (accounting for 8% compared to a mean of 10.30% of the other European countries), and this is the result of a downward trend of 7% in the years 2012-2018, according to Eurostat2 statistics. In parallel, the number of students identified as having "SEN" has been constantly increasing (Banks et alii, 2023), showing how resources for inclusive education are, at least partially, adopted to compensate for the contraction in expenditure on education in general.

Second, we propose a school-based resource allocation, which binds resources to a plan designed by schools to best meet all learners' talents, interests and needs and to foster a democratic and equal learning environment. This implies overcoming the connection between a student's diagnosis and resources. Local school authorities could assign resources on the basis of the educational and organisational planned actions presented by a school community.

This would allow to overcome some of the major limitations discussed in the critical analyses, such as the strict link between identification of some learners (with mainly medical categories) and the assignment of resources. It can be hypothesised that resources seen as inclusion-relevant could extend beyond the allocation of specialized personnel resources. Furthermore, this approach could open the door for reflections on (changing) orientation frames at the school level and within the framework of school development processes, thus proving beneficial for teachers' professionalism (Berkemeyer & Manitus, 2016). However, it would also entail a high responsibility for school heads given their guiding role in shaping school cultures (Schratz, 2015) which implies the need for a structured counselling system.

This strategy would still leave the responsibility for individual assessment within the medical system and fail to dissolve the described contradictions between quality of education and normalcy-led habitual expectations of schools. Moreover, it would not mean a clear departure from the meritocratic approach



as the guiding principle of schooling and school-related policies in Italy which goes with some specific contradictions (Seitz et alii, 2024). Both of these critical aspects would need deeper discussion and research as they imply paradigm shifts. Consequently, the two concrete proposals should be regarded as initial steps on the long journey towards achieving high quality education together with a reduction of social inequity (United Nations, 2015).

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