School cultures between visions and policies – findings of a document analysis of three-year educational offer plans

Culture scolastiche tra visioni e politiche educative. Una document analysis dei piani triennali dell'offerta formativa

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OPEN ACCESS

Double blind peer review

Abstract

This article examines how schools articulate and communicate their pedagogical and inclusion-related orientations through the Piano Triennale dell'Offerta Formativa (PTOF), the three-year educational plan mandated by Italian law. Anchored in the sociology of knowledge and school culture theory, the study conceptualises PTOFs not as neutral descriptions of school reality but as social artefacts that both reflect and shape institutional knowledge discourses. The empirical basis consists of 46 PTOFs, covering all educational levels. The findings of the document analysis reveal that PTOFs serve a dual function as instruments of accountability towards external audiences and as internal reference points for school development. Their analysis offers insight into the symbolic orders, implicit norms, and discursive strategies through which school cultures navigate the interplay of autonomy, regulation, and inclusion policies.

Keywords: school development; school cultures; inclusion; document analysis

Riassunto

L'articolo esamina come le scuole articolano e comunicano i propri orientamenti pedagogici e in materia di inclusione attraverso il Piano Triennale dell'Offerta Formativa (PTOF), strumento di progettazione triennale previsto dalla normativa italiana. Ancorato alla sociologia della conoscenza e alla teoria delle culture scolastiche, lo studio non considera i PTOF come descrizioni neutre della realtà scolastica, bensì come artefatti sociali che riflettono e, al tempo stesso, plasmano il dibattito istituzionale sulla conoscenza. La base empirica è costituita da 46 PTOF relativi a tutti i gradi di scuola. I risultati dell'analisi documentale mostrano come il PTOF svolga una duplice funzione: da un lato, strumento di *accountability* verso interlocutori esterni; dall'altro, punto di riferimento interno per lo sviluppo scolastico. La sua analisi consente di mettere a fuoco gli ordini simbolici, le norme implicite e le strategie attraverso cui le culture scolastiche negoziano il rapporto fra autonomia, regolazione e politiche inclusive.

Parole chiave: sviluppo scolastico; culture scolastiche; inclusione; document analysis

1. Introduction

Individual schools in Italy have a high degree of autonomy in school management, e.g. in relation to the specific deployment of staff and to certain aspects of the curriculum; however, they are also subject to various accountability requirements (Campione, 2013). One of these requirements is to draw up their own three-year educational offer plan (in Italian: *Piano triennale dell'offerta formativa; in the following: PTOF*) containing school-specific curricular decisions and pedagogical guiding principles as well as structural regulations at school level. They are usually published on the school websites and can primarily be viewed and practised either as an administrative duty with a control function or as more of a beneficial instrument for quality-related change and development processes in schools. Whether and how this instrument of school development actually contributes to the quality of schools still seems to be unclear in many respects. In particular, there has been surprisingly little research into the specific contribution this instrument can make to the inclusion-related quality of schools, the extent to which inclusion-related development tasks are reflected in it and how these are processed in these documents. This is noteworthy above all because, in Italy, the consideration of aspects of inclusive education within PTOFs is mandatory (Eurydice, 2023). Addressing this research gap, in this article we discuss the findings of a document analysis of 46 PTOFs of schools within the Autonomous Province of Bozen-Bolzano.

2. Theoretical Framework

The study is theoretically grounded in the sociology of knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 1977) and related approaches to school cultures (Hargreaves, 1995; Helsper, 2008; Hinrichsen & Hummrich, 2021), aligning with research critical of educational inequity (Krüger et al., 2010; Diehm, Kuhn & Machold, 2017). We examine the conditions and dynamics of inclusive school development (Ainscow, 2020) through an understanding of school cultures as sets of social rules and norms underlying observable practices (Seitz et al., 2026a, in press). These norms, often unconsciously reproduced and transmitted as conventions, connect to the institution's 'hidden' structures, most visible in the unspoken "dos and don'ts" of school life (Hargreaves, 1994).

Based on these considerations, our analysis assumes that school cultures constitute conjunctive spaces in which pedagogical orientations are negotiated and shared knowledge is built (Asbrand, 2013). These organisational knowledge discourses manifest through social practices (Reckwitz, 2003), including the writing and implementation of PTOFs. Narratives and rationales in these documents thus provide insights into the pedagogical orientations and knowledge discourses shaping school cultures. Rather than determining individual thought and action, school cultures open possibilities for action that actors can draw upon in specific situations, such as drafting or applying PTOFs.

School development—understood as the systematic advancement of schools as learning organisations (Senge, 2011)—occurs within an educational system shaped by specific norms (Scott, 2014) at national and international levels. This creates distinct governance constellations in which school-level change interacts with broader structural and policy conditions (Maag Merki et al., 2016; Mincu, 2024) institutionalised in specific ways at the school level (Douglas, 1986). School development thus depends both on the coordination of organisational processes that recontextualise normative frameworks internally and on the agency of actors, who shape these discourses through communication, making them part of the school culture (Seitz et al., 2024a; Seitz et al., 2026b, in press).

Taking into account the briefly outlined internal and external governmental embedding of school cultural processes, we refer to a school-cultural understanding of school development, understood as symbolic orders (Helsper, 2008). This perspective makes it possible to analyse more precisely how contradictions between imaginary and social practices are dealt with, as documented in PTOFs, which are rooted in communicative practices in the elaboration and dissemination of the documents. To summarise, PTOFs as documents provide indirect insights into conjunctive spaces of experience and related knowledge discourses at the level of the school (Asbrand, 2013), which to a certain extent guide the social practices in schools in the background and shape communication in the school community (Hinrichsen & Hummrich, 2021).

Based on these considerations and following the outlined theoretical framework, PTOFs can therefore

be provisionally interpreted as an expression of the communicative struggle for the pedagogical and institutional identity of a school community (Seitz et al., 2026b, in press). They are intended to provide orientation for social practices within the school and for the school-based collaboration of all acteurs involved in school development, including children and young people. Further, it can be said that school development requires both external and internal communication and that directives such as the request to write and publish PTOFs are recontextualised differently within these dynamics at the level of the individual school, accompanied by specific interpretations and concretisations of the instrument. Of specific meaning for a deeper understanding of the school cultural anchoring of the documented orientations in PTOFs is therefore the extent to which acteurs in schools might collaborate and thus communicate when working on them, considering that collaboration has been shown as a weak aspect of professionalism of teachers in Italy (Mincu & Romiti, 2022).

Following this briefly described understanding of school development processes, school acteurs play an active part in these processes by placing external impulses, such as the request to write PTOFs, in the context of their own school and processing them in relation to the specific framework conditions that exist there in terms of school culture. Rules and norms about processes of institutionalisation implicitly find their way into school cultures and, through this, also into social practices (Hinrichsen & Hummrich, 2021). Writing and talking about PTOFs within schools are therefore social practices that are embedded in regulations as well as the corresponding processes of institutionalisation. Consequently, these documents bundle school cultural dynamics in a specific way, which is why the analysis of PTOFs should allow conclusions to be drawn about these dynamics.

This means that PTOFs are also documents from a research methodological perspective, as they are media with a mediating function that must be considered in a specific context of origin and follow their own logic (Hoffmann, 2018). Thus, the documents we analysed were seen as 'natural data', as they were not created for research purposes. Furthermore, they are not a 'mirror' of reality which researchers can simply look at in order to gather information and can only be read to a very limited extent as 'evidence' of school reality or indications of the issues addressed in them. PTOFs are thus not containers of information but have a life of their own within the described dynamics and can metaphorically be considered a kind of transparent lens through which we can perceive socially constructed realities as part of school cultures. As an object of research, they are 'an independent layer of social reality that unfolds its own effect' (Breidenstein et al., 2013, p. 94). Consequently, they are not objective representations of a factual situation but must always be considered in their social context as well as in regard to their logic of development and their communicative content. Their own logic and history of use, as well as the question of what the document attempts to represent, frame the document analysis we have undertaken, the research methodology of which is explained in more detail below.

3. Framework Conditions and State of the Art

In Italy, children typically begin primary school at the age of six and complete it over five years, finishing around the age of eleven. Afterwards, they progress to a three-year lower secondary school, which since 1961 has operated without tracking (Seitz, 2026, in press). In the 1970s and in the slipstream of the democratic waves around 1968 and the anti-psychiatry movement (Basaglia, 1968), special schools were legally abolished in Italy and it was mandated that mainstream schools are responsible for the education of all children, obligating them to develop concepts for inclusive education (Ianes et al., 2020; Marsili et al., 2021). This inclusive structure extends across all educational levels, from early childhood to upper secondary education, and dictates that inclusion-relevant aspects be crucial in school development processes as well as in teacher education. Teacher education in Italy was academized quite late at primary level (around 2000); at secondary-school level it is still fragmented (Capperucci & Piccioli, 2015; Mincu, 2019; Seitz, 2026, in press). In the programme of study to become a primary school teacher, inclusion-related curricular components are a compulsory part of the programme and need to be taken up in all parts of the programme with specific topics worth 36 credits.

According to the current research discourse, the consensually negotiated cornerstones of inclusive school quality are the realisation of democratic and participatory practices, a reflexive approach to inequity and

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diversity, and well-developed types of collaboration (Ainscow et al., 2012). To reach that aim, Italian schools have a high level of autonomy but are also subject to various accountability requirements. Thus, while schools are legal personalities and providers of education with their own cultural and programmatic identity, they must also report and ensure transparency (Presidential Decree No. 275/1999). PTOFs are a key component of the accountability system, which must be drafted and updated every three years by each educational institution (Law 2015, No. 107, Art. 1, paragraph 14). The PTOF is the document in which the school details its educational, organisational and pedagogical offer. Its creation must align with national and regional guidelines and be shared with school staff, but also with families and the local community, promoting greater transparency and participation. Within this framework, the ministerially prescribed curricula vary depending on the specific situation of the school (Allemann-Ghionda, 2013). This becomes particularly relevant in the context of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, where our research was conducted. Here the education system is characterised by the coexistence of three linguistically and institutionally distinct school administrations: one for schools with German as the educational language, one for those with Italian, and one for those with Ladin (Alber, 2012). These three systems operate under separate legal and administrative frameworks, each managed by its own department within the provincial government and headed by an independent school board authority (*Intendenza scolastica*). While all schools are part of the national education system, the three administrations retain significant autonomy in organisational decisions, teacher recruitment and development, and educational planning. This results in a certain degree of institutional differentiation, which significantly shapes how educational policies – especially those regarding inclusion, diversity and multilingualism – are interpreted and implemented in practice.

In view of these considerations, it can be assumed that the concrete social practices of drafting and dealing with PTOFs might vary between the differently administered schools. It can therefore be asked to what extent the PTOFs as documents provide indications as to whether they are primarily understood, to a greater or lesser extent, as a superficially relevant part of the administrative work, interpreted as relevant only for the public relations work of a school, or understood as pedagogical concept work with room for open discourse, reflection, creativity and design thinking. The latter would enable schools to focus on visions (the imaginary) on the one hand and on the underlying guiding rules and standards on the other. Reflections on that level of school culture open up meaningful opportunities to work on the development of a shared reason and intention for the future with which as many people as possible can identify (Seitz & Hamacher, 2022; Seitz et al., 2026b, in press). This points to the dual function of PTOFs at the level of school cultures: on the one hand, they serve to inform about a school's educational values and principles of action and thus address external persons – first and foremost the school administration – but also (potential) students and their families as well as cooperating organisations and networking partners. In addition to this external function, a PTOF can also serve as an internal 'compass', increasing a school's self-assurance of its values and the guiding educational principles of its social practices.

In concrete terms, a PTOF generally documents structures (organisation chart, areas of responsibility, timetable concept, etc.), cultures (mission statement, guiding principles, etc.) and practices (specific content priorities, implementation of framework guidelines, etc.).

This is particularly relevant with regard to the inclusion-related development of schools, which was the focus of our analyses, as clear pedagogical orientations and guiding values are a crucial resource for this (Booth & Ainscow, 2017). However, it must also be borne in mind that PTOFs with a clearly recognisable inclusion-related profile alone do not constitute inclusion-related school quality. For them to become integrated into the school culture, it must be possible to connect them to social practices and thus to the discourse of knowledge within the school. At the same time, they must be compiled within the structures and regulations of school requirements, as they are subject to specific administrative control, but also made publicly accessible, which gives them a certain volatility.

They are, therefore, a form of socially based negotiation about guiding principles of social practices but do not reflect 'reality'. In this respect, however, it can be assumed that they are based on a realistic ideal image of the school from the writers' point of view. This makes the way in which general inclusion-relevant guiding principles are translated into concrete school projects, action plans and structures within PTOFs of particular interest. In connection with this, the extent to which these aspects are communicated primarily as documentation of steps that have already been taken or as future-oriented plans must also be analysed.

4. Research Focus and Methodological Design

The aim of our analysis is to generate more precise knowledge about the function and significance of PTOFs within school development processes and to obtain information for relevant steering processes at policy level and for the concrete work on PTOFs with regard to their productive use within inclusion-related school development processes. This specific focus means a certain location-boundness (Mannheim, 1980) of our document analysis which, given that this results in the unavoidable selectivity and constructed nature of our depiction, has therefore been made transparent.

Document analysis is an interpretative method, a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating existing documents (Bowen, 2009, p. 27; Hoffmann, 2018), which means that the analysed texts have been produced without a researcher's involvement. The term does not refer to a specific methodological instrument but rather serves as a description of a specific approach (Wolff 2000, p. 504), which is why it is hardly possible to present an ideal-typical or paradigmatic sequence of a document analysis (Hoffmann, 2018, p. 141). Given that PTOFs document a school's public identity, mirror knowledge discourses within the school and guide its internal and external communication, the research interest, focused on identifying indicators of school cultural discourses related to inclusive structures, inclusive cultures and inclusive educational practices in the document, was operationalised into the following research questions:

- What information can be found on dealing with diversity? Is it documented more as a problem or as a resource?
- What indications can be found with regard to concepts of normality or practices of doing difference? To what extent are ideas of normality documented?
- Which references / What indications can be found in relation to opportunities for children/young people to participate and which can be found in relation to democratic school development?
- Which references / What indications can be found regarding a reflexive approach to inequity? (Is this reflected? How?)
- At a higher level, it is also of interest which indicators for dynamics of change and school development processes can be found in the documents.

Following Hoffmann (2018), in the document analysis we refer to content analysis, seeing documents as an expression of orders or contexts in the respective 'world' considered. This method allows us to go beyond a so-called 'text analysis' aimed purely at internal description, even if it cannot reveal the entire complexity of the respective communication process. The development of the ordering category system in content analyses is closely linked to the material to be analysed (Mayring, 2015, p. 67) and aims at:

a. Summarising
To reduce the material in such a way that the essential content is retained, to create a manageable corpus that still remains a faithful representation of the basic material.
b. Explicating
To pursue the intention of analysing individual parts of the text in question (terms, sentences, etc.) and additional material that expands understanding, explains and interprets the text passage.
c. Structuring
To filter out certain aspects from the material, to create a cross-section of the material according to previously defined organisational criteria and to assess the material on the basis of certain criteria.

In the document analysis presented here, the content is structured with a broad spectrum between deductive and inductive categorisation (Kuckartz, 2016, p. 97). Given the multilingual situation of the chosen region (Autonomous Province of Bolzano), the sample included documents in both Italian and German, representing two (of the three) school administrations responsible for schools with Italian or German (complemented by Ladin) as the language of instruction. A total of 46 documents was analysed: 32 three-year plans from schools teaching in Italian (including 13 comprehensive institutes, 4 multi-comprehensive institutes and 15 upper secondary schools, encompassing lyceums, technical schools and vocational schools) and 14 from schools teaching in German (comprising 4 primary school clusters, 5

comprehensive institutes and 5 upper secondary schools with various tracks). The institutions and their respective documents were selected based on the following criteria: representation of the region-specific condition, inclusion of institutions at all educational levels, and representation of various types (ranging from clusters consisting solely of primary schools to multi-comprehensive institutes). Moreover, considering the resources available for the analysis, an effort was made to represent both schools using Italian and ones using German as the language of education and instruction.

The process of coding and interpretation was conducted in two main phases: the first focused on identifying inclusion-related topics and aspects within the texts of the PTOFs, and the second aimed at extracting, interpreting and summarising the content of several related categories.

The first phase involved the development of a protocol, in both Italian and German, based on the three dimensions proposed by the Index for Inclusion (cultures, policies and practices, see Booth & Ainscow, 2017).

For the first dimension, the analysis focused on linguistic choices within the documents, such as keywords related to heterogeneity, difference, diversity, disability and so-called special educational needs; associated expressions or terms; and the use of gendered nouns. Additionally, the analysis highlighted the values affirmed in the documents, the pedagogical and instructional models referenced, the professionals involved in inclusive processes, and the network systems activated within the community or region (working groups, external support and advisory services, collaboration with families, etc.), thereby also connecting to the dimension of policies.

Finally, regarding documented school practices, attention was directed to projects implemented at the institutional, interclass and class levels, including operational strategies targeting specific groups, minorities or individual students. This approach was informed by the awareness that, in the literature, the term 'school inclusion' has a dual connotation (Ainscow, 2020): on the one hand, a systemic vision translated into holistic actions aimed at supporting and valuing the school community as a whole and its diversity; on the other, a specific focus on removing barriers for students at risk of exclusion, marginalisation or underachievement. At the school level, administrative and managerial aspects were also considered, such as the coordination of personnel, the access to, distribution and sharing of physical and educational resources (spaces, tools, technologies), and any self-evaluation and improvement processes undertaken by the institution.

In this initial phase, coding was conducted by two independent collaborators using the Maxqda software, which enabled a comprehensive overview to be developed of the presence, frequency and recurrence of specific linguistic (e.g. lexical choices), operational (e.g. instructional strategies at the class level) and cultural aspects (e.g. reference pedagogical models). The protocol consisted primarily of deductive categories derived from the literature and was consistently applied to conduct parallel coding in both Italian and German. This approach provided both aggregated data in both languages and more detailed insights, highlighting, for instance, differences across educational levels and types of institutions.

In the second phase, based on the coded data and extracted categories, the research team conducted a more nuanced and detailed analysis of the most represented themes. This deeper analysis, carried out in parallel by two researchers, led to the identification of four thematic categories derived inductively during this phase. These categories were particularly prominent in the available material. While they appeared with similar frequency across documents in both languages and at different school levels, they reflected partially divergent interpretations and perspectives:

1. Assessment (in relation to equity and diversity)
   For whom?
   → Diversity approach vs normalcy approach
   → Construction of specific 'types' of students through categorical distinctions
   Described social practices/implementations:
   → School-wide projects vs classroom-based teaching strategies

2. Dealing with multilingualism/languages used in education
   For whom?
   → Diversity approach: open to all students

→ Normalcy approach: constructing a specific student profile via categories
Described social practices/implementations:
→ School projects vs classroom-based strategies

3. Promotion of talents and/or giftedness
   What is meant by talent, giftedness or 'potential'?
   For whom?
   → Diversity approach: inclusive of all students
   → Normalcy approach: definition and targeting of specific student types
   Described social practices/implementations:
   → E.g. school initiatives vs strategies embedded in everyday teaching

4. Pedagogical models of reference
   Recurring terms and expressions found across document extracts

5. Crucial Findings

Through the document analysis of the 46 PTOFs, four main trends emerged: the centrality of specific pedagogical models, talent promotion, language support and enhancement, and student assessment. These trends will be explored in detail in the following subsections, with attention to variations across educational levels and types of secondary schools and a specific focus on the operational and cultural aspects of the planning and reflection of classroom practice. The discussion will examine how the referring trends manifest differently in comprehensive institutes compared to upper secondary schools, highlighting distinctions between lyceums and technical/vocational schools, as they cater to different educational objectives, which may be relevant to school cultures. Additionally, the analysis will consider potential differences in educational priorities reflected in the PTOFs of schools which are administrated either by the Italian or the German school authority of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano. These comparative perspectives offer a comprehensive understanding of orientational frames which shape educational strategies and priorities and allow insights into school cultures within the specific political context at the regional and national level.

5.1 Pedagogical models of reference (stated)

The PTOFs analysed present a variety of educational approaches, all oriented toward addressing contemporary challenges. Across school levels and types, there is a consistent preference for student-centered models promoting active, participatory, and personalised learning, with pluralistic methods fostering autonomy and responsibility. This shared emphasis on individualised pathways may reflect lived practices, a common vision, or strategic alignment with administrative expectations; its actual enactment remains unclear.

In schools with German as instructional language, particular emphasis is placed on self-directed learning and self-organised learning, both encouraging students to plan, manage, and reflect on their learning. These are combined with differentiated instruction through grouping by ability or interest and open-ended teaching to address heterogeneity. Common practices include collaborative learning, hands-on teaching, use of concrete materials, cooperation with external experts, and laboratory-based approaches. Secondary schools often adopt interdisciplinary teaching and blended learning, while primary and lower secondary schools reference open teaching and free work, station-based teaching, and structured weekly/monthly work plans. Creativity, discovery-based learning, and holistic development are recurring values.

Schools with Italian as instructional language more frequently describe co-teaching, particularly for small-group support, workshops outside the classroom, and individualised assistance, both within and across classes. Ability-based grouping is especially noted in upper secondary schools for languages and

mathematics. Cooperative learning is widely mentioned, often linked to supporting students identified with special educational needs. Multimedia and multichannel strategies, integrating technology to address diverse learning styles, are also common. While no explicit whole-school models are cited as institutional choices, flexible methodologies remain a clear priority.

Overall, schools of both types emphasise active and differentiated learning, but German-language PTOFs highlight autonomy and self-management, whereas Italian-language PTOFs focus more on collaborative structures and targeted support.

5.2 Language support and enhancement

Language teaching support is a central feature of many PTOFs, focusing on official languages, foreign languages (L2/L3) and overall linguistic competence. Differences emerge more between individual schools than across levels, types or administration. Some document to target support exclusively to newly arrived students who migrated, primarily strengthening learning of the language of education through recovery activities, workshops, courses and collaboration with local language centres or mediators. This is typically framed as enhancing competencies and supporting integration, especially in early literacy. Individual Educational Plans (PEI/IBP) for newly arrived students are common, enabling tailored interventions and differentiated assessment that adjusts as skills develop. However, no documents critically address labelling practices or possible dynamics of linguicism or racism (Dirim & Mecheril, 2025; Mecheril, 2018). Strategies include co-teaching, ability grouping and cooperative learning, alongside personalised teaching plans aimed at 'protecting' students—without addressing the implications of *doing difference* or subjectivation (Migliarini, 2017). Timely interventions and goals such as language certification are stressed.

While some schools adopt mainly technical responses, others value students' multilingualism, promoting first-language projects and linguistic biographies. Common models include traditional types of second language learning, multilingual classrooms, and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). Teacher education is emphasised for implementing these approaches.

Notably, one school omits any mention of language support, possibly reflecting a monolingual student body but also a lack of sensitivity to multilingual realities; another focuses solely on Italian as L2 for German (L1) speaking students. Such variation suggests differing interpretations of diversity and underlying concepts of normalcy (Mecheril, 2018).

There is a broadly documented commitment to linguistic diversity through tailored programmes, though emphases vary: some prioritise classroom-based literacy strategies, others structured language labs, often linking progress to certification. These context-dependent practices raise the question of how far they align with broader goals of inclusion and equity, especially given the absence of critical reflection on normative assumptions (Ivanova-Chessex et al., 2021; Migliarini & Elder, 2023).

5.3 Talent promotion

Talent promotion and the development of the potential of students considered gifted are addressed in all PTOFs, regardless of school level.

In schools with German as instructional language category-based strategies are often outlined such as enrichment beyond the standard curriculum, mentoring, acceleration, and compacting—approaches that imply normal pedagogy does not meet the needs of the "gifted" (Seitz et al., 2024b). The *Revolving Door Model* (temporary withdrawal for specialised activities), internal differentiation, and extracurricular opportunities (workshops, courses, competitions) are also noted as specific strategies targeted on students considered high achievers, this way essentialising differences. Some schools adopt a broader view, assuming all students possess talents and promoting enrichment for all; in such cases, success is seen to depend largely on teachers' capacity to stimulate and develop interests. PTOFs of schools with Italian as instructional language more often link "giftedness" to specific students identified as potential high achievers, though without clear identification procedures. Tailored opportunities include both classroom-based enrichment and extracurricular initiatives: advanced literary guidance by teachers/librarians, cultural and

recreational excursions (e.g., mountain days, high-ropes courses), and participation in national/international competitions such as Kangaroo Mathematics or the Science Olympiad. This often seems to reflect a stereotyped view of the "gifted student", resonating with habitually underpinned, socially selective ideas (Bourdieu, 1984; Seitz et al., 2026b/in press). Emphasis on awards and competitions also signals meritocratic orientations.

Overall, the diversity model—offering enrichment to all—is present but often coexists with a categorical focus on specific "types" of students. Such practices, though varied, generally seek to create opportunities for excellence through individualised projects, extracurricular activities, and targeted teaching.

Notably, no documents describe identification practices for categorical approaches, leaving them vulnerable to habitually guided assumptions (Seitz et al., 2024b). The potentially inequality-reinforcing dynamics of categorical gifted education (Margolin, 2018) thus remain unexamined.

5.4 Assessment

In the PTOFs analysed, assessment receives comparatively limited attention, particularly in schools with German as instructional language. References to differentiated assessment are more common but generally tied to targeted interventions for students considered as having 'migration backgrounds' or as having 'special educational needs', reinforcing patterns of normalcy and deviance.

Italian-language PTOFs devote greater attention to equal and differentiated assessment in relation to rights-based categories defined by regulations on 'disability' or 'specific learning disabilities'. Measures ensuring accessibility and differentiated evaluations, as outlined in Individual Educational Plans (IEPs), are emphasised. These IEPs often reflect an essentialist view of categories as fixed attributes, thereby reinforcing them. Ambivalences in deficit-oriented attributions—where differentiated expectations may confirm perceived limitations—are absent from the discussion (Migliarini & Elder, 2024).

Formative, ongoing evaluation aimed at tracking progress and improving teaching quality is also mentioned but often as a declarative statement of compliance rather than a description of concrete methods. Such evaluation is typically discussed in relation to specific categories (IEPs, PDPs) and rarely extended to all students, with the exception of certain groups (e.g. student-athletes) requiring accommodations such as adapted exam schedules.

Across institutions, differentiation of content and exam formats is noted alongside competency-based teaching and assessment. This approach appears at all educational levels, with institutional rather than level-based variation. Explicit references to self-assessment and reflective evaluation are rare and largely confined to primary school plans, which focus on monitoring student progress. A documented feedback culture is present in both primary and secondary schools, emphasising formative feedback within transparent, continuous assessment processes.

6. Discussion

The analysis reveals common patterns in how schools respond to institutional demands and conceptualise educational pathways. A first finding is the widespread reference to pedagogical and instructional models, diverse in application but consistently centered on student-focused, personalised learning. Strategies such as project-based learning, cooperative education, and digital integration aim to foster transversal skills and autonomy, which implies first and foremost that this approach is known to be relevant for the profiles of schools. Furthermore, many PTOFs highlight an orientation toward inclusion and the appreciation of diversity, employing targeted strategies to ensure the academic success of all students, with particular attention to talent promotion – a theme that extends across the plans examined.

German-language PTOFs emphasise individualised pathways, autonomy, and multidimensional learning, whereas Italian-language documents foreground co-planning, co-teaching, inclusive use of spaces, and holistic approaches aimed at specific categorised groups. The competency-based model—linked internationally to performance measurement (PISA)—is more strongly recontextualised in German-language schools towards autonomy and self-management, reinforcing meritocratic orientations with potential eq-

uity risks (Stojanov, 2015). This is less evident in Italian-language plans which place instead greater emphasis on cooperation.

Descriptions of approaches reflect dominant knowledge discourses rather than confirmed practices; they may also serve as external positioning or adaptation to accountability logics. Language support emerges as a crucial theme, reflecting the multilingual reality of South Tyrol but also tensions within its monolingually structured educational system. Assessment receives less attention overall, with a focus on differentiated approaches for specific categories. Despite the systemic intent of holistic inclusion, many proposals remain category-bound, shaped by regulations and tied to measures for formally defined groups. This is evident in assessment, often centred on content/method adaptations, and in language support. Schools rarely commit to a single pedagogical model, instead drawing from varied strategies such as self-organised learning or cooperative learning.

PTOFs often function less as expressions of unique identity and more as statements of intent and compliance—an outcome of Italy's centralised system (Argentin, 2021) and its strong accountability culture (Campione, 2013). Analysis of their language, categories, and priorities reveals implicit norms (Hargreaves, 1994; Hinrichsen & Hummrich, 2021) structuring school knowledge discourses. Thus, PTOFs are not only accountability tools but also communicative practices through which institutional identities are constructed (Seitz et al., 2026b, in press) and normative expectations either reproduced or contested. Their dual function—addressing external audiences and guiding internal development—operates within the interplay of regulation and school agency. The observed variability shows schools actively positioning themselves within wider institutional discourses, with administrative frameworks playing a significant role in shaping conceptual choices.

7. Limitations and Perspectives

While this study offers new insights into how schools construct and communicate their pedagogical and inclusive orientations through the PTOF, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the analysis relies exclusively on documentary sources and does not involve triangulation with other methods such as interviews. As such, they allow only indirect insight into knowledge discourses of schools, and it is not possible to comment on the social practices within the development processes and when drafting PTOFS. It is also not possible to determine to what extent and in which way declared intentions and principles reflected in the PTOFs are communicated within schools or, of course, whether they are effectively enacted in everyday school practices. However, the analysis allows conclusions to be drawn about the function of the documents as communicative 'nodes' between the internal and external worlds of schools and thus shows what is given relevance to at this point and to what extent which overarching tendencies and policies are represented here and passed on to the individual school.

Second, PTOFs are institutional texts that are also written with the aim of accountability and transparency, which may lead to strategic formulations that are aimed at an external audience – such as school authorities or future families – and may conceal rather than reveal internal pedagogical circumstances that are considered problematic. On the one hand, this intentionality is a limitation for the interpretation of the findings, but on the other hand, it also enabled targeted conclusions to be drawn about the way in which schools strategically and intentionally shape and communicate their school cultures under these requirements.

Third, the sample is geographically limited to the Autonomous Province of Bolzano, a context marked by multilingualism, but also by a differentiated school administration along linguistic lines. Although this setting has offered a particularly rich and complex field for investigation, the findings may not be readily generalisable to all other Italian regions or school systems at the international level.

Fourth, the analysis did not encompass Ladin-language schools which operate trilingual (Verra, 2016). Moreover, although care was taken to represent a variety of school types and levels, the selection of 46 PTOFs may not fully capture the diversity of school cultures across the province.

Fifth, PTOFs may not reflect recent or ongoing shifts in pedagogical orientations, internal organisational change or external pressures. Their static and formalised nature makes them less sensitive to the fluidity and immediacy of school development processes.

Sixth, the focus of the analysis was on declared structures, values and practices related to inclusion and school development. As such, informal, implicit or contradictory elements that may shape school culture – as yet undocumented – could not be captured by this approach.

Future research could benefit from designs that combine document analysis with qualitative methods aimed at social practices and related orientational frames in schools. We are pursuing this in a current study and combining a section of the document analysis presented here on only five schools with the findings from ethnographic classroom observations and group discussions with teachers and students undertaken there (Consalvo et al., 2025; Seitz, et al., 2026a). These in-depth analyses might gain more precise knowledge about the dynamics of legitimisation within school development processes and the intersection of school cultures and social practices by means of reconstructing the orientations of teachers that guide their actions.

Following a reverse line of thought, follow-up studies comparing other Italian regions characterised by multilingualism would also be possible. This could help to contextualise the findings and better understand how schools navigate the interplay between accountability and inclusive policy development, the role of school leadership and, most importantly, why educational transformation processes are easy to propose, difficult to implement and extremely difficult to sustain (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

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