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GIOVANI STUDIOSI

Teachers' socio-emotional competencies and the negotiation of special educational needs in inclusive classrooms

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Le competenze socio-emotive degli insegnanti e la negoziazione dei bisogni educativi speciali nelle classi inclusive

Abstract

The growing heterogeneity of contemporary classrooms requires a reconceptualization of the boundary between normality and special educational needs, recognizing it not as an objective reality but as the contingent outcome of pedagogical, organizational, and relational practices. The article conceptualizes the classroom as a space of margin negotiation and analyzes the role of teachers' socio-emotional competencies in managing differences. Particular attention is devoted to differentiated instructional practices and to the risks associated with an uncritical use of artificial intelligence in the processes of identifying needs. The contribution proposes an integrated model of inclusive professionalism grounded in socio-emotional competencies, pedagogical judgment, and the critical use of technologies.

Keywords
Inclusive education, teacher socio-emotional competence, special educational needs, artificial intelligence in education; teacher professionalism

La crescente eterogeneità delle classi contemporanee richiede di ripensare il confine tra normalità e bisogno educativo speciale, riconoscendolo non come dato oggettivo ma come esito di pratiche pedagogiche, organizzative e relazionali. L'articolo legge la classe come spazio di negoziazione del margine e analizza il ruolo delle competenze socio-emotive degli insegnanti nella gestione delle differenze. Particolare attenzione è dedicata alla didattica differenziata e ai rischi connessi a un uso acritico dell'intelligenza artificiale nei processi di identificazione dei bisogni. Il contributo propone un modello integrato di professionalità inclusiva fondato su competenze socio-emotive, giudizio pedagogico e uso critico delle tecnologie.

Parole chiave
Educazione inclusiva, competenze socio-emotive degli insegnanti, bisogni educativi speciali, intelligenza artificiale nell'educazione, professionalità docente

Introduction

The identification and management of special educational needs does not constitute a technically neutral process: it is interwoven with institutional expectations, developmental models, and evaluative devices that orient, often implicitly, the way in which students' differences are observed, interpreted, and named (Bourdieu, Passeron, 1970).

The boundary between ordinary educational variability and needs requiring specific recognition, support, or accommodation is not a fixed datum, but the outcome of situated pedagogical, institutional, and relational practices. This issue belongs to a long-standing debate on classification, labelling, and the institutional construction of educational difference. The idea that categories of need are not neutral, but are shaped by social, professional, and organizational frameworks, has been widely discussed in sociology of education, special education, disability studies, and critical educational theory (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963; Mercer, 1973; Tomlinson, 1982; Sleeter, 1986; Minow, 1990; Skrtic, 1991).

The growing heterogeneity of contemporary classrooms is a further defining challenge for inclusive pedagogy. Present-day educational contexts are characterized by cognitive, linguistic, cultural, emotional, and social differences that make it increasingly difficult to classify student profiles into fixed or clear-cut categories (Mura, Bullegas, Mallus, 2023).

The contribution of this article is therefore not to present the constructed nature of educational categories as a new problem, but to examine how this long-standing dilemma is reconfigured in classrooms increasingly shaped by socio-emotional expectations, documentation practices, and data-driven technologies.

Within this framework, teaching professionalism assumes a decisive role. There is evidence that teachers' socio-emotional competencies affect not only classroom climate and student well-being, but also the processes through which needs are interpreted, discussed, and negotiated with students, families, colleagues, support teachers, and institutional actors (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Brandao De Souza, Jacomuzzi, 2025).

The capacity to regulate one's own emotions and to build relationships grounded in trust is a key professional resource for reading differences without prematurely reducing them to deficit-oriented interpretations (Jennings, Greenberg, 2009).

These dynamics have a specific psychological and pedagogical structure. The teacher's interpretive act - the moment in which a behaviour, a learning difficulty, or a relational pattern is read as a sign of need - is never a purely cognitive operation. It is shaped by the teacher's own emotional states, implicit expectations, and professional frameworks, as well as by institutional pressures that demand standardized, documentable, and rapid responses to difference (Jennings, Greenberg, 2009; Bourdieu, Passeron, 1970). When a teacher is emotionally dysregulated, or operating under conditions of high organizational stress, the interpretive space between "this student is experiencing difficulty" and "this student requires formal categorization" may narrow too quickly. The relational and emotional quality of the teacher-student encounter is not a peripheral condition of inclusive education: it is a constitutive mechanism that determines, upstream of any formal procedure, whether difference is approached as a question to be understood or as a category to be assigned.

This problem is amplified by the growing integration of artificial intelligence into educational contexts. Predictive systems operate on normative models built on population-level data, designed to detect deviation from expected trajectories. While teachers' relational knowledge can sustain interpretive ambiguity over time, algorithmic systems may shorten this process by assigning categories, risk profiles, or recommendations. The issue, therefore, is not simply whether classifications are correct or incorrect, but under what conditions teachers and schools can keep interpretation open before difference is translated into a stable category. The following section introduces the notion of margin precisely to name this pedagogical threshold: the space in which ambiguity is either sustained as a condition for understanding or closed through premature classification.

1. The margin as a pedagogical threshold: from classification to negotiated recognition

1.1 Classification, labelling, and the historical construction of difference

The critique of educational classification is not new. It belongs to a long intellectual tradition that has examined how categories of deviance, disability, difficulty, and need are socially produced, institutionally stabilized, and pedagogically consequential. Labelling theory showed that deviance is not an intrinsic property of individuals, but the outcome of social processes through which certain behaviours or conditions are named and treated as problematic (Becker, 1963). Goffman's analysis of stigma further clarified how social labels affect identity, interaction, and institutional positioning (Goffman, 1963). In the field of special education, this debate was developed through sociological and critical analyses of educational categories. Mercer's study of the labelling of intellectual disability showed how institutional agencies, including schools, contribute to defining who becomes identified through a category of deficit (Mercer, 1973). Tomlinson interpreted special education as a social and organizational field, rather than as a neutral response to naturally given differences (Tomlinson, 1982). Sleeter's historical analysis of learning disabilities demonstrated how a specific special education category emerged within broader educational, political, and social conditions (Sleeter, 1986). Minow's formulation of the "dilemma of difference" then made explicit the ambivalence of recognition: ignoring difference may deny support, while naming difference may produce stigma or exclusion (Minow, 1990). Skrtic's critique of special education as a professional and organizational system further showed that categories of need are embedded in institutional arrangements that shape both access to support and forms of marginalisation (Skrtic, 1991).

This article builds on that tradition rather than presenting the constructed nature of educational categories as a new problem. Its specific contribution lies in examining how this long-standing dilemma is reconfigured in contemporary classrooms, where teacher socio-emotional competencies, differentiated instruction, documentation practices, and data-driven technologies increasingly interact in the recognition of special educational needs. Against this background, understanding the margin as a pedagogical threshold rather than a residual space requires a shift in how inclusive pedagogy is framed.

In common thinking, the margin is often interpreted as what lies outside the norm: a peripheral space, associated with difficulty, deviance, or lack. In this understanding, the school's task becomes that of bringing what is marginal back within parameters deemed adequate, through remediation, compensation, or adaptation.

Contemporary inclusive pedagogy invites us, instead, to rethink the margin not as external to the educational system, but as an internal point of tension at which normative categories are put to the test (Florian, 2015; Nilholm, 2021).

In this sense, the margin can be understood as the point at which the limits of a category become visible and therefore contestable (Derrida, 1972). Transposed into educational terms, the distinction between ordinary educational variability and needs requiring specific support is not given once and for all, but emerges when interpretive categories are challenged by the encounter with the singular case. The margin thus has both a pedagogical and an analytical function. It does not simply indicate what falls outside expected patterns of participation or achievement; it makes visible the criteria through which those expectations are constructed. In school contexts, this means that the margin is not simply where difference is placed, but where teachers are called to exercise an interpretive judgment rather than apply a pre-determined label.

This reading converges with Bourdieu and Passeron's (1970) analysis: the school system does not merely register pre-existing differences, but actively contributes to constructing the criteria through which competence, adequacy, and legitimate development are recognised. The pupil who appears "normal" is therefore not simply identified, but produced through curricular practices, assessment devices, and institutional routines (Costa, Brandao De Souza, 2025).

The category of special educational need is located precisely in this space. Far from being a neutral description of individual characteristics, it results from a complex interpretive process involving classroom observation, diagnostic tools, developmental models, institutional procedures, and available forms of support.

As the literature on inclusion shows, labelling processes tend to reduce complexity by stabilizing profiles

that, in educational practice, remain dynamic and relational (Milani, Jacomuzzi, 2022). From this perspective, the margin becomes a pedagogical threshold: not the place where inclusion fails, but the point at which the boundary between ordinary educational variability and special education needs is negotiated, in the tension between recognizing the singularity of each student and responding to institutional pressures for classification and support.

Adopting the margin as a pedagogical threshold therefore implies a redefinition of teaching professionalism. The teacher is not merely called upon to apply pre-defined categories, but to exercise situated interpretive judgment, connecting theoretical knowledge, relational sensitivity, ethical responsibility and awareness of institutional consequences. This is the perspective of Ainscow and Booth (2011): inclusive education is an ongoing process of interrogating the cultures, policies, and practices that produce barriers to participation. The margin is a signal that the school's interpretive frameworks require continuous revision. At stake, then, is not whether schools classify, but how they do so, through which actors and devices, and with what pedagogical consequences. This question becomes concrete in everyday instructional practice, where special educational needs are progressively recognized through classroom observation, student participation, family knowledge, collegial discussion, support services, and institutional documentation.

2. The negotiated recognition of special educational needs in instructional practice

2.1 Negotiation as a multi-actor process

If the boundary between ordinary educational variability and special educational needs is constructed in everyday educational practice, the central question is not simply "who has a special educational need?", but how a form of difficulty becomes recognized, discussed, documented, and translated into specific forms of support.

Negotiation should not be understood as a metaphor for the teacher's internal reflection. It is a multi-actor process through which different forms of knowledge are brought into relation. Students participate in this process through their ways of engaging, withdrawing, resisting, asking for help, remaining silent, or responding to tasks. Families contribute biographical and contextual knowledge that may confirm, complicate, or challenge the school's interpretation. Colleagues, support teachers, school leaders, and specialist services provide additional professional perspectives. Institutional documents do not merely record needs after they have been identified; they also shape how needs become visible, discussable, and actionable.

This process is dialogical, but not symmetrical. The actors involved do not have the same authority, language, or institutional power. For this reason, the teacher's role is not simply to apply criteria, but to mediate between everyday classroom observation and formal recognition. Negotiation does not mean delaying support. It means ensuring that support is grounded in a sufficiently rich and revisable understanding of the student's situation.

The attribution of a need does not precede instructional action. It emerges through the interpretive judgments that teachers formulate in daily practice and through the ways in which those judgments are discussed, shared, contested, and formalized within the school community.

Such judgments are mediated by institutional devices - individualized education plans, personalization tools, and diagnostic categories, collegial meetings, support procedures, and available resources - that orient the reading of differences and contribute to making them visible (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970). These tools are not neutral; they reflect specific visions of learning, development, participation and support. In school practice, this negotiation takes shape through documentation procedures, individualized planning, classroom observation, collegial discussion, family-school dialogue, and the daily interpretive decisions through which teachers read student behaviour within a specific relational and institutional context. The recognition of need is therefore a situated and negotiated process, constructed in the interaction between instructional observation, professional expectations, student responses, family knowledge, collegial interpretation, organizational constraints, and available support.

Such devices should support shared professional judgment rather than substitute it. Otherwise, they may anticipate labelling processes and reduce educational complexity to rigid categories (Costa, 2023).

In the Italian context, planning devices such as the PEI[1] and collegial bodies such as the GLO[2] may be interpreted not only as administrative requirements, but also as institutional arenas in which different interpretations of need are compared, formalized, and periodically revised.

Within this framework, differentiated instruction represents a first ordinary response to classroom variability. It should not be understood as a set of compensatory measures reserved for formally identified students, but as an ordinary mode of instructional design that starts from heterogeneity as the normal condition of any classroom (Tomlinson, 2014). Differentiation operates at the level of content, process, product, and learning environment, calibrating tasks to students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles without fixing those profiles too quickly. In this sense, differentiated instruction occupies an intermediate space between ordinary educational variability and the recognition of needs requiring specific accommodations. It allows teachers to observe how students respond to varied forms of access, participation, scaffolding, and assessment before moving toward more formalized categorization.

A key inclusive strength of differentiated instruction is its capacity to allow teachers and school teams to respond to variation without fixing students too quickly within stable categories. It does not simply adapt teaching to difference; rather, it creates conditions for interpreting that difference pedagogically and for discussing whether further forms of recognition or support are required.

The quality of this process depends not only on instructional design, but also on the socio-emotional competencies that enable teachers to regulate their own responses, listen to different actors, and sustain uncertainty long enough for a richer and more contextualized interpretation of students' needs to emerge.

3. Teachers' Socio-Emotional Competencies and Interpretive Judgment

Socio-emotional competencies represent a central dimension of teaching professionalism in inclusive education, particularly when teachers are required to interpret students' difficulties before they become formal categories. Following Salovey and Mayer (1990) and Goleman (1995, 2001), these competencies can be understood as the capacity to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions in ways that are relevant to professional and educational contexts. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) operationalize them in their Prosocial Classroom model across four domains: teachers' socio-emotional competence, teacher-student relationship quality, classroom climate, and social-emotional learning implementation. The value of this model for the present argument lies in the fact that it connects teachers' emotional regulation with relational quality and classroom processes, rather than treating socio-emotional competence as an individual trait alone.

The first domain is particularly relevant for the others: a teacher who struggles to regulate their own emotional responses may find it more difficult to construct the relational conditions that support learning and participation for all. In inclusive settings, emotional fatigue and burnout may reduce teachers' empathic availability and underline the need for structured professional support (Mura et al., 2023).

In school contexts, the CASEL (2023) framework identifies four interconnected competence domains – self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship skills – applicable to both student development and teacher training (Nielsen et al., 2019).

The link between teachers' socio-emotional competencies and the identification of special educational needs should be formulated with caution. Existing research does not yet provide conclusive evidence that emotionally competent teachers label students less frequently or less prematurely. However, different strands of literature support the plausibility of this relationship. Research on teacher-student relationships, teacher stress, emotional regulation, and inclusive education suggests that teachers' affective and relational capacities influence how behavioural and learning difficulties are perceived, interpreted, and addressed.

1 PEI (Piano Educativo Individualizzato-Individualized Educational Plan) is the statutory planning document used in the Italian school system to define educational objectives, support measures, and accommodations for students with disabilities, developed through a collaborative process involving teachers, families, and specialist services.

2 GLO (Gruppo di Lavoro Operativo per l'Inclusione-Operational Working Group for Inclusion) is the multidisciplinary team responsible for discussing, developing, monitoring, and revising the PEI, bringing together teachers, families, school leaders, and external professionals

The point, therefore, is not to claim a direct anti-labelling effect, but to understand socio-emotional competencies as professional resources that help sustain interpretive openness before difficulties are translated into stable categories.

In the context of the inclusive school, these competencies are particularly relevant at different moments of the pedagogical encounter. Emotional self-awareness helps teachers distinguish their own affective reactions from the student's behaviour. Consider a teacher who finds a student's persistent silence in group activities frustrating. Without self-awareness, that frustration may become the lens through which silence is read as opposition, withdrawal, or lack of competence. Yet the same behaviour may also reflect anxiety, cultural norms of participation, linguistic insecurity, or a different processing style. Without this capacity to pause and examine one's own response, frustration or anxiety may be projected onto the student and interpreted as signs of pathology or deficit. Emotional regulation helps preserve the cognitive space needed for pedagogical reflection, especially when institutional pressures encourage rapid and documentable responses (Nielsen et al., 2019). Professional empathy, understood as the trained capacity to consider the perspective of the other, helps teachers recognize that similar signals, such as withdrawal, agitation, or refusal to engage, may have different meanings depending on the student's history and context. Relational skills extend interpretive work beyond the dyadic teacher-student relationship. Collaboration with families, support teachers, colleagues, and specialist services is necessary for developing a shared and revisable understanding of need, rather than a unilateral institutional diagnosis (Milani, Jacomuzzi, 2022).

Empirical evidence supports the broader relevance of these competencies, although the specific relationship between socio-emotional competence and SEN identification requires further research. A systematic review by Brandao De Souza and Jacomuzzi (2025), based on 21 studies across 14 countries, documented a moderate but significant association between teachers' emotional intelligence and student outcomes, a pattern consistent with the mechanisms described in the Prosocial Classroom model (Jennings, Greenberg, 2009). The most robust effects concern motivation (Rahman et al., 2024) and academic satisfaction (Tacca Huamán et al., 2020). These findings do not prove that socio-emotionally competent teachers avoid reductive labelling. They do, however, support the broader argument that teachers' emotional regulation, empathy, and relational capacities contribute to the conditions under which students' difficulties can be interpreted contextually. These competencies are therefore not peripheral to inclusive practice. Rather, they help sustain the relational and interpretive conditions under which reductive labelling may be questioned, delayed, or revised.

The question, then, is how these interpretive conditions can be preserved in educational environments increasingly shaped by data, prediction, and accelerated decision-making.

4. Artificial Intelligence, learning analytics, and the risk of premature classification

The progressive introduction of artificial intelligence, learning analytics, and data-driven platforms in educational contexts is transforming processes of observation, monitoring, personalization, and identification of students' needs. Adaptive platforms, learning analytics dashboards, early-warning systems, and intelligent tutoring systems can make patterns of performance, engagement, response time, and risk more visible to teachers and school institutions.

However, these systems operate through models constructed from historical and behavioural data, and they inevitably reflect assumptions about learning progression, participation, performance, and risk. The risk is not only classification error, but the possibility that educational complexity is translated too quickly into operational indicators, risk profiles, or recommended interventions (Floridi, 2022).

4.1 From educational data to pedagogical meaning

The educational issue is not AI in general, but the institutional use of data-driven systems in processes of observation, prediction, personalization, and support to decision. These systems may help teachers notice patterns that would otherwise remain less visible. At the same time, the pedagogical meaning of such patterns depends on contextual information that the system may not capture: the student's linguistic history,

emotional state, family situation, peer relationships, previous experiences of failure, or relationship with the teacher. Learning analytics, therefore, should not be understood simply as a technical instrument for making learning visible. It is also a form of mediation that selects which dimensions of learning become measurable, comparable, and actionable. This is why the question of AI in inclusive education is not only whether a prediction is accurate, but how the prediction enters professional judgment, institutional documentation, and decisions concerning recognition, support, or accommodation.

The issue is structural, not merely technical. It concerns the relationship between data, interpretation, and pedagogical authority. Adaptive learning platforms infer a student's "learning profile" from patterns such as response times, error rates, task progression, and engagement metrics. These indicators can be useful, but they do not automatically capture the relational and biographical context that gives those patterns pedagogical meaning. A student who consistently answers late during a mathematics activity may be processing the task carefully, fearing public error, or still translating the instruction internally. In data terms, these situations may look similar. Pedagogically, they require different responses. A latency pattern can therefore become meaningful only when it is interpreted in relation to the student's history, classroom participation, emotional state, and learning context. This does not mean that all algorithmic systems are pedagogically reductive. Well-designed learning analytics may include uncertainty estimates, fairness checks, interpretable models, and forms of teacher control.

Research on teacher-AI complementarity shows that data-driven tools can be designed to support teachers' situated judgment rather than replace it. The risk, therefore, is not purely technical. It is pedagogical and institutional. It concerns how data are interpreted, who has authority to contest them, how uncertainty is communicated, and whether teachers have enough time and professional space to compare algorithmic outputs with relational knowledge.

As Palmquist, Sigurdardottir, and Myhre (2025) show, the integration of socio-emotional competencies into AI literacy for education still lacks shared pedagogical frameworks. This gap matters because inclusive education requires more than technical competence: it requires the capacity to connect algorithmic outputs with relational, emotional, and contextual knowledge.

4.2 Predictive systems and risk categories

Early-warning systems provide a useful example of how educational data may translate complex student trajectories into operational risk categories. Although such systems do not necessarily concern special educational needs directly, they illustrate how predictions can enter school decision-making and shape institutional attention. A student may become visible to the institution through a score, a colour code, or a risk label before a sufficiently rich pedagogical interpretation has taken place. The problem is not only whether the prediction is accurate. It is also how the prediction shapes expectations, allocates attention, and influences subsequent decisions. The Wisconsin Dropout Early Warning System (DEWS) offers a documented example of this dynamic. Developed as a statewide predictive model, DEWS was designed to estimate the risk that students in grades six to nine would not complete high school. Although it does not concern special educational needs directly, it is relevant here because it shows how educational trajectories can be translated into risk categories that become available to schools for decision-making. The case illustrates a broader issue for inclusive education: once a predictive label enters institutional practice, it may orient attention and intervention before teachers have developed a sufficiently contextual understanding of the student's situation. For this reason, predictive outputs should be treated as signals requiring pedagogical interpretation, rather than as classifications that directly determine educational action.

These risks are particularly significant in primary and lower-secondary education, where students' cognitive, emotional, and relational profiles are still developing and may change over time. When a student deviates from a predicted learning curve, the system may flag an anomaly. Yet the same deviation may reflect a developmental transition, a temporary emotional difficulty, a linguistic barrier, or a relational issue that the available data do not fully capture.

The pedagogical risk is not simply misclassification, but premature closure of interpretation: the student may be assigned a category before the educational relationship has had enough time to understand what the difficulty means in context.

Integrating intelligent technologies into educational environments therefore requires more than technical literacy. It requires a professional culture in which teachers are not positioned as validators of algorithmic outputs, but as interpretive agents whose relational and socio-emotional knowledge remains a necessary professional resource (Costa, 2023).

From a governance perspective, these concerns are consistent with recent regulatory and policy debates. The European AI Act identifies certain AI systems used in education and vocational training as high-risk when they may affect access, assessment, or educational and professional trajectories. UNESCO has similarly emphasized the need for regulation, institutional policies, and human capacity-building to ensure a human-centred approach to AI in education. For inclusive education, this means that algorithmic outputs should be treated as hypotheses requiring professional interpretation, not as diagnostic conclusions.

This is not merely a pedagogical concern. When algorithmic systems inform decisions about educational support, the question of who retains interpretive authority over a student's educational trajectory becomes pedagogically and politically significant. The risk is not only misclassification. It is also the gradual transfer of interpretive responsibility from teachers and educational communities to systems that operate mainly through patterns, indicators, and predictions.

If this transfer becomes routine, teachers may have less space to contest or reinterpret algorithmic outputs. The point, then, is not to reject AI in education, but to ensure that data inform pedagogical judgment without replacing it. In inclusive education, algorithmic outputs should be treated as hypotheses to be interpreted, not as conclusions to be applied (Floridi, 2022; Brandao De Souza, 2022).

5. Toward an Integrated model of inclusive professionalism: socio-emotional discernment, negotiated recognition, and critical ai literacy

The discussion developed so far points to a central conclusion: the challenges of inclusive education today cannot be addressed through any single dimension of teacher preparation, whether relational, instructional, institutional or technological. Inclusion cannot be understood as a set of compensatory practices applied after formal identification. It should be understood as a continuous pedagogical orientation that shapes how teachers and school communities read, discuss, interpret, and respond to the full range of differences present in any classroom. This is consistent with Norwich's "dilemma of difference" (2008): the tension between recognizing specific needs, which may require adapted provision, and avoiding the stigmatization that formal categorization can produce. An integrated model of inclusive professionalism should therefore be built at this intersection. In the present article, this model is organized around four interdependent dimensions: socio-emotional discernment, negotiated recognition, differentiated instructional design, and critical AI literacy.

The first dimension is socio-emotional discernment. This refers to the teacher's capacity to recognize how emotions, expectations, stress, and relational histories shape the interpretation of students' behaviour and learning difficulties. Socio-emotional discernment does not eliminate the risk of labelling, but it helps keep open the interpretive space between difficulty and category. In line with the Prosocial Classroom model (Jennings, Greenberg, 2009), these competencies should not be understood as personality traits, but as professionally cultivable capacities that require training, reflective practice, and institutional support. In inclusive classrooms, these competencies support the interpretive conditions that make differentiation responsive.

A teacher who struggles to regulate emotional responses, or who has difficulty reading behaviour contextually, may find it harder to implement differentiation strategies in a genuinely pedagogical way.

The second dimension is negotiated recognition. As argued above, special educational needs are not simply detected by the teacher; they are progressively recognized through classroom observation, student participation, family knowledge, collegial discussion, support services, and institutional documentation. This dimension prevents need from being reduced to an individual attribute. It situates recognition within a relational and institutional process in which interpretations can be shared, questioned, and revised.

The third dimension is differentiated instructional design. Differentiated instruction should not be understood as an episodic adaptation for formally identified students, but as an ordinary mode of instructional design that starts from classroom heterogeneity (Tomlinson, 2014). It allows teachers and school

teams to respond to variation before every difficulty is translated into a formal category. In this sense, differentiation is not only a teaching strategy; it is also a way of producing pedagogical knowledge about how students respond to different forms of access, scaffolding, participation, and assessment.

The fourth dimension is critical AI literacy. AI tools, learning analytics, and predictive systems may support the identification of learning patterns, but their outputs should be treated as hypotheses requiring pedagogical interpretation, not as conclusions to be applied. Critical AI literacy therefore includes the capacity to understand what data-driven systems can and cannot know about students, to question the assumptions embedded in predictive models, and to preserve human responsibility in decisions concerning support and accommodation (Palmquist et al., 2025).

The integration of these four dimensions does not produce a static model or a procedural sequence. It defines a set of professional and institutional conditions that make pedagogical judgment possible in situations of uncertainty.

The question is not only whether individual teachers possess these competencies, but whether schools are organized in ways that allow them to operate: whether there is time for observation, space for collegial interpretation, access to support, and a professional culture that treats ambiguity as a condition for understanding rather than as a sign of institutional failure.

Professionalism in inclusive education is therefore not reducible to individual attributes alone. It is shaped through relationships, institutional structures, professional cultures, and the norms through which difference is interpreted and acted upon (Ainscow, Booth, 2011; Nussbaum, 2012).

The originality of this model lies in the connection among these dimensions. Socio-emotional discernment sustains the quality of interpretation; negotiated recognition prevents need from being reduced to an individual attribute; differentiated instructional design creates opportunities to respond to variation before formal categorization; critical AI literacy ensures that data-driven tools remain subordinate to pedagogical judgment. Together, these dimensions define inclusive professionalism as the capacity to act responsibly in the space between uncertainty and formalization.

6. Conclusions

The boundary between ordinary educational variability and special educational needs is neither objective nor stable, but emerges through interpretive processes embedded in everyday educational practices. From this perspective, the recognition of needs does not concern only the application of diagnostic or administrative categories. It implies a pedagogical responsibility exercised through the capacity to read students' difficulties in relation to classroom participation, relational histories, institutional procedures, and available forms of support. Teachers' socio-emotional competencies emerge as a central dimension of this process. They do not guarantee the avoidance of labelling, but they support the professional conditions through which teachers can keep open the space between difficulty and category, sustaining inclusive practices grounded in relationship and contextual understanding. The article has therefore not treated the critique of classification as a new discovery. Rather, it has situated this critique within a longer debate on labelling, stigma, institutional categories, and the dilemma of difference. Its specific contribution lies in showing how this long-standing problem is reconfigured in contemporary inclusive classrooms, where socio-emotional competencies, differentiated instruction, institutional documentation, and data-driven technologies increasingly interact in the recognition of special educational needs. The implications concern, in the first place, teacher education. Developing the competencies described here requires structured formats of professional learning. Approaches such as mindfulness-based stress reduction for educators, video-based reflection on classroom interactions, and supervision models inspired by relational pedagogy may support the development of regulatory, empathic, and interpretive capacities relevant to inclusive teaching (Jennings, Greenberg, 2009; Domitrovich et al., 2017). Continuing professional development should also include the critical analysis of technological tools, equipping teachers to read algorithmic outputs as hypotheses to be examined in relation to pedagogical and relational knowledge, not as diagnostic conclusions. In the second place, the implications concern educational policy. The governance of AI in schools requires explicit regulatory and professional frameworks defining how algorithmic outputs may be used, reviewed, contested, and integrated into educational decision-making. This is particularly important when

data-driven systems inform decisions about support, accommodation, or educational trajectories, because such decisions require contextual interpretation and human responsibility (Floridi, 2022; Palmquist et al., 2025). Recent regulatory and policy frameworks, such as the European AI Act and UNESCO guidance on AI in education, reinforce this point: educational technologies should be governed in ways that preserve human oversight, transparency, and professional responsibility. An inclusive school is not one that eliminates difference, but one that has the pedagogical, institutional, and ethical capacity to interpret difference without reducing it too quickly to deficit. In this perspective, the teacher is not a mere validator of categories or algorithmic outputs, but a professional agent whose relational knowledge, socio-emotional competence, and pedagogical judgment remain central to inclusive education.

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