Integration and inclusion in Italy. Towards a special pedagogy for inclusion

Intégration et inclusion en Italie. Vers une pédagogie spéciale pour l'inclusion

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Research paper

Article history:
Received 24 May 2012
Accepted 5 December 2013
Available online 2 April 2014

Keywords:
Integration
Inclusion
Inclusive pedagogy
Special pedagogy
Institutional pedagogy

Abstract
Recent Italian ministerial policies have re-affirmed the commitment to educating students according to a policy of inclusion. This commitment follows the initial decision to begin integrating pupils with disabilities into mainstream classes nearly 40 years ago (Act 517/1977) and is in line with current international studies and directives. However, many problems with implementation still remain. (Norwich, 2010). Here, we intend to contribute to the discussion, illustrating some of the theoretical and operational aspects developed under the special pedagogy, the meaning of which will be clarified in the text. We intend to support the view that what had been done in the past to ensure disabled pupils’ right to learning and participation can act as a reference for an inclusive pedagogy that caters for the educational needs of everyone involved, as documented by recent research (Canevaro, 2010; Canevaro et al., 2009, 2011). We view the issue from the perspective of special normality (Ianes, 2006), according to which the teachers should work within normal contexts, pursuing common goals using methods and techniques that apply to all, but putting special elements in this normal context.
La décision de scolariser les élèves dans la perspective de l’inclusion a récemment été affirmée dans les documents ministériels italiens. Après presque 40 ans d’élaboration (loi 517/1977), elle est dans la continuité des choix d’intégrer les élèves ayant des besoins éducatifs particuliers dans des classes ordinaires. Elle s’accorde également avec les idées exprimées dans les documents internationaux. Néanmoins, il subsiste quelques difficultés dans sa mise en œuvre opérationnelle (Norwich, 2010). Nous souhaitons contribuer à la discussion en illustrant certains aspects théoriques et pratiques développés dans la Pédagogie spéciale (dont nous précisons le sens plus en avant dans le texte). Nous soutenons l’idée que tout le travail réalisé afin de garantir les droits des élèves ayant des besoins éducatifs particuliers à l’apprentissage et à la participation, peut servir de référence au développement d’une pédagogie inclusive à l’écoute des besoins de chacun (Canevaro, 2010; Canevaro et al., 2009, 2011). La perspective adoptée est la normalité spéciale (Jones, 2006), selon laquelle il faut travailler dans des contextes normaux, en poursuivant des objectifs communs avec des méthodes et des techniques appliquées à chacun, mais en introduisant, dans ces voies éducatives normales, les éléments spéciaux qui sont essentiels pour assurer que les stratégies d’enseignement répondent adéquatement aux caractéristiques cognitives et affectives de chaque élève à besoins éducatifs particuliers.

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1. Introduction

The decision to educate students inclusively has been re-affirmed by recent Italian ministerial documents, after the decision to integrate pupils with disabilities into mainstream classes was introduced nearly 40 years ago (Act 517/1977). It is also in line with what has been expressed in international documents and directives. However, in terms of operational implementation, there are still certain issues that need to be addressed. (Norwich, 2010).

The perspective proposed by recent Italian legislation is the “bio-psycho-social” model in the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF, 2001), according to which “every student, continuously or at certain times, can develop special educational needs for physical, biological, physiological, or even psychological and social reasons, for which it is necessary for the school path that ensure that teaching strategies adequately address the cognitive and affective characteristics of each subject with disabilities.

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The “bio-psycho-social” model (ICF, 2001) calls for various forms of “certification” of difficulties according to the special educational needs of the pupil. Special educational needs is a broad category that comprises “the culturally and socially disadvantaged, those with specific learning disabilities and/or specific developmental disorders and those with difficulties derived from a lack of knowledge of the Italian language and culture due to diverse cultural backgrounds”, (Ministero dell’Istruzione dell’Università e della Ricerca (M.I.U.R.), 2012, p. 2).

Public health certification is required for those who display disabilities (whether intellectual, motor, sensory, autism, etc.) and specific learning disabilities (dyslexia, dysorthography, dyscalculia, etc.).

For those who present learning difficulties of a temporary nature (i.e. sociocultural and linguistic disadvantages, etc.), a pedagogical and educational document elaborated by the teachers of the class council and signed by the school and by the family is sufficient to allow the creation of a individualized and personalized learning pathway.

More precisely, beginning and continuing the integration/inclusion process in schools relies on the drafting of technical and planning documentation that, in the case of students with disabilities, should consist of a Functional Diagnosis issued by a public health commission, a Dynamic Functional Profile and an Individualized Education Plan (DPR 24/2/94). These reports must be drafted by a working group composed of members of the Health Authority, the headmaster, schoolteachers and educators from the Local Authority. For students with specific learning disabilities (Act 8/10/2010 n.170) and all other students who may have special educational needs, an Individualized Education Plan must be drafted that sets out a “plan for the student’s education and teaching based upon the lowest requirements in the national curriculum” (Ministero dell’Istruzione dell’Università e della Ricerca, (M.I.U.R.), 2013, p. 2).

Furthermore, professional help, caregivers and support teachers (insegnanti di sostegno) are only assigned when a student has a public health certification of disability.

Despite these explicit guidelines designed to radically innovate the institutional organizational structure through the creation of a network of services (Territorial Support Centres at the provincial level, Territorial Centres for inclusion at local level, the Working Group for inclusion within each school) designed to overcome a “medical” perspective, and emphasis on a pedagogical approach to these difficulties, there is still the risk of producing categorization and creating stigmatization in educational practice, marginalizing students who are “flagged” as different. This requires careful consideration, which is currently taking place within the teaching community in universities and schools throughout Italy, and in light of international thought on the subject (Ainscow, 2005; Norwich, 2010).

Here, we will illustrate some of the theoretical and practical foundations of the special pedagogy – known as the pedagogy of integration/inclusion, as we will clarify later – that promote meaningful learning not only for students with disabilities but for all pupils, even the most talented, both in terms of knowledge, skills and expertise in the various fields of study, and in terms of education that upholds the values of solidarity and participation. Recent studies (Caneparo, 2010; Caneparo, D’Alonzo, & Ianes, 2009; Caneparo, d’Alonzo, Ianes, & Caldin, 2011) have confirmed that these pedagogical reflections, developed over decades to guarantee the integration of pupils with disabilities, can be used as the basis for a pedagogy that is attentive to the educational needs of every student while respecting diversity.

Working from this perspective, however, is complex and involves a detailed organizational system that is influenced by the interplay of factors both internal and external to the school system. These factors include not only national policies, the social-cultural values that are promoted, reference laws and contributions from the relevant authorities (school boards, local authorities, local health

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3 Functional diagnosis describes the clinical-functional situation of the pupil at the time of the assessment and highlights their disabilities and their potential on the cognitive, affective/relational and sensory levels (Presidential Decree 24/2/1994). A Dynamic Functional Profile “means soon after the first period of school placement ends, the expected level of development that the student with disabilities will display in the short term (six months) and medium term (two years)” (Presidential Decree 24/2/1994).
It is essential that everyone involved take into account a conscious choice of values based on the ethics of mutuality and dialogue (Morin, 2004) and the affirmation of a cultural sedimentation process in people and social contexts. A constant debate needs to be promoted both at the institutional level, specifically about the competence of the various institutions and the different professionals involved, and at the level of curricula and mainstream school practices, taking an approach that is intentionally based on co-responsibility, co-evolution and community participation. There should also be further development of adequate professional expertise based on continuous self-assessment by teachers as reflective practitioners (Schon, 1983) to verify whether practices are consistent with what is formally expressed in official documents, and that they lead to effective integration/inclusion.

In the following paragraphs, after clarifying the theoretical references and focusing on the definitions of integration and inclusion, we shall look at the merits of the curricular proposals and the teaching/learning processes, drafted over the course of almost 40 years of “integration” in Italian schools, in greater detail. We shall highlight how, when conducted with awareness and professional expertise, they can lead to community participation and a co-evolution of the education system that overcomes any kind of marginalization.

2. The theoretical basis: a clarification of terms

Before proceeding with this reasoning, it is necessary to clarify the terms integration and inclusion, recognizing that they may be construed differently both internationally and within individual countries themselves. Despite the fact that the integration of persons with disabilities in Italy has been one of the most relevant social, cultural and political changes in the last few decades, it cannot be taken for granted since it cannot be shared and endorsed once and for all.

Some teachers might believe, for example, that it is better to “treat” subjects in specialized and protected environments based on the idea that an intensive rehabilitation program is essential for subjects with disabilities to acquire “normal” abilities. Consequently, making students work individually with a specialized support teacher in a specially equipped classroom could be considered appropriate for their learning.

Other teachers are convinced that integration in the classroom, especially in secondary education, only makes sense for disabled students who have the potential to attain the basic learning objectives planned for their classmates. Therefore, the type and severity of the disabilities are considered in order to assess a pupil’s chances of success.

From this perspective, the notion of integration is interpreted as it is in the Anglo-Saxon culture (Booth & Ainscow, 1999) as an adjustment by the person with the disability to the school context, and not as a process of mutual adjustment respecting individual differences as indicated by special pedagogy and acknowledged by Italian regulations.

The theoretical references for this model (Canevaro, 1999) can be traced back to Institutional Pedagogy, interpreted as Pedagogy of Complex Organizations (Vasquez & Oury, 1967), in action research (Cunningham, 1976; Pourtois, 1986), in the systemic relational approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and in social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1924; Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999).

Within this paradigm, the school can be seen as a system in relation to other systems (families first and foremost) made up of professionals where each professional has mutual relationships of interdependence with all the others and, together, they co-build interactions thus, sharing responsibility for optimizing the system itself.

Integration requires constant research into the best form of interaction between institutions and their members in order to guarantee an effective response to the needs for recognition and belonging and an appreciation of the potential of the student with disabilities. Therefore, a process of change and empowerment should be implemented within the community. Every person involved should feel co-responsible and cooperate, depending on their own specific professional expertise, in order to co-construct an educational community in which everyone can learn according to his or her own potential in a mutual relationship built on respect.
Inclusion, in turn, starting with the right of everyone not to be excluded, can be interpreted as “a process of increasing participation and of decreasing exclusion from the culture, community and curricula of ordinary schools” (Booth & Ainscow, 1999).

We maintain that both integration and inclusion must be placed at the very centre of the teaching and learning processes in accordance with the considerations made by Lucia De Anna who wrote “A worldwide discussion is taking place on the right terms to be used. The transition from integration to inclusion is seen by most of our European colleagues, in the best case, as a successive more extended and involving step. Unfortunately in this context, the term integration is sometimes seen in a negative manner, in a reductive way meaning assimilation into normality. I believe, instead, that these are two different actions, and one cannot exclude one or the other. The coined notion of integration, with special reference to persons with disabilities, was based on the idea of promoting personal and collective change without neglecting or trivializing specific characteristics. On the basis of the new organization of the context and interpersonal relations, new forms of diversity can be included, ranging from multicultural to social diversity. It is important not to exclude any diversity and to attach a more comprehensive sense to the term “inclusion”. There can be no inclusion without integration” (De Anna, 2010, p. 77).

It is possible to highlight a common element in these two processes. If, in fact, as Armstrong and Barton (2007) affirm, inclusion, although sensitive to individual differences, concerns the community as a whole and aims to remove social, economic and political barriers that hamper the learning processes of all pupils, then, the objective is also pursued by integration.

In fact integration, although it particularly concerns those who have been identified through assessments carried out by health authorities as having a disability, requires a shift in institutions, organizations and culture, since it aims to trigger processes of recognition and developing the potentials of the person with disabilities and their citizenship rights. This would not only benefit those who have special educational needs but everyone involved, and would thereby lead to the civil and social growth of the whole community.

The perspective common to both integration and inclusion is aimed at developing a school organization that is structurally designed as a solidarity-based community at the service of learning for all that respects individuality. It is therefore fundamental with regard to these aims and the indications of Institutional Pedagogy to consider the educational context (the environment, interactions, system of rules, but also people with diverse roles, functions and skills, their interactions, and the narratives through which mutual relations are formed and strengthened).

According to Bateson (1972), the context is the “matrix of meaning”; it can be viewed as a story, a plot made up of the meaning of the actions of those who are interacting. The educational relationship between teacher and pupil is one of those meaningful narratives and it can only be understood if we look at the interweaving relationships that develop along the way.

The crux of this is to guarantee every disabled person the right to participate as protagonists in the particular institutional and scholastic “stories” in which they are included, stories that concern the organizational, cultural and teaching aspects that they themselves can help improve.

By placing contextual analysis at the centre of educational discourse, Institutional Pedagogy urges us to shed light on institutions’ explicit and implicit purposes (that are not expressed but nevertheless have a profound impact on the dynamics between individuals) in order to modify the rules and regulations. This opportunity to adapt is expressed in individuals’ attempts to modify the school institution that confronts the pupil with disabilities with a set of rules, spaces, timetables, organizational methods, etc. (the instituted system) and change these elements with the aim of developing a semantic background (instituting system) able to accept and accompany each student, respecting their individual characteristics and promoting the actualization of their potential.

It is therefore vital for each teacher to acquire the skills needed to analyze the system they are part of, be aware of their own beliefs and attitudes in order to monitor the integration/inclusion process, and contribute to its completion by producing the necessary changes.
3. Integration/inclusion: reflections on multi-disciplinary and multi-professional work

The fundamental concept of an essentially democratic and inclusive school incorporates the assertion that the student with disabilities is a student who takes part in every aspect of the class group, participating as an active protagonist. It is also necessary to replace the current model based on the support of the disabled person being provided exclusively by the support teacher, in favour of a model of “broad support” given by the class teachers, peers, other figures (e.g. educators, assistants), auxiliary staff (janitors, canteen staff, etc.), and through the organization of the classroom, via aids, etc. From the “broad support” perspective, the disabled person is not seen as a passive observer, but as someone pursuing the objective of autonomy as much as possible, recognizing and deciding when and what aid is necessary (Stainback & Stainback, 1990; Canevaro, 2011).

To put this process into practice, it is fundamental to promote a deep and shared understanding of the normative and pedagogic concepts that form the basis of integration and inclusion, and how they can be realized within teaching and education practices. Furthermore, it is very important to consider the possible prejudices towards the role and functions of the support teacher and other professional figures that provide aid. These considerations are important to give value to positive professional interactions that guarantee the quality of learning and relationships between the students.

It is difficult to create an inclusive environment without sharing the same principles and aims. Similarly, the problem persists if one believes that the innate intellectual capacity of a person is decided once and for all (Florian, 2008; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011), or if one looks entirely to the specialist teacher to develop an educational relationship with the disabled pupil. This point is especially relevant with certain general teachers who do not believe they have adequate training to face an educational dialogue with the pupil.

Further difficulties arise if one considers the specialist teachers as “the” teachers of the students with disabilities, or think that they are less skilled and have fewer abilities than general teachers (Devecchi, Dettori, Doveston, Sedwick, & Jament, 2012), or if these same specialists are helping to adhere, more or less deliberately, to a “medical model” that requires them to claim sole responsibility for caring for the student, as holders of specific technical skills, thus, isolating themselves within exclusive relationships in order to “heal” the students.

It is important to gain awareness of the bias and poor efficacy of “specialist” interventions, conducted by single figures, for the benefit of pupils with disabilities. It is necessary to provide an organizational dimension and coordinate the work of all professionals involved (both support and general teachers, rehabilitation technicians, psychologists, educators, etc.), from the perspective of co-responsibility with the students’ families to respond to both the educational needs of the pupils with disabilities and their classmates, urging them to meet and get to know one another and interact reciprocally whilst respecting each other.

We need to promote a co-evolutionary process of action research to enable learning that reflects upon the experience itself, the identification of assessment strategies, the systematic reformulation of proposals, and the turning of good practices into stable, institutional procedures.

Action research is mainly carried out within the working group made up of the various educational, health and socio-educational professionals that are involved in the integration–inclusion process for a given student, especially when the student’s disability situation is particularly complex to manage within the classroom. This process should be undertaken with all parties involved: the professional group, the family and, as much as possible, the disabled person themselves. After a thorough analysis of the data collected both within and outside the school, action research defines the problem and this definition leads to proposals of possible solutions that can then be tested in practice.

The subsequent interventions are proposed in a synergic and comprehensive way, bearing in mind the different contexts of the disabled person’s life, both scholastic and extra curricular. Constant and careful examination of the disabled person’s actions, reactions and the contextual elements that could influence them can alter the nature of the problem situation, the original hypothesis and the interventions needed to reach a satisfactory solution.

Action research should be implemented as a constant form of conscious review of educational activities, and this practice should be supported more, as is already the case at the international level (Cain, 2011).
This inter-professional work is best expressed in the development of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), the document that describes the contributions that teachers, educators, health professionals, the family and the pupil with disabilities can make to the realization of their right to education. In the broader context of their life project (Barbuto, Biggeri, & Griffio, 2011), it is intended to ensure that the disabled person can attain their full potential and aspirations.

Each professional’s contribution should work to overcome a fragmented view of the person with disabilities (to the school, a pupil; to healthcare services, a patient; to the local authorities, a user; to the family, a child) and contribute, together with the disabled student, to a reading of the interactions and the creation of a comprehensive profile of the person with disabilities from an evolutionary perspective.

Within the framework of team action and networking, teachers specialized in support services (insegnanti di sostegno), in particular, act both as members and coordinators of the network itself, albeit with great difficulty, mainly because currently the continuity of their job within the same school is not always certain. They must work to establish interactive and shared processes aimed at the mutual recognition of both professionals and the family’s skills within the group. They are called to intervene both inside the school and classroom and outside the school. In schools and classrooms, they should develop their actions on a number of different levels: working with head teachers and other teachers to promote an inclusive culture and establishing working groups; on a par with other members of the teaching staff, they will co-plan, co-operate and request, on the basis of their specific skills concerning disabilities, the adoption of a teaching method which should be individualized, personalized and inclusive, with a view to gradually reducing teacher-led lessons in favour of cooperative learning, peer tutoring, etc. Support teachers should also assess the suggested curriculum for the entire class, supporting other members of the teaching staff in analyzing the complexity of the teaching/learning process and identifying all possible variables in pupils’ learning difficulties, particularly, pupils with disabilities. In this way, the whole team of teachers may identify adequate strategies and techniques to ensure educational success and overall inclusion. They should offer guidance to pupils with disabilities, identifying and encouraging the acquisition of skills that may be useful for increasingly active social participation and future inclusion in the labour market.

Outside the school environment, they should promote relations with Local Healthcare Units, Local Authorities, formal and informal educational bodies, families first and foremost, for the education and guidance of pupils with disabilities, developing and possibly holding laboratory projects, internships and school- and work-based training.

Regular teachers are mainly characterized by their command of the epistemological foundations of the fields of study and their knowledge of the methods of teaching specific subjects in a way that promotes holistic, interdisciplinary learning.

For effective comparison and collaboration – as is clear from both the results of published research (Sandri, 2003; Chiapetta Cajola, 2004; Cardarello, Garibaldi, & Antonietti, 2006; Canevaro et al., 2011) and research currently underway, which take into account recent international contributions (Thousand, Nevin, Villa, & 2007; Devecchi & Rouse, 2010) – it is essential that regular teachers have a basic knowledge of special pedagogy as required by the recent legislation regarding training (DM n. 249/10) and exercise an ever improving attitude towards critical reflection on their choices in teaching and education (Schon, 1983; Day, 1993).

It is essential that the cooperation between regular teachers and support teachers also be expressed in the interchangeability of their roles; however, this does not always happen in the practice of teaching. It remains important for the integration/inclusion of the person with disabilities that the support teacher works within the classroom setting and is seen by all as a teacher promoting the educational growth of everyone. This can avoid the forms of marginalization that may occur with both support teachers and students with disabilities.

With a view to enhancing professional resources, it is essential that there is no interchangeability of roles between teachers and other professionals (educators, assistants, rehabilitation technicians, etc.), but rather complementarity and integration of their respective contributions.

The task of helping is carried out by educators in a way that actually differs from the task done by support teachers, who are more focused on the transposition of disciplinary learning. The former work from a perspective of complementarity with respect to the latter, as characterized by soliciting the
acquisition of communication skills, relationships and personal autonomy on the part of the disabled student in various social contexts, both inside and outside the school.

These professionals must be able to interact with each other and elucidate their different methods in a shared effort to build permanent collaboration within the instituting/instituted dialectic. This is needed to innovate within the instituted system so as to meet the needs of both individuals and the community with increased effectiveness, developing a culture and a working model that are based on inclusion. This is essential if innovation is to become part of the system.

3.1. A culture of respect for diversity

Achieving the aims set out above involves, first and foremost, the promotion of a culture supportive of integration/inclusion within the school community. This can be achieved by making it possible to set in motion a process of acceptance of disability by viewing it as a learning opportunity through the introduction of processes that involve learning about different disabilities with a specific approach associated with the subjects to be studied in the curriculum common to all classes in a Circolo/Istituto\footnote{Circolo: a circumscription consisting of one or more primary schools (pupils’ age range from 6–7 to 10–11) or several pre-school classes (age range from 2½–3 to 5–6) under responsibility of one school head; Istituto: There are two types of institutes, both under the responsibility of one school head. An Istituto Comprensivo (pupils age range from 2½–3 to 13–14) is a circumscription consisting of an aggregation of pre-school, primary school and “secondary school of first grade” (pupils’ age range from 11–12 to 13–14) whereas an Istituto instead consists of secondary school (students’ age range from 14–15 to 18–19).} even in the absence of pupils with any specific medical certifications.

The aim of education, as stated by Edgar Morin, is to ensure that “the idea of human unity should not efface the fact of its diversity and the idea of its diversity should not efface the idea of its unity. […] Understanding what is human means understanding our unity in diversity, our diversity in unity. […] Education should illustrate this unity-diversity principle in all spheres,” (Morin, 1999, p. 56).

There are many interdisciplinary curricula which may be developed on different levels, depending on the school system and grade in which they are operating; they might entail the reading of fairy tales, novels, biographies, videos that can help one better understand different impairments and the possible disability situations that may be experienced. Furthermore, it is possible to introduce a study of the etymology of the words that refer to given disabilities, a thorough knowledge of different linguistic codes (sign language, Braille, the picture exchange communication system, etc.), possible methods of verbal and non-verbal communication, scientific considerations regarding body structures and functions, possible rehabilitation aids, the physics of sound, sight, etc. However, it is important to present these topics from a “humanizing viewpoint”, which may help pupils grow in their knowledge of different disciplines and in their ability to feel empathy for each other.

If there is a student with a disability in the classroom, each of the above mentioned curriculum proposals regarding the student’s specific impairment or disability must be carefully scrutinized to ensure that each proposal is shared by the student and his or her family themselves, making sure to avoid creating situations of stigma or discomfort.

The quality of integration/inclusion depends upon the status and role given to the student with a disability by his or her teachers and classmates and by the school community at large. It is important to continuously bear these aspects in mind so that an atmosphere of respect for the different individual learning abilities in the classroom is ensured and specific knowledge and skills are enhanced. It is vital that the pupils themselves be involved in building up inclusive processes, promoting considerations of the different ways of being and the importance of working together as a learning community that is enriched by interaction and the growth of supportive attitudes. When this happens, the inter-disciplinary path becomes a special training opportunity for all involved, promoting deutero-learning (Bateson, 1972), that is, the ability to learn to learn, reflect on how they attribute meaning to experience, and activate a process of co-evolution that leads to significant changes in each person with respect to their view of themselves and the world around them.

Active participation, for example by a pupil with visual disabilities, in a process linking scientific understanding of how the eye works to a study of the optical perception of space and perspective in
Art History could lead to the making of plastic relief models reproducing works of art and tactile model explorations, with a detailed study of the different ways that works of art may be enjoyed (Secchi, 2004; Caldin, 2006).

But at the same time, these suggestions are in line with the fundamental aims of school, which entail guiding all developing individuals to cultivate their ability to have an empathic relationship with others and adopt a decentralized, critical standpoint capable of appreciating different perspectives. All this is feasible only if people are educated in reflective thinking to grasp the educational opportunities in every specific approach to every subject that make it possible to enhance diversity and grow in knowledge. It is a matter of developing a learning environment that is meaningful to everyone while respecting individual differences, and co-building a school that can forge empathic and flexible citizens and cultivate each individual’s humanity to the highest degree, as Martha Nussbaum has said (Nussbaum, 1997).

3.2. Individualized and personalized educational pathways

In addition to raising awareness and attaching cultural value to diversity within school communities, as highlighted above, it is also important, particularly in classes which include pupils with disabilities, to provide teaching methods aimed at the individualization – i.e. the use of different pedagogical procedures (schedules, space, content, strategies, materials, exercises, etc.) according to each student’s different characteristics to ensure that all pupils achieve the shared core objectives – and personalization of curricula – i.e. the diversification of educational goals so as to help promote individual potential and make it possible for pupils to pursue personal interests (Baldacci, 2005).

As Marisa Pavone has stated, it is necessary to “overcome the idea of an education differentiated by necessity – the special educational needs of a few students – in favour of an adequate education in the pathways, methods, tools, their characteristics, and also the learning difficulties of each student” (Pavone, 2005, p. 34).

The individualization program means that teachers must accurately analyze the cognitive learning processes of pupils with disabilities in relation to the specific goals and skills identified in the class’s common curriculum. They must also partake in an in-depth investigation of the fundamental elements in the different disciplines and their pedagogical transposition so as to offer educational solutions that are well suited to the real potential of individuals with disabilities and respect their right to study. In particular, it is a matter of developing a different organization of the teaching process with regard to how the fundamental goals for all students may be pursued using different strategies, teaching devices and assessment methods so as to ensure knowledge acquisition is in line with the curriculum.

With personalized planning, the emphasis is shifted from the organization of disciplines to the characteristics of the student in order to promote the pupil’s education and avoid an overly rigid and schematic application of teaching principles and methods. In the case of a student with disabilities, this focuses on observation and knowledge of the student’s history, strengths and weaknesses so as to steer the educational intervention towards achieving functional goals for their life project. Therefore, particular attention is paid to identifying targets appropriate to the potential and resources of the student with disabilities, activating inductive strategies and using analogies and references to concrete situations, providing for assessment that makes use of testing relevant to the teaching plan developed for the student.

The individualization and personalization of educational pathways should be placed at the foundation of the teaching processes for all students, not just those with special educational needs. In particular, the choice – often made a priori – to utilize personalized pathways only for students with disabilities, pathways that are partially or totally different from those offered to the rest of the class, should be made with careful analysis of several factors, including those related to teachers’ teaching methods.

If, after a careful analysis and assessment of both the strategies pursued by the teachers and the results obtained, it is felt that it would be impossible for the pupil to achieve the basic goals envisaged for his/her classmates then and only then, and bearing in mind the different expectations of the pupil and his/her family themselves, teachers should work together to develop a personalized curriculum that may also include school and (in the case of high school students) work-based training so that all
available human and institutional resources are used in the best possible way. Indeed, the inclusion process, implies a design phase that would be focused on guidance and credit certification, and extend from school to the outside taking into account pupils’ life projects (Sandri, 2006, 2010).

It is essential that these indications be followed based on a now consolidated teaching/learning experience when dealing with disabled students, especially adolescents who have followed a school curriculum that may have caused them to doubt their own potential.

Each teacher should reflect on his/her own beliefs regarding, for example, the influence that the severity of disabilities can have on the effective integration/inclusion of the student and the ability to produce cognitive modifiability through educational interventions (Feuerstein, Rand, & Rynders, 1988; D’Alonzo, 2002; Hart, Dixon, Drummond, & McIntyre, 2004) as these beliefs have a meaningful impact on educational activity.

Sometimes, especially in the case of mild intellectual or sensory disabilities, the teachers “aim low” without actually assessing their own teaching methods and without providing an individualized program that, by enabling pupils to feel increasingly able to meet educational demands, will develop their potential and give them a perception of their self-effectiveness and self-esteem (Bandura, 1997).

Classical studies on the self-fulfilling prophecy (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1992) warn us, as teachers, about the importance of questioning ourselves regarding our views on the possibility of cognitive modification and the extent to which individuals with difficulties are able to learn, knowing that our expectations may influence children’s behavior and results. If our expectations are low, often based on an a priori assessment, then, these expectations are likely to be confirmed.

3.3. Educational success

There are a number of factors that can cause pupils to be unsuccessful in school and/or in their education. These factors interact with one another in complex ways that differ from individual to the next. Teachers are required to consider a number of aspects such as: the pupil’s characteristics and cognitive potential and the variables associated with their emotions, feelings and motivations; the epistemological difficulties inherent to the concepts in the subjects of study (for example, in mathematics the use of formal language or of negative numbers, the theory of which has taken centuries to be accepted and organized by the community of mathematicians themselves); the teaching methods used to present the subject itself (an example of a pedagogical error in primary school could be introducing the conceptualization of geometrical figures through definitions rather than inductive reasoning); and educational modalities and the relationships that are established between pupil and teacher, between pupil and classmates (there could be a lack of empathic communication between the teacher and the pupil, which could instead help understand the cognitive and emotional processes set in motion in the learning phase). Limited attention might also be given to the environment and the many variables that can affect the motivation to learn, etc.

The professional expertise of regular teachers and specialized support teachers in this regard brings a number of skills into play. The absolutely essential ones are aimed at: collecting information, observations and assessments, which should be as clear as possible and also shared regarding the disability; analyzing needs and strengths, designing a map of the resources and constraints present in the environment; identifying learning difficulties and their nature (general and specific difficulties); proposing individualized/personalized curricula, informing the pupil of the goals to be pursued and ensuring that he/she works as autonomously as possible to achieve them, encouraging cooperative knowledge building; using different didactic tools (active, iconic, analogical, symbolic) and integrated didactic strategies (tutoring, cooperative learning, multimedia technologies, etc.); and providing multiple opportunities for growth in the perspective of dynamic planning that will also involve changes and adjustments with regard to the mainstream curriculum so as to build up a learning community that will be supportive and conscious of diversity and of everyone’s assets. Indeed, it is not a question of denying differences, but rather of seeing them as the starting point for epistemological analysis of the structure of disciplines and their teaching, introducing the changes required to meet the specific educational needs of individual students more effectively (Sandri, 2007b).

Should it be necessary to differentiate learning goals for the student with disabilities compared to the mainstream ones established for the entire class, the educational plan should refer as much as
possible to the skills indicated in the curriculum for the category and grade of the school in which the pupil with disabilities is integrated. It would be necessary to consider the characteristics of both the classroom group and the pupil, so that topics and working methods able to enhance every individual are chosen while also allowing for integration between the two different curricula and preventing the curricula from developing along parallel lines, one for the classroom and one for the pupil with disabilities, as such a parallelism could result in a situation where the physical school space is shared but there are no opportunities for “recognition” and learning while socializing.

From this point of view, it is essential that every teacher play an active role, working in a team with other members of the teaching staff to identify the best possible classroom conditions in which individuals may tap into all their resources to learn how to learn (Bateson, 1972), expressing their cognitive strategies to themselves and others and reflecting upon their strengths and weaknesses in an atmosphere of acceptance and empathy.

It is useful to carry out a dynamic assessment of learning potential (Vygotsky, 1924) to establish what pupils are able to do on their own and what they can do with help (their potential development level). Levels may differ even among individuals presenting the same actual development level. The teacher's attention should be focused above all on identifying the capacities expressed by individuals during the learning sequence in the interactive phase, thanks to the support provided and given that these are the most reliable indicator of a pupil's potential and a meaningful predictor of possible future outcomes.

“One proposition, open to success in school, involves bringing out into the open an ability (the ‘what I can do’), the conditions under which this capacity is expressed (the ‘what I can do if’), the procedures by which the ability is achieved (the ‘how I can do it’) and bringing about the conditions in terms of organization and relationships under which it may be possible to activate individual resources to deal with new difficulties. These may then be broadened when matched with the resources of the other members of the classroom group. And so the pupil who is top of the class, when there is a cooperative class, may consider and talk about the strategies that have led to his/her success and offer a contribution to the classroom group,” (Severi, 1995).

Such a process requires a context that is attentive and respectful of differences and individual specificities. People grow within a community, and the educational success of each pupil, with more or less serious disabilities, also depends on the extent to which the school is capable of being an integrating community and providing adequate educational opportunities.

Identifying the student’s zone of proximal development, implementing a pedagogical mediation and a formative assessment (Scriven, 1967; Weeden et al., 2002) are some of the pillars of a teaching model that has adopted the principles of social constructivism. This implies recognizing individuals – independent of any categorization and even if they have an impairment – as active builders of their own knowledge through interaction by negotiating and cooperating with members of their own community (Sandri, 2007a).

To promote the inclusion of students with disabilities in the class if they follow a personalized plan, it is also essential that the teacher identify the most meaningful aspects of this pathway and includes them in the teaching program for the class as a whole to give the student's classmates deeper understanding of both the knowledge of the subjects of study and their learning strategies.

From a teaching standpoint, it is not a matter of trivializing or simplifying the subject matter, but rather of adopting a different way of looking at one's own teaching discipline.

Interaction with a pupil with a speech disabilities, for example, can help teachers include methods and tools relevant to the rehabilitation process for the person with disabilities in the class's curriculum goals taking advantage of exchanges with speech therapists, which can be highly educational for everyone and, in particular, for anyone with a speech disorder. In this regard, for instance, a small mirror commonly used in speech therapy to allow the child to control how they are “holding” their mouths while pronouncing phonemes can be transformed by the teachers from a special object into a normal object in a primary school classroom within a program aimed at the acquisition of reading and writing.

This example is helpful in understanding the specific nature of the special pedagogy, as defined in Italy, which is focused on reformulating and identifying proposals in an inclusive context that, by going beyond the medicalization of specialized activities, allow one, paradoxically, to wipe out the
special tool while responding to the specific needs of the person with disabilities, making everyday school life special, so to speak.

4. Conclusions

In this article, we have illustrated some theoretical, methodological and operational approaches developed in Italy to ensure significant achievement and attainment for pupils with disabilities in schools accessible to everyone. It is believed that these issues can actually be meaningful points of reference and an important model for quality teaching and learning for the educational needs of all pupils, including the most gifted.

Achieving inclusion is complex work that primarily involves the whole school community and requires everyone be trained and prepared to accommodate students with disabilities and promote a culture that values diversity. It also involves the ability to activate individualized and/or personalized teaching designed to ensure that all student are in control of the direction of their own learning, that they learn to learn and decentralize their self-reflection within a community while at the same time being attentive to the social and emotional-relational school experience. All of this takes place within a context referred to as special normality (Ianes, 2006), where common educational objectives are pursued with methodologies and techniques that are valid for all students. In this normal path, however, it is necessary to enter those special elements that are essential to ensure that pedagogical strategies adequately address the cognitive and affective characteristics of each subject with disabilities.

Disclosure of interest

The author declares that he has no conflicts of interest concerning this article.

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