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## FOSTERING EDUCATIONAL EQUITY AND SOCIAL PARTICIPATION THROUGH INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY

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**Abstract:** Today more than ever, the activation of inclusive projects through the contribution offered by physical education is essential to implement a strong alliance between school and extra-school, between school and family in order to activate a positive contamination of universal and timeless values of motor activities. This becomes essential since the structuring of society requires a cultural and social pact that guarantees in all formal and non-formal environments the learning of skills that could transform children's lives. It is for this reason that physical activity cannot be for the benefit of a few because the aggregative moments that it can express often become a real lifeline for many young people.

In this context, acting through inclusive teaching makes it possible to value and capitalize on the individual differences present in all pupils, with particular attention to situations in which these differences create significant barriers to learning and participation in social life. In fact, for some time now it has ceased to be considered as an access lane only for students with disabilities or special educational needs, qualifying as a quality teaching for all. We can increasingly consider it as a style of teaching, a daily educational and didactic orientation.

**Keywords:** Learning; Inclusion; Special Pedagogy.

### Introduction

One of the main themes of contemporary educational discussion is the concept of school inclusiveness, which is achieved when the school becomes a learning environment that ensures the educational success of all students, no one excluded.

An inclusive school is a school that thinks and designs with everyone in mind, starting from the modification of the context and not acting only on the subject, but finding specific strategies, suitable for the disability and, at the same time, useful to the community. In inclusive schools, all students as persons have the right and dignity to personalize and individualize. The Italian school today is called upon to respond to the different and specific needs of each individual student. The current guidelines in the pedagogical and didactic field, in fact, affirm the dignity of diversity, enhancing it as a resource for the entire class group, capable, through the enhancement of the potential of each one, to become an inclusive class. In this sense, the disabled partner becomes an asset, a resource

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and even a strength because it allows you to measure yourself against your limits and potential (Brennan, King, & Travers, 2021; Óskarsdóttir, Donnelly, Turner-Cmuchal, & Florian, 2020).

To achieve this goal, the school must necessarily involve all those who play a decisive role in the learning processes (teachers, school managers, students and families, local authorities) and take advantage of all the resources and educational opportunities useful for carrying out interventions that aim not to separate, distinguish, and highlight the diversity of each student, but to include, valuing and harmonizing differences (PozoArmentia, Reyero, & Gil Cantero, 2020).

In the 1970s in Italy, the closure of special schools (Law 517/1977) led to the inclusion of disabled pupils in mainstream classes. Over the years and the advancement of pedagogical research, the term "insertion" was considered too static and incapable of expressing the work of co-education existing among the pupils.

For this reason, we moved on to talk about "integration", a term that better expressed the idea that the disabled classmate was not only physically present in the classroom, but shared the teaching activity of his classmates, integrating, precisely, into the work of the class with the necessary modifications, reductions, adaptations, and the support of the support teacher (Kefallinou, Symeonidou, & Meijer, 2020).

From the mid-1990s, however, people began to question the value of the term "integration", which risked taking on negative, purely compensatory connotations, forgetting unique aspects related to the person, such as originality, authenticity, and freedom. The term "inclusion" was born, with the intention of highlighting a mutual permeability and exchange between pupils with different potentials within the same class.

The concept of inclusiveness, as we understand it today, is therefore nothing more than the result of a slow and gradual evolution of the original concept of "tailor-made school", based on the centrality of the child, already typical of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Fröbel and Aporti, and which takes the form of innovative educational proposals and pedagogical theorizations by particularly significant pedagogues of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries attentive to learning environments and development psycho-cognitive and social, disability and the child's emotionality (Stentiford, & Koutsouris, 2021).

Inclusion thus becomes a two-way phenomenon, in which not only the disabled classmate adapts to the behavior of the non-disabled classmates, but also the whole class must strive to adapt and understand the partner's disability, learning and changing through experience with people with disabilities and vice versa. The new term "inclusion", therefore, refers to a process, a philosophy of acceptance, such as the ability to provide a framework within which pupils can be equally valued, treated with respect and provided with equal opportunities. It is a comprehensive approach, not only centered on the individual disabled person, but which is aimed at all pupils and all their potential (Hansen, Carrington, Jensen, Molbæk, & Secher Schmidt, 2020).

The inclusion of students with disabilities in Italian schools has been implemented for forty years in regular schools and normal classes and is achieved through the individualization and personalization of educational activities, starting from the differences and potential of each disabled student, valued in the context of the class group.

### **1. The Inclusive Didactic Approach**

Inclusive teaching is the teaching of all, which is based on personalization and individualization through active, participatory, constructive, and affective methodologies. The quality of inclusive teaching is determined by educational reflexivity and intentionality, by the search for alternative motivations and hypotheses, by the ability

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to change perspectives of meaning and to produce transformative learning (DeMatthews, Serafini, & Watson, 2021).

As Pennac (2010) argues, "Each student plays his own instrument, there is nothing to be done. The difficult thing is to get to know our musicians well and find harmony. A good class is not a regiment marching in step, it is an orchestra playing the same symphony."

Inclusive teaching is, therefore, a teaching conceived, designed and planned, from the beginning, based on individual variability, capable of being accessible for all students and not only for some with special educational needs. Designing in an inclusive way means thinking, whatever the content to be conveyed, of personalized, multi-modal, and multilevel forms of teaching, because each student faces learning at different levels and ways, thus avoiding "path emergencies" that force, a posteriori, to modify what has been designed for an "ideal class", thus avoiding loss of effectiveness of the teaching action itself. Poorly designed and poorly conducted teaching can run the risk of creating barriers to learning itself (Graham, 2020). Inclusive teaching is therefore an innovative and flexible teaching "style" that facilitates the participation, enhancement, and educational success of all students.

Inclusive teaching challenges teachers to develop a wide repertoire of teaching strategies that are considered effective, not only for pupils with special needs, but for everyone. This means that every teacher can improve their effectiveness, first of all by knowing and then using, monitoring and evaluating the best strategy, so as to help students become more effective learners themselves. There is a lot of research that shows how meta-cognitive, cooperative strategies, the strengthening of social and emotional skills, as well as the creation of a positive classroom climate, are essential for inclusive teaching. Developing a broad repertoire of effective strategies is essential as long as they reflect knowledge of the characteristics, needs of students and environmental circumstances, as well as teachers' professional and personal knowledge and skills (Garg, & Sharma, 2020; Sleeter, & Zavala, 2020).

In addition to the dimension of effectiveness with respect to methodological-didactic choices and actions to be made, an inclusive teacher cannot forget the importance of relational and emotional skills. Numerous studies show that teachers' appropriate mental attitude, emotional closeness, and ability to give appropriate and positive feedback to students are decisive elements for their academic success and the creation of a good classroom climate. The training of teachers with respect to their social and emotional skills, in an inclusive school context, certainly cannot be underestimated. The quality of the classroom climate (made up of relationships and emotional experiences) is crucial for the success of students, who learn best when they are in an emotionally safe and predictable environment, which motivates them and stimulates them towards positive and inclusive goals (Demchenko, Maksymchuk, Bilan, Maksymchuk, & Kalynovska, 2021).

The concept of inclusivity in contemporary schools goes beyond disability, learning disorders, explicit difficulties in integration and behavior and concerns all pupils with respect to whom it is necessary to give different answers for their educational needs. The goal of inclusive teaching is, in fact, to make all students reach the highest possible degree of learning and social participation, enhancing the differences present in the class. UNESCO's Guidelines for Integration Policies in Education (2009) emphasize that: "Inclusive schooling is a process of strengthening the capacities of the education system to reach all students. [...]. An inclusive school system can only be created if mainstream schools become more inclusive." In other words, if they become better at educating

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all the children in their community. For pupils with certified disabilities, on the other hand, Legislative Decree No. 66 of 13 April 2017 lays down specific rules for the promotion of their full school integration. In particular, it refers to the so-called Plan for Inclusion that each school must prepare to overcome all those factors that may hinder its implementation, for the coordinated use of resources and to design specific improvement interventions. The Inclusion Plan must include an analysis of strengths and weaknesses, objectives to increase inclusiveness for the following school year, resources (support teachers, assistants, contact persons), methodologies, methods of involving families, relations with local social and health services that are intended to be activated, actions for the acquisition and distribution of additional resources for the implementation of inclusion projects, the preparation of interventions for entry into the school system, continuity between the different levels of school and future integration into the world of work (Ciyer, 2010).

The inclusive school, therefore, equips itself in a synergistic way to propose multiple educational and didactic strategies, according to a holistic approach, which considers the student as a complex and multidimensional person with his or her own socio-cultural and biological characteristics, and aims at the overall development of the potential and skills of each one for the achievement of the highest possible level of learning and socialization. To achieve this, however, schools must have the courage to renounce the standardization of teaching (Kinsella, 2020). It must allow all its members to feel part of a community in which the same educational ideals are shared, the individuality of all its members is respected, each with his or her own interests, needs and talents, and offers multiple possibilities and formative opportunities, so that each one can realize his or her aspirations. Fundamental to this new vision of the school is respect for the right to self-determination and to the construction of future life projects adapted to the potential of each and everyone, to the aspirations of families and to the new demands of society and culture. The school intends to achieve these important educational objectives with the collaboration of families with whom it is necessary to share, in respect of roles and specific responsibilities, objectives, goals and strategies for the healthy growth of young people. An inclusive systemic vision must also consider the contributions that can come from collaboration with other public and private entities, and from associations operating in the area and that are able to contribute to ensuring the educational success of students (Kim, Yi, & Hong, 2021; Miller et al., 2022; Stinken-Rösner et al., 2020).

In the process of individualization of teaching, activities are provided for disabled pupils so that it is possible to achieve knowledge and skills common to the rest of the class. Common objectives, therefore, to the class group, but different, individualized methodologies, which consider the potential, skills, and personal abilities of the disabled student, which become a resource, trying to eliminate the factors that originate or maintain the difficulty. Personalized teaching, on the other hand, provides for the achievement of objectives that are different from those of the class, because they are built ad hoc on the disability of the individual student, enhancing his or her strengths. In this way, by specifically considering the different ability of the pupil as a peculiarity of his own, the pupil will be given the opportunity to develop his full potential and give him the opportunity to transmit his different ability to others (Väyrynen, & Paksuniemi, 2020).

To interpret inclusion as a "day-to-day" way of managing classrooms, training must be aimed at both support teachers and all curriculum teachers. Indications and Guidelines remind us that diversity poses a great challenge to didactic and educational action, such as being able to face it, having adequate skills in inclusive teaching strategies, in order to respond adequately not only to the needs of disabled pupils or with Specific Learning

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Disorders, with other difficulties or developmental disorders and with social and cultural disadvantage, but also emphasizing the quality of learning of all pupils (Sturm, 2019).

A key aspect is also that of "taking charge" of the student, which must be carried out by the entire "educating community", avoiding processes of delegation to the support teacher alone. Hence, therefore, the need for targeted, specific, modular training interventions that consider the different starting levels of those who access training and, above all, based on a participatory vision of inclusion and oriented towards cooperation and cooperative teaching (Mihajlovic, 2020).

Nevertheless, the school, which for over forty years has been trying to be a welcoming and inclusive context, today feels it must oppose the adverse pressures that come from the outside with a decisive and constructive commitment to inclusion. These educational ideals are expressed through pedagogical challenges from which the school cannot move away. Learning and teaching practices can guide inclusive actions in the classrooms, through participation, cooperation, interdependence, and laboratory methodology.

### **2. Physical Education as a means of inclusion**

The stimulating encounter between physical activity and the world of disability takes place starting from the origins of school inclusion. Physical education, in fact, is one of the school disciplines that contributes decisively to the formation of one's bodily identity, personality and the acquisition of communicative-relational skills (Demchenko, Maksymchuk, Bilan, Maksymchuk, & Kalynovska, 2021). It is considered fundamental for the harmonious development of the personality and for the formation of citizens capable of expressing themselves and relating in today's world, so much so that it has been defined as a "hinge discipline between the scientific, communicative and expressive, relational and citizenship fields" (MIUR, 2018). Physical education promotes self-knowledge and one's potential in a constant relationship with the environment, others, and objects. It also contributes to the formation of the student's personality through the knowledge and awareness of one's own bodily identity, as well as the continuous need for movement as a constant care of one's person and well-being. Motor activities provide students with opportunities to reflect on the changes in their bodies, to accept them and live them serenely as an expression of each person's growth and maturation process (Sánchez, de Haro-Rodríguez, & Martínez, 2019). They also offer opportunities to reflect on the significance of self-image in comparison with peers. The primary objective of physical education is, in fact, to promote the growth of physically educated people through the acquisition of skills, such as motor skills, knowledge, socio-affective behaviors and motivations such that they are urged to adopt healthy and physically active lifestyles based on awareness of the bodily (Haeghele, 2019). This orientation frames the discipline in a holistic approach, which identifies among its main purposes the physical, cognitive, and social development of children, together with the promotion of a healthy lifestyle, assigning it the role of a privileged tool for the structuring of personality, social relationships and for the acquisition of the necessary life skills throughout life. It is for this reason that physical education is proposed as an essential element for integrated growth. It follows that, through a conscious pedagogical orientation aimed at proposing significant motor experiences and the acquisition of new skills, it is necessary to promote an adequate motor planning that correlates with a coherent pedagogical intentionality, in order to adequately define motor action and to attribute a fair value to it. Therefore, education through the body and movement cannot be linked to didactic strategies linked only to doing but must also and above all be realized in a condition linked to the deepest meaning of being a person acting in the environment (Hutzler, Meier, Reuker, & Zitomer, 2019).



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Starting from these assumptions, the School must, therefore, become the ideal setting in which to build a didactic of motor and sports activities that looks at the educational conception of the body and movement understood as a factor of promotion not only of the aspects of self-construction but also as an educational exercise for the acquisition of healthy lifestyles that allow to improve the well-being and health of the individual. In this sense, it becomes necessary to integrate in the teaching practice both the purely physical and the socio-relational aspects, in order to allow a global taking charge of the psychophysical health of the subject.

Physical education must, therefore, necessarily become essential to the formation of young people. In fact, it contributes to their growth both in structural terms and to the formation of the Self that concerns the body, its potential and its limits, its position in physical space, its perception in relation to others, its image. It also plays a crucial role in directing motivation to improve one's individual skills and self-determination in achieving psychophysical well-being. Therefore, it not only has the educational value that contributes to the development of motor skills, abilities, and competences, but also and above all the value of all those activities that, through movement, contribute to the structuring of identity and awareness of the potential of one's own body (Rekaa, Hanisch, & Ytterhus, 2019).

Physical education conceived and experimented in this way puts into practice a didactic that becomes a tool for the metacognitive development of the body and mind, in a framework in which the subjects can recognize themselves in body and movement. The education of the body and movement is therefore aimed at a training process capable of allowing learners to achieve an ever-greater awareness of their body in movement in order to obtain that intrinsic pleasure and the achievement of cultural, social and expressive factors that identify the value aspect of motor activities (Vilchez, Kruse, Puffer, & Dudovitz, 2021). It follows that the educational process represents the tool through which the individual gives shape to his or her personal identity, integrating all those knowledge, skills and competencies that allow him or her to live and mature an increasingly complete self-awareness. The body and movement are, therefore, two fundamental elements of the individual and social dimension in the personal development of the individual, it follows that physical activities provide a special contribution to the creation and strengthening of skills that can be used in other contexts of life. Within the didactic path of motor and sports education, due to the specific experiential characteristics of the discipline, the curriculum helps to develop transversal skills capable of making students capable of transforming the knowledge, attitudes and values acquired into real skills, such as "what to do" and "how to do it" in every circumstance of life (Nilholm, 2021).

This type of offer characterized by a multiplicity of accessible, interdisciplinary, situated, and immersive learning opportunities, based on plural and differentiated didactic mediations in their complementarity, represents the methodological framework within which the knowledge and skills acquired through physical, and sports education can contribute to the development of educational and social equity.

### **3. Physical education as a perspective for the development of individual potential**

Physical education unquestionably assumes an educational value for everyone, able bodied and disabled; For the latter, play, movement, and sport take on an added value by giving visibility to their physical and cognitive abilities. Every form of educational intervention stems from the teacher's ability to remove "obstacles", focusing on functional abilities and hypothesizing suitable, not adapted, educational proposals (Kirk, 2019).

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The presence of a person with disabilities within a group changes relationships, relationships, balances, emotions on an intra and interpersonal level: there begins to be more collaboration, sharing and there is a tendency to face any obstacle in order to resolve the various conflicts. Disability also produces advantages for able-bodied people to the extent that they are in an inclusive dimension that is not limited only to welcoming diversity. Various didactic and educational strategies must be put in place in order to create a learning community, a community that manifests solidarity and sensitivity.

Everyone should perceive difference as a value or resource and not as a threat precisely because, when an individual meet someone "different" from yourself, you create a greater awareness of your identity. It is necessary to create a new educational paradigm, it is necessary to educate to the difference, to the other and to the different to create those effective conditions in which the subject can express his potential and the most hidden reactions (Sulasmi, & Akrim, 2019).

It becomes necessary to identify the skills of the most "fragile" in order to enhance their abilities within the class group. The resulting didactic proposal will have to respond to the needs of the students, taking into account the conditions of extreme heterogeneity of the classes, aiming at the discovery of their own body and their motor and communication skills to increase self-esteem and self-confidence. Starting from the assumption that every student needs, indifferently, appropriate educational proposals and that whatever the "difficulty", the educator will have to create the conditions of welcome and collaboration such as to allow adequate participation in the activity, Motor and Sports Education could intervene as a facilitator of school learning in subjects with special educational needs. The person, the goal, and the context (rules and people) are the factors that unite the world of play and sport and the world of disability: everyone indiscriminately uses their skills and determination to achieve the same goal, that is, to reach the limit of their limits by overcoming obstacles. From this point of view, it is important to be able to train the teachers themselves in order to make them understand the real and personal needs of the students in order to create inclusive actions that can make the disabled person feel the protagonist of their own life project and no longer a simple spectator in which others play their game (Opstoel et al., 2020).

Physical education, in fact, becomes effective when the focus is on the student and not on sport, when the teacher is able to motivate the student and create a positive teacher learner relationship, making him more and more autonomous in his activity and personal choices.

The educational process and the related training project require an educational space in which motor and sports paths are flexible and personalized in relation to the characteristics and peculiarities of each subject, which allow not only to "overcome" the deficit but also to increase in each subject the awareness of his possibilities, thus contributing to the formation of his identity. It happens, in fact, that every student has special needs to be transformed into special desires and life prospects, as each subject is unique and unrepeatable, with his or her own experience and his or her own life project. The line to be taken is, therefore, that of "valuing differences in the awareness of diversity as an indispensable value" in order to confront the diversity of each student in a new learning environment that ensures convergence and balance between different characteristics and needs and above all is able to change flexibly with changing attitudes, aspirations, environments, fragility and potential of the person (White et al., 2021).

Looking at the disabled person beyond their deficit means considering their life history by providing different possibilities for personalized and integrated growth. Physical education is well suited to this training approach as

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motor activities allow you to "abandon the pressures of everyday life, have more bodily contact, be cooperative, resolve conflicts, get to know the other and, consequently, socialize with all people beyond disability" (Juvonen, Lessard, Rastogi, Schacter, & Smith, 2019).

Physical education, as a training process, therefore, represents a real breaking down of social barriers, a tool capable of giving life to an innovative and mature paradigm based on the promotion of social inclusion. For the disabled person sharing the same experience, the same spaces and the same moments with others represents an opportunity for growth and social integration. Physical education should be considered as a method of intervention in the difficult educational path and integration of the disabled person. The motor and sports field, in fact, is a favorable context for the development and consolidation of fundamental cognitive skills and, at the same time, the body, motor activity, games and recreational activities aimed at integration, become concrete and coherent educational tools for the affirmation of this paradigm.

Through motor activities, exploiting a psychoeducational intervention model that integrates the educational aspect with the psychological and relational one, it is possible to create the conditions for the subject with disabilities to benefit from a learning context, understood as growth and structuring of the personality (search for autonomy). This means, first of all, valuing the diversity of the student: difference is to be considered a resource and a richness and, in this sense, collaboration and teamwork are essential for everyone's growth (Pangrazi, & Beighle, 2019). Sport and play, in addition to spreading the values of solidarity, loyalty, respect for the person and the rules, which are the founding principles of any healthy society, are extraordinary tools for building skills that can be transferred to other contexts of life. The organization of a competition, the definition of roles, the determination of timing, game strategies, are real intellectual skills that can be transferred to any context of life and represent skills that everyone should be able to put into practice when they must make decisions or prepare a program of action. Movement activities are opportunities to privilege creativity and emotional investment because the educational perspective is to support the processes that lead to autonomy, the growth of self-esteem, the ability to initiative and self-awareness at various levels, physical and emotional.

## **Conclusions**

Educating the person to become himself, also by concentrating on his bodily realization, means helping him to become aware of his being a whole person, which is expressed and fulfilled through movement, action. This means accompanying the subject to read the body not only as a set of muscle bundles to be controlled as such and therefore a mere expression of coordinative and conditional capacities, but to ensure that it grasps itself integrally in its total corporeality, which also involves relating to others. The body, as a co-builder of knowledge and self-knowledge, in its being "in situation", is correlated with motivation, with the intentionality that each subject puts into his action and not only with his mechanical action of a merely reproductive model.

Physical education, conducted in formal, non-formal and informal educational systems, calls for the acquisition of the person's awareness of his transformation as a bodily identity, in his existence, acting and perfecting himself. In this sense, pedagogical intentionality has as its peculiarity the feeling and becoming of bodies, embodied and embodied actions that give meaning and significance to the person's experience, including those who may show deficits and disabilities. Physical education has, in essence, the purpose of allowing each and every one to develop



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their own personal life project according to an eco-systemic approach, using a multi-perspective vision in relation to the contribution that the different motor activities can offer in order to achieve a "formative" design.

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