

## **INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO INCLUSIVE TEACHING IN AFFORDABLE EDUCATION SYSTEMS**

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### **Abstract**

Even if the term accessibility declined on schools can make us think mainly of infrastructures, accessibility in its most proper sense, as a characteristic of being easily usable by any type of user, fully involves teaching, methodologies and materials that it uses. Practicing inclusive teaching means adopting a real educational orientation, a teaching style that was created to identify and guarantee beneficiaries the optimal learning conditions to smooth out difficulties and differences. The goal is, therefore, to be able to put each student in a position to discover, enhance and express their potential to the fullest, helping to increase school well-being.

**Key words:** Educational context; Academic achievement; Special pedagogy.

### **Introduction**

The school environment is the crucial place where children and young people live many experiences on which they build their perception of themselves, relationships with classmates and, more generally, relationships outside the family. Knowing how to respect and value the particularities of each individual is the key to creating an inclusive and open school environment (Fabiano, 2020). It is of fundamental importance to pay particular attention to situations in which differences can create barriers to learning and socializing. It is in this context that inclusive teaching must act as a facilitator, differentiating and personalizing teaching activities so that the whole class group is involved. These are strategies that modify traditional teaching methods with the aim of making diversity perceived, not as obstacles but as resources. It proves, therefore, to be an innovative and flexible teaching style that facilitates the educational success of all students (Juvonen et al., 2019). But who needs to implement an inclusive method? Here are some examples:

1. Pupils with Special Educational Needs. The term has formally entered the Italian school context with the Ministerial Directive of 27/12/2015 and indicates all those stable or transient conditions of difficulty, which can affect learning and school performance.
2. Pupils with autism;
3. Foreign pupils; 4. Disabled pupils.

In a truly inclusive school, all students, including those with disabilities, must be able to independently access the proposed content, which must not present barriers to fruition. The students must be able to understand the material presented because it is organized in such a way that everyone can get to the content. Students must be able to

interact with the material and contents, they must be able to adapt the materials to their needs to enrich their skills and abilities through direct manipulation (active teaching) (Nilholm, 2021). The "Stanca Law" (9 January 2004, no. 4, "Provisions to facilitate the access of disabled people to IT tools", Art. 5 - Accessibility of teaching and training tools) established that the accessibility criterion should also be extended to all training and school material (Gianelli, & Imperiale, 2019). Accessibility is a feature that must belong to every device, service, resource, environment, or cultural content, in order to be easily usable. The concept of accessibility has had great development on the web and aims to eliminate the so-called web accessibility divide, such as the gap between those who can independently access web resources and those who cannot (Mangiatordi, 2020). Today, this term must rightly find a place in the world of schools, where the obstacles are not only represented by architectural barriers, but also by teaching methods that risk excluding students with fragility. Compared to accessibility in general, however, the school has an advantage: at school, teaching is designed with the students of a given reality in mind. There is no such thing as a design that is not tailored to a specific class. Teachers can know the characteristics of their students well and must take them into account in the design of each didactic intervention, in the choice of materials, strategies, languages to be used, times and methods of verification and evaluation (Marrucci, & Bianchi, 2022). Daniel Pennac (2010) in his book "School Diary" describes the concept of the classroom as a place made up of people with different characteristics and needs but who cooperate to achieve a splendid harmony, each musician thus brings an added value and at the same time becomes aware of his or her own abilities. The teacher has the arduous task of conducting the orchestra. To do this, it can rely on the four essential pillars at the basis of inclusive teaching:

1. **Plan.** Planning is of paramount importance; in this way you avoid mishaps along the way that slow down the class. Inclusive, poorly thought out and improvised teaching runs the risk of creating obstacles to learning. All the variables of each pupil must be considered, and it must be accessible to everyone both those suffering from disabilities and special educational needs, but not only that, pupils with social hardships must also be involved (Ghigi, & Piras, 2021). Educational success gratifies the student, which is why thinking inclusively in any school discipline requires multi-modal and multi-level forms of personalized teaching, since each student learns at different levels and ways.
2. **Collaborate.** Complementary to planning, inclusive teaching requires the collaboration of all figures in the school community and the family: teachers of all subjects, managers, local authorities, school staff, parents, and the pupils themselves are involved. No one should be left out of the program, as it is only through the co-participation of all those involved that an appropriate methodology can be achieved (Piccioli, 2020).
3. **Relationships and emotions.** In addition to the organizational part, we cannot forget the relational and emotional issue. Among the decisive elements for creating a good emotionally safe and predictable classroom environment, there is emotional closeness and the ability to give appropriate and positive feedback on the progress achieved by pupils (Matucci, 2019). This type of climate motivates them and stimulates them towards positive and inclusive goals.
4. **Adopt effective teaching.** Inclusive teaching is a challenge for teachers. They must develop a broad repertoire of effective teaching strategies for each individual. Each methodology can be improved, but first of all it is necessary to monitor and evaluate the evidence accordingly. To do this, the training of teachers becomes an extremely important element (Pinnelli, & Fiorucci, 2019). Therefore, it is necessary to design always keeping in mind everyone's needs, with the awareness that good design is such only if it guarantees everyone the right to

learn without difficulty. A school is inclusive when it designs educational actions with all its students in mind, when it proposes content and paths (Jogan, 2019). The members of the class group must find their own space within the teacher's proposal, which looks indiscriminately at all the students and their different potentials, always intervening first on the context.

### **1. Inclusive teaching**

In recent years, an innovative teaching concept has been gaining ground, which aims to enhance the individual student, allowing everyone to learn and train according to their rhythms and abilities. We are talking about inclusive teaching, a real educational orientation whose cornerstone is respect for every student, regardless of the existence of special educational needs. To achieve inclusive teaching, a continuous effort is needed, on the part of the school and teachers, to design ad hoc programs that respect each student and present the lesson and activities through methods that allow each student to learn the contents (Azorín, & Ainscow, 2020). The aim is to build and guarantee a better and less exclusionary future for future generations, starting from the assumption that if there are limits, they can also be broken down to create more equality and less inequality. By definition, inclusive teaching is that "modus educandi" that was created to ensure the understanding of the educational needs of the individual and to implement functional solutions, overcoming methodological rigidities and differences of all kinds (Moore, & Vallejo, 2021). To achieve inclusive teaching, it is necessary to present the lesson and activities through strategies that allow everyone to learn the contents (from essential to in-depth, depending on their abilities) through:

1. Previous experience and knowledge;
2. Modalities that are most suitable for the student;
3. The most appropriate individual and collective activities;
4. The hook" with the boy's interests.

It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that inclusive teaching is only aimed at students with special educational needs. The purpose is broader: inclusive means for everyone. Each teacher must do his or her part by identifying the best strategies for each individual's learning, and a school is truly inclusive when it looks, indiscriminately, at all students and all their different potentials, intervening first on the context and then on the subject. In this type of approach, the focus shifts to learning and no longer to teaching, making use of techniques and tools that make the process more engaging. Inclusive teaching is aimed at all pupils, as it allows them to get the best out of each one while respecting their characteristics (Le Pichon, & Kambel, 2022). The teaching of inclusion aims to create the optimal learning conditions to smooth out difficulties and differences, with the aim of putting each student in a position to discover, enhance and express their potential to the fullest.

Among the main objectives of this teaching methodology are:

1. Seeking, finding, valuing, and celebrating all the differences between individuals;
2. Differentiate, individualize and personalize educational activities according to them;
3. Promote pupil autonomy, responsibility, and self-awareness.

All this necessarily leads to a radical paradigm shift, namely:

1. Putting the pupil at the center of the learning process;
2. Abandon the idea of using tailor-made tools for people in conditions of diversity to orient themselves towards actions towards all, therefore not thinking only of compensating for difficulties but designing with a view to inclusion;

3. Move from the concept of simplification (making a task simpler) to that of exemplification, i.e. showing, through examples, how to carry out a task;
4. Shift from focus on deficit to focus on learning potential;
5. Moving from reducing learning to reducing barriers to learning.

The foundation of inclusive teaching is therefore the recognition of the uniqueness constituted by each person (and not only by the disabled person), as the bearer of his or her own life story and his or her own unique and particular way of looking at the world (Ainscow, 2020). This uniqueness means that even the learning methods are not the same but vary from person to person and that the school is called upon to take this into account. Inclusive teaching aims to create learning conditions through which each student can express and realize their potential to the fullest and is therefore based on three cornerstones:

1. Seeking, finding, valuing, and celebrating all individual differences. The issue of differences can be addressed at different levels, such as trying to understand if different pupils have different ways of developing those processes that will lead them to similar results, congruent with expectations (e.g. different cognitive styles) or if there may be pupils outside the box who produce original knowledge results, outside the usual schemes;
2. Differentiate teaching activities through individualization and personalization processes;
3. Develop the autonomy and responsibility of the pupil, also through the promotion of a certain degree of self-awareness and freedom, for example by encouraging activities in cooperative groups and tutoring pairs.

The research and appreciation of these differences is absolutely necessary for the purposes of teaching and above all as a difficult choice of civilization, culture and politics of human coexistence. However, since these are complex and ambitious objectives, their achievement is only possible by developing a broad co-responsibility among the teachers who are called upon to collaborate, among themselves and with other professionals. By activating a project inscribed in a time horizon that, starting from school, can accompany the whole life of the person until it becomes part of the broader life project. Integration and inclusion are therefore configured as processes to be built situation by situation, where it is essential that the whole school develops the ability to be inclusive, welcoming to all pupils, being able to offer answers to the specific needs of each one and the possibility of educational success while respecting the present heterogeneity (Merrigan, & Senior, 2023). Therefore, thinking in terms of inclusion involves the design and implementation of a rich and articulated educational proposal, capable of making the educational offer of the school flexible, within which variables such as the organization and management of space and materials, times and methodological choices assume great importance, in view of the growth and development of each and every one in terms of autonomy, empowerment and satisfaction of educational needs. To become possible, it is very important that all these components are designed from the outset in plural, different and multiple forms, usable and suitable for various needs, according to a logic that takes the name of Universal Design, which literally means designing and creating environments that meet everyone's needs, in order to optimize the energy and resources available (Wardana, & Rulyansah, 2019).

## **2. Universal Design for Learning**

What is therefore outlined is a didactic that follows the principles of Universal Design for Learning, a psycho-pedagogical approach that addresses three major teaching challenges in a convergent way: the enhancement of diversity, inclusive education and the critical and conscious use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) (Basham, Blackorby, & Marino, 2020). UDL leads the development of flexible learning environments that can accommodate individual differences and aims to foster access to learning by reducing physical, cognitive,

intellectual, organizational and digital barriers, as well as other barriers. Since the way in which individuals learn is unique, it will be necessary to design curricula intentionally and systematically from the outset in such a way as to make them responsive to the needs of individual pupils. In this way, what is necessary for one can become useful for all (King-Sears, & Johnson, 2020).

Universal design for learning is guided by three core principles:

1. Encourage multiple means of representation to give students different ways of acquiring information and knowledge;
2. Use multiple means of action and expression, to provide students with alternatives to demonstrate what they know;
3. Offer multiple means of involvement, to exploit learners' interests and motivate them to learn.

Therefore, the first thing to avoid will be to be single mode and rigorous on fixed schemes of didactic intervention in favor of innovative teaching strategies, which involve multiple means of representation and expression and allow different modes of involvement. According to the principles of Universal Design, designing and creating environments that meet everyone's needs allows you to optimize the energy and resources available. In this design, two fundamental aspects must be taken into consideration, namely the organization of the "classroom space" and the teaching methods, times and materials adopted (McMahon, & Walker, 2019).

1. Space: how to arrange the classroom

Space and its organization in themselves say a lot about our idea of teaching and the climate we intend to create within the group, and they are so important that they can influence the behavior of students and teachers, to the point of facilitating or hindering learning. Through the arrangement of spaces and furniture, students receive a first idea of the behaviors that are considered correct and what they are expected to do. It is therefore an important non-verbal message capable of positively or negatively modifying the quality of the learning atmosphere and consequently the learning itself. In addition, the layout of the space can help students focus their attention both visually and acoustically and help the teacher manage the classroom (Kieran, & Anderson, 2019). Since it is not possible to find a suitable classroom layout for all teaching activities, the space must be organized in a flexible way, so as to clearly delimit the work areas and encourage as much as possible the physical proximity of the students (i.e. by arranging the desks in work groups) and the exchange of materials.

1. Teaching methods, times and materials

Since learning methods and times vary from person to person, it is important that the teacher varies his or her methodological choices in order to offer a range of proposals that are from time to time facilitating for some and challenging for others, in an alternation in which everyone can explore and perceive themselves in their strengths, without giving up working on their own difficulties. It is necessary for the teacher to reduce the use of frontal teaching, preferring learning paths that encourage the direct participation of pupils. This does not mean that the adult should give up his role as a guide with respect to the subjects in training, it is rather a matter of moving from the role of first actor to that of director, to go on stage with the entire class group (Fovet, 2022). The teacher's task therefore becomes that of proposing outlines, stimulating questions, preparing the canvas within which the students are called to play an active role in the construction of the educational path, gradually learning to know themselves and their classmates and to take responsibility for their choices, until they become real resources for the teacher and for the entire class group.

### **3. Teaching Strategies**



When we talk about strategy, we refer to the conscious choices regarding the type of educational intervention and the methodology necessary to achieve certain educational objectives in a given context, always taking into account the starting situation, the means available and the resources available. It is natural that the strategy should be significantly affected by the environment and the resources made available (Fornauf et al., 2020). Now that the new school reality moves in a context that is mainly digital, where the means, the environment and the times are radically different, strategies should also be rethought. First of all, it will be necessary to choose whether you want to use an innovative teaching methodology, which puts the student, his needs and potential at the center of the educational action, or if you want to use the teacher-centered transmission mode, such as the frontal lesson. The latter is certainly the best known and least innovative. It is appropriate to start right here because, although research in the pedagogical-didactic field has come very far, this is still the most widely used methodology, especially in secondary schools. These are therefore strategies aimed at modifying the schemes and standards of classic teaching methodologies, aimed at growing within the class group the idea that diversity is not an obstacle but a resource (Cumming, & Gilanyi, 2023). Thinking of a didactic system for all suitable for the individual is certainly not easy. First of all, it is important to have good collaboration at multiple levels involving pupils, teachers, managers, parents, professionals and the territory. The aim is to create a dynamic and flexible school environment capable of adapting to change. With respect to the teaching itself, it is important to differentiate and multiply the materials and methodologies, therefore use different teaching channels (images, videos, audio, group work, frontal lessons...) and material with different degrees of difficulty. This allows all students to be able to follow the teaching and approach different levels of in-depth study, according to their potential. Use the group as a resource through group activities, the use of alternative methodologies such as cooperative learning and peer-education, to promote learning and school motivation but also collaboration and relationships between students (Israel, Jeong, Ray, & Lash, 2020). To make activities and topics more captivating and engaging, new technologies and laboratory experiences can be used that give greater accessibility to teaching and motivation. Finally, it is important to work on elements that are less explicit, but fundamental for teaching. These are metacognitive (i.e. design, control, monitoring, prediction, evaluation of the learning process...) and emotional skills. These, in fact, strongly affect motivation, involvement in the student's educational plan, sense of responsibility, self-efficacy and self-esteem (Kennette, & Wilson, 2019). Thinking, and above all acting, from an inclusive perspective is an important challenge for today's context and it is important to continue to work, train and try to offer a school and teaching reality that is as accessible as possible to all and attentive to the individual. It will be up to the teacher to evaluate which strategy is appropriate to apply based on the specific situation, which is why it is important that he has particular skills and knowledge on the subject. With a view to implementing inclusive teaching, what skills do teachers need to have?

It is necessary to start from the initial formation, in order to acquire the solid foundations to adapt to the new needs of the school of our days (Capp, 2020; Mirza, Khurshid, Hasan, Shah, & Shah, 2022). After this, it would be advisable for teachers to have the opportunity to carry out continuous updates regarding the most varied functional specializations, in order to be ready and have a clear picture of all the possible difficulties and cases that may arise in front of them. The teacher must be able to act as a promoter of inclusion within the classroom, carrying out a work of emotional and cognitive involvement on the students and on himself (Karisa, 2023). Inclusive teaching methods arouse students' interest and increase motivation, promote different ways of offering personalized and stimulate active and autonomous learning processes.

Some examples:

1. Cooperative learning

In which students work in small groups to complete learning activities while receiving assessments based on their achievements. This working method is designed so that the response of one member of the group helps that of the other and vice versa.

2. Laboratory teaching

In which the subjects are an active part and can learn through the method of learn by doing.

3. Tutoring

Older or simply more competent students, help their peers to facilitate the learning of cognitive and social knowledge and skills.

4. Problem solving and reality tasks.

This method is important for finding solutions to problems you face in the real world that can have multiple interpretations. It's a great opportunity to collaborate, because they offer activities that can't be completed by a single student. It helps the maturation of transversal skills related to the area of languages, favors the development of multidisciplinary communication strategies and the ability to know how to structure a logical discourse aimed at persuasion. It develops critical thinking and the ability to research and select sources, as well as respect for the other's point of view. In the area of debate, we can also include the trial of historical figures who really existed.

5. Using the interactive white board

**Conclusions**

Defined as quality training for all, inclusive teaching is a real educational orientation, a didactic and interactive style that allows all pupils, including those with disabilities, to learn and undergo lifelong learning. This involves a continuous effort on the part of the school to design and prepare ad hoc programs in respect of each student, regardless of the existence of discomfort or disability. Teaching and learning have always been "social acts", whether this happens together with teachers or with classmates, who are a great resource, very often neglected and unused. Therefore, teaching children means first of all socializing, getting to know each other, valuing what collaboration and cooperation can convey, both at an informal level and at a technical tutoring level.

Promoting inclusive teaching in the classroom is, therefore, a very complex challenge because it aims to ensure the maximum degree of participation by all students, enhancing each individual student and, at the same time, each individual teacher with their own teaching style.

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