

Diversity and inclusion. Shared meanings between Italy and Lithuania. International comparative analysis of inclusive trajectories in educational policies and practices

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Abstract

The meaning of inclusion is complex and related to every form of diversity; it needs to be defined in a broad context, within and beyond the school context, to overcome all forms of exclusion and discrimination.

The concept of inclusive education concerns proper and appropriately agreed-on terminology and meanings expressed in the 2006 UN Convention ratifying the need to recognize the same rights for all individuals, as human beings, beyond stigma and labels.

The paper aims to show the trajectories of inclusive education policies and practices in the historical and educational contexts of two European countries, referring to the social-constructivism and bio-psycho-social pedagogical constructs, valuing the contribution of national and international scientific literature.

This article investigates cultural approaches, law evolutions and management policies that make an educational institution inclusive in the Italian and Lithuanian systems.

To identify and share the developments towards inclusive education in two historically different countries' contexts, the methodology of this article refers to the relevant literature, document and research reports review.

Keywords: inclusion; diversity; context; education; school; accessibility

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Introduction

This work represents the first research step by the Universities of Macerata

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(Italy) and Vytautas Magnus (Lithuania), comparing inclusive practices developed in Italian and Lithuanian school systems.

The collaboration between these two universities is part of an Erasmus Plus exchange and research project on shared interests in the evolution of inclusive dynamics.

The first part of the research project, to which this article refers, addresses the evolution of inclusive education at the supranational level, deepening the distinctive approaches of the different school systems. The common purpose is to identify, in both countries, the appropriate actions to implement school inclusiveness, the most effective cultural approaches, management policies and organizational practices as the aspects to be improved in an evolutionary perspective.

The paper starts with a synthetic excursus of legislation and scientific reports from the Italian and Lithuanian documentary panorama. It examines both contexts in the light of the specific contribution of special pedagogy, as a paradigm for analyzing change and differences in the general context (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2021).

The subsequent fieldwork will investigate cultural approaches, management policies and organizational practices that make an educational institution inclusive through a Mixed Methods approach.

The configured design includes two identical and parallel studies, each consisting of three sub-studies.

The first two follow an exploratory sequential design, according to the model for the development of tools.

The third is a parallel convergent design, according to the convergent triangulation model.

The two parallel studies, conducted in some Italian and Lithuanian schools, will provide helpful information for comparing the findings in the two research areas.

The research aims at identifying and analyzing the network of supports and inclusive spaces and the underlying systemic or emergency perspective.

2. Inclusion. Shared meaning

The inclusion of students with disabilities can be read in the light of the clinical-medical or systemic-social perspective to which different educational models correspond.

The medical-individual paradigm emphasizes the pathological elements of disability.

It provides for rehabilitative, dispensative and compensatory educational actions in special educational contexts.

The second vision confirms the educational community's role within a systemic perspective (WHO, 2001), where learning is a process that places all pupils at the center. The focus shifts from the deficit to the person's capability set, the development of the person's potential, regardless of the individual characteristics: the person and the environment are central in the inclusive process. (Canevaro, 2021).

Every pupil is educated within the mainstream system, where the schools are set up as inclusive environments. This perspective in Italy has resulted in full inclusion, with pros and cons and margins for further evolution. Despite undeniable progress, much remains to be done for a pervasive change of the socio-cultural system, for the constructs of ableism and norm still hinder every person's full participation and active citizenship.

Both on the epistemological and political level, Italy started with the abolition of closed institutions, special schools, psychiatric institutions, asylums, and orphanages – representative of an excluding system.

Promoting integration and inclusion is an ongoing process: people with disabilities of all ages are more exposed to the risk of marginalization, disadvantage and exclusion.

School is the first formal agency welcoming and supporting the potential of each and every one.

It plays a crucial role in fulfilling the life project (Giaconi, Caldin, 2021) through evolutionary support, overcoming the one-to-one model to build a context where everyone feels recognized, accepted and valued in his peculiarities.

The meaning of deficit itself requires new complex and multi-dimensional interpretative perspectives. The inclusive dynamics look first at the person and then at their characteristics, supporting the construction of identity processes from the self-determination perspective.

A targeted pedagogical, didactic, evolutionary, and dynamic action, respectful of human development processes, can shape new social and cultural representations against any stigmatizing, diagnosis-based categorization.

Inclusive pedagogical action takes on an eco-systemic, constructivist and interactionist dimension, involving the whole context. Inclusion either concerns everyone, or it is not: it cannot be based on the definition of categories because it is labeling that creates exclusion (Salis, 2017).

Like other European countries, Lithuania has committed to developing and implementing an inclusive education system. Changes in education started with the implementation of integrated education, emphasizing regulation of integration (involvement) of students with special needs into mainstream schools (Alisauskiene, Milteniene, 2018) in an approach coherent with the concepts of *partial* and *full* integration (Law on Special Education, 1998).

Global systemic change in the education policy, culture and practice is targeted at quality inclusive education for all, acknowledging the diversity of students and their needs, ensuring their participation and recognition of their achievements (Booth & Ainscow, 2014).

Different national-level documents in Lithuania (Law on Education, 2011; 4 MESS, 2014) recognize inclusive education (European Agency, 2018). Until 2021 there was no mention nor definition of the concept and content of inclusive education.

In Lithuania, for almost three decades, new concepts related to democratization of the education system simply replaced the previous ones with little evidence on the policy and practice of inclusive education (Ališauskienė, Miltenienė, 2018). Since 2021, in the revised version of Education Law (2011), ‘inclusion’ is mentioned among the educational system principles (article 5): the education system enables everyone to be educated, develop their powers and abilities, receive the help they need, experience success in learning, social, cultural and other activities, and not be discriminated because of the diversity of educational needs or educational assistance needs. If so, in the Education Law, the complex social constructs ‘inclusion’ and ‘inclusive education’, agreed upon internationally, are replaced with the Lithuanian equivalent concept “involvement in education” (lt: įtrauktis švietime). So the question is: is the objective “involving” or “inclusive” education.

To decide and agree on what inclusive education is, we should rethink the content of the concepts and their links with the education model, and clearly define them in national documents, avoiding ambiguity and simplifying complex processes that can lead to confusion and challenge the implementation of practices.

The passage from integration to inclusion, different in the two countries, stimulates new challenges, towards contexts shaped by the perspective of universal learning design. The path of inclusion, only recently started, will not be linear but complex and reticular, never definitive but open to ongoing changes.

3. Inclusive trajectories in Italy

3.1. Legislative and cultural paths in an inclusive perspective

The inclusive process in Italy followed the legislative and cultural complexity that, at different stages, led to the abolition of special schools in favor of an educational and social organization aimed at welcoming and enhancing every difference and diversity.

The Italian tradition of inclusive education started in the 1970s with the first experiences of integrating students with disabilities into mainstream schools.

Summarising, the Italian regulatory process has evolved through three stages:

1. insertion into common contexts, as a fundamental step in the process of overcoming exclusion and separation (Canevaro, 2017);
2. integration, as a result of the recognition of the needs of the person and the maturation of significant methodological and didactic experiences strongly supported by the evidence of special pedagogy;
3. the beginning of inclusive processes, which represents a suitable curvature towards the consideration of diversity (Cottini, 2017) and the exercise of active citizenship for a democratic society (Meirieu, 2007).

The inclusive school designs accessibility for everyone, beyond ableism, to allow every person to express their potential.

The Italian Constitution compels the state to remove all barriers that may limit personal development or the opportunity to participate in social activities (Art. 3) and requires the mandatory solidarity duty to be fulfilled (Art. 2).

The Italian school system, conceived as free and compulsory for everyone (Art. 34), up to the 1970s, excluded students with disabilities, isolating them in *their* special classes.

The professional figure of *support teacher* has been legally set up with the D.P.R. 970/1975, as a teacher *specialist*, distinct from other curricular teachers, and defined through Law 517/77 that proclaimed the decisive change in school practices. In this phase were laid the foundations of a new discipline, Special Pedagogy, as complex science of diversities, differences and inclusion.

A milestone in Italian law is the Framework Law for disability issues 104 of 1992, defining a person with a disability as someone recognized by medical certifications as having “physical, mental, sensory impairment, permanent or progressive, that causes difficulties in learning, working, relationships, and brings to disadvantage or exclusion”.

Despite the language, Law 104/92 remains a valid reference for school inclusion in every order and degree. It guarantees the activation of local support networks through teams of representatives of local authorities, social and health services, and associations of people with disabilities, providing guidance and planning to achieve inclusion (Canevaro, 2017).

Personalization and individualization, as didactic principles, guarantee the right to education for all students with disabilities through the differentiation of learning itineraries.

The Italian legislation on Special Educational Needs follows the “bio-psycho-social” anthropological model (WHO, 2001): “each student, continuously or in certain phases, can develop special educational needs for

physical, biological, physiological, or even psychological and social reasons, for which the school must provide an adequate and individual response”, (MIUR, Directive, 2012, p.1).

Law 66 of 2017 issues directives to enhance the school environment and individual education plans for pupils, identifying barriers and facilitators in school life. Inclusion is fulfilled through educational and didactic strategies focused on the development of the individual potential, respecting the right to self-determination and reasonable accommodation in the perspective of the best quality of life (Giaconi, 2021).

3.2. The point of special pedagogy in Italy

A reflection on inclusive processes and practices in Italy needs to refer to the themes of special pedagogy (Canevaro, 2021), which contributed to spreading the bio-psycho-social model (WHO, 2001) by proposing intervention models aimed at self-determination.

Even in the most complex and compromised subjective situations (Caldin, 2020), education is one of special pedagogy's inalienable principles. It addresses the issue of inclusion with an open and flexible viewpoint, aware of the responsibility and consequences of this epistemological and heuristic attitude on subjective and collective interest.

In the viewpoint of special pedagogy, the deficit, permanent or transitory, is a subjective peculiarity strictly related to the contexts, affecting the life experience.

Recognition and participation always depend on the cultural structure and the consideration of diversity and difference; the language itself can mark exclusions or configure respect for the rights and dignity of each person.

Through education and language, it is possible to overcome ableism, acknowledging diversity as the hallmark of humanity.

Inclusion concerns the stories of each and everyone and suggests the abandonment of labeling visions.

In the common feeling, inclusion becomes an often abused word that needs to be brought back into the standard of awareness of its pedagogical and cultural meanings affecting practices. In this perspective, a paradigmatic reversal occurs: the right to inclusion is not a goal but the precondition of any educational and social action.

The inclusive process in Italy represents a complex path, no longer conveying a dyadic learning perspective (teacher-learner), but triadic, with the environment (social and physical, economic, cultural, anthropological) being the driving force of the learning process. Teacher training consequently

assumes a key role (D'Angelo, 2021), where a school is a tool for inclusion in a recognized role within the network of services (d'Alonzo, 2018).

Italian schools build inclusive policies by drafting the Triennial Education Plan (Ptof), linked to the specific educational needs of their context. The individualized educational plan (PEI) is tailored to the educational needs of any student to support personalized learning paths (Ianes, Cramerotti, Fogarolo, 2021).

The inclusive dynamics still show criticalities and grey areas.

Attitudes of delegation and differentiation act as barriers: the articulation of the teaching staff, curricular and specialized, sometimes overlook the joint responsibility provided by law and specified by scientific literature.

Good school inclusion drives social inclusion (Booth and Ainscow, 2014): the educating community must build a context of effective cooperation between teachers, families, managers and health system representatives, aimed at the development of individual potential.

Inclusiveness orients the Italian school model; however, competitive models resist, together with an evaluation regime linked to grades.

For all students, with and without disabilities, assessment is a right, as it is meant to be an educational didactic action, aimed not just at competencies but at the desires and needs of each one so that the school can effectively be part of the person's life plan.

Privileging inclusiveness entails, for each student, the right to have a personalized study path shaped by personal and cultural peculiarities, thus providing targeted answers that enables to play an active part in the educational and learning process (Demo, 2015).

Therefore, disciplinary content preparation is not enough: it is necessary to modulate an educational relationship in which all students, especially those with disabilities, are not passive elements but central actors.

4. Inclusive trajectories in Lithuania

4.1. Educational Legislation in Lithuania: Challenges and Progress towards Inclusive Education

The renewal of the education system and the implementation of the new educational aims declared in the Education Act of the Republic of Lithuania, passed on 25 June 1991, represented, at that time, a challenge to the entire educational community.

The education of children with special educational needs (SEN) and the assurance of relevant educational support in comprehensive education settings was complicated.

Schools were not properly equipped to accept every child and to provide quality education for everyone, mainly due to teacher training not being adequately provided. However, the Education Act (1991) strongly impacted the fate of children with severe mental disabilities, allowing them to learn in educational settings as 'educable' (Alisauskiene, Milteniene, 2017; Galkiene, 2017).

At the time, the movement for inclusive education was very active, and, in the last few decades, since Lithuania regained its independence, an intensive transition from a medical clinical *defectological* to a social educational approach towards the education of students, especially those with SEN, has occurred (Ruskus, 2002; Evans & Sabaliauskiene, 2010).

The previous defectology terminology focused on diagnostic categories and problems located *within the child*. The notion of special educational needs stresses the importance of the educational context (Evans & Sabaliauskiene, 2010, Law on Education, 2011; Alisauskas, 2019) alongside a paradigm shift from a clinical model towards a social educational model.

From 1991, the education system in Lithuania underwent many changes on the integration and inclusion of students with SEN, with increasing attention on the diversity of needs rather than on the deficit.

Until 2020, there had not been a general national agreement on the concept of inclusion and inclusive education. In most European countries, including Lithuania, during the past three decades, the educational philosophy has shifted gradually towards a rights-based perspective giving each student equal educational opportunities. The fulfilled right to education automatically leads to realizing other human rights (UNICEF, 2017; Global Education Monitoring Report, 2021). For inclusive educational practices to be successful, a transformation of the entire education system is needed: its policies and laws, financing systems, administration, design and monitoring of education, teacher education, and the way schools are organized (European Agency, Inclusive Education in Action, 2010). In this approach, the ideology of IE is implemented in multiple ways across different contexts. It varies with national policies and priorities, influenced by social, cultural, historical and political issues (ibid).

Lithuania, alongside many European countries, is committed to developing its IE system and implementing different practices connected to this (Galkiene, 2017; Law on Education, 2020; Milteniene et al., 2020; Alisauskiene, Harju-Luukkainen, 2021). The recent strategic national documents adopt the main ideas of inclusive education.

Equal opportunity is one of the founding principles of the educational system.

The revised version of the Lithuanian Law on Education (2020) will enter into force in 2024. It clearly states that the education of students with diverse educational needs should be implemented by all schools providing compulsory education. In parallel, the essential educational support structures and functions are implemented from an evolutionary perspective.

The new legal regulations provoked debates and analyses about the role of special schools in the inclusive education system (Milteniene et al., 2020), activating the search for a new model of a national support system (Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, 2022).

4.2. Availability, accessibility and efficacy of educational support provision in Lithuania

Following the EU agenda (COM/2017/0247), Lithuania (LT) prioritises promoting changes in the educational system to ensure quality education for every learner. This section of the paper provides the findings related to the efficacy of educational support provision.

The positive and challenging issues of inclusive education implementation in practice are based on the secondary document analysis (Global Education Monitoring Report, 2021, and UNICEF, 2021) and recent mix-method research (Šapelytė et al., 2021).

The needs of the learners are identified in a three-level system (Pedagogical psychological support provision model, June 25, 2003):

- school level - Child Welfare Committee in cooperation with families;
- municipality level - Pedagogical Psychological Services;
- national level - National Agency of Education.

Lithuania supplies a network of pedagogical, psychological and educational support services in every city and town. These services are responsible for the independent assessment of the needs of educational participants (including learners, their families, and teachers); guidance to address the assessed needs of learners; counseling of parents, teachers and educational support professionals; coordination of educational support.

The school-level team of professionals, including special and social pedagogues, speech and language therapists, and psychologists, is the major structure that should provide educational and didactic support, and, where it works, it ensures an efficient level of inclusion (Šapelytė et al., 2021). Collaboration with families and teamwork are valued positively by the teachers, learners, and families. The voices of children and families are heard. In most of these participating schools, the school policy and leadership are focused on addressing the learners' diverse needs and ensuring educational support. School

leaders consistently recruit educational support professionals and provide relevant support to teachers. The efficiency of the educational support system is most evident in primary education.

The research (Šapelytė et al., 2021) shows the ways to ensure accessibility: adapting the school environment, offering psychological, special pedagogical, special and social pedagogical assistance, providing schools with technical aids to education and by other means prescribed by law.

However, there are still many challenges relating to physical access to general education schools and a need for more quality support for children with SEN.

Although, as in the Education Law, all mainstream schools in Lithuania should be able to include all children, including those with SEN, by 2024, there were still 44 special education schools with 3,800 pupils. The number of children with SEN in mainstream schools in LT is above Europe's average (96.88 percent).

However, as noted by European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, having a high level of children with SEN enrolled in mainstream classes does not mean that a sufficient quality of education is ensured. According to data from the Education Management Information System (National Network of Education NGOs, 2022), one of the significant challenges regarding the inclusion of children with SEN is the lack of educational support professionals in mainstream schools. In 2018, 9% of mainstream schools had no educational support professionals, 53% of schools did not have psychologists, and 28% had no special pedagogues or speech therapists (UNICEF, 2021). National and international research shows that children from disadvantaged social, economic and cultural (SEC) environments in Lithuania experience significant exclusion in education, and their achievements are much lower than those of other children. Notably, these children's parents often do not adequately understand the need to educate their children. Therefore, additional efforts are needed to ensure opportunities for these children to attend preschool or general education schools and participate in other non-formal education (National Network of Education NGOs, 2022).

5. Shared conclusions and open challenges

The research and analysis of documents and frameworks allow common orientations to emerge, in conceiving inclusion and education as a right for everyone, challenging stigma and practices of exclusion, and putting the person at the center of the educational project.

Systemic dimensions operate, in both countries, for the plural and differentiated strategic and methodological elements that respond to personalization needs through pedagogical-didactic action (Alisauskiene et al., 2020). Inclusive good practices outline a non-marginalizing school and society (Gardou, 2015), promoting systemic and widespread well-being through cultures and policies oriented to a shared construction of knowledge, full accessibility, social justice and equity (Nussbaum, 2007). The constantly evolving complexity of needs requires permanent training for teachers and all the helping professions (Florian, Pantic, 2017).

In this sense, the research group believes using the Index for Inclusion (Booth, Ainscow, 2014) is essential for the inclusive development of the school to identify concrete actions to improve the overall context.

Inclusion is the only way to break down discrimination in education: high professional qualification of teachers implies work on perceptions, prejudices and forms of labeling to develop a proper inclusive culture (Medeghini, 2015; Fiorucci, 2016).

The development of permanent systems in the perspective of Universal Design for Learning (Cottini, 2019) foresees the intentional and systematic review of educational curricula to meet the needs of every person, recognize diversity and enhance the originality of each student.

Describing the pedagogical paradigms of inclusive teaching, we focus on welcoming diversity and designing a personalized path for everyone.

In this sense, two fundamental constructs in the two countries are accessibility and language. Accessibility implies the ability to implement skills that help build effective relationships, as learning has a social basis. Accessibility does not merely entail the physical and spatial dimension and, therefore, the removal of architectural barriers; it is also the ability to overcome cultural obstacles and accept others by looking outside oneself to welcome differences and combine them in a constructive perspective.

The concept of accessibility also includes flexibility as a constant search for methodology customized within the specific context and for an effective didactic differentiation offering subjective responses to particular needs.

Language represents cultures and beliefs and spreads the perception and recognition of the culture of diversity and disability. Flexibility refers to the acknowledgment of different abilities, although not all people with disabilities have different skills or abilities; this statement demonstrates the power of language.

The research presents a framework of meaning, unfolding analysis perspectives for fieldwork and methodologies.

The subsequent phases of the ongoing research will focus on the European framework of inclusive policies and their quality through the indicators referred to in the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2014).

The inclusive process and practices disclose experiences of autonomy and self-determination, ensuring rights to dignity, respect, equity, justice and freedom.

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