

Does the school inclusion really work?

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Abstract

This article aims to take stock of the research aimed to evaluate the inclusive processes, referring to investigations carried out both in Italy and in international contexts on issues that may have important repercussions on the current organization of the Italian school. Through four key questions (How are we working? Which results have been obtained? What gives the best results? Are more inclusive schools also more efficient?) the authors develop a reflection useful to provide application support for both those who work every day in the school and those who are called to make decisions on organizational policies, as fundamental to promote inclusive and oriented to the maximum educational success of all students schools.

Keywords: evidence-based education; special education; inclusion; special educational needs, efficacy research.

Introduction

Inclusive education is for all individuals, whatever is their condition, a right that cannot be questioned. It was established as early as the '70s of the last century by the national school law through the abolition of the special institutions. It was reiterated and specified later by relevant international decisions, which have widened the field of investigation and considered not only the needs of the disabled students, but rather those of each student, who must find in the school an environment able to welcome all differences.

A key moment for the affirmation of the inclusive dimension, understood in this perspective, was definitely affirmed in the course of the Salamanca Conference, organized by UNESCO in 1994, when the commitment to educate everyone within the normal educational system was stated. Two years later, in the Luxembourg Declaration, the European Union recognized that “the school for everyone and for all” must ensure a quality education and provide equal accessibility to every student throughout his/her educational progress. Ten years ago, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations,

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2006) highlighted the great importance of the inclusive dimension of education. Specifically, it was emphasized that an inclusive educational system at any level was to be assured, in order to realize the right to education of subjects with disabilities without any discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunities.

The UNESCO Policy Guidelines on Inclusion in Education (2009) emphasized once again that the inclusive school is a process aiming to strengthen the education system capacity to reach all students. An inclusive school system can only be created if ordinary schools become more inclusive, in other words, if they improve in the education of all children within their community.

If expressed in these terms, the concept of inclusion launches new challenges to the school, inviting it to reorganize itself on different bases; it doesn't mean, as in the integration perspective, to address to an average student and then add individualized programs, but to conceive, from the beginning, a project aimed at all, taking into account differences in order to promote the best opportunities for the personal growth of everyone. In other words it means to raise the quality of the school, with the aim to support the students' entire learning experience.

These principles are absolutely incontestable because they rely on a universal theoretical grounding, which considers every individual, regardless of cultural or personal traits, as an entity of the society, who finds his/her real reason for being in the full appraisal by all. When from the plan of theoretical statements we pass to that of the actual application in the school context, however, we see that not always the structured set of organizational, methodological and educational procedures, as necessary for a real realization of the principles and for the promotion of a true inclusion practices, are implemented. Besides that, this approach is not adequately supported by an applied research system, able to validate its purposes, procedures and results.

Through this contribution we intend to investigate the matter taking into account the empirical evidence, trying to emphasize the lines of research carried out until now and those which need to be developed, in order to provide support for those who daily work in the schools and need use validated strategies and procedures, as well as for those who are called to make organization and policy decisions, which are also fundamental to promote really inclusive and oriented to the maximum educational success for all schools.

1. Efficacy assessed through four questions

The nearly forty-year history of school integration developed in Italy (characterized by bright lights as well as very thick shadows) has not been the subject of extensive evaluation researches, able to properly validate both the organizational system and the implemented methodological procedures. This

resulted from different factors, some linked to the characteristics of the school model that has been adopted, others to the difficulty of defining the concept of efficacy, others to the prevalence of an affirmation of the value of inclusion from the principle point of view, rather than from that of the demonstration of results.

The first element, that is the one related to the school model, concerns the choice (in our view appropriately made in the mid '70s of last century) of a total integration policy, which foresaw the almost complete abolition of special institutions. It didn't allow us to make comparisons between different school organizations, as was the case, on the contrary, of other countries that have maintained the two models.

As far as the problem of the definition of a positive result of inclusive processes, it is clear how the detection of results to be evaluated is far from easy. Specifically, there are many elements that fall into this vision and that refer to the pupils' learning process, to the effects on the different actors that come into play (schoolmates, teachers, families, community) and to the impact on the organization and quality of education for all.

The last factor that has helped guide the reflection on inclusive processes in a direction poorly related to the search of evidence has been the tendency to assume a perspective of absolute affirmation of the validity of the principle. In other words, the aim of this approach was to promote an inclusive society in which the differences were not interpreted in a negative or stigmatizing way, but as an element to be enhanced and promoted. This has definitely represented a major milestone for the pedagogical reflection, but when it became an absolute element, that is capable of being legitimized from the point of view of the individual's rights, it ended up lowering the interest for the research on the outcomes. In practice, assessing whether the various social actors' attitude towards integration were positive has become central, while an only marginal value has been assigned to the assessment of the actual impact on the involved people. On the contrary, even the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education has recently emphasized the need to have reliable data for a long-term development of education systems aimed to inclusion as one of the five key messages for an inclusive education (Soriano, 2014).

As already said, though this contribution we want to take stock of the research focused on assessing inclusive processes, referring both to researches carried out in Italy and developed in different contexts, but on issues that may have an impact on our organization. Four leading questions seem fundamental at this regard:

How are we working?

Which results have been obtained?

What gives the best results?

Are more inclusive schools also more efficient?

1.1. How are we working?

About this aspect a number of researches were carried out through interviews or questionnaires administered to teachers, school heads and families, to ascertain, at that time, the procedures that were put in place, the education organization, the level of satisfaction, the used resources, the involvement of different actors and so on. In general, on the basis of a series of integration quality indicators previously defined, it has been investigated if the same were satisfied in specific school situations.

We would like to specify that the researches that will be taken into consideration below show (for most of them) an attention specifically oriented towards the educational *integration*, rather than inclusion. This is not surprising, taking into account that the most part of these studies are related to a school organization centred on the individualized education model (i.e. education tailored to the specific characteristics of the disabled student) and organized in function of the typical pupils and, therefore, not available to change in order to welcome the needs of all.

On the contrary, an orientation deriving from an individualized vision of the problem and leading “[...] to consider the diversity of each one as a basic condition, an *a priori* to be taken into account to build environments able to welcome all” (Cottini, 2016a, p. 34), as advocated by the inclusive perspective, is still struggling to emerge and the almost total absence of Italian studies on the matter is an aspect that deserves a specific reflection by pedagogy and special education for inclusion.

In a research on school integration of students with Down syndrome, interesting though a bit outdated, Gherardini and colleagues (2000) assessed a number of quality indicators concerning school inclusion, grouping them into three categories: *structure*, *process* and *result*. By administering a questionnaire to a large sample of school staff, comforting elements as well as worrying lacks were detected.

In short, a high number of support teachers have to deal with a tendency to be delegated of the relevance and responsibility of educational activities related to students with disabilities. Some significant problems within the collaboration between teachers and support teachers when called upon to program educational interventions have been identified as well as a very little flexibility in organizing activities and a lack of planning them beyond the school.

As far as result indicators are concerned, the questionnaire administered to the school staff had a list of basic skills (related to autonomy, language, logical-mathematical and socio-affective abilities) that students with Down syndrome should acquire at different ages. Despite the inevitable individual

variability, the obtained results appeared encouraging, showing a good availability of cognitive, relational and social competences.

Vianello et al. (2006) analyzed the attitudes of parents towards the education of students with Down syndrome. The survey methodology focused on filling out a questionnaire, which was administered to 120 parents with children in primary school and 120 at the secondary school, evenly distributed in relation to three conditions: parents of children with Down syndrome; parents of normal children in a classroom in which there was a subject with Down syndrome; parents of normal students in a classroom in which there was no schoolmate with disability.

The obtained results confirmed that both parents with a child with Down syndrome and the other parents had a very favourable attitude towards inclusive education. Besides that, it was shown that the direct experience promotes better predisposition to positively accept the presence of a schoolmate with disabilities in the classroom. Therefore the authors concluded that a privileged way to facilitate integration, improving the basic attitude, is to lead people to come into contact with it. In other words, we can prepare for integration starting to implement it and not delaying it and waiting to do our best subsequently.

In 2007-2008 the group coordinated by Canevaro, D'Alonzo and Ianes (2009) carried out a research on the state of the art of inclusive education in Italy after thirty years of implementation (1997-2007). More than 1,800 people with disabilities or family members were involved in the research. They described their school life and what occurred at the end of school, trying to highlight, in this way, even some integration outcomes.

This research took into account seven groups of people experiencing disabilities of varying severity and diagnosis, distributed throughout the national territory and belonging to different age groups ranging from a lower level (born 1955 to 1969) to an upper one (born 1995 to 1999).

Referring to reports and memories from the families a “picture” of the school integration process and its evolution over time was obtained. The most interesting data concerned the attendance of the different school levels, which has been significantly increasing over time together with the level of satisfaction expressed by parents. An apparently surprising element concerned the presence of students with disabilities in the classroom. For all levels of school a progressive decrease in the years in the percentage of total inclusion programs was stressed, to the advantage of “mixed” situations, where a subject with disability spent part of the school time in the classroom and a part in another room. As for the evolution of people after school, the situation was very heterogeneous and unsatisfactory. In general terms, nearly 42% of the sample was hosted in protected structures, 23% stayed at home, and 22%

claimed to be engaged in works not specified in the questionnaire. Only 9% was employed in a company and less than 7% in social cooperatives.

In 2009-2010 the same team analyzed the state of the art of school integration through the teachers' opinions. Again a very large cohort was considered: over 3,200 school professionals filled an online questionnaire.

The results showed a body of opinion that in some ways confirmed, but from another point of view contradicted, the expectations. An unexpected and definitely worrying result, as the authors pointed out, was the one deriving from a teachers' statement: they didn't believe in the efficient responsiveness of the educational system, in its present organization, to the disabled students' needs. The same sample, however, expressed a strong belief in the necessity of integration in the classroom both in terms of learning facilitation and socialization and in their professional improvement, as enhanced by the presence of students in situation of disability.

The importance of a coordination program concerning both teachers and support teachers, capable of affecting the formulated opinions, was strongly emphasized, even more than the number of support hours granted to each student.

As far as the possibility of institutionalizing separate programs within the school, in case of some serious diseases, that is a *de facto* return to special classes, the sample answers were uneven: $\frac{3}{4}$ around showed their opposition, with more or less emphasis, while $\frac{1}{4}$ declared him/herself in favour, considering this perspective as an opportunity of improving the present situation. This is certainly a cause for concern, because a percentage of about 25% cannot be considered as marginal when expressed by professionals directly involved in the integration process.

Another investigation of great interest is that developed by the Treelle association, the Italian Caritas and the Agnelli Foundation (2011). It tried to make an assessment on the integration policy and proposed an organizational model very different than that one in force at that time. In practice, the report provided statistical data that showed a progressive increase in the number of certified students and that of the support teachers, with a relevant commitment of resources, which represented about 10% of the entire national budget allocated to education. In presence of this very significant investment, the authors remarked several shortfalls to be replaced in order to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the system. The analysis of the critical aspects appears as broadly acceptable, although it is to be highlighted how the examples of good practice are not actually so sporadic as claimed by the authors, who also consider exceptions as possible even in a not too efficient organization as that found at moment.

An aspect that, in conclusion, deserves to be highlighted concerns the systematic nature with which the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat) is carrying out annual surveys on school integration of pupils with disabilities in primary and secondary (first level) both state and private schools, in order to draw and constantly update the “picture” of our school system (Istat, 2015). The information currently available refer to the school year 2014/2015; data on schools are census-based, while those concerning the pupils are obtained from sampling (pupils were divided by gender, type of disability, geographic area, etc.). During the same school year another survey, recently published (Istat, 2016), was carried out through an electronic questionnaire; its aim was to detect the resources, activities and tools at all schools’ (all primary and secondary - first level - both state and private schools) disposal, in order to promote the education of students with disabilities.

Even if such investigations have goals different than those ones obtained in the researches shown so far, however, they deserve their attention, especially for the information they can provide, in relation to the trend changes occurred in our country. These researches show, in fact, an Italian evolving situation compared with those ones of the previous years: there are many more students with disabilities who attend the levels of schools considered by the survey; intellectual disability and developmental disorders are the most frequent problems in students; the number of support teachers gradually increased, even if their presence is not assured from one school year to the next one nor even during the same. What emerges from these studies is not only interesting as they “take a picture” of the situation of the education system taking into consideration these problems, but also because they open up possible further possibilities of research - of whatever nature - that could investigate the trends and/or the resulting critical issues more in detail.

1.2. Which results have been obtained?

We have already pointed out the difficulties in this field in defining the concept of “significant result” and the substantial inability, in most situations, to select samples using randomized procedures and to identify control groups, given the widespread implementation of the full inclusion policy. For these reasons, the researches on the outcomes of inclusive education practices in Italy, as evaluated on the performance of individual students, are not very numerous.

An interesting investigation was carried out by Vianello and Lanfranchi (2009), who evaluated the surplus effect, which is a phenomenon opposite to that one of deficit and considers how students with disabilities can have better performance in some areas than the normal children with the same mental age. A

surplus effect related to the performance in reading and writing by a sample of Italian students with Down syndrome, which proved to be higher than that of other countries and that suggests to consider the total integration policy students in mainstream classes as a crucial variable able to justify the result, was found.

Other contributions in the literature on the outcomes of the integration process refer to the use of the research methodology on the individual subject (Cottini, 2002; 2016; Celi, 2003). It is a procedure in which the lack of groups of subjects with repeated measurements on the same individuals is compensated, in order to highlight if the introduction of a specific independent variable (an educational intervention) will amend the student behaviour (dependent variable) in relation to the previous situation (baseline).

Similar researches, referred to the school inclusion, have been carried out in our country mainly by the research team coordinated by Celi (2007) and by our group (Cottini, 2008, 2016). Curricular subject areas (reading, writing, mathematics), soft skills (attention enhancement, memory strategies), management of behavioural problems (aggression, self-injury, behaviour disorders in the classroom) have been taken into consideration. In general terms, these researches gave encouraging and significant results, demonstrating the efficacy of the teaching process in general contexts, when properly designed, implemented and monitored. Besides this, it is evident that the applied research does not interfere, *de facto*, with the curricular teaching activity, indeed helping make it much more systematic and controlled.

International research on inclusive processes provides several interesting experimental studies, although they, referring to different organizational and educational models, are not immediately generalizable in our context (Nepi, 2013; Cottini and Morganti, 2015). About some central dimensions for inclusive education assessment, such as school performance and social participation of students with special needs, the available researches (Farrell, 2000; Ainscow, César, 2006; Lindsay, 2003, 2007; Ruijs and Peetsma, 2009; Dyssegaard and Larsen, 2013) do not show results that can provide certainty about the expected benefits of inclusion in school. Differences in tools, methods and measured variables, investigations of heterogeneous populations of students with special educational needs, different methods of certification and then of inclusion within school are some of the causes that may explain the great variability of results, also connected with the difficulty of comparing data from an investigation in a context and those ones carried out in another ones, even if centred on the same aspects. In fact, as pointed out by Giangreco (2009), if we compare, for example, the Italian model with the US one, first of all the different propensity to certify existing in two contexts is to be taken into account: in our country approximately 2% of the school population are identified as disabled as provided by Law 104 dated 1992, while in the US this figure rises to over 13% and includes all those

difficulties including the so-called “special educational needs”. At this subject, it is estimated that in the US approximately 60% of the students with special educational needs involved in various researches belong to that category of “language disorders” or “specific learning and behaviour disorders”, which in Italy benefit of services provided by different regulations on the matter.

Besides this, it is to be considered that even the attendance rates of students with disabilities in regular classes are not exactly comparable in Italy and in other countries. As highlighted by Giangreco, Doyle and Suter (2012), the official statistics show that in Italy 98% of subjects are included in the common schools, while in the US this figure is 61%. The American rate, however, considers only the students that pass more than 80% of their school time in a regular classroom, while in our country there are very different situations, not easily classifiable in a single organizational profile.

Having stated this, researches provide not unique feedback as far as both cognitive and social learning that students with special needs seem to achieve in inclusive classes than in special ones: in some studies related to inclusive condition (Freeman and Alkin, 2000; Jepma, 2003; Katz and Mirenda, 2002, Myklebust, 2002, 2007; Markussen, 2004; Lee-Tarver, 2006; Buckley, Bird and Sacks, 2006) benefit from inclusion are documented, especially when the level the impairment of students considered is not too serious, while in others there were no significant differences (Karsten et. al, 2001; Szumski and Firkowska-Mankiewicz, 2010).

As regards the impact of the presence of companions with special educational needs on normal students, a systematic research carried out by EPPI³ by comparing a number of investigations (Kalambouka et al. 2005) excludes slowing effects, at least as regards the primary school. These findings, also confirmed in subsequent studies (Demeris et al., 2007; Gandhi, 2007; Ruijs et al., 2010), allow certainly affirming that the presence of children with special educational needs does not exert a negative effect on the academic and social results of the other subjects (Calvani, 2012).

Finally, a number of investigations on cost-benefit analysis referred to education interventions aimed at all, to be carried out even before the start of the compulsory schooling (O’Connell et. al., 2016), are also to be taken into account. Promoting a quality inclusive approach since early childhood, with a greater attention to children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds (Heckman, 2008; Harrison et al 2012), is a key strategy to change the future life of these children, greatly reducing the costs to be incurred in subsequent

³ Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordination Centre (EPPI-Centre) established at the Institute of Education of the London University in 1993; it aims to promote research projects and systematic reviews in social and educational sciences, paying special attention to the policy making taking into account the research results.

remedial intervention (Heckman, 2008; Access Economics, 2009; Allen, et al., 2008; Fox et al, 2015). In other words, even at social and economic purposes, so early interventions are definitely more effective and beneficial than implementing actions later that is in adolescence or adulthood.

1.3. What gives the best results?

As far as the most adequate strategies to facilitate significant learning and relationships, some important literature reviews that have taken into accounts the significance of specific educational procedures when used with individuals with different kinds of deficit, must be highlighted (Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003; Nind *et al.* 2004; Mitchell, 2008, 2014; Hattie, 2009, 2011; Slavin, 2008; Parsons *et al.* 2011; Flynn & Healy 2012).

About intellectual disability, the efficacy of behavioural strategies, such as direct instruction through “*step by step*” modalities oriented at teaching, stimulus control, *modelling*, the use of reinforcing contingencies, etc. have to be highlighted. Further, cognitive interventions, especially with pupils who showed light or medium severity, have also been significant. Among these, self-instruction and self-monitoring, the enhancing of mnemonic strategies and metacognition must be highlighted.

In the field of intervention aimed at pupils with autistic spectrum disorder, behavioural techniques (*Applied Behavior Analysis*, ABA), behavioural-cognitive techniques (*TEACCH*, *Denver*, etc), augmentative and alternative communication and video *modelling* have shown efficacy. Almost the totality of the studies taken into consideration by these reviews, though, has been implemented in the field of rehabilitation or in special institutions thus it is for little generalization in our context.

Concerning strategies referring to inclusive teaching-learning, research highlights, generally, good levels of validation.

For what concerns the organizational aspect, in his important review Mitchell (2008) reserves a large section, amongst those which he calls “context strategies”, to the quality of the school’s environment and the involvement of all figures, particularly parents. He shows how different studies and reviews underline that the quality of the environment can contribute in a crucial way to make the learning experience a motivating and enjoyable one.

Other collections of studies and reviews (Clark, 2002; Higgins *et al.*, 2005; Woolner *et al.*, 2007) are on the same line, mainly based on United States and United Kingdom literature, in which the paucity of research in this field is analysed: as Heppel and colleagues (2004) remind, to this purpose, it is surprising to observe that knowledge has improved for what concerns the

causes that may lead heat dispersion in the various environments, but not as much for what concerns possible “learning dispersions” linked to classrooms and schools not adequately planned, from a pedagogical point of view.

Concerning the role of teacher’s interaction, Mitchell (2014) points out various studies that prove its significance in pursuing inclusive objectives. To share a vision and responsibilities, to exchange views on teaching-learning procedures, to agree upon how to approach pupils’ behavioural problems, actions for the quality of inclusive processes proved to be effective. Similarly, the active involvement of school heads (meaning the ability to be a reference point, also in looking for resources, without seeing themselves as the sole responsible and supporter of the school’s inclusive culture) and the collaboration with professionals are pointed out as essential conditions.

The involvement of the families, pursued as well through specific *parent training* programs, revealed to be very important for the achievement of educational success, connected both to parents’ collaboration in teaching programs, and the positive attitude that they assume towards the educational project and towards the figures involved (Hornby, 2000; Turnbull e Turnbull, 2001; Durst, 2002).

How classroom climate can affect learning has been investigated many times, stressing high levels of correlation. A welcoming environment, from a psychological point of view, where everyone is respected and where collaboration and sharing objective are fostered, is at the basis of motivation for learning and determines significant outcomes (Dorman, 2001; Anderson, Hamilton e Hattie, 2004).

Social and emotional learning as well contributes to this aim; it is important, in fact, that a good educator would recognize their pupils’ emotion and that would avoid that these do not get in the way of the motivation for learning. Social and emotional learning programs lead pupils to considerable improvement in the specific field, not only of social and emotional competences or educational results (Durlak et al, 2011; Sklad et al., 2012). Pupils who were exposed to social and emotional learning programs show to have more prosocial behaviours, less emotional and behavioural problems, such as disruptive behaviours in classroom, aggression, bullying and delinquency. It is interesting to highlight the data emerged from the most recent meta-analysis in pupils aged between 5 and 18 year (Durlak et. al., 2011), that shows that those pupils who experimented social and emotional learning had also better grades. In addition to these short term confirmation, long-term benefits concern the acquiring of competences in the social and emotional field, useful for enhancing the chances to achieve a high school diploma to access university, to have a successful job and family, to have better relationships, a better mental health, less criminal behaviours and a higher

commitment in an active citizenship (Hawkins, Kosterman, Catalano, Hill, e Abbott, 2008; Jones, Greenberg, e Crowley, 2015).

To conclude, concerning *peer tutoring* and *cooperative learning* strategies, high levels of efficacy must be highlighted for peer tutoring, while less clear are the evidences referring to cooperative learning, even though a number of recent studies tend to confirm its significance, especially in inclusive classes.

Two important meta-analyses (Hattie, 2009; Bowman-Perrot, Davis e Vannest, 2013) on many experimental studies on *peer tutoring* highlighted that this strategy is very effective in the field of special education aiming at inclusion. As regards to *cooperative learning*, as Bonaiuti (2014) asserts, data concerning outcomes generally show positive results in the different dimensions examined: learning, social cohesion and inclusion.

Both Hattie (2009), and Kyndt and colleagues (2013), bestow to this strategy the ability to ease learning that are much more significant than those acquired through individual and competitive learning.

1.4. Are more inclusive schools also more efficient?

The last question mark can well represent the closing of the argumentation developed so far, urging a wide and in-depth reading of the inclusive process. Are the schools that from an organizational, structural and procedural point of view can be considered as being more inclusive than others also schools where children have better outcomes in the learning process, improve their social and emotional abilities, their sense of self-efficacy as for a task or self-determination?

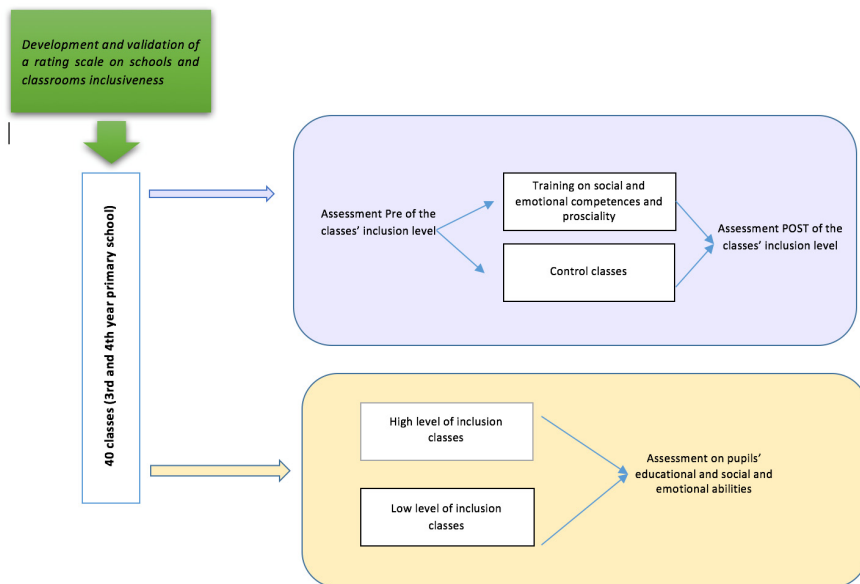
At present, we do not have satisfactory answers to these questions, but only partial and fragmented ones, also because of the real difficulty in assessing a process, such as the inclusive one, so wide and that involves a number of contextual and personal commitments. This, though, cannot exempt us, as so far stated, from verifying, through rigorous and systematic procedures, how much can a change (in an inclusive perspective) in the school organization affect pupils' educational achievements, social relations, classroom climate, emotional states, motivation and participation in learning. In other words, if a school is inclusive it is also more efficient in pursuing the educational and learning objectives of its pupils.

Currently, we are working on a European research project whose aim is the identification and the evaluation of which elements can really characterize the quality of school inclusion, using the principles of *evidence-based education*. The project, called *Evidence-based education: European strategic model for*

*school inclusion*⁴, is currently in its second year and sees the participation of five European countries (Italy, Spain, Croatia, Slovenia and the Netherlands), which have different educational systems, posing an interesting challenge to research.

The project aims at the elaboration of educational programs able to promote inclusive processes within the schools and assess if the schools that develop in this direction are also more efficient in pursuing their pupils' learning and educational objectives. The first step for building such programs has been the planning and developing of a tool (more precisely a *rating scale* on inclusion) necessary for monitoring the whole experimental process.

Fig. 1. Research courses of action developed by the EBE-EUSMOSI project



The tool we planned and developed⁵ has as initial starting point the inclusive concept proposed by Booth e Ainscow (2002) in their *Index for*

⁴ It is a three year project (2014-2017) founded within the ERASMUS+, KA2 Program Strategic Partnership for Schools, called *Evidence Based Education: European Strategic Model for School Inclusion* (EBE-EUSMOSI) (Ref. no. 2014-1-IT02-KA201-003578). This project sees the participation of the Italian University of Udine and Perugia together with the Open University of the Netherlands (NL), the Autonomous University of Barcelona (ES), the University of Zagreb (HR) and the University of Ljubljana (SI). For further info please visit the project official website inclusive-education.net.

⁵ The assessment tool has been developed and validated by the Italian Universities of Udine and Perugia.

Inclusion (2002), for subsequently differentiating itself from it, due to *focus groups* carried on with key informants and an evaluation of the psychometric parameters of the scale, obtained through a pilot study.

The tool, differently from the *Index*, is not anymore centred on three (inclusive cultures, policies and practices) but on two dimensions, the first of which refers to the *organizational aspects* of the school, while the second concerns the *methodological and teaching-learning* aspects, ascribable to the classroom context.

Adding to these two dimensions, there is a collection of objective parameters (e.g.: the numbers of training courses for teachers on inclusion activated during the school year, etc.).

As stated previously, the project entails the building of programs able to promote inclusive processes in schools; particularly, the experimental plans implemented by the various countries are two (Fig. 1) with the following objectives:

1. outlining educational programs to improve inclusion;
2. verifying if the school that are more inclusive are also more efficient.

About the first aspect, the study is currently run by the Universities of Perugia and Barcelona and entails a quantitative experimental design that implies the presence of two groups: the experimental one (with social-emotional and prosocial intervention, called PROSEL; Morganti and Roche, in press) and the control (no intervention) one. The *independent* variable is the PROSEL intervention, while inclusion in this case is the *dependent variable* that will undergo changes.

Almost at the final stages of intervention, we are not able currently to produce any data coming from assessments, since these are yet to be done at the end of the school year, but we can report some “invisible outcomes” perceived during the visits in the involved classes and the meetings with teachers. These intangible results highlights deeply changed classroom climates since the starting of the educational program in the experimental classes, unexpected involvement of the families in educational activities, pupils who are more self-aware of their emotional states and who are also more able of understanding others’ emotional states, as to establish social relationships based on respect, acceptance and appreciating the other. The empirical evidences to be collected will verify (or falsify) our perception and make visible results that would be disseminated and contribute in feeding knowledge and debates on inclusion. In practice, the question this research aims to answer is if educational interventions aimed at building social, emotional and prosocial competences can affect the quality of inclusive processes, improving and promoting them and if this, as we hope, takes place, we could confirm them as efficient educational paths aiming at inclusion, to generalize nationally and internationally.

The second experimental aspect impacts more directly the question that gives the name to this chapter. This study is currently managed by the Universities of Udine and Zagreb and entails a *correlation* experimental design, through which verifying (or not) the existence of a relation between high or low level of school inclusion and the educational outcomes achieved by pupils on educational abilities and on those of social and emotional nature.

The two countries involved in this part of the experimentation selected about 200 4th grades of primary school classed and administered to each of them the rating scale for inclusion. The data analysis allowed for the partitioning of this large sample of classes in two main blocks: classes with high levels of inclusion and classes with low levels of inclusion. Currently, text comprehension capabilities, calculation and mathematical problems capabilities are being assessed, beside the social and emotional skills of the involved pupils.

The purpose is to verify if in the classes with a higher level of inclusion, the learning processes are more significant, not only for what concerns social and emotional skills, but also those skills referring to school curriculum.

Conclusions

The aim of this contribution was to show the state of the art of the school inclusion, with the double intent of analysing the current situation and point out the possibility of validating the Italian model based on a *full inclusion* approach. We think that school has an absolute need for a deepening of the research in this direction, to substantiate the organization system and to get clear information on which teaching-learning strategies are more validated on the basis of evidence (*evidence-based*). This surely does not mean to provide “ready-made” and “ready to use” models, but to provide the foundation for a practice supported by procedures that showed a good reliability, clearly to be adapted to the different situations.

To this purpose, it must be pointed out that, in the Anglo-Saxon context, *evidence-based* practices have been the subject of a recent qualitative study (Guckert, Mastropieri and Scruggs, 2016), aiming at investigating the perception of their use from support teachers in the field of special education. The teachers have been interviewed and their classroom practices have been examined. The main data gathered reveal that teachers’ awareness of the use of *evidence-based* practices changes considerably from very high level to complete lack of awareness. The interesting data are concerned, though, with the need for personalization of the procedures, that is of adaptation and modification of the practices to answer teachers’ needs, instead of relying on the accuracy and efficacy of interventions or referring to pupils’ needs. This is an aspect that

surely encourages a reflection on teacher training and education and on the difficulty of transferring the practices that proved to be efficient during the research to the daily, real context.

Different studies, generally, highlight the importance of implementing *evidence-based* practice in school, paying special attention to the accuracy with which they have been planned and developed (Dulák and DuPre, 2008).

If the fundamental elements of a practice based on evidence are not implemented as expected, it is thought that this could be less efficient. Nonetheless, researches highlights also that a rigorous adherence to the fundamental elements of an evidence-based practice that would not take into consideration pupils' characteristics could be counterproductive and inefficient (Johnson and McMaster, 2013).

To optimize pupils' outcome it is always desirable and advisable for teacher to find a balance between the *evidence-based* practice and the accuracy on the one hand, and the adaptability and personalization on the other. The *Universal Design for Learning* (UDL) approach can be, as some scholars deem (Cook, Rao and Cook, in press), a surely important mean to balance accuracy and personalization in the implementation of *evidence-based practices*.

To meet these aims, we recently submitted an *evidence-based education* model in the field of special education for inclusion (Cottini and Morganti, 2015), that highlights the need to combine the dimension concerning the efficacy of research (*what works*), with the one concerning the real effect and outcome in real contexts (*what works in which circumstances*), through a constant monitoring on the intervention's trend.

The wish is that this model, specifically thought for the Italian context, could be spread and bring a growth in the culture aimed at researching evidences to improve teaching-learning practice and to be pursued with integrated experimental approaches able to combine quantitative and qualitative methodologies relating to the complexity of the subject of the study.

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