

## Curriculum and inclusion: critical issues and redefinition lines

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### Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyze the core of the curriculum-inclusion pair according to a specific interpretation that reconsiders the inclusive identity of scholastic institutes, able to programme a balanced curriculum both in disciplinary demands and Quality of Life remarkable areas, for all students, with and without disabilities. Beginning from the theoretical framework of the Quality of Life, the authors, after the illustration of the issues related to Italian and Brazilian context and referring to two pilot studies with specialized teachers, identify some areas of intervention that could lead to consider the curriculum in an inclusive perspective, without the individualization of specific curricular forms, exclusively devoted to this perspective.

**Keywords:** Curriculum, Inclusion, Personalization, Quality of Life.

### Introduction

To approach the issue of the curriculum, by linking it to the great theme of inclusion, pushes the analysis into deep pedagogic and didactic conceptual corollaries: such as the definition of Inclusive School, in addition to the planning and organization of the curricula (structure and contents) and the evaluation of the potentially inclusive curriculum, that could be appreciated within an inclusive School.

The epistemological crux that leads us to face the curriculum-inclusion pair can be expressed by the following questions: how is it possible to reconsider

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the organization of the curriculum in order to implement an effective inclusive culture? And again: which indicators should be essential to evaluate the presence or the absence of an inclusive School identity starting from the planning of the curriculum itself?

There are numerous international researches, as the *Index for Inclusion* (Booth, Ainscow, 2002), that stress the relevance of an organizational perspective centered on inclusive values able to give strength to a curriculum oriented towards an inclusive culture, and also, related to the specific characteristics, that can emphasize the structures (for instance the values of equality, rights, participation, community, sustainability), the relationships (such as the values of respect of diversity, non-violence, trust, honesty, courage, compassion) as well as the human spirit (for example joy, love, optimism, beauty), in coherent dynamisms of connections and reciprocity (Booth, Ainscow, 2002). Such direction marks the shift from a traditional and disciplinary view of the curriculum toward a new structure, based on inclusive values, as mentioned above (idem, p. 36), or oriented on significant areas of relevance for the promotion of the students' skills profile, to achieve the promotion of the Quality of Life for each and everyone (Giaconi, 2015), that also for other authors (Booth, 2011; Dovigo, 2017) is directed towards participation, interdisciplinary, equality and educational equity.

The view point pedagogical-didactic, this means operating a structural change, starting from the afterthought of the curriculum itself, with the aim of overcoming the bureaucratic rigidity and the disciplines separations, aiming to revitalize the teachers professionalism towards an inclusive leadership, based on co-planning and co-responsibility. In this way, the inclusive education becomes the "middle land" that belongs to different communities of practices and is able to connect them.

Reconsider the structure of the curriculum means to rethink the weight that is attributed, from a side, to the disciplinary objectives, on the other side, to significant dimensions in people's lives, such as self-determination, interpersonal relationships, etc., that, as we are going to illustrate in this contribution, today are internationally recognized as the Quality of Life domains, relevant for people with and without disabilities (Schalock, Verdugo Alonso, 2002).

### **The Italian context: teachers issues and attitudes**

In another text, the authors Rossi, Giaconi (2016) argued about the complexity of the curriculum structure that is currently outlined in the Italian scholastic context. The presence of Law 170/2010 "New regulations for Specific

Learning Disabilities in the School environment” and the 2012 communication concerning Special Educational Needs, pushed the teaching staff to insert the project format, called Personalized Educational Project, which revealed critical pedagogical elements in the harmonization of curriculum programming. The same pedagogical emergency becomes visible when the question of Individualized Educational Plan is drawn up for students with disabilities, with the risk of not extending the project within the framework of an inclusive curriculum planning vision.

Not endorsing the easy temptation of thinking an inclusive curriculum different from the general curriculum, we share the idea that the curriculum should be flexible and in continuous movement to model in daily micro-practices, looking for new personalized paths where diversity become the elements of educational and social cohesion of the curriculum itself.

There are several national and international researches, which favour the study of inclusive or non-inclusive teachers attitudes, appreciated as indicators for the presence or the absence of inclusive practices and inclusive contexts. There are two researches that we want to mention for the importance of the analysis we are conducting.

Developed research with a sample of specialized Italian teachers, documented by previous research (Giacconi, 2013), oriented to investigate opinions/perceptions of support teachers in reference to the curriculum, the aspects emerged from the qualitative analysis of interview texts are noteworthy. Firstly, the support teachers reported the difficulty to integrate the individualized educational programs within the curriculum, especially in Higher School, not finding contact between individualized educational planning and the class curriculum programming. Again on this level, support teachers report difficulties to harmonise, in terms of purpose, content and evaluation criteria, with the class teachers, tendency mostly reported, even in this case, by a group of supporting teachers within the Secondary School. Support teachers also reported the discrepancy during the actualized moment of the individualized educational planning. In other words, in the daily didactic action the work focused on the finality would be lost and it would remain anchored to the disciplinary objectives. Finally, the teachers participating in this research have highlighted however the presence of parallel projects (projects based on the management of emotions or else cooperative learning) aimed at favoring an inclusive culture of the Scholastic Institute, proposing, in conclusion, the hypothesis of approaching the idea of an inclusive curriculum.

Numerous significant researches showed the importance to investigate inclusive teacher attitudes and relationships between values and educational practice. Worthy of note is the research conducted by Camedda and Santi (2016) in the school year 2013/2014 with a group of teachers, belonging to

different school orders, during the Specialization Course for support activities. The results of the research show interesting acquisitions about inclusion concept by teachers, both male and female, concerning relationships between inclusive values and the educational-didactic practice and regarding the importance of support training as a potential stimulus for develop inclusive teacher attitudes. The research demonstrates how hyper specialization on disability areas is not really directly proportional to the implementation of inclusive contexts, on the contrary it would be the training of all teachers on inclusion issues the turning point for the implementation of planning practices in this direction. Within this analysis, the figure of the support teacher needs to be deconstructed, analyzed and rethought from an inclusive perspective, allowing the possibility of a reflection that allows an overhead reconsideration of the teaching role in general, reducing the distinctions (curricular/support) and expanding the connections, to arrive at a new concept of inclusive teacher (Camedda, Santi, 2016, pp. 141-149).

Also these researches suggest that in relation to teacher training is necessary to favor the aspects linked to the inclusion matters (Caldin, 2009; Cottini, 2014) and to new connections between inclusive values and educational-didactic practice, it leads us to evaluate a reorganization of the curriculum in an inclusive key, without the presence of general and inclusive curriculum, but to provide indicators that can characterize the organization of curriculum in order to implement an effective inclusive culture, as we will illustrate in the last paragraph.

### **The Brazilian context: analysis and reflections**

Education in Brazil has a great challenge, which is to ensure that all students have access to quality primary education through school inclusion, respecting cultural, social and individual differences that can shape the special needs education that we all can have, and that, depending on how they are seen by the educational institution, can put us in situations of disadvantage.

According to the National Council of Education from Brazil (Conselho Nacional de Educação - Câmara de Educação Básica, Brasília, 2001), special needs education as a differentiated pedagogical proposal can occur concurrently with or be substituted for educational system. This resolution explains the beginning of school attendance in kindergarten, ensuring special education services, through the evaluation of the need for specialized educational services. Therefore, the specialized educational service is implicitly arranged as a differentiated service, identifying itself with the special needs education and will be present in:

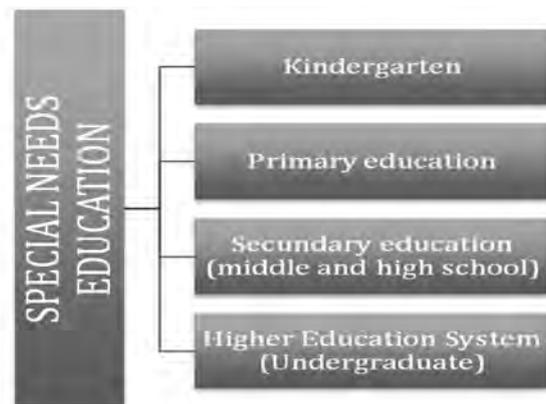
1. services of specialized pedagogical support, realized, in the common classes:

- a) collaborative performance of a teacher specializing in special needs education;
- b) performance of teachers-interpreters of the applicable languages and codes;
- c) the performance of teachers and other itinerant professionals intra and inter institutionally;
- d) provision of other support for learning, locomotion and communication.

2. specialized support services in resource rooms, in which the teacher specializing in special needs education complements or supplements curriculum, using specific procedures, equipment and materials.

The following Figure 1 illustrates how special needs education services should be understood and offered as an integral part of the Brazilian educational system at all levels of education.

*Figure 1 - Brazil Educational System (Conselho Nacional de Educação - Câmara de Educação Básica, Brasília, 2009)*



According to Ministry of Education of Brazil (Ministério da Educação, Brasília, 2006) the conditions of learning and development of students with special needs, discussed in a case study, curricular adaptations of temporality may be necessary, since it is considered extremely important to analyze the time the student needs to achieve the educational objectives and carry out the activities proposed for him.

The following are suggestions for measures that allow access to the curriculum for students with disabilities, modifications that can be implemented in physical and material elements and in the methodology used by the teacher:

- Organize environments within the classroom that favor meaningful learning, such as atelier, workshops, and group students in a way that facilitates group activities.
- Promote the development of adaptive social, communication, personal care and autonomy skills, encouraging and facilitating student participation.
- To adapt written materials of common use, such as highlighting some aspects that are essential to the acquisition of learning with colors, drawings, and traces; include charts that help understanding; highlight images and modify content to make them more accessible to understanding.
- Provide adequacy in evaluation and teaching-learning instruments, such as using oral assessment, adapted to the computer, in fiches, with visual resources that support writing.
- Use augmentative communication technologies for students who do not do it orally and educational software for those who need this pedagogical support.
- Provide environments in the classroom that enable adequate luminosity, sonority and movement, so that the student is able to hear or see orofacial movements of the teacher.
- Use alternative systems of adapted communication such as Braille, extended texts and written texts with tactile elements and illustrations.
- Explain verbally and use visual accompaniment to make content that is being worked in the classroom accessible.
- To promote the removal of architectural barriers in order to facilitate the locomotion of wheelchair students and who use orthoses and prostheses, avoiding the possibility of accidents.
- Adapt the use of boards, clips or adhesive tapes to prevent paper slipping, as well as pencil holder, use of hives among others, to facilitate written registration.
- Use instructions with clear texts and objectives to enable proposed activities to better understand what is being requested.
- Introduce complementary or specific activities to enrich proposed activities.
- Eliminate or modify activities that prevent student participation in the context of the classroom.

The most important question is put the highlight that the methodology of care for students with global developmental disorder follows specific procedures and programs, which consider their degree of individual difficulty. Some pedagogical tools collaborate significantly in order to value their potential. Among them, we mention Incremental and Alternative Communication (CAA) and Social integration; Classroom with structured routine, because the autistic people should have the same chance to learn

as other people. In addition to laws, norms, decrees, ordinances, statutes, etc., the most important thing is to understand the person, to respect their individual differences, to give them the experience of living a life similar to that of other non-autistic people, attending a school, receiving support to its full development, in the search for a better Quality of Life.

As illustrate in the next paragraph, the research perspective, even in the Brazilian context, is to promote scholar planning forms that provide conceptual indicators increasingly able to respond not just specific needs of students with disabilities, but to determinate new reorganizations of curriculum with strategies that promote new configuration of personalized work and enhance the diversity of each student.

For this reason we have validated the perspective that rethink educational and didactic planning from the point of view of the Quality of Life, considered the basic epistemological structure of School programs.

### **Reflections and perspectives**

Although we have taken into consideration two contexts with very specific references of both Italian and Brazilian Institutional System, the part of common interest is aimed to evolve a system that could always provided a specific attention and a specific response to students with disabilities towards inclusive forms of curriculum, that in addition to teachers attitudes, ensure a combination of inclusive values and planning practices, directed to build personalized itineraries.

Examining the epistemological node that leads us to face the binomial curriculum and inclusion we posed the following questions: how is it possible to rethink the organization of the curriculum in order to implement an effective inclusive culture? And again: which indicators should be present in the School to evaluate the presence or the absence of an inclusive identity starting from the planning of the curriculum itself?

We validate the Dovigo's interpretive key explicated in the *Index for Inclusion* preface (Booth, Ainscow, 2008) since underlines the necessity to aim not just the construction of "special programs", but rather to work "to modify the common curriculum, extending and diversifying it, to embrace everyone's needs" (Dovigo in Booth, Ainscow, 2008, p. 22).

In this regard, there are two perspectives that we want to re-launch in order to find answers to our previous questions and fundamentals to outline possible guidelines for synergistically connect the curriculum planning to the inclusive perspective.

The first suggestion concerns the proposal of the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST)<sup>5</sup> that focus the attention on the rethink of planning curriculum through guidelines that allow all students personalized accessibility paths to achieve contents and equal learning opportunities. The proposed approach is flexible and open to adaptation of each classroom context, with attention to providing adaptable forms and methods to elaborate disciplinary contents and the active participation of students. The second perspective concerns the multidimensional proposal of the Quality of Life.

Several authors through meta-analysis (Schalock, Verdugo Alonso, 2002) identify eight significant areas, for the life of all people, who define domains. These eight domains are characterized by different indicators and can be contextualized through descriptors (Giaconi, 2015).

The authors present eight crucial domains of the concept of Quality of Life (Schalock, Verdugo Alonso, 2002; Schalock, Gardner, Bradley, 2007):

- Emotional wellbeing;
- Interpersonal relations;
- Material wellbeing;
- Personal development;
- Physical wellbeing;
- Self-determination;
- Social inclusion;
- Rights.

This approach become an interesting start point to plan the curriculum in an inclusive key in which the Quality of Life domains can be the aims that all curriculum shared, alongside the disciplinary skills. In this case, not only the organization of the individualized educational plans could be oriented to the model of Quality of Life indicated above, but the curriculum planning itself could be oriented towards the Quality of Life domains, which would become the common purposes of direction.

In particular, becomes fundamental, moreover for the curriculum planning, the concept of alignment (Laurillard, 2012; Rossi, 2011; Giaconi, 2015) that can be expressed in different levels:

- Alignment between macro-planning and micro-planning (Rossi, Giaconi, 2016);
- Alignment between class planning, personalized learning plans and individualized educational plans (idem);
- Alignment between needs and Quality of Life domains in order to plan necessary supports (Giaconi, 2015, p. 86);

<sup>5</sup> [www.cast.org](http://www.cast.org).

- Alignment between disciplinary objectives and Quality of Life domains and identification of intervention areas in an inclusive key;
- Alignment of expectations (idem, p. 87).  
To orient School planning in this direction, some authors (Adams *et al.*, 2006) have proposed relevant guide questions, that we propose in an adapted form below.
- Is it possible to construct objectives aligned and coherent with the indicators?
- Among the indicators of a program of quality, we must stress the following: relevance, observability, functionality, temporality, monitoring, realism, regulation and participation.
- The goals of the programs to improve the quality of life should answer the demands that will follow.
- Are the rehabilitation goals relevant and significant for an individual life plan?
- Can they be translated in observable behaviour? The goals must translate into observable behaviour, through a clear operational language, which should not leave room for uncertain terminology.
- Are they suitable for the subject and his/her health conditions? This means that the activities must be suited to the chronological age of the persons, rather than the mental one, because a job focuses only on the mental age would signify a fall in expectations and levels of performance.
- Are they functional to the daily needs and significant in relation to their contexts? The goals must be functional to the daily needs. Persons with disabilities must be actively involved in meaningful activities within the contexts where persons belong and refer to; activities that allow persons to assume specific roles.
- Are the goals temporally weighted and limited in time to verify their attainments?
- Are improvements and eventual deteriorations traceable? This becomes essential to re-plan the project of life, which characterises itself for the flexibility.
- Are they classifiable and quantifiable? A program of intervention must have indicators at qualitative and quantitative level, as to appreciate the efficiency and efficacy of the intervention.
- Are they obtainable in terms of human and material resources? In other words, the goals must be realistic, or to be obtainable with the available resources, to avoid dangerous failures which would affect the self-esteem of the person with disabilities.
- Are they functional to increase autonomy, self-determination, personal *empowerment*? Are they aligned to the person's desires? We would say

today that goals must aim inclusion, must make persons more able to choose based on their needs and desires.

- Do they favour social participation and relations with friends, family and context? The program must place itself inside an ample project of participation to the community life.

In this way, the service directs its interventions toward quality, widening the qualitative offer of the school.

The issues above illustrated, encourage us to summarize some lines that every School should take into consideration to orient curriculum in an inclusive perspective:

- Encourage refresher courses in inclusive logic for all teachers, to achieve inclusive practices and transversal skills;
- Promote new connections between different forms of planning (macro-planning and micro-planning, class planning, individualized educational planning or personalized didactics plans), keeping a special focus on identifying relations during the project planning between regular teachers and support teachers within the model of Quality of Life. Additionally particular attention must be paid on epistemological and founding nodes of disciplines and procedural and transversal nodes among the disciplines themselves in favor of inclusive pathways and projects (for example, project on the creation of collaborative environments, on the management of emotions, on the study method, etc.);
- Experiment new forms of supervision and planning that transform educational practices into continuous research, also from the point of view of the Quality of Life model;
- Facilitate forms of alignment in the curriculum planning between disciplinary objectives and Quality of Life domains, identifying several strategic areas of intervention, important for the development of inclusive culture and climate, as well as personalized paths;
- Support forms of monitoring and supervision to evaluate whether the curriculum is oriented towards Quality of Life in inclusive perspective.

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