

## Theoretical and Methodological Elements of an Inclusive Approach to Education

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### Abstract

The educative experience of people with disability leads the international debate towards the value of inclusive learning contexts. Nonetheless, the theoretical and methodological principles of an inclusive education approach have to be outlined. Data collected using explorative questionnaires during a five-years survey in an Italian region's schools show a slow evolution of the scholastic context. From the perspective of Special Pedagogy, the qualitative investigation on three macro-dimensions (the diversity perception, the didactic and methodological means, the wellbeing of pupils) reveals an emerging development of solid awareness among teachers. Findings confirm that the inclusion processes at school are attainable only throughout a series of clear methodological elements: 1) a valorising attitude towards diversity; 2) an orienting learning process; 3) a plural and flexible use of both methodologies and strategies; 4) a collaborative work environment; 5) a continuous training process; 6) a deontological approach. These are the principles that allow teachers to support each student in the manifold itineraries of identity fulfilment, encouraging pupils to express their needs and to develop their abilities in a welcoming and participative context.

**Keywords:** Disability, Inclusive Education, Special Pedagogy, Teachers' Professionalism.

### Introduction

Nowadays and from various standpoints, our society is characterized by radical changes and transformations in many areas and dimensions of

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citizenship experience. Nevertheless their high progressive worth, several cultural, political, economic and technological innovations are mentioned as being the source of critical conditions of disparity and disadvantage (Bauman, 1990, 2005; Beck, 2000; Benasayag & Schmit, 2003). These elements lead to a complex situation that on the one hand has the features of an educational emergency, evidently marked by both individual and collective experiences of disorientation. On the other hand, this scenario invites to develop a critical thought about the dominant values and the criteria for conducting the efforts in shaping the future society.

In this sense, a mature ethic of responsibility (Jonas, 1979) seems to be not yet achieved in the present society, where still are manifest several and meaningful marginalization phenomena with respect to the experience of real citizenship. Such a circumstances appear more odious if we consider how firmly international political and cultural policies are encouraging for over ten years inclusion processes and conditions of equality and sustainability for all the world's citizens (UN, 2006, 2015b, 2015a).

New forms of disadvantage and diversity such as health conditions, psychical and relational disorders, addictions, poverty and functional illiteracy characterize social reality. It is a circumstance that marks the school experience and concurs to define the complex concept of Special Educational Needs (SEN) (Baptista, 2006; Booth & Ainscow, 2002; d'Alonzo, 2016; Giaconi, 2019; Ianes, 2005; Mura, 2016; Mura & Zurru, 2016b). These existential conditions strongly influence learning in the school life and pose a serious question to Educational Sciences and Special Pedagogy about the value and the meaning of the educative advancements and the ways didactics can supports authentic inclusive processes (Batanero, 2009; Cottini, 2017; de Anna & Plaisance, 2014).

In this sense, Didactics can be considered as a frame of actions that plenty supports inclusive processes of pupils with disability and learning difficulties (de Anna, 2014a; Moliterni, 2013; Mura, 2005b, 2016, 2018). Nonetheless, such an awareness still results particularly feeble among the various views about the topic.

In a subtle way, the unclear role of didactics depends on the misleading of the educational and formative mission that the school have to accomplish. Referring to the institutional idea of the school it is evident a core mandate carried out throughout the promotion of «student's competence to make sense of their experiences, reducing fragmentation and irregularity of their lives» (MIUR, 2012, p. 7). Despite this worthwhile suggestion, many teachers and scholars conceive the learning tasks in terms of mere efficient and effective instruction, mainly concerned with the gaining of narrowed knowledge and abilities in respect of an ideal student.

Taking the question of inclusive education seriously, the risk is to lose the authentic dimension of an action led to nourish in pupils a deep awareness of themselves, of their competencies, their difficulties and their realistic growth objectives. Furthermore, it seems to be crucial to develop an education idea devoted to the building of learning experiences able to give each pupil the means to educate themselves. It is important to offer them many opportunities to forge their identity, cultivating reflective and relational abilities (Mura, 2005a). It has to do with enhancing all the resources of schooling to promoting a didactic action devoted to a significant learning experience (Castoldi, 2009, 2015; Cook & Ausubel, 1970; Perrenoud, 2010). In this sense, and whatever their health and learning conditions, students must have the opportunity, not only to follow standardize training and employment itineraries, but to trace original ones autonomously. Thus, it is necessary to establish an active learning process in which knowledge, abilities and competencies are oriented to shape a particular individual attitude, defined as *learning to learn* (CE, 2006; MIUR, 2012). This approach to learning has to be conceived as an experience able to provide for all students' the conditions for foster their responsibility and awareness.

### **Teachers' professionalism between difficulties and training needs**

In a mature perspective of inclusion, the educative dimension has to be crucial. Pupils with disabilities and students with special educational needs have to achieve competencies in order to accomplish successfully their personal and autonomous Life Project. The school plays its important role in addressing the students' needs of development, orientation and growth throughout the accomplishment of the learning process. Therefore didactics, as a broad plot of methods, strategies, approaches and attitudes, is a pattern of professional complexity that teachers can follow in order to offer an emancipation process, to develop problem solving competencies; to train self-evaluation abilities; to stimulate experimentation, awareness and self-knowledge chances for each student.

Those already mentioned aspects are the elements that characterize the professional expression of a teacher who interprets his/her role in terms of qualified and careful source of support for the development of pupils' identity dimension. Whatever is the health and learning condition of students in the classroom, teachers encounter the individual experience of the pupils as an unexpected (Schön, 1983), an expression of self that cannot fit immediately in a strategic and methodological well definite plan. It is necessary a didactic and hermeneutical peruse (Gaspari, 2014) in order to comprehend the pupil's

authenticity, the history of his biographical baggage and of the environment in which he/she lives in, and then to orient him/her in the achievement of competencies (de Anna, 2014b).

In order to lead and guide the changing scenarios we mentioned above and to offer answers to the challenging school setting, it is important that teachers take a precise cultural and ethical responsibility, and that school invokes its emancipatory role, calling for a renewal in the training of staff teachers.

Because of its heterogeneity and complexity, the management of educative needs at school requires, as matter of fact, a professionalism that must make teachers able to act reflexively (Schön, 1983) and to interpret the change (Mura, 2012, 2016). This has become necessary to provide meaningful answers to the several forms of social, cultural and relational marginalization and maladjustment. It is now vital to assume an open and critical pedagogical view, able to enjoy the formative opportunities that arise when education faces with diversity and special educational needs (Chiappetta Cajola, 2015; d'Alonzo, Bocci, & Pinnelli, 2015; Mura, 2016). Teachers have to be able to develop useful competencies to interpret the context and to offer inclusive educative solutions, which lead pupils towards their individual and social emancipation, against any *a priori* standards (Mura, 2018). In the professional practice, the ability to individualize, personalize and differentiate didactic interventions through problematizing and transformative actions is essential (Fabbri & Romano, 2017). In this sense, teachers undertake their activity by adapting the different methodological options in a close interaction with pupils' needs, the didactic proposals and the achievement of learnings (Zurru, 2015).

As evoked by the Italian Department of Education in the basic document on the "first-cycle" school curriculum (from the infant school to the secondary school) (MIUR, 2012), and recently reformulated in the document titled *Indicazioni e Nuovi Scenari* (MIUR, 2018), the accomplishment of the «new humanism» calls for a professional profile that makes teachers able to support the formative success of all pupils. Particularly, teachers have to pay attention to «all forms of diversity, disability and disadvantage», promoting in children their «being in the world», «reciprocal recognition», the enhancement «of each one's identity», «the fulfilment of the human being» and «the exercising of a full citizenship» (MIUR, 2012, p. 4). These are fundamental learning goals that constitute the pillars of a real inclusive society, which conceives itself as democratic, not only nominally, but throughout the concrete attainment of equity, justice and solidarity.

### **The surveys with teachers**

The enduring experience of Italian support teachers has been observed with

great interest by the international scientific debate. As reaffirmed by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2012), the introduction of specialised teachers in mainstream school has gradually led to the realization that any curricular teacher needs to develop an inclusive didactic profile. For the creation of an inclusive environment, as a matter of fact, the action of all teachers become crucial for both the activation and the modulation of the human emancipation of each student and the entire school community. For this reason, an ongoing professional qualification is necessary.

Despite such strong awareness, even in the Italian school some difficulties in welcoming, recognizing and enhancing diversity persist. In several cases these complications produce drop-out phenomena (ISTAT, 2018; MIUR, 2017) that bring a series of questions. How limited is the teachers' action in recognising the uniqueness and complexity of each person? Why they fail to support students' growth and their full development? What weak points impede teachers mastering and combining different competencies such as planning, evaluating, organizing with other crucial features of the teaching/learning relationship (subjects management, methodology, communication, technology)?

Starting from these key questions the data collected in a five-year survey (Mura, 2014; Mura & Zurru, 2016b, 2019) are analysed and perused.

Considering the complexity of the inclusive phenomenon and the several actors involved, the data discussed in the present work has been collected during a broad research project carried out in a period of five years (2013-2018). After a first research step on in training curricular teachers (Mura, 2014), we have focused our attention on in training teachers, who have nurtured a long experience as classroom teachers and have then decided to become support teachers (Mura & Zurru, 2016b, 2019).

According to the researches (Cavalli & Argentin, 2010), we have chosen to involve these teachers because they are more inclined to re-think their professionalism. Moreover, they appear to be better disposed towards the enhancement of inclusive processes than permanent teachers, who are likely to interpret their role as mere routine. Furthermore, pedagogical and didactic classes have contributed in reaching the favourable conditions for the teachers to be able to interpret the complex inclusion dynamics. For these reasons we privileged the collaboration with these subjects.

The data were collected through an explorative anonymous questionnaire (de Ketele & Roegiers, 2013), online self-administrated. The questionnaire construction refers to the epistemic perspective of Italian Special Pedagogy, as theoretical-practical science aimed to both authentically acknowledge the value of diversity and orient the anthropological and cultural emancipation of the

whole society (Canevaro, 1999; d’Alonzo, 2008; de Anna, 2014b; Gaspari, 2012; Mura, 2012; Pavone, 2014).

The questionnaire goes through five thematic areas and their respective constructions and indicators (Coggi & Ricchiardi, 2005) useful to appraise teachers’ experience (Tab. 1). Besides the sample’s characteristics, we surveyed the motivational dimension, the past professional experiences, the educative importance of Special Pedagogy and Didactics, and the transposability into ordinary didactics of the acquired competences. The first part of the questionnaire is meant to gather the sample’s characteristics. The second part of the questionnaire investigates the principal motivations that have brought the teachers to choose to undertake the specialization course. The third section aims to understand how the teachers consider their past teaching experiences after having attended all the classes on Pedagogical subjects. In the fourth section, we have evaluated how the encounter with Special Pedagogy and Didactics has been perceived as an instrument that can have an impact on cultural and professional training. In the last section, we analyse how the competences acquired throughout the course are considered by the participants to be transposable to ordinary didactics.

Tab. 1 - Macro-dimensions and Indicators

Macro-dimensions	Indicators
1) Anagraphic data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Past qualifications</li> <li>• Past teaching experiences</li> </ul>
2) Motivation and professional choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Starting motivations</li> <li>• Difficulties faced</li> </ul>
3) Perceptions on past teaching experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The personal professional competence</li> <li>• The community professional competence</li> <li>• The school management</li> <li>• The inter-institutional network</li> </ul>
4) The encounter with Special Pedagogy and Didactics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality of theoretical subjects</li> <li>• Training needs satisfaction</li> <li>• Impact of Special Pedagogy on teaching professionalism</li> <li>• Priorities for inclusion processes</li> </ul>
5) How Special Pedagogy and Special Didactics competences are transposable to ordinary didactics?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contents to explore and to integrate</li> <li>• Special Didactics and Special Pedagogy as mandatory issues in teachers’ training</li> <li>• University and School partnership in teachers training</li> </ul>

In the five-years period, teachers interviewed (n = 532) in different moments have yielded a broad representation of the school reality over the regional territory. The sample analysed is equally divided in groups, according to the different school levels. The interviewees, mostly female (76%), are aged

between 26 and 61 ( $\bar{x} = 42$ ,  $\sigma = 6.2$ ). This datum substantially attests the situation represented in the third IARD report 2010 (Cavalli & Argentin, 2010), in which the increase in age rate of the teachers who get a permanent contract is evident.

As for what concerns the data analysis, the exploratory and inquisitive character of the survey has led us to, rather than just a statistical treatment, a prospective assessment (de Ketele & Roegiers, 2013) of critical areas in the accomplishment of inclusive processes (Mura, 2014; Mura & Zurru, 2016a, 2016b, 2019).

### Difficulties, uncertainties and qualifying elements

The elements that slow down inclusive processes have been verified using a first version of an explorative questionnaire described above and addressed to the teachers in an Italian region's school. Two different teacher's groups have been interviewed in two different moments (2013 and 2015).

For what concerns the motivational aspects of the choice to become teachers, both class and support teacher, an incoherent and feeble representation of the motivational spur is quite evident. The desire of getting a stable job prevails over the vocational dimension. This phenomenon gets also a possible confirmation in dropping rate of the specialized teacher role after the mandatory period of five years, which, according to the interviewed teachers' perception, is caused by a sense of isolation and professional inadequacy (53%).

Moreover, data show complications at organizational and managerial level (i.e. difficult relations with colleagues, the headteacher, services operators and families; an excessive amount of work for specialised teachers; a sense of professional isolation). However, what widely worries teachers is the perception of their insufficient methodological and didactic competence.

As shown (Tab. 2), only a low percentage of teachers (10 and 8%) ascribes their troubles to the relationship with disabled pupils in classroom. Results seems to be similar between the two groups. Most of the difficulties are related to the planning-normative sphere, to the collaborating with colleagues and headmasters, and to the mediation with the inter-institutional network (school-family-territory). An investment in cultural training could improve the teachers' didactic-methodological competence and overcome the generalized sense of inadequacy, as well as establish a collaborative relationship with colleagues, families and socio-health operators of territory.

Tab. 2 - Personal professional skills: difficulties

<i>What difficulties have you encountered in your teaching experience?</i>	<i>%</i>	
	<i>2013</i>	<i>2015</i>
Insufficient methodological and disciplinary skills;	21	21
insufficient competencies in planning, organizing and in lawful administrating;	18	18
generalized sense of inadequacy towards inclusion issues;	22	12
difficulties in dealing with students with complex disabilities;	10	8
difficulties in collaborating with colleagues and the headteacher;	12	17
difficulties in collaborating with the institutional network (school, services, family, community);	13	19
any difficulty;	5	4
no answer.	0	1
<i>N</i>	<i>295</i>	<i>108</i>

Moreover, there are still contexts where the inclusion project is conceived as a mere nominal act.

Tab. 3 - Professional skills shared in the school: difficulties

<i>What difficulties have you encountered in your teaching experience?</i>	<i>%</i>	
	<i>2013</i>	<i>2015</i>
Not sufficient headteacher's competence and interest towards inclusion;	3	5
IEP plan and management are commonly delegated to the specialized teacher;	30	33
IEP and classroom program are not integrated;	22	10
a limited use of multiple didactic methodologies;	20	20
inability to share IEP with others institutional entities;	6	12
the inclusion project is considered as a mere nominal act by many colleagues	17	16
None	2	3
<i>N</i>	<i>295</i>	<i>108</i>

With respect to the perception of the competences spread in the school (Tab. 3), the data collected are confirming the difficulties above mentioned. Some variations between the two groups seems to be not particularly significant. Approximately in the 30% of cases, teachers state that the IEP's (Individualized Educative Project) plan and management are delegated to the specialized teacher; consequently, there is a lack of integration between IEP and class' plan (22% in the 2013). For these reasons the interviewed teachers state that the inclusion project is still perceived as a mere bureaucratic act. In these cases, teachers point out a scarce ability to share competencies and responsibilities among colleagues. It is remarkable that the datum referred to the insufficient use of manifold didactic methodologies is stable over time (20%). Facing these difficulties and being invited to rethink their professional experience, teachers



feel the necessity of vocational training actions for the entire teacher staff, in order to acquire inclusive didactic and methodological competencies.

In a recent survey, conducted during a specialization course for support teachers (AY 2017), we interviewed another group of in training teachers (n = 129). Findings begin to show some important modifications in school context. Data collected reflect a circumstance in which, notwithstanding some resistance and delegation phenomena, a slow evolution in awareness and co-responsibility is evident (Tab. 4).

Tab. 4 - The growing competencies of teachers

<i>How teachers show their skills in recognizing and promoting interests and potentialities of students with disability?</i>	<i>%</i>
All teachers work to promote interests and potentialities of the pupil with disability;	44
most of the teachers work to promote interests and potentialities of the pupil with disability;	43
only few teachers work to promote interests and potentialities of the pupil with disability;	39
no one;	0
the support teacher only knows interests and potentialities of the pupil with disability.	3
<i>N</i>	<i>129</i>

### Professional training: elements for an inclusive education model

The inclusive school system started in Italy forty years ago and since then it represents the institutional mainstream of education (Galanti, 2017). Nevertheless, data confirm that the enhancement of inclusive processes is still an open question that needs to be addressed with professional qualification and revision. As a matter of fact, it is evident that authentic inclusion, didactic practices and the educative care of pupils can only be achieved through the actions of professionals able to face with the classroom heterogeneity, to share the aims and the responsibilities of the educative plan, and to promote the concrete emancipatory mission of school.

Starting from such a professional qualification need, a more and more relevant part of the pedagogical and didactic research has been oriented to formulating the principles of a training model for teachers and to lead learning processes – i.e. toward the real attainment of inclusiveness in school. The scientific literature (Cottini, 2017; d’Alonzo et al., 2015; de Anna, 2014b; de Anna, Gaspari, & Mura, 2015; Giaconi, 2016; Giaconi & Capellini, 2015; Ianes, 2016; Mura, 2016, 2018) and the most recent research results (Mura & Zurru, 2019) allow us to say that teachers’ training (including in-service

training) serves a relevant role do that all teachers – not only the specialized ones – can achieve and adopt an inclusive professional profile.

An interesting scenario about competencies and awareness that teachers are acquiring is unfolding. The data (Tab. 4) testify how the collaborative work is growing among teachers relating the promotion of diversity and the concrete accomplishment of an inclusive environment. At the level of methodological and didactic skills, teachers are slowly taking a role of increasing co-responsibility towards the classroom work and in promoting the wellbeing of pupils with disability, with learning disabilities and disadvantages of different nature.

Summarizing the elements emerged in the five-year period of research, some crucial dimension in developing an inclusive profile for teachers can be identified. In particular, these elements can be delineated as the abilities to:

- conceive and enhance diversity as an educative resource and a gain in the didactic enrichment for all the students, as well as for the teachers' professionalism;
- consider learning as the way to encourage educational orientation for the individual, and the social emancipation of pupils;
- use a plurality of languages, methods and strategies for the individualization, personalization and differentiation of learning goals as instruments of didactic improvement for all students in a various setting of learning environment;
- activate and promote the cooperation among colleagues and other contributors within the institutional network (i.e. school, services, family, community);
- generate and cultivate the conditions for an ongoing and aware professional training;
- act in accordance with ethical and deontological principles set out in the inclusive cultural horizon of the State School.

As evident, this model is the product of a reasoned synthesis of the data emerged in the above mentioned research works (Mura, 2014; Mura & Zurru, 2016b, 2019) and allows us to depict the school reality with its uncertainties and weak points, but also with the qualifying elements that are characterizing teachers' professionalism and that promote the development of inclusive processes. With reference to the teachers' opinions, these same data allow us to affirm that the achievement of special didactic competencies is essential in the global training of teachers. It has been pointed out that such competencies improve the quality of general didactic actions, of those addressed to students with SEN and, furthermore, of subject didactics (Fig. 1) (Mura, 2014; Mura & Zurru, 2016b).

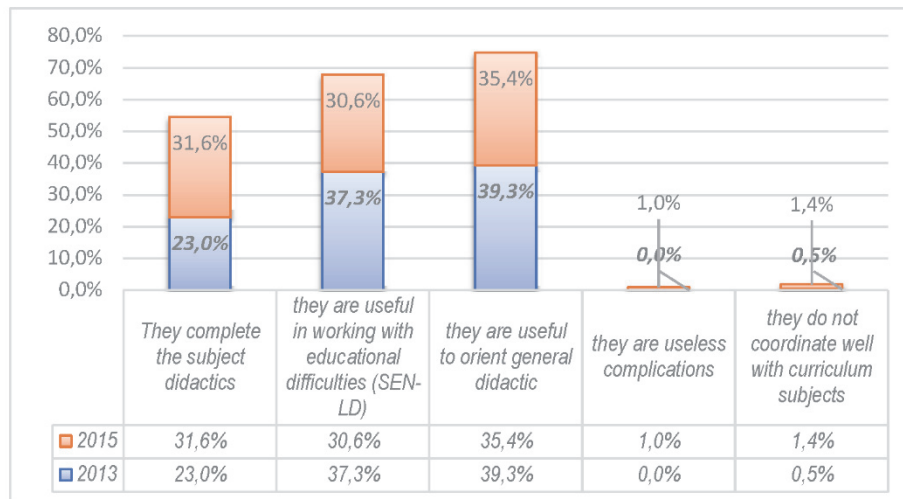


Figure 1. How special-didactical competencies support teaching work

All this considered, is evident the need to offer professional training opportunities to all teachers, so they can be engaged in the activation of a problematizing and reflective didactics. It is necessary to get to a series of didactic measures, conceived as a work in progress able to offer different options for planning and organizing. With an open combination of several methods, teachers should adjust their approach progressively on the basis of the hermeneutical circle that originates and develops from the interaction among teachers, pupils and contexts. Although crucial, the methodological abilities have to be conceived in a frame of principles and actions that allows to answer to the specific variables of both individuals and contexts.

Such a training perspective leads toward a professional involvement of teachers in a teaching method that serves the needs of all students. In this sense, special didactics is not merely centred on subjects' contents, it is rather devoted to the wide theoretical and practical field of the identification of pupils' special needs and of what can answer them. It is a didactic programme able to actively include with synergy all the parts within school and society in planning, accomplishing, and evaluating educative and formative experiences (Mura, 2016).

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