Microaffirmations as a tool to support the process of inclusive education

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Abstract

The main question that guides this work concerns the intentional use of microaffirmations in support of the inclusive education process. We will describe how microaffirmations can help to achieve significant goals for inclusive education both inside and outside the classroom (Ainscow 2015; Messiou *et al.*, 2016). Specifically, attention will be focused on how support and recognition communicated through microaffirmations can improve sense of belonging as an essential element of creating safe spaces for learning (Mitchell, 2014). The theoretical overview provided here sets the groundwork for a research study, to be implemented in Italy and the United States, where inclusion and microaffirmation is the binomial investigated.

Keywords: Inclusive education; Microaffirmations; University students

1. Introduction

In schools around the world, students with learning differences are often excluded or marginalized. Inclusive education is a process aimed at increasing participation and decreasing exclusion for students (Booth, Ainscow, 2011). In addition to developing academic competence, inclusive education is

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focused on improving the student experience, enhancing student satisfaction, and increasing Quality of Life (Mitchell, 2014; Giaconi, 2015). To meet the goals of inclusive education, educators need tangible pedagogical, curricular, and communication strategies to employ inside and outside of the classroom. Microaffirmations are a form of communication that has been demonstrated to support the success of marginalized students (Kuh *et al*., 2006; Ellis *et al*., 2019). We are interested in exploring if microaffirmations can be a beneficial tool to support students with learning differences and promote the inclusive education process. To begin this exploration, this article provides a brief overview of inclusive education as a process. This is followed by an introduction to microaffirmations in educational contexts. Finally, applications for practice and next steps for research, including a study which is going to be implemented in Italy and the United States, is discussed.

2. Inclusive Education as a Process

While advancements have been made, students with learning differences remain frequently excluded or marginalized in schools at all levels from primary through higher education. Exclusion is a process of disempowerment through which students are identified as other, lessor, or inferior (Barton, 1997). Excluded students have different, and often fewer, learning opportunities. Inclusive education is a process and a movement that has spanned across decades, and seeks to include rather than exclude, by diverse student groups learning together in the same classroom, and participating in co-curricular activities together outside of the classroom.

In Italy, the transformative process of inclusion has gone through several phases: initially people with disabilities were *inserted* or put in the mainstream, then *integrated*, and finally *included* in education. Law 118 of 1971, Article 28 "Measures for school attendance," required the mainstreaming of students with disabilities in school contexts (Sagramola, 1989). This *insertion* process was put to an end by Law 517 of 1977, which led to the first forms of integration. This law also required public schools to provide customized design procedures and flexible teaching strategies, in addition to the introduction of the special education teacher. This step forward, therefore, not only establishes the possibility for all students to attend shared spaces and times, but also provides the necessary support for participation in school life. The subsequent Law 104 of 1992 introduced important regulatory and operational innovations that have ensured a greater quality of *integration* of pupils with disabilities in the common classes of schools of all levels and in universities (104/1992, Articles 12, 13).

The series of measures (L. 170/2010; M. C. 8/2013; D. L. 66/2017) implemented in the last several decades mark, finally, the subsequent passage towards *inclusion*. Among the most significant regulatory proposals, is Law 170/2010 (protection of subjects with SpLDs - Specific Learning Disorders), which requires educational institutions to ensure «the introduction of compensatory tools, including alternative means of learning and information technologies, as well as measures to dispense from some services not essential for the quality of the concepts to be learned» (Law 170/2010, Article 5). Another example is the Ministerial Circular 8/2013, which leads to a wider form of attention towards subjects with SEN (Special Education Needs), that is, towards three large sub-categories of students: disabilities, specific developmental disorders, socioeconomic, linguistic and cultural disadvantages. Finally, Legislative Decree number 66 (2017) includes «rules for the promotion of school inclusion of students with disabilities» (*Rassegna Cnos*, 1/2017, p. 12). The second of the political priorities is "school inclusion". Implementations of such efforts is intended to promote the educational success of all students, especially those with disabilities, specific learning differences and in situations of socio-economic, linguistic and cultural disadvantage.

The 'inclusive challenge' is understood today as «the presence of a person with specific characteristics in an ordinary context that is connected to other contexts, in an ecosystem process that cannot be defined *a priori*» (Ianes, Canevaro, 2017, p. 112). The idea of involving all students in educational settings is based, therefore, not on measuring from a framework of perfection, but rather, by recognizing the students' full engagement with each subject throughout their academic career (Tramma, 2017). Within any educational context today, whether it be inhabited by children or adults, it is necessary to plan and implement actions that foster the development of autonomy for each student (Del Bianco, 2018) as well as the definition of a student's life project that guarantees his or her broader Quality of Life (Giaconi, 2015).

At an international/global level, beginning in the Nineties, an important and potential transformative process aimed at the realization of inclusive education emerged. These processes reflect the evolution of anthropological, socio-cultural and pedagogical interpretative models of the concept of disability. Among these we mention the ICF (WHO, 2001), which provides a sharable language worldwide regarding inclusion of all people, and the ONU Convention (2004), which represents the internationally agreed regulatory framework about the inclusion of everyone.

Among the main epistemological frameworks centered around the concept of inclusion, the World Health Organization (WHO), through the ICF *International Classification of Functioning Disability and Health, pubblicato*

(ICF), contributes to the elimination of an observational focus which places emphasis on the causes or etiology of disabilities. An example being the disruption of the unidirectional progression regarding terms such as illness or disorder, impairment, disability or handicap. Furthermore, this approach pays more consideration to the description of life situations. The functioning of the person is therefore considered as a complex product of the multiple dynamics existing between biological, individual and environmental factors (Ianes, Cramerotti, 2007; Lascioli, Pasqualotto, 2011). The ICF provides opportunity to overcome both the limits and the opposition between the social model and the medical approach to disability, arriving at a new holistic approach, which is the biopsychosocial model. This perspective, able to investigate the Quality of Life as a whole (Giaconi, 2015; Taddei, 2017), directs its attention to contexts that meet everyone's needs.

Parallel to the reconstruction of the epistemological frameworks that led to the true inclusion of everyone in educational contexts, beyond national borders, we also remember the historical presence of the inclusive approach based on human rights. This approach is reaffirmed thanks to the ONU Convention (2004), which places the rights of people with disabilities at the center of the education debate, affirming their dignity, equality and freedom. The Convention, while not adding new rights to the documents that preceded it, reaffirms them, with the aim of promptly responding to the needs and varied situations experienced by people with disabilities, thus introducing measures that require their implementation (Terzi, 2013).

It is thanks to the inclusive perspective reached over time, coupled with best practices being infused into educational contexts, that this contribution takes shape. A reconstruction of the educational needs within the University setting will enable the utilization of the current inclusive modalities that can be implemented in order to protect and enhance the differences of everyone.

3. Inclusion in University settings

The historical and regulatory changes incorporated over time, push our investigation focus towards the analysis of higher education contexts. More specifically, we aim to understand whether the transformation processes, which we have gradually witnessed, actually guarantee inclusive practices and processes within Universities settings.

In the world of academia, there are guidelines and methods that are aimed at protecting equal opportunities. In Italy, for example, CNUDD Guidelines (2014), are aimed not only at guaranteeing the right to study, but also at promoting inclusion, autonomy and active citizenship of all students.

Specifically, the guidelines address the policies and the best practices of the Universities. These practices stimulate exchanges and synergies within the scope of a greater qualification regarding the right to study for those students with special learning needs, in addition to the constitution of inclusive academic communities (CNUDD, 2014, p. 3). The document, in line with the ONU Convention (2004), was inspired by the principles of reception, participation, autonomy and integration of the student with disabilities, to whom is guaranteed equal opportunities for training, study and research (*Ivi*, p. 2) through the promotion of the themes of diversity.

Another form of protection against discrimination, which has been implemented by the Italian University system, is represented by the figure of the Delegate for equal opportunities and the Single Guarantee Committees (CUGs). Following the Law 183 of 2010, that replaced the previous Committees on Equal Opportunities (CPO), which was already active for some decades within University contexts. The Delegate and the CUGs, as guarantee, evaluation and control bodies, have the main objective of ensuring compliance with the principle of non-discrimination, ensuring equal opportunities in relation to all members of the academic community. The Delegate and the Committee, in pursuing the organizational well-being of the academic institution, pay particular attention to the risk deriving from gender inequalities and other forms of inequality (referring to age, sexual orientation, ethnic origin, disability and language) (Tomio, 2017).

From a broader perspective, specifically in the European context, we mention the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as a fundamental document on the issues of increasing equity in education and the importance of quality learning throughout the whole life for even the most vulnerable people (Bellacicco, 2018). Signed by the governments of the 193 member countries of the EU, 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are proposed in the Agenda, including a great action program that operates from the notion that no one is excluded or left behind in order to achieve real change.

The measures and guidelines mentioned represent the foundations on which to implement strategic actions that can promote greater accessibility and inclusion in University contexts. Starting from the assumptions issued, both nationally and internationally, higher educational systems should therefore guarantee the realization of structures to protect and support students from all backgrounds and lived experiences (Bellacicco, 2018). In order to ensure quality University experiences, it becomes necessary to carry out actions that contribute to achieving greater autonomy and awareness of the personal aspirations for those who attend (Mura, 2011, 2018), ensuring active participation in the training context (Rainone *et al*., 2010). In reality, these assumptions demonstrate the need to significantly improve the living

conditions of all students. Furthermore, these best practices have the potential to contribute both to the acquisition of metacognitive skills that support the aspirations of all students, as well as reduce forms of discrimination and of marginality, thereby moving towards the promotion of full citizenship (Canevaro, 1998; Mura, 2018; Pace, Pavone, Petrini, 2018).

Paying attention to the particular need of each student must not, however, be reduced to a "specialism of exclusioning" framework. (Canevaro, 2014). A fair education that is truly inclusive should contribute to the achievement of personal educational goals that, at the same time, have to be recognized by the institution itself (Rainone *et al*., 2010). The ultimate goal, therefore, becomes to achieve goals that are shared between the students and the institutions that welcome them.

4. Inclusive Education in Practice

Today inclusive education is seen as a process where members of an educational team, including students, faculty, staff, and family, make needed adjustments for all students, including those with learning differences, to meaningfully engage in education (Stegemann, Aucoin, 2018). Through this activity, learning differences are seen as a naturally occurring part of human diversity that should be welcomed and seen as a resource as opposed to a problem (Armstrong, Armstrong, Spandagou, 2011). To this end, inclusive education seeks to value all people, promote sense of belonging, and provide all students with opportunities to thrive (Connor, Goldmansour, 2012).

Requiring more than a shared physical space, inclusive education requires schools and communities to articulate clear values, policies, and practices (Cologon, 2014). These values, policies, and practices must be translated in to practical, daily processes effecting the day-to-day course of students' lives (Mogharreban, Bruns, 2009). Learning supports and structures must not be separate from, but embedded within everyday educational activities and shared student experiences (Anderson, Boyle, 2015).

Although inclusive principles are generally recognized as fundamental within educational contexts and are an integral part of Universities' educational designs, research shows alarming data on daily and chronic experiences of unfair treatment in educational contexts (Ellis *et al*., 2019), in addition to new forms of discrimination, defined by the microaggression literature (Sue *et al*., 2007, 2008, 2009; Sue, 2010). Individuals marginalized can encounter innocuous and explicit discriminatory communications (Sue *et al*., 2009), or rather, microaggressions can be identified as intentional or unintentional brief exchanges that communicate hostile, negative slights and

insults on an individual or group (Sue *et al.*, 2007; Sue, 2010). Specifically, across a variety of manifestations, microaggressions have been negatively associated with student well-being and success (Nadal, 2014). In this direction, the need for specific actions, which know how to be oriented to circumscribe the phenomenon of microaggressions, are evident. For these reasons, our analysis is oriented towards the investigation of possible implementation methods that are able to overcome even these forms of discrimination, in order to guarantee, to the widest possible number of students, a greater inclusion in academic contexts and a higher Quality of Life (Giaconi, 2015).

5. Microaffirmations in Educational Contexts

A microaffirmation is a form of micromessage (Rowe, 2008). Micromessages are verbal and nonverbal communications in social contexts that are expressed orally, through body language, affect, and tone of voice (Young, 2006). Expressed from one person to another, or from one group to another group, micromessages impart key information that can influence how people relate to one another and their immediate environment (Young, 2006; Rowe, 2008). Microaffirmations are a form of brief verbal and nonverbal communications that can be used to convey care as well as inclusion, support, and appreciation to students through daily interactions (Ellis *et al.*, 2019). These positive communications are small acts expressing listening, comfort, and support (Rowe, 2008). These acts may be especially beneficial for students, such as those with learning differences, who may feel unwelcome or invisible in a learning environment (Demetriou *et al.*, 2011, 2014, in press).

Microaffirmations can be statements acknowledging a student's efforts. Saying, for example, "I see how much time and energy you have invested in this work" is a great way to express positive messaging to students. Additionally, microaffirmations can also affirm a student's experience by communicating gratitude. For example, when a student share's a learning experience or challenge, simply stating "Thank you for sharing your story with me" before providing a detailed response can validate the student's experience and appreciation for their challenge.

Incorporating microaffirmations into educational settings can help foster inclusivity and care for students. Inclusive education focuses on teaching to the whole student (Mitchell, 2014). Inclusive educators are responsible for creating safe and secure environments that promote optimal student learning and outcomes (Mitchell, 2014). Within these environments, demonstrations of care can positively influence the student experience (Baik, Larcombe, Booker,

2019). Microaafirmations can advance this focus by attending not only to the academic needs of students, but also social and emotional necessities.

From a very early age, students' understandings of inclusion, exclusion, and engagement are informed by the educators in their lives (Willan *et al*., 2007). Educators serve as role models and are capable of influencing students' beliefs, values and practices. As a result, educators have powerful influence, and can enhance the student experience by way of strategic, affirming communication. Furthermore, inclusive educators must take an interactive approach to instruction. This includes listening to students, speaking to individual students directly, encouraging ideas, and providing supports and scaffolding as needed. Microcommunications are key to such interactions.

Building relationships is also essential to optimal student learning and success, and could be particularly beneficial for students with learning differences. It takes time and intentionality for educators to establish rapport and trust within the learning environment. The most effective learning environments are built upon relationships where students feel safe to share their experience, ask questions, and make mistakes. Incorporating microaffirmations into daily activities with students can help build trust through small interactions spread across time (Russell, Slater, 2011).

Establishing close relationships and trust can help increase sense of belonging for students with learning differences on campus. Belonging is a human need influencing individual motivation, health, and happiness (Dyson, Renk, 2006; Deroma *et al*., 2009; Carvalho, de Oliveira Mota, 2010; Baumeister, Leary, 2017). A sense of psychological safety and interpersonal connection is necessary for sense of belonging and critical to inclusion (Milner, Kelly, 2009). Supportive campus environments benefit all students, including those from marginalized or underrepresented populations. Sense of belonging occurs when students are a part of an environment or community where they feel their identities are affirmed, their needs can be met, and their academic and personal goals are supported (Strayhorn, 2012). The first step in fostering sense of belonging and affirming students' identities begins with genuinely listening and appreciating the students' experiences. It is of critical importance to authentically listen to students and appreciate the microaggressions they experience as real and powerful. This activity of listening and validating the student experience serves as a form of affirmation. Communicating microaffirmation support through daily, commonplace interactions can advance sense of belonging among students and connection to the campus community.

Microaffirmations also provide students with recognition. Recognition is the regard individuals feel when they are afforded respect by others (Browne, Millar, 2016). Honneth (2003) identifies multiple forms of recognition,

including relationships of positive regard and communities of solidarity. Microaffirmations can help build this recognition by providing validation and respect for the experiences students with learning differences bring with them to campus. Additionally, Honneth (2003) identifies social relations through which individuals receive recognition. These relationships communicate affection and concern, and are commonplace relations within a community where members are treated as though they possess abilities and talents that are valuable to the community (Honneth, 2003). Another key aspect of social inclusion is being recognized as an individual (Cobigo *et al.*, 2012). The concept of recognition assumes positive affirmations by others, and is applicable to supporting students' optimal learning and development.

Microaffirmations can communicate mattering, care, acceptance, respect, and value. These forms of validation are critical to student success, particularly for students with learning differences. Infusing microaffirmations into daily interactions can support inclusion in educational settings both inside and outside of the classroom. Through repeated, positive microaffirmations, educators can create safe spaces for students to develop strong social networks. Intentional use of microaffirmations will contribute to enhancing a campus culture of inclusivity, and students will benefit from feelings of connectedness and sense of belonging.

6. Microaffirmations as a Strategy to Promote Inclusive Education

The processes of exclusion and marginalization, present in today's University settings, push our investigation towards pedagogical and University-wide reflections.

The current educational emergency, which still requires strategically prepared interventions, is the reduction of all forms of marginalization within University settings (Krause *et al.*, 2008; Powell *et al.*, 2013; Browne, Michelle, 2016; Brooker, Brooker, Lawrence, 2017). Indeed, a portion of the student population is still excluded from community support and enrichment processes, to the detriment of academic success, as well as well-being (Strayhorn, 2012). As such, we believe that it is necessary to incorporate intentional efforts that include microaffirmations as a strategy to promote inclusive education. Specifically, this includes interventions that are able to transform the University context in to being more open and sensitive to the topic of microaffirmations. As a result, these efforts will discourage microaggressions, and will promote a campus climate that supports all students.

Among the practices that Universities can implement, we mention the need for intentional trainings which will help guide students, faculty and staff members alike through greater reflection of this critical topic. Institutions may require training for student orientation leaders and peer advisors on understanding microaggressions and microaffirmations and how it is possible to act in various settings of University life (Matthews, 2009; Powell *et al.*, 2013; Midkiff *et al.*, 2016; Ellis *et al.*, 2019). All students can be advised in a formal way to reflect on and plan how microaffirmations can be incorporated in personals meetings. For example, students can give be trained on giving feedback to classmates during classroom discussions that validates their experiences; compliments concerning personal challenges from peers or interactions that welcome and acknowledge the different college experiences could be important starting points for implementing microaffirmations.

In general, we believe that all students can benefit from the positive effects of microaffirmations, since through these forms of communication they foster a series of skills that will be useful throughout their life. With a view on permanent learning, aspects related to microaffirmations can be activated thanks to the dynamics experienced in university contexts, resulting in widespread development of life skills for all students. Reception, participation and mutual support can therefore contribute significantly to the realization of educational processes necessary for continuous training.

Universities and educative systems can also focus the attention on specific training for teachers and staff members. This could include facilitating workshops that discuss key definitions and learning outcomes as it relates to microaffirmations and what faculty and staff can do to support those efforts inside and outside of the classroom. Faculty can learn techniques for assessing student work and providing critical feedback in a manner that validates effort and experience regardless of a grade or score. Faculty can also consider microaffirmations in the development of and when leading classroom activities, designing curriculum, and creating classroom rules, policies, and expectations. Beyond the classroom, it is important to remember that administrative and logistical roadblocks frequently prevent students from progressing towards degree completion. These can include unpaid bills and fees, administrative tasks, and confusing, beaucratic University systems. If staff members working within these systems were trained on microaffirmations and how to incorporate them into their daily work and administrative processing, it could help students navigate necessary but frequently challenging systems. Communications conveying compassion, validation, and patience can support students when they must work through frustrating administrative tasks. These communications can include in-person, verbal exchanges as well as the ways in which policies, forms, websites, and

other written communications are expressed. Daily interactions expressing care and concern, even through administrative processes, can support students' daily experiences and sense of well-being.

7. Conclusions

Student health and wellness are of critical concern in education today (De Coninck, Matthijs, Luyten, 2019). An important goal of inclusive education is to support positive experiences, student satisfaction, and Quality of Life (Mitchell, 2014; Giaconi, 2015). Student well-being is imperative to meeting challenging learning goals and development for students with learning differences. We theorize that intentional use of microaffirmations can promote inclusive education by communicating support, providing recognition, and enhancing sense of belonging.

To increase our understanding of the student experience, including how microaffirmations may benefit students, we are partnering with researchers at four universities to collect data, explore, and describe the experiences of undergraduate students. Through a survey, data will be collected regarding positive communications experienced by students called microaffirmations. Participants will complete survey items regarding if and when they received or perceived positive, affirming communications during their collegiate experience. Participants will also respond to items measuring resiliency, hope, and sense of belonging at and within their university setting (Snyder, 2002, 2003; Snyder *et al*., 2006). The investigators will examine experiences and responses in relation to one another in an effort to advance understanding of positive student development.

Results of this study will advance our understanding of micromessages among undergraduate students and the ways in which educators can create affirming learning environments within the University setting. Appreciating these experiences and traits among students will support efforts in improving the undergraduate student experience overall by promoting student retention as well as degree completion, particularly for marginalized students. Furthermore, we will use the data to explore the ways in which microaffirmations promote the inclusive education process.

For students with learning differences, it is essential that educators create supportive learning environments that serve as safe spaces where students are comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas and feel welcomed and valued (Mitchell, 2014). These environments must also focus on providing educational practices of the highest quality and lead to full educational participation (Ainscow, 2015; Messiou *et al*., 2016; Baumeister, Leary, 2017;

Scorgie, Forlin, 2019). Finally, inclusive education should contribute to enhancing the student experience, satisfaction, and quality of life (Mitchell, 2014). We believe microaffirmations can help educators meet these goals both inside and outside of the classroom and will share preliminary research findings within the scholarly community in upcoming months.

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