

# **The quality of school inclusion of children with special educational needs in a multidimensional perspective: A systematic review**

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## **Abstract**

The quality of school inclusion could be considered as a crucial feature for children and adolescents, especially for those with developmental disabilities.

Starting from the QU!S-S model that focuses on the quality of school inclusion in a multidimensional perspective, this systematic review has the main aim to examine the key elements of the quality of school inclusion.

According to PRISMA guidelines, a systematic search strategy was adopted. First, 7134 records were identified through database searching; then, the title-abstract screening led to the identification of 742 potentially relevant studies and, finally, after the full-text screening, 23 studies were included.

Outcomes show some key elements of the quality of school inclusion such as the presence of effective responses to individual needs, the tendency to adapt teaching strategies to different situations, and the cooperation inside and outside the school. These key elements can have positive effects on the general quality of life of students, especially for those with developmental disabilities.

Furthermore, findings highlight that only a few studies considered the quality of school inclusion following a multidimensional approach.

This systematic review can offer readers insights into good policies and practices to adopt in the school setting to promote school inclusion, and well-being for students, especially those with developmental disabilities.

**Keywords:** quality of school inclusion; special educational needs; school, QU!S-S model.

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this contribution is to analyze research published between 2013 and 2023, focused on the quality of school inclusion, considered as a multidimensional construct. To achieve this objective, we rely on the five dimensions model proposed by the Quality Scale of Inclusive School Development-Short Form by Heimlich et al. (2018).

Several authors have highlighted how, despite the international trend towards the creation of inclusive educational settings present for many decades (Lindner & Schwab, 2020), there are still many differences between different countries and contexts in overcoming barriers that prevent effective and equitable education for all children (Ainscow, 2020). Furthermore, the very meaning of school inclusion is not univocal, and many meanings of the term are present both in the applied and theoretical fields. Consequently, as Florian pointed out in 2014 (p. 286), a clear working definition of school inclusion is needed “to capture evidence of inclusive education in action”.

A number of reviews have been published over time about specific aspects of school inclusion. They concern teachers’ attitudes (De Boer et al., 2011; Ewing et al., 2018; Perez et al., 2021; Lindner et al., 2023); role of peers (de Boer et al., 2012; Woodgate et al., 2019); interventions implemented in inclusive classrooms (Hagiwara et al., 2019); factors influencing school inclusion of specific populations as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Olsson, 2022) or autism spectrum disorders (Bayley and Baker, 2020) but all these reviews consider only one aspect of the multidimensionality of the school inclusion construct.

On the other hand, only a limited number of reviews have addressed the multidimensional nature of the process in order to analyze a broad range of indicators and outcomes of school inclusion.

In 2014, Loreman and colleagues presented a review of the international literature aimed at taking stock of current indicators of school inclusion emerging from the literature. Taking into account the macro, meso and micro levels, they analyzed several indicators pertaining to different phases of inclusion: input, that is provisions by the system to achieve an inclusive education; process, that is practices and concrete ways of working in schools and classrooms; outcome, that is achieved results at many levels (learning achievements, satisfaction ...).

Lindner and Schwab (2020), in their systematic review of papers published from 2008 to 2018 regarding teachers’ practices and their characteristics in terms of differentiation and individualization, identified five useful areas for dismantling barriers and promoting an inclusive school climate: instructional practice, organizational practice;

social/emotional/behavioral practice; collaboration and teamwork; determining students' progress.

Ainscow (2020), starting from a historical and contextual analysis of provisions, agreements, concepts, and policies that have promoted educational inclusion in the world, proposed a theoretical framework useful to promote inclusion and equity in educational contexts.

First of all, the model considers central the ability of the school system to evolve and change in order to support the participation and learning of all students. In turn, this capacity is influenced by several contextual factors: the extent to which educational policy is informed and guided by principles of inclusion and equity; the ability to collect evidence on the impact of the education system in terms of presence, participation and performance of all students, especially those at greatest risk of marginalization; the involvement of the entire community (parents, teachers and other professionals; administrators, researchers...) in promoting inclusive and equitable education; finally, the role of national and local administrators in removing barriers and promoting cultural changes towards the application of universal principles of inclusion and equity.

Although the scientific contribution of these systematic reviews is considerable and indicate that the construction of school inclusion is multidimensional, these reviews do not reveal the relationships that exist between various dimensions and do not indicate possible gaps in the literature.

The theoretical model which guided this systematic review is the QU!S-S model. The QU!S-S model originates from the Quality Scale of Inclusive School developed in Germany by Heimlich et al. (2018), then translated and adapted in English in its short form (Schurig et al., 2020), and recently published in its Italian adaptation (Zanobini et al., 2024). The scale represents a self-report tool aimed at teachers and requires them to respond keeping in mind the actual reality of their school. This involves sticking to the concrete implementation of the inclusion process in its various aspects.

Moreover, the model presents characteristics in line with the current perspective on the quality of school inclusion: it refers to a plurality of dimensions and takes into account, as advocated by Ainscow, indicators relating to individuals, schools, external services and the whole community. In this direction, it proposes an ecological model and systematically moves from the individual level, focusing on students' needs and teachers' responses, to cooperation between the actors of the process, and finally to the macro levels of school policies and the involvement of the entire community (Zanobini et al., 2024).

The first level concerns the ways in which the school takes into account the needs of all students through the instruments dedicated to planning and monitoring the educational project; the second level is centered on teaching and its adaptation to the abilities and characteristics of all students; the third concerns the crucial dimension of cooperation within the teaching team; at the fourth level we find the analysis of school policies and the participation of all school components in the process; finally, the involvement of families and a variety of stakeholders and external support services is considered.

Understanding how and if literature has saturated all levels of the QU!S-S model would not only offer practical insights to improve the quality of school inclusion, but it would also allow to understand the gaps in the literature in order to broaden knowledge about the topic.

Starting from these premises, this systematic review aims to highlight the indicators of the quality of school inclusion investigated in psychological and educational research of the last ten years, and to analyze in depth those relating to the QU!S-S model. Specifically, the paper focused on the following questions:

- RQ1 How does the school take into account the needs of all students?
- RQ2 Which are the factors that make teaching inclusive?
- RQ3 How do relationships among various school actors promote the quality of school inclusion?
- RQ4 How do school concept and life promote school inclusion?
- RQ5 How do external support and communal networking impact on the quality of school inclusion?

## **2. Method**

A systematic search strategy was used to identify relevant studies, following the PRISMA statement (Page et al., 2021). Figure 1 shows a flow diagram illustrating the search process and the identification of included studies.

### *2.1. First phase: literature search*

The literature search was conducted in May 2023, including the following databases: Scopus, PubMed, and PsycINFO.

We designed a general query to encompass all levels of the QU!S-S model, using the keywords: “School” AND (“quality of inclusion” OR

inclusion) AND (“special need\*” OR disability OR “developmental disorder”) AND (“student\*” OR teach\*).

For the first level, the query used was: “School” AND “inclusion” AND (“special need\*” OR disability OR “developmental disorder”) AND (“individual characteristic\*” OR “individual need\*”) AND “student\*”. For the second level, the query was: School AND inclusion AND (“special need\*” OR disability OR “developmental disorder”) AND “inclusive teaching” AND student\* AND teacher\*. The third level query was: school AND inclusion AND (“special need\*” OR disability OR “developmental disorder”) AND (“interdisciplinary cooperation” OR “professional team cooperation” OR teamwork) AND teacher\*. For the fourth level, we used: School AND inclusion AND (“special need\*” OR disability OR “developmental disorder”) AND (“school life” OR “school concept”). Finally, for the fifth level, the query was: “School” AND “inclusion” AND (“special need\*” OR disability OR “developmental disorder”) AND (“communal networking” OR “external support”).

This comprehensive search strategy initially yielded 7134 articles. After removing duplicates, 6434 articles remained.

## *2.2. Second phase: title-abstract screening*

In the title-abstract screening phase, the first three authors<sup>1</sup> independently and blindly reviewed all titles and abstracts. The agreement between reviewers was 98.45%.

In this phase, the selection process followed a set of inclusion criteria:

1. Studies were published in psychological and/or educational journals from January 2013 to May 2023;
2. Studies were written in English or Italian;
3. Studies were published in peer-reviewed journals, including original empirical findings;
4. Studies included a school population ranging from early childhood to the final year of high school;
5. Studies included a sample of participants greater than 10;
6. Studies were conducted in the school context.

In addition, in this phase we decided to exclude all studies that (i) were published in books or grey literature; (ii) were review articles; (iii) were conducted in special classes; (iv) focused on specific disabilities; (v) were descriptions and/or validations of specific interventions.

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<sup>1</sup> The first three authors divided the papers in a way that ensured agreement between two reviewers for each level of the QU!S-S.

Articles that did not provide sufficient information to determine inclusion were carried forward to the full-text screening phase. A total of 742 references proceeded to full-text screening.

### *2.3. Third phase: full-text screening*

In the full-text screening phase, we added the following exclusion criteria to assess the records: (i) papers that reported studies conducted using unvalidated tools, (ii) papers that didn't investigate QU!S-S variables; (iii) papers that only considered teachers' perceptions, attitudes and values.

In this phase, the percentage of agreement was 97.44%. All disagreements were resolved by discussion.

Finally, a total of 23 papers have been included in the current systematic review.

### *2.4. Coding strategies*

To analyze the results section, we employed a manual coding approach (paper-and-pencil method), focusing exclusively on the results sections of the selected articles. This process was used to draft the results section of the present systematic review and to map all included studies according to the QU!S-S model (for details, see Table 1).

*Table 1 – Study Overview*

Level 1 of QUIS-S							
Study: 1 <sup>st</sup> author	Country	Special schools in the country	Age / grade	Sample	Measures	Data analysis	Main findings
Rakap, S. (2019)	Turkey	Yes	Primary	206 IEPs (from 60 inclusive elementary schools across 26 cities; referring to students with disabilities, mainly intellectual disabilities and autism; age, gender, SES and immigrant background not reported)	IEP Component Checklist (IEPCC)	Descriptive statistics, percentages	Results outlined that the reviewed IEPs on average included only one-third of the legal requirements, and the components recommended by the literature were rarely included.
Shapiro, A. (2023)	USA	Yes	Kindergarten, Primary, Lower secondary	1,285,165 (students from 10 cohorts followed longitudinally; includes demographic variables such as gender, race/ethnicity and SES; specific distributions not reported)	Data from the Michigan Education Data Center (MEDC) – Michigan Department of Education (MDE).	Regression discontinuity design	Children who enter kindergarten at 4 years of age are more likely to be enrolled in special education than their 5 years old classmate and this effect is consistent through time (5th and 8th grade).
Yngve, M (2019)	Sweden	Yes	Upper secondary	484 (students with SEN; mean age = 17.3; includes neuropsychiatric and learning difficulties; ~50% without diagnosis; gender, SES and immigrant background not reported)	School Setting Interview (SSI)	Logistic regression analysis	The results outline that students studying in a vocational programme or with a neuropsychiatric disorder and a high level of school absence present a high level of accommodation needs. The data outline roughly 50% of the students perceive that they have not received support in school activities related to academic performance, such as “remembering things,” “writing,” and “doing homework”.

Ge, Z. (2019)	China	Yes	Lower secondary	8252 (students with and without disabilities; longitudinal sample; type and severity of disability, gender, SES and immigrant background not reported)	Cognitive ability: standardized test (Hao & Yu, 2017). Short version of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression (CES-D) (Radloff, 1977).	regression estimates	The results outline those children with disabilities had lower scores in all the measures in both T1 and T2. Nevertheless, the cognitive gain was similar between children with and without disabilities. Furthermore, both categories had a decline in school attachment and emotional well-being, but the decline was more prominent in children without disabilities.
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Level two of QUIS-S

Study: 1 <sup>st</sup> author	Country	Special schools in the country	Age / grade	Sample	Measures	Data analysis	Main findings
Coelho, V. (2019)	Portugal	No	Kindergarten	184 (preschool children; 45 with disabilities, 59 at risk, 80 typically developing; age range, gender, SES and immigrant background not reported)	Child Observation in Preschool (COP; Farran & Anthony, 2014) Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; Pianta et al., 2008)	Pearson's correlation Multilevel regressions	Children with disabilities are less engaged in classroom activities compared to peers without disability. Whole group activities have a detrimental effect on children with disabilities engagement level but, on the other hand, free play had greater positive effects on child engagement.
Cameron, D., L., (2014)	USA	Yes	Kindergarten, Primary, Lower secondary	17 classrooms; 7 teachers (students in 9 schools; includes mild and severe disabilities; student-level age, gender, SES not reported)	Inclusive Classroom Observation System (ICOS; see Cameron et al., 2012)	Quantitative descriptive analysis of the number of interaction (percentages)	Results outline a traditional organisation of the classroom, with general educators rarely involved in interaction with whole class and special education teachers and

Feldman, R., (2016)	USA	Yes	Upper secondary	108 (students with severe disabilities; ASD and intellectual disability; 63.9% male; majority European American; ~30% low SES; age range not reported)	MOOSSES (Multi-Option Observation System for Experimental Studies; Tapp, 2012)	Semistructured interview	Qualitative analysis of interview content	paraprofessionals dedicated to 1:1 interaction with children with disability. In the interview, teachers report struggling to find a balance between the needs of the whole class and those of students with disabilities.
Jackson, L., (2022)	USA	Yes	Kindergarten, Primary, Lower and Upper secondary	117 (students across school types; demographic variables collected at multiple levels; specific distributions not reported)	Student Demographic Survey Classroom Demographic Survey District Demographic Survey	Comparison of the demographic data between inclusive school, partially inclusive school, and special education school	Special education of partially inclusive schools may provide less opportunities and resources for students' learning and development	
Vlachou, A. (2016)	Greece	No	Kindergarten	52 classes (preschool settings; children aged approx. 4-6; individual-level gender, SES and immigrant background not reported)	Inclusive Classroom Profile (Fyssa & Vlachou, 2012) School system information and teacher's demographics survey	ANOVA Spearman's Rho	The quality of inclusive teaching practice ranged from 'low' to 'minimal'; furthermore, data did not outline any significant relation between kindergarten inclusion quality and demographics	

Level three of QUIS-S

Study: 1 <sup>st</sup> author	Country	Special schools in the country	Age / grade	Sample	Measures	Data analysis	Main findings
Schwab (2015)	Austria	Yes	Primary and Lower secondary	340 (teachers: 188 female, 33 male; in-service; student-level characteristics not reported)	Teamwork (Holzinger, 2011); Holzinger et al. (2011) positive, respectful school climate; democratic leadership style of the school, general structure at school level; heterogeneity of class performance; reduction of administrative work	Univariate and multivariate analysis. ANOVA and correlations	Differences emerged in educational practices between secondary and primary schools. Specialized teachers, especially in secondary schools, showed higher ratings in strategies such as paired work and weekly organization. Both groups emphasized the importance of a positive school environment, democratic leadership, and teamwork, while differences in student performance were less significant but still noteworthy. Secondary schools obtained lower scores in teamwork.
Gibson (2016)	Australia	Yes	Upper secondary	65 (49 teachers, 10 teacher aides, 6 dual-role; staff supporting students with disabilities; age, gender and SES not reported)	Questionnaire about inclusion, curriculum, classroom management, and student support (Connell, 2007).	ANOVA	There were no significant differences in including assistants in the school community, but disparities arose in involvement in extracurricular activities. Teachers and assistants agreed on many curriculum aspects, while the mixed group involved assistants more in defining curriculum goals. Classroom management perceptions were similar across

Stefanidis (2018)	New York (USA)	Yes	Kindergarten, Primary, Lower secondary and upper secondary	147 (co-teachers; includes general and special education teachers; age and experience considered; student-level characteristics not reported)	Co-teacher Questionnaire (CTQ) developed by King-Sears et al. (2014) and demographic characteristics	Descriptive statistics and hierarchical regression analysis	They found positive correlations between perceived co-teaching benefits, effective co-planning, parity among co-teachers, and relationship quality. However, there was an unexpected negative correlation between co-teaching benefits and co-teachers' age. Hierarchical regression showed co-teachers' age, co-planning, and relationship quality accounted for variance in perceived benefits. Younger co-teachers perceived greater advantages. While supporting some hypotheses, the role of co-teachers' age in perceptions of co-teaching benefits remained less clear.
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groups. Teachers voiced concerns about student dependence on assistants, emphasizing the need for negotiated standards and proactive support. Different perspectives on assistant involvement in the curriculum were evident, but there was broader agreement on classroom management. All groups acknowledged the importance of assistants supporting not just their assigned students but also others in need.

Level four of QUIS-S

Study: 1 <sup>st</sup> author	Country	Special schools in the country	Age / grade	Sample	Measures	Data analysis	Main findings
Blatchford (2018)	UK	Yes	Primary and lower secondary	97 (48 SEN aged 9-10; 49 SEN aged 13-14; comparison groups included; gender, SES not reported)	Observation with rationale	Two separate observers and reorganization of material into categories	It emerged that students with SEN in smaller classes tend to have less academic performance. There are no differences in interactions with teachers at age 9, but at age 14 SEN students have more interactions with the teacher and less with peers, than peers without SEN.
Yang (2022)	China	Yes	Lower secondary and Upper secondary	118 (students with SEN; age 11-20, M = 14.98; 77 male, 34 female; SES via government assistance; includes dyslexia, ADHD, multiple needs)	Peer support (Zimet et al., 1988) School Support (Bear et al., 2011) Self-Determination (Walman et al., 1994) School engagement scale (Fredricks et al., 2005)	Path Analysis	It finds a positive link between school support and personal determination, which in turn influences school engagement for SEN. However, peer support doesn't seem to significantly affect students with SEN. Assessments of different nurseries highlight that while the interiors are suitable for activities, dated buildings, inappropriate furniture, and lack of specialized equipment like ramps hinder educational inclusion. Statistical analysis shows that group size and structural conditions significantly affect the quality of education in these nurseries.

Sannen (2021)	Belgium	Yes	Primary	441 (teachers; 90% female; age 21-60; SES considered at school level; student-level characteristics not reported)	Teacher collaboration (Sannen et al., 2019); support network (Borgatti et al., 2013); School external support (Leonardi & Contractor, 2018).	Multi-level analysis	Individual-level factors had the most impact on diversity beliefs, but school context was significant. A denser support network at school positively correlated with diversity beliefs, while larger schools showed less positive attitudes toward diversity. Dense school networks were associated with more differentiated instruction, while centralized support networks linked to less differentiation. Gender, support extent, and school location also influenced differentiated instruction. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective, diversity-sensitive educational strategies within schools.
Trifonova (2023)	Bulgaria	Yes	Kindergarten	40 kindergartens (preschool settings; child-level demographics not reported)	ECERS-3 (Harms et al., 2014)	Descriptive statistics, Observation with open coding process	The school context had an influence on the level of education achieved by children.

Level 5 of QUIS-S

Study: 1 <sup>st</sup> author	Country	Special schools in the country	Age / grade	Sample	Measures	Data analysis	Main findings
Coster (2013)	USA	Yes	Kindergarten, Primary, Lower secondary and upper secondary	576 caregivers (parents of children aged 5-17 with and without disabilities; detailed SES and demographics not fully reported)	PEM-CY (Bedell et al. 2011; Coster et al. 2011)	T-test and Chi-square	Students with disabilities participated less in school life and this, at times, was due to the barriers of the environment.
Zanobini (2018)	Italy	No	Kindergarten, Primary and Lower secondary	285 parents; 581 students (children with disabilities; type and severity considered; SES and immigrant background not reported)	Inclusion INDEX (Di Nuovo, 2012) Emotions/Regulation subscale (Roid and Miller, 1997) Severity and type of disability		There is no specific influence of the type of disability on parental satisfaction, but the severity of the disability affects parents' perception of acceptance and support from classmates and their families. Parental satisfaction is linked to maintaining learning outcomes, and a reduced perception of the gap between the performance of the disabled child and their peers leads to greater parental satisfaction, especially concerning the integration of educational and rehabilitative activities. Parental satisfaction seems to depend more on the emotional outcomes than the cognitive outcomes of children with disabilities, suggesting a more significant role of emotional perception in parental satisfaction than academic aspects or autonomy.

Scientific articles that consider multiple levels of QUIS-S

Levels two and four

Study: 1 <sup>st</sup> author	Country	Special schools in the country	Age / grade	Sample	Measures	Data analysis	Main findings
Wang (2021)	China	Yes	Primary	1676 teachers (85.4% female; primary and junior high; teaching experience reported; student-level characteristics not reported)	The multidimensional School Inclusion Climate Scale (Schaefer, 2010)	Correlation, SEM (Structural equation modelling)	The support of the principal has had a significant effect on the professional skills of teachers; the role of mediation at school level of inclusive practices and teachers on the relationship between the main support and that of professional skills teachers has also been significant. These findings suggest the direct and indirect roles of the principal in promoting inclusive professional skills of teachers. The results also highlight the significant effects of the school environment on inclusive education.

Levels two and five

Study: 1 <sup>st</sup> author	Country	Special schools in the country	Age / grade	Sample	Measures	Data analysis	Main findings
Sucuoğlu (2017)	Turkey	Yes	Kindergarten	147 teachers (preschool teachers working with children with developmental	Teacher Strategies Questionnaire	Descriptive statistics and Correlation.	The study evaluated the classroom management strategies of preschool teachers using the TSQ-T, confirming

disabilities; teacher demographics not reported)	(TSQ; Webster-Stratton et al., 2001)	its validity. Turkish teachers use positive strategies similar to their American and Irish counterparts, but also some negative strategies. The results show that teachers have high confidence in managing behavioral problems and that neither age nor experience influences their strategies. Pre-service courses in special education and inclusion did not significantly improve management strategies. Teachers need more support to use effective proactive strategies in inclusive classrooms. Classroom management courses should include practical examples and proactive strategies, not just theories.
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Level three and five

Study: 1 <sup>st</sup> author	Country	Special schools in the country	Age / grade	Sample	Measures	Data analysis	Main findings
Ladenstein (2022)	Bulgaria, Austria, Portugal, Slovakia	Yes; Portugal No.	Primary and lower secondary	70 (teachers, assistants and parents; multi-country sample; qualitative subsample n = 9; age, gender, SES not reported)	Collaboration between assistants and teachers' (Kaufeld, 2004); Questionnaire on Teamwork' (Kaufeld 2004);	Descriptive statistics and Spearman correlations, for qualitative data Kuckartz's qualitative	They found frequent interaction between assistants and teachers but no significant correlation between interaction frequency and perceived collaboration quality. Challenges included time constraints, role uncertainty,

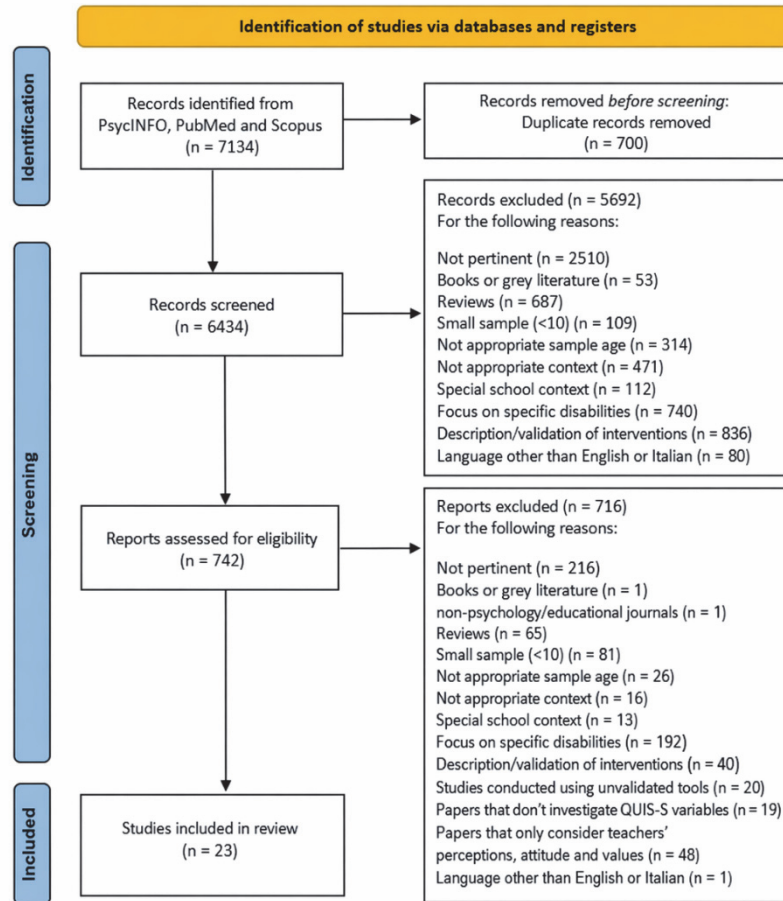
							focus group with explicit rational	content analysis	and difficulties establishing professional relationships with parents. Implementing informative tools showed slight positive changes in collaboration perception but not linked to initial collaboration quality. Clarity on roles and targeted training for inclusive skills are vital for improving collaboration. Both teachers and assistants stress the importance of clear roles and training. Raising teachers' awareness during training and professional development is crucial for optimizing collaboration and providing effective student support.
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Levels four and five

Study: 1st author	Country	Special schools in the country	Age / grade	Sample	Measures	Data analysis	Main findings
McCoy (2019)	Ireland	Yes	Primary and lower secondary	7423 (students and families; includes age, gender, SES and family variables; multiple SEN categories)	Descriptive Informations; Family information; Family dynamics (Laible and Thompson 2000); child-reported Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale	Descriptive statistics and multivariate logistic regression model.	This paper emphasizes the value of helping students continue their secondary education into their second year, encouraging good teacher-student interactions, and offering extra assistance to children who performed less well in elementary school. For students with impairments, the

							(Piers, Harris, and Herzberg 2002); Transition Difficulties Scale (Smyth, 2016); Child engagement in school (McCoy and Banks, 2012); Interaction with teachers (Hannan et al., 1996)	research underscores a need for more effective transition supports, particularly during the pre-transition period.
Levels one, two, three and four								
Study: 1st author	Country	Special schools in the country	Age / grade	Sample	Measures	Data analysis	Main findings	
Žic Ralić (2020)	Croatia and Poland	Yes	Lower secondary	312 teachers (173 Poland, 139 Croatia; variation in experience; student-level characteristics not reported)	The Scale on Quality Indicators for Inclusion – for Teachers (Ivančić, 2012)	Descriptive statistics ANOVA	Teachers generally provided favourable evaluations of the quality of inclusion. The subscale Support monitoring and assessment received the highest scores from respondents from both nations, whereas the subscales Resources for inclusive education by the Croatian sample and Teaching assistant support by Polish participants received the lowest ratings. With the exception of teaching assistant support, Polish teachers rated higher than Croatian instructors on every subscale.	

Figure 1 - PRISMA 2020 flow diagram



### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Level 1: individual needs

This level includes articles addressing the following research questions:

1. Are specific special educational needs (SEN) included in individual support?
2. Have all students with special educational needs a diagnostic report as a basis for individual support?
3. Have students with special educational needs individualised education programmes (IEPs)?
4. Are the initial level and learning progress of all students regularly reviewed?
5. Can all students take advantage of individual support, if necessary?

Level 1 of the QU!S-S model focuses on the detection of students' individual needs. A total of four articles were included in this level.

The main goal of Ge and Zhang's (2019) study was to define the school outcomes of children with and without disabilities. The results outlined the importance of measuring not only the cognitive gains but also emotional and motivational variables as they represent important elements of children's school well-being and the quality of life. Nevertheless, some methodological issues can be pointed out: school attachment and well-being are very complex constructs that stem from multidimensional models (Dias et al., 2020); the measures chosen by the authors do not seem to fully explore the many dimensions of the variables taken into account.

Rakap and colleagues (2019) focused on a tool called the IEP Component Checklist (IEPCC) used to evaluate Individualized Education Program (IEP) quality. The IEP (Individualized Education Program) is a school document developed jointly by teachers, professionals and families which outlines learning goals, plans interventions, and assesses students' progress. Results outlined that the reviewed IEPs, on average, included only one-third of the legal requirements, and the components recommended by the literature were rarely included

The goal of Shapiro's (2023) study was to analyse the effect of being young for grade on receiving special education services in pre-school. The main finding of this study was that the youngest children in a class were more likely to be enrolled in special education. This effect was consistent through time; furthermore, the age effect was more concentrated in kindergarten classrooms with a wide age range. The study suggested that age is a demographic variable that can heavily influence the decision to provide special individual support.

Yngve and colleagues' study (2019) was part of a larger research project aimed at implementing assistive technology in the school environment. The specific goals of the study were to identify variables linked to a high level of need for support in school activities among students with SEN and verify whether the school system has managed to meet these needs or not. The data outlined roughly 50% of the students perceived that they did not receive support in school activities related to academic performance, such as remembering things, writing, and doing homework.

### 3.2 Level 2: *Inclusive teaching*

This level includes articles addressing the following research questions:

1. Does inclusive teaching take into account the individual learning styles of all students?
2. Does instruction take appropriate account of the different learning requirements and ability levels of all students?
3. Are lessons clear and comprehensible for all students?
4. Does inclusive teaching offer all students a well-organised learning and development space?
5. Does inclusive teaching endeavour to create a climate conducive to learning for all?

This level assesses the practices that teachers address to the whole class to meet all students' needs. Five articles have been selected for level 2.

Jackson and colleagues (2022) analysed a broad range of contextual variables to identify strengths and weaknesses of different categories of school placements for students with SEN, ranging from a completely inclusive environment to a special setting placement. The findings suggested that more inclusive placements provided more access to peer interaction, academic content, learning materials, collaborative teaching, and student-centred instruction than restrictive placements. Overall, the authors argued that restrictive environments compromised students' learning opportunities. Nevertheless, the study also pointed out areas of weakness in the less restrictive placements: teachers' training may be insufficient to manage children's complex special needs.

Feldman and colleagues (2016) analysed the interaction of students with and without disabilities to evaluate the social integration of students with SEN in the classroom. Feldman's study outlined that mere enrolment in a general education classroom was not sufficient to ensure social inclusion in the group of peers. Further arrangements must be deployed to foster peer interactions, peer learning and actual inclusive teaching.

Cameron (2014) carried out an observational study aimed at examining the interactions between school professionals and students in relation to students' level of ability and activity arrangements. This research underlined the relationship between a traditional school context, in which the teacher deals with the entire class group, while the support teacher has a 1:1 relationship with children with SEN, and a traditional problem, represented by the sense of fatigue of teachers in the management of the trade-off between the individual needs of the students and the progress of the class.

Coelho and colleagues' (2019) analysed the interaction between preschool process quality, activity setting in terms of children's listening and verbal behaviours, schedule, proximity to and interaction state, activity and tasks demands, materials and focus of activities, and level of involvement and setting and the engagement of children with different levels of abilities (children eligible for special education services, at-risk children, typically developing). Results outlined the complex relations between teacher support, class settings and activities and children's level of ability. The study suggested that an engaging, inclusive classroom stems from a delicate balance between the previous factors.

Vlachou and Fyssa's (2016) study analysed the relation between observed inclusive practice and structural elements of Greek preschool programmes (i.e. group size, number of children with disabilities and model of special educational provision) and teachers' demographic characteristics of both

regular and special education teachers (i.e. years of teaching experience and professional training in special education). The observational findings highlighted a low quality of inclusive teaching practice, frequently implementing practices that only partially promoted participation for children with disabilities in academic and social classroom activities.

### *3.3 Level 3: collaboration among teachers*

This level includes articles addressing the following research questions:

1. Are lessons taught as a team?
2. Are lessons planned and conducted together?
3. Are teaching and educational activities subject to shared reflection?
4. Is pedagogical work organized to be learned as rapidly and effectively as possible?
5. Does cooperation extend beyond the boundaries of the classroom?

Level 3 focuses on collaboration among teachers; three articles were included in this level.

Schwab and colleagues (2015) reported a detailed analysis of educational practices in primary and secondary schools and general and support teachers' experiences. Specifically, support teachers showed higher ratings in strategies such as paired work and weekly organization, especially in secondary schools. Both groups of teachers emphasized the importance of a positive school environment, democratic leadership, and teamwork.

Furthermore, results highlighted that school level significantly influenced teamwork, with lower scores in secondary schools.

Stefanidis and colleagues (2018) followed Bandura's social learning theory to explore the contextual factors that impact the perceived benefits of co-teaching. Perceived benefits of co-teaching showed a positive correlation with co-planning effectiveness, parity among co-teachers, and the quality of the co-teachers' relationship. However, a negative correlation between co-teaching benefits and co-teachers' age was noted.

Gibson and colleagues (2016) investigated the role of teachers' aides (TAs) in schools. Three groups were involved in the study: TAs, teachers and T/TAs (participants worked as both teacher and TA)

Four main themes were investigated: inclusion in the school community, curriculum, classroom management, and student support.

Findings highlighted that the three groups agreed on the role of the TA about inclusion, classroom management, and student support. On the other hand, the T/TA team appeared to be less involved in curriculum development, often lacking access to the programs on which students' curricula were based.

### 3.4 Level 4 School setting and life

This level encompassed articles that addressed the following research questions:

1. Do the fundamental principles of the school create opportunities for reflecting on the possibilities of an inclusive school?
2. Is school management actively involved in developing inclusive school policies?
3. Is it clear that all students can fully participate in all extracurricular activities?
4. Has the school anchored the principal of inclusion in its school concept?
5. Is the theme of inclusion supported by the faculty?

Level 4 focuses on school setting and life. Four articles about this topic were identified.

Blatchford and Webster's (2018) reported a systematic observation study that involved a sample of children with SEND at Year 5 (9-10 years) and a sample of children with SEND at Year 9 (13-14 years) compared to two samples of children with typical development. Findings revealed disparities in the inclusion of students with SEND, often placed in groups with lower academic performance than their peers. Concerning class composition, at Year 5 students with SEND tended to be placed in larger classes, instead at Year 9 students with SEND were placed in smaller classes. Furthermore, an investigation into the impact of class sizes on the performance of students with SEND highlighted a marked decrease in performance when placed in smaller classes with low-achieving classmates. Regarding interactions with teachers, at Year 5, no significant differences emerged between students with and without SEND, but at Year 9, an increase in interactions with teachers and a decrease in interactions with peers for students with SEND were evident.

Yang et al. (2022) aimed at examining the influence of school support (reflecting the values, climate, and interpersonal relationships of the school) and peer support on the determination and school engagement of students with SEN. Findings highlighted a positive correlation between school support and personal determination, which is in turn linked to school engagement. In this context, personal determination acted as a mediator between school support and student engagement. However, peer support did not emerge as a significant predictor for students with SEN. Concerning the environment, most of nurseries reported a lack of specialized equipment, suggesting a suboptimal environment for educational inclusion. In particular, the lack of private spaces affected children's ability to take breaks during group activities.

Sannen and colleagues (2021) focused on the relationship between teacher collaboration, teachers' beliefs about school inclusion, and differentiated instruction.

Findings highlighted that high density school network opposed to a centralized one was associated with more differentiated instruction.

Trifonova and colleagues (2023) focused on the structural and process characteristics of the education quality in kindergarten. Findings revealed high scores related to the care practices and the positive social interactions. On the other hand, lowest scores about the common instructional approach were reported due to the lack of adequate learning opportunities tailored to the children's individual needs. Furthermore, in terms of practical implications, this study highlighted that more flexibility in instruction, incorporating free-choice activities and play in small groups, is needed to enhance the quality of early childhood education.

### *3.5 Level 5 Relations with the territory*

- Within this level, there are articles addressing the following research questions:
1. Does the school collaborate with all stakeholders involved in the pedagogical process to provide each student with the best possible learning conditions?
  2. Is the school committed to developing a network to offer all students the best possible conditions for living and developing within the community?
  3. Is collaboration with parents considered a prerequisite for continuous progress in inclusive schooling?
  4. Are local institutions involved in the development of inclusive schooling?
  5. Can the school receive professional advice and support?

Level 5 focuses on the interactions between the school actors and the territory. Two papers have been identified for this level.

Coster and colleagues (2013) investigated whether features of the school environment were perceived to help students with and without disabilities (5-17 years old). Findings revealed that younger students with disabilities are less involved in school activities and in social extracurricular interactions, compared to their peers without disabilities. Parents of these students also reported lower levels of involvement and expressed a greater desire for change in their children's participation. This pattern was also replicated among older students with disabilities, who showed lower involvement in extracurricular activities.

Zanobini and colleagues (2018) examined the satisfaction of parents of children with disabilities and its correlations with various factors, using indices, questionnaires and demographic data: Inclusion INDEX (Di Nuovo, 2012), Emotions/Regulation subscale (Roid & Miller, 1997) and Severity and type of disability. Findings highlighted that the severity of the disability influenced parents' perceptions of acceptance and support from classmates and their families.

Parental satisfaction was partially linked to the maintenance of learning outcomes but it did not show significant associations with their improvement or generalization. Furthermore, the autonomy assessed by support teachers did not correlate with parental satisfaction, except for autonomy in interpersonal relationships, associated with satisfaction regarding acceptance by classmates and their families. Moreover, a more significant role of emotional perception in parental satisfaction than in academic aspects or autonomy was found.

### *3.6 Multiple levels of the QU!S-S model*

In this systematic review, we found only a few studies that have simultaneously met the criteria of multiple levels of the QU!S-S model, following a multidimensional perspective. We reported below the selected studies.

Wang and Zhang's (2021) study was selected for level 2 and 4. This study considered the role of principal support in inclusive teacher education. They found that principal support was positively correlated with inclusive practices, teacher agency, and teachers' professional skills. Furthermore, principal support and teacher agency had a crucial role in the development of teachers' professional skills.

Sucuoğlu et al.'s (2017) study was selected for levels 2 and 5. This study examined the use of strategies by teachers in kindergarten. They reported a high confidence among teachers in managing problematic behaviours, as well as similar frequency and utility in positive strategies. Furthermore, inclusive teachers with children with disabilities in their classes perceived negative strategies as less useful compared to their colleagues' teaching classes without children with disabilities. Findings highlighted common strategies like praising positive behaviours and using group incentives. However, differences were observed in the less frequently used strategies and in how teachers perceived their utility, depending on whether they had children with disabilities in their classes. Moreover, findings highlighted that the teachers who had previous knowledge on inclusion due to specific training used more positive approaches to the parents compared to teachers without a specific knowledge about this topic.

Ladenstein and colleagues' (2022) study was selected for levels 3 and 5. The research focused on the collaboration between learning assistants, teachers, and parents. Interviews highlighted uncertainty regarding assistants' responsibilities, generating difficulties for both teachers and the assistants themselves. In the assistant-teacher relationship, a high frequency of interaction emerged. Interviews highlighted uncertainty regarding

assistants' responsibilities, mainly due to issues raised by parents, generating difficulties for both teachers and the assistants themselves.

McCoy and colleagues' (2019) study was selected for levels 4 and 5. This study examined how the family context and teacher relationships may play a role in the school transition through the use of questionnaires and household demographic information. Girls, students with lower academic performance, and those from vulnerable family backgrounds tended to have negative transition experiences. Family conflict and positive teacher relationships influenced the transition experience. While academic performance aided in predicting challenges in adapting to secondary school, factors such as family situation and social dynamics played a significant role in the transition journey of students with disabilities.

Žic Ralić et al. (2020) study was selected for levels 1-2-3-4. This study focused on evaluating the quality of inclusion in schools by Polish and Croatian teachers. Both groups of teachers gave positive feedback on the support provided for monitoring and assessment, noting their appreciation for how student knowledge is evaluated during lessons and the assistance offered during tests. They especially valued the collaboration with parents in monitoring student progress and highlighted the level of counselling offered to both students and parents regarding future education. However, there are some differences regarding resources for inclusive education and support from educational assistants. Croatian teachers rated lower in high-quality school equipment, the number of school professionals, and collaboration with parents compared to their Polish counterparts. Similarly, Polish teachers expressed lower ratings for educational assistants' support compared to Croatian teachers.

#### **4. Discussion**

The main aim of this systematic review was to analyze recent research concerning the quality of school inclusion, considering all pupils, especially those with disabilities, from a multidimensional perspective. To accomplish this aim, we conducted a systematic review starting from the QU!S-S model.

The choice of this model allowed us to take into consideration articles centered on concrete quality indicators, potentially capable of describing what really happens in relation to the individual actors involved in the process, the school environment, external services and the entire community, also taking into account, whenever available, key descriptive characteristics of participants reported in the studies (e.g., age/grade, gender, socioeconomic

status, immigrant background, and type of disability), which were systematically extracted and included in Table 1.

In fact, studies that analyzed the presence of effective responses to individual needs, the tendency to adapt teaching strategies to different situations, cooperation inside and outside the school, and the consistent presence of inclusive policies, although these characteristics were not consistently reported across all studies, can shed light on the effective implementation of principles already present in international declarations and underlying the achievement of a satisfactory quality of life even for the most vulnerable students.

#### *4.1 How does the school take into account the needs of all students?*

We tried to respond to this question by analyzing a series of papers consistently with the first level of the QU!S-S model that focuses on individual needs.

Some studies emphasized that, in the school context, children's cognitive abilities were more frequently explored and evaluated than complex constructs such as school attachment and well-being, which arise from multidimensional models (e.g., Dias et al., 2020). However, it is essential to measure children's cognitive abilities alongside their emotional, motivational, and relational components, as these elements are crucial for assessing school well-being and QoL (Ge & Zhang, 2019).

This means that schools, in order to implement inclusive practices that can support students' well-being, should consider students' changes in a longitudinal perspective, not only in terms of learning progress but also by monitoring with specific tools changes in the emotional, motivational and relational domains. In this way, schools can monitor changes related to the whole functioning profile of the students (e.g., WHO, 2007).

To do this, it's fundamental using school documentation appropriately, especially for children with SEN, referring to the individualised education programmes (IEPs); therefore, the employment of an IEP evaluation tool with the aim at investigating IEPs quality, such as the IEPCC (Rakap et al., 2019), could be considered a valuable practice.

Moreover, a proper analysis of students' needs is an essential factor for their school well-being. To address this problem, the literature highlighted the importance of employing appropriate tools aimed at detecting students' needs. Yngve and colleagues (2019), highlighted the importance of taking into account also the students' perception; this is in line with the literature that suggests to consider the combination of different points of view in the school community, thus mitigating individual bias, also considering that students' and teachers'

perceptions can focus on different aspects (Panesi et al., 2020). These good practices of evaluation could represent a key element for monitoring students' wellbeing. In this perspective, it is also important to consider that the studies included in this level referred to highly diverse populations, ranging from primary school children to upper secondary students, and including different profiles of special educational needs (e.g., intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum conditions, neurodevelopmental disorders). However, these characteristics were not always systematically reported, limiting the possibility of understanding how individual differences may interact with the quality of inclusive practices.

#### *4.2 Which are the factors that make teaching inclusive?*

We tried to respond to this question by analyzing a series of papers consistently with the second level of the QU!S-S model that focuses on inclusive teaching.

Overall, the literature in this field highlighted that the presence of students with SEN in a general education classroom is a necessary but not sufficient condition to benefit from inclusive teaching (Feldman et al., 2016).

Good practices highlighted by literature to make teaching inclusive are reported below.

Concerning the class setting, students with SEN in the classroom space should be taken into consideration to ensure an inclusive environment. Specifically, Jackson and colleagues (2022) highlighted that less restrictive placements provide more access to peer interaction, academic content, learning materials, collaborative teaching, and student-centred instruction than restrictive placements.

Considering the relationships between general and support teachers, Cameron (2014) argued that they should work in synergy to address the needs of the whole group of students, including students with SEN.

Referring to the class activities, teachers should choose carefully class activities and arrangements in order to foster all children's engagement and participation (Vlachou & Fyssa, 2016).

Coelho and colleagues (2019) highlighted that an engaging inclusive classroom emerges from a delicate balance among different complex factors, such as teacher support, class settings, activities and children's level of ability.

##### *4.3.1 How do relationships among various school actors promote the quality of school inclusion?*

This systematic review also reported the key elements to make collaborative and inclusive practices among teachers.

For example, Stefanidis and colleagues (2018) highlighted the importance of co-teaching practices that are linked to co-planning effectiveness, parity among co-teachers, and the quality of the co-teachers' relationship.

This systematic review also highlighted differences among compulsory education levels concerning the collaborative practices (i.e., planning and teaching reflection) among teachers that impact on students' inclusion. Specifically, Schwab and colleagues (2015) found that school level significantly impacts on teamwork, with lower scores in secondary schools.

#### *4.3.2 How do school concept and life promote school inclusion?*

The literature in this field emphasized some inclusive policies that the schools could take into account to support well-being of all students, especially those with special needs.

Concerning the class environment, students with special needs should not be placed in smaller classes with low-achieving classmates (Blatchford & Webster, 2018). In fact, Blatchford and Webster (2018) found that students with special needs are often placed in lower-performing groups and this condition negatively affects their academic outcomes.

About the school network, Yang and colleagues (2022) highlighted the importance of school support in fostering engagement for students with special needs. Always referring to the school network, Sannen and colleagues (2021) revealed that robust support networks at the school level could enhance teachers' attitudes toward diversity and differentiated instruction, and this aspect could have a good influence on inclusion of students with special needs.

In terms of good practices, Trifonova and colleagues (2023) argued that in kindergartens a more flexible instruction is required, with free-choice activities and play in small groups.

#### *4.3.3 How do external support and communal networking impact on the quality of school inclusion?*

To answer this question, consideration has been given to the literature that referred to the relationships between school community and external actors, especially focused on relationships with parents of children with special needs.

In examining the relationships between the school community and families of children with special needs, Coster et al. (2013) and Zanobini et al. (2018) provided insights into the challenges faced by students with

disabilities and their families. They emphasized the ongoing barriers to school participation and social interactions for these students, which were worsened by perceived shortages of resources. They also highlighted that parental satisfaction, emotional outcomes and the perceived inclusion of educational and rehabilitative efforts are associated, rather than purely academic achievements or autonomy assessments.

These findings emphasized the ongoing need to have a support network that implements inclusive practices, creating a “bridge” between the school context and extra-curricular activities, also involving families, in order to promote the full inclusion of students with special needs.

#### *4.4 Some limitations and further research*

The conclusions of this systematic review should be considered together with its limitations. Firstly, although we have excluded all studies conducted in special education classes, there are still special schools in some countries where the samples come from. Specifically, this could be seen as a crucial aspect in light of the different laws and regulations on the subject of inclusion in different countries, which could significantly influence teachers’ perceptions about the quality of school inclusion. A further limitation concerns the descriptive features of the samples included in the reviewed studies. Although additional information on participants (e.g., age/grade, gender, socioeconomic status, immigrant background, and type of disability) was included in Table 1 whenever available, many studies did not provide a complete or systematic description of these variables. This limits the possibility of comparing findings across studies and of identifying how inclusive practices may differentially affect students with different profiles. Future research should therefore ensure a more detailed and consistent reporting of participant characteristics.

## **5. Conclusion**

This systematic review of recent psychological literature on the quality of school inclusion has shed light on the fundamental aspects, inside and outside of school, to promote the quality of school inclusion of students with special needs. Thanks to this, it is possible to indicate some promising directions for improving the inclusive characteristics of school environments.

First of all, the importance of focusing attention on all facets of students’ needs emerged: careful monitoring of the educational, emotional and relational objectives present in the IEP is a necessary condition to respond to these needs and enhance students’ inclusion.

As expected, the role of the teacher emerged as crucial not only in implementing instructional strategies to adapt academic content to all students, but also in organizing the school environment to make instructional materials accessible and encourage peer interaction. However, teachers alone cannot ensure the full achievement of quality standards: to implement teachers' action, support is needed in terms of professional training, availability of resources and school policies.

In this direction, the analysed literature highlights the importance of co-teaching: an equal collaboration between teachers with different roles favours the possibility of implementing diversified strategies, enhancing both learning and the sense of belonging to the school community.

This review also highlights gaps in the literature that should be filled to implement good practices to make schools more inclusive. Indeed, it is possible to see that the scientific literature does not fully answer all questions at every level of QU!S-S. This means that there are indicators of school inclusion which have not been considered in the scientific literature. The level of QU!S-S that has been less analysed is the impact of the external community on the quality of school inclusion. The lack of a macro-level of analysis suggests that the way to involve the whole community in promoting inclusive and equitable education is still largely open.

Finally, despite the multidimensional construction of school inclusion, research often does not provide data on the interaction of the various levels.

### *Practical implications*

This systematic review suggests some practical implications that should be considered in order to create increasingly inclusive school environments.

Firstly, it is desirable that the school documents give clear and precise indications of the individual path of the students. It also emerged that cooperation between teachers is a key to ensuring an inclusive environment, especially cooperation between discipline and support teachers. Another important issue concerns the school environment, which must promote inclusiveness by ensuring the right spaces and adequate equipment.

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