

Special Education for inclusion in Europe: Critical issues and comparative perspectives for teachers' education between Italy and Portugal

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Abstract

The contribution of Special Education in the context of teacher education is becoming increasingly essential, especially if we take into account the epistemological wealth deriving from the relationship with numerous related sciences. This contribution aims at comparing the training axes of Italy and Portugal in order to detect common features and future research tracks in a comparative perspective and with an open look at complexity. In particular, the aim is to investigate whether (and how) the inclusive educational dimension of teachers is organized and designed to meet the needs of all pupils, also with reference to the programmatic actions promoted by the 2030 Agenda (ONU, 2015) which sees in the educational axis a real catalyst of development capable of breaking down inequalities and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. Without forgetting, then, that the teaching profession needs, today more than ever, a sharing, open on an international level, regarding the professional profile traceable in the main and priority competences to be possessed in the increasingly globalized knowledge society.

Keywords: Teacher education; Inclusion; Special Education, Educational Policies.

Introduction

The epistemological framework of Special Education, which has become

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wider and more defined over time, makes it a science of questions rather than a science of answers (Trisciuzzi, Fratini, Galanti, 1996; Caldin, 2019). Such thesis, however, does not limit the intervention of Special Education to the sole aim of raising questions: its *borderline* nature systematically connects it to other disciplines at discussion, dialogue and exchange levels (Besio, Caldin, 2019). An example of this, albeit limited, is the (welcome) overcoming of the connection linking Special Education to the study of the single person with disabilities in favour of a perspective of a wider scope not focusing on *who*, but rather on interactions, relationships and encounters in the contexts of life (Goussot, 2015). Hence, it is an identity still in evolution accepting the challenge of integrating itself into the complexity we live in to understand its alterations and its meanings in an ecological and prospective manner.

Ianes (2019, p. 124) underlines in a recent contribution the need of a trans-professional vision of the inclusion issues, beckoning the interaction and the collaboration with disciplinary *families* and similar approaches: from neuroscience to technology, from legal to social and techno-architectural sciences.

The subtle gaze of Special Education is indeed strongly needed in those educational and professional spheres, in which human relationships play a pivotal role: from the school to the health worlds, from welfare to management. Its more specific declination can be found in the indissoluble duo of noticing and interpreting, which helps setting up the educational action.

Noticing is the acknowledgement of a reality which, despite being different from myself, involves and consults me as the conscious action of seeing an odd reality, which is, nevertheless, not ignored, nor turned away, nor rejected. Such action intentionally facilitates this reality, thus satisfying its moral, rather than personal, call. [...] Correctly interpreting other people's reality gains extraordinary importance and an appropriate educational action can only be established, if such hermeneutic process is correctly carried out (d'Alonzo, 2018b, p. 28).

One of the prevailing topics within the heuristic declinations of Special Education is teachers' education. In this regard, the virtuous connection between field research, technological innovations and legal implications has played a major role in implementing school and educational systems which take the demands and the needs of all pupils at heart. Nevertheless, as far as Italy is concerned, «the analysis of educational levels clearly shows differences between the population with disability and the population without. An inequality in the attainment of the highest education qualifications in the two analysed allotments persists, despite the application of laws and the implementation of policies in favour of people with disabilities, which have been enforced in the last few years» (Istat, 2019, p. 45). The statistical survey reveals that schools are

still substantially far away from the possibility of granting conditions of equal educational opportunities to students with disabilities.

Hence, the implementation of *law*, tools, methods, and services to foster full social engagement and to improve school performance of people with disabilities cannot be defined as a completed path despite all the precious improvements obtained so far. According to this perspective, Special Education as a complex science can and must continue tackling research questions also in favour of a more consistent and systematic education for teachers, as these precisely play the role of strategic agents of social and educational inclusion processes, as defined by UNESCO (2005, 2009).

Special Education and Educational Policies in Italy

The planning capability of teachers, who can commit to removing the barriers to the education of all through methodological and organisational choices and can bring the talents of each and every one to light, is a crucial element in the promotion of an inclusive didactics (Chiappetta Cajola, 2013). The quality of schools necessarily lays its foundations on the quality of teachers (Amatori, 2019b). For this reason, reflecting on the educational practices of teachers before, during and after entering the professional world means monitoring the multidimensional and transversal process which, as a result of the rapid social, cultural and legal changes affecting the school systems in the past few years, obliges the teachers *of today* to have a wide range of skills, whose nature ranges from disciplinary to methodological-didactic, from organisational to communicative, and from relational to reflective and research-oriented.

The educational dimension can only be read in its functional and heterogeneous meaning with respect to the needs of teachers and, consequently, of students, especially considering the international framework envisaging the programmatic actions promoted by the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015). The 2030 Agenda sees education in a continuous and positive evolution and considers the educational axis as a real catalyst of development, able to demolish inequalities and to foster lifelong learning opportunities for all.

The Italian framework of Special Education and Didactics, which has been focusing on the approach to teachers' education, has considerably redistributed the inclusive skills. Initially, the educational intervention has indeed focused on the role of the special education teacher, conceived as an engine of relationships and of the inclusive educational mediation. However, the above-mentioned approach is extremely obsolete in the current schools' reality. As a matter of fact: «the traditional discriminating factor – students with/without disabilities – does not fully denote the complex reality of our classes» (MIUR,

2013, p. 1). An organic and coordinated vision of inclusive educational interventions, which can be «achieved only within a system of co-decisions and inter-institutional cooperations» (Chiappetta Cajola, 2019, p. 17), is indeed necessary to face such complexity. Not only the entire team of class teachers, who should be able to work in a perspective of *cooperative teaching* according to a participated vision of the process, but also the entire school community need to be involved in the inclusive and educational shared responsibility. As Booth and Ainscow (2014) have underlined, the necessary approach should not focus on the sole special education needs. Instead, it should seek and create a common direction for the development of educational and social inclusion at all levels, removing obstacles in the learning environment.

Inclusive educational practices are strongly opposed to a deterministic and extemporaneous vision of the teacher's action. Educational choices have a strong social impact today more than ever and are the result of the teacher's decisional process, which needs to be supported by solid and specific skills.

The Italian situation as far as teachers' education is concerned, which we have already analysed several times (Amatori, 2019a, 2019b), has witnessed a sequence of important changes both from the structural and substantial points of view. The most recent one is the on-going debate regarding the education of pre-primary and primary school teachers, who are attending the unified postgraduate courses in "Primary Education Studies" (SFP - Scienze della Formazione Primaria), in the light of the revision of the Ministerial Decree n. 66 of 2017 implemented by the Ministry. Article 12 paragraph 2 of such Ministerial Decree proposes a postgraduate course in special education and didactics, which can be accessed by graduates of Primary Education Studies having achieved 60 ECTS of inclusive didactics, on top of the credits included in the graduate degree programme, according to paragraph 3. "Any university credits obtained by the aforementioned postgraduate students in relation to teaching and university credits obtained during the internship and the dissertation discussion regarding special education and inclusion may be recognised", in order to gain the above-mentioned 60 ECTS. The ensuing debate, involving also the most important scientific societies of the sector, sees such proposal critically because of two substantial criteria. The first one underlines the consequent need for disciplines (linguistics, history, mathematics...) to be reduced or to be optional. The second one emphasises the legislator's lack of attention to the results concerning the quality of the graduate course and the skills acquired by students. However, we would like to highlight, without aiming at solving the aforementioned issue, that the current organisation of the education for teachers of junior secondary and upper secondary schools is almost incomparable (at least in quantitative terms) to an educational structure boasting a great richness in inclusion topics for the future teachers of pre-primary and primary school.

Secondary school teachers can indeed obtain the teaching qualification after achieving the postgraduate degree including 24 ECTS, 6 of which are devoted to special education and didactics. Moreover, if the vulnerability of pre-adolescent and adolescent students and the consequent greater impact of teachers' didactic-planning choices are taken into consideration, reshaping the education of secondary school teachers clearly seems a necessity.

An inclusive educational approach and quality education need time to be able to positively influence teachers' professionalism.

Italy has witnessed a shift from separate educational programmes for curricular and special education teachers in the last decade to postgraduate courses focusing on specific types of disabilities or disorders (autism, specific learning disorders, sensory disabilities), and to a *vision* of inclusive class teachers. According to this vision, the aforementioned teachers should perceive themselves as able to carry out their function with all students and with each one of them. Therefore, they should recognise themselves as able to teach to the class, including to students with disabilities, and to be open to relationships and systematic exchanges with colleagues and other professionals inside and outside the classroom.

This is first of all a cultural process, changing the inclusion reference paradigm in favour of a greater attention to the needs of all students and of a more adequate education for school professionals supporting teachers' decisional processes in implementing high quality inclusion interventions.

Special Education and Educational Policies in Portugal

In Portugal, as in most developed countries, the education of pupils with disabilities has been characterized by traditional segregated practices for many years, which were carried out in schools or centres of Special Education (Mesquita, 2001)

School integration began in the early 1970s, similarly to other Western countries, and the change was driven by the political and social transformations dating back to the 25th of April 1974 and by the international influences of Public Law (1975), Warnock Report (1978) among others.

Since 1975, a network of Special Education institutions has been developed, seeking to respond to the needs of public education and breaking its purely assistance-oriented nature that existed at the time; the subsequent legislation created conditions for the attendance of these institutions for children with types and degrees of disability that proved not to be part of the regular official teaching structures.

The 1980s saw a process of reorganization of Special Education services

with the most relevant legislation being published, such as the Basic Law of the Portuguese Educational System¹, whose articles 17 and 18 reinforce the need of equal opportunity and the right to education for all pupils, regardless of their physical, social and ethnic characteristics. This document also establishes the objectives and organizing principles of Special Education as a modality of education in the Portuguese educational system.

From the 1990s onwards, it became evident in the Portuguese educational policy that the regular school was responsible for the education of pupils with disabilities through Decree 319/91 of the 23rd of August, which enabled the creation of conditions adapted to processes of teaching and learning suitable for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) from a School for All perspective. Mesquita (2001) states that the most relevant aspects of this document are: the possibility of integrating students with intellectual problems in Special Education; the accountability of the school and its bodies; the individualisation of the educational intervention; the need for teamwork always ensuring the role of parents.

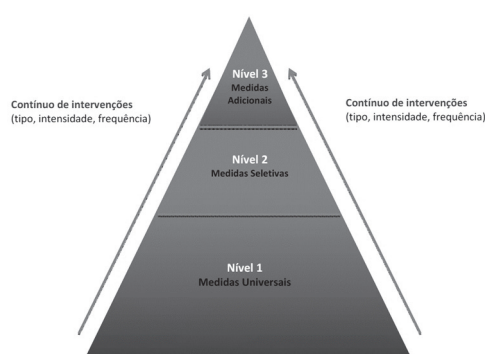
The publication of the Salamanca Declaration in the 1990s was probably the most striking document with regard to Inclusive Education, announcing a profound reform of the regular school (UNESCO, 1994) representing a formal break with the Educational models in practice and in particular courses of action in special education. The impact of this document on Portuguese educational policies with regard to Special Education became evident in 2008 with the publication of Decree 3/2008 of 7 that establishes an inclusive paradigm defining specialised support to be provided to students from pre-primary to primary and secondary education in both the public and, in particular, the cooperative sectors. Although it seeks to operationalise inclusion in line with the Salamanca Declaration, this diploma provides that the identification and evaluation of the target population of special education is carried out taking into account the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health of the World Health Organization, referring to those students with significant limitations in terms of activity and participation in one or more domains of life, resulting from permanent functional and structural changes. By using the International Classification of Functionality (Quelhas, Mesquita, Oria Segura, 2018), this legal document departed from research published in the area, discouraging the use of this type of instrument in education (Rebelo, 2011).

The recent publication of the Decree 54/2018 of the 6th of July that establishes in its article 1 the principles and rules that guarantee inclusion, as a process that aims to respond to the diverse needs and potential of each and every student and introduced the necessary measures in Portuguese legislation to

¹ Lei de Bases do Sistema Educativo, n.º 46/86 de 14 de Outubro.

guarantee an effectively inclusive teaching model. Leaving behind a limited conception of “support measures for pupils with special educational needs”, the document shifts the focus, so far aimed only at a specific group of students, to a broader perspective in the school for all. This diploma presents a set of proposals framed in a three-level approach, where the focus is on the measures to support learning and not on the assessment of learning as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 - Measures to support learning and inclusion (Pereira et al., 2018, p. 21)



The first level corresponds to the Universal Measures (Pereira *et al.*, 2018) and presents concentrated practices and services whose objective is to promote the learning and success of all students, without depending on the identification of specific intervention needs such as:

- a) Pedagogical differentiation.
- b) Curricular accommodations.
- c) Curriculum enrichment.
- d) Promotion of pro-social behaviour.
- e) Intervention with an academic or behavioural focus in small groups.

The second level corresponds to a set of Selective Measures which include services aimed at students at risk of increased school failure or who need complementary support to interventions at the first level, which need to be implemented in small groups and for a short period of time, such as:

- a) Differentiated curricular paths.
- b) Non-significant curricular adaptations.
- c) Psycho-pedagogical support.
- d) Anticipation and reinforcement of learning.
- e) Tutorial support.

The third level regarding Additional Measures concerns more frequent and intensive interventions, which are tailored to the needs and potential of each student and which need to be put into practice individually or in small groups

for a longer period of time, which sometimes requires conducting specialized assessments. The measures envisaged at this level include:

- a) The attendance of the school year by subject.
- b) Significant curricular adaptations.
- c) The individual transition plan.
- d) The development of structured teaching methodologies and strategies.
- e) The development of personal and social autonomy skills.

Assuming an effectively inclusive orientation, Decree 54/2018 of the 6th of July confirms the right of all students to an education in accordance with their potential, expectations and needs, proposing a set of planned responses framed in a common educational project that provides everyone with participation and belonging in genuine conditions of equity.

Portugal registers a remarkable path with regard to inclusion, assuming this principle as essential to the construction of an increasingly democratic and inclusive society. In three decades the school in Portugal has moved from a segregating school to a school that integrates everyone, repeatedly giving admirable and varied examples of inclusion.

Quoting the words of João Costa, the Portuguese Secretary of State for Education: “it is intended that education is an effective right for everyone and not a privilege for some. This implies wills, practices and cooperative learning, because the school is only so when it guarantees the best learning for all students” (Pereira *et al.*, 2018, p.4)

Critical issues, Emergencies and International Research Perspectives

«The issues regarding teachers’ education are being debated in the pedagogical community and their complex nature necessarily forces a vision which is contaminated by the typical investigation knowledge of pedagogy. Interdisciplinary twists, which are typical of complex phenomenon, occur indeed in the educational framework» (Amatori, 2019b, p. 151). Such wide debate addresses not only the educational junction limited to a specific national context, but rather the international relations reporting the testimonies and the needs of those directly involved, the teachers, in order to help drawing a shared profile and the professional activities to be carried out inside and outside the classroom (UNESCO, 2005, 2009; OECD, 2014).

Specific factors are at the root of the difficulty of achieving an effective education for teachers and of applying its backbones at international level. The first one consists in the need of sharing the teachers’ professional profile, which includes the main and primary skills to master in the knowledge society. Another essential factor is the parallel need to clarify and to share an idea of

school, which should be as clear and precise as possible. Thus, the complexity of identifying its “definition” to share at international level lays on the widespread (and ancestral) inclination to “schematise” schools in relation to the narrow needs of the national community, rather than opening its boundaries and creating global profiles. As a matter of fact, teaching is undoubtedly a complex and demanding process, which cannot «be easily detected through linear formulas, which have developed through history and are mostly subjected to the cultural, political and social influences, typical of any historical phase» (Chiappetta Cajola, Ciraci, 2019, p. 153).

The identification of educational needs of future as well as of current teachers requires taking the heuristic data into consideration, which have internationally showed the high or moderate need for specific interventions on disciplinary areas allowing them to foster more adequate, diversified and innovative teaching methods (OECD, 2014). These include the conscious use of technology, which has blatantly emerged especially in the emergency management in several European countries (for example, the recent critical situation of some countries caused by the Covid-19 virus, which has required a considerable effort by educational institutions to implement effective remote teaching in a short time).

Hence, the definition of teachers’ educational needs is almost exclusively up to the single European educational systems, in which professional development policies greatly differ from each other. «However, higher authorities are themselves often not informed about teachers’ needs, which can be identified by focusing on teachers’ feedback regarding the priorities of professional development instead» (Chiappetta Cajola, Ciraci, 2019, p. 156).

Therefore, defining a syllabus of teachers’ standard skills, which should be not only shared, but also regulated at European or international level, is increasingly needed (Ianes *et al.*, 2019). The contribution of Special Education and Didactics in this direction is essential and most urgently needed. The research drive should lead scholars to work more internationally, also in the light of the valuable resources that Europe puts into action (e.g. Erasmus+ projects or COST actions) in order to share research practices and results.

Teaching as a *Design Science* (Laurillard, 2012) needs to be universally re-interpreted, in order to blend educational theory and practice through continuous educational research.

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