

Educational Guidance: A Key Tool For The Italian Inclusive School

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Abstract: Every student, regardless of disability, is entitled to participate in educational counseling activities and to acquire the essential competencies in this field. However, despite its significance, this aspect of special education is one of the least studied in academic research and is often overlooked in laws pertaining to inclusion. This may be attributed to the relatively new focus on this area within Italian educational institutions. The purpose of this essay is to examine the inclusive measures adopted by Italian schools within their scope of autonomy. It will delve into the obstacles, tactics, and outlooks that contribute to fostering a genuinely inclusive educational environment, beginning with the policies established by the Italian Ministry of Education and Merit.

Keywords: Carrier guidance; educational guidance; disabilities; guidelines; Italian; Italy.



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1. Introduction

A document from the late 2000s says something about school integration that is certainly still valid today for inclusion. Inclusion is "an irreversible process, [and that] precisely for this reason it cannot lie on unengaged practices that empty the pedagogical, cultural and social meaning" (Miur, 2009). Rightly, the 2009 Miur guidelines said that inclusion is a process (more: an "irreversible" process) that must inform the entire activity of the school as a whole, starting from teaching practices to educational practices, from administrative to management practices, from those involving the teaching staff to those involving the entire school community, including parents of pupils who do not have disabilities. In the Italian School, in fact, inclusion represents a fundamental pillar to guarantee balanced and accessible educational opportunities for all students and among them, pupils with disabilities. Like all other students, children with disabilities have the right to participate in orientation activities and must have the opportunity to access related skills. Orientation constitutes an area among the least analyzed by scientific research in special education and pedagogy and little attention is paid to it by the inclusion legislation itself. This is probably due to the fact

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that attention to orientation in practitioners, researchers and in ministerial legislation itself has grown significantly only in recent decades. This essay aims to examine inclusive interventions within the context of Italian school autonomy, analyzing the challenges, strategies, and perspectives for promoting a truly inclusive educational environment, with particular attention to the role of orientation in order to realize the framework of an inclusive school.

2 Promoting inclusion in the Italian school: strategies and perspectives

The implementation of inclusion in the Italian School of Autonomy is accompanied by several challenges. Firstly, the diversity of students, which includes differences in socioeconomic background, skills, language, and culture, requires special attention to ensure that no one is excluded or left behind. Furthermore, the limited training for teachers on inclusion and lack of adequate resources can hinder efforts to create a truly inclusive educational environment. Italian schools have implemented several interventions to promote the inclusion of students with special educational needs. These interventions include:

- **Personalized Educational Plan (PDP):** the PDP is a document that identifies educational objectives and customized pathways, taking into account their specific needs. This tool allows a personalization of the educational offer to promote the inclusion of students with special educational needs (SEN) within the ordinary school environment.
- **Specialized assistance:** specialized assistance provided by the Italian School includes a wide range of personalized services for students with special educational needs. These include the presence of specialized personnel, such as support teachers, educators, autonomy and communication assistants. Support also includes adapting or modifying teaching materials, dispensatory measures and/or compensatory tools, planning of personalized activities, and the management of the specific needs of students.
- **Teacher training:** the ability of teachers to create an inclusive environment in which each student feels accepted, respected, and supported plays a crucial role in determining the success of teaching and learning. (Pedone, F. 2019).
- **Indeed, special emphasis has been placed on teacher training on inclusion and the adoption of inclusive teaching practices.** This includes raising teachers' awareness of the needs of students with disabilities, acquiring skills for designing tailor-made interventions, and promoting an inclusive school climate.
- **Collaboration with families:** close collaboration between the school and families of students with disabilities has been promoted to ensure effective support and continuity between school and family educational environments. This involvement of families is crucial to fully understand the needs of students and developing targeted interventions.
- **Adaptation of the physical and technological environment:** the Italian school of autonomy has implemented interventions to make school environments accessible to students with disabilities, such as through the installation of wheelchair ramps, the use of assistive technology, and the creation of accessible educational materials. Educational institutions have

also equipped themselves with computer equipment and specific software as compensatory tools for the different needs of SENs pupils and in particular with Dsa. (Miur, 2012)

These interventions have been part of a broader commitment of Italian schools toward the inclusion of students with disabilities, aimed at guaranteeing them equal access to education and educational success.

Despite the progress made, several challenges lie ahead for the future of inclusion interventions in Italian schools. These include the need to overcome structural and cultural barriers that hinder the effective inclusion of students with special educational needs. In addition, the lack of financial resources and qualified personnel is a significant obstacle. Finally, resistance to change and lack of awareness about the importance of inclusion can slow future progress.

To address these challenges and improve inclusion interventions in Italian schools, targeted strategies are needed. These may include additional investments in human and material resources, implementation of national policies and programs to promote inclusion, and public awareness of the importance of inclusive education. In addition, ongoing research and sharing of best practices can help inform decisions and actions to improve inclusion at the national level (Canevaro, Ciambro & Nocera, 2021). Finally, at the individual educational institution level, effective leadership, collaboration among all stakeholders, and continuous commitment to innovation can add value to national policies.

3. The recent evolution of orientation in secondary school

The topic of school guidance is one that has become increasingly impactful in the reforms that have taken place over the years since 2007, when for the first time people began to think of school not as an institution in its own right, but as a link with external institutions, and the world of work in a perspective of "holistic learning" that can then be applied in all areas of life.

All school in general has an orientation function as preparation for life's decisive choices. Already, the first cycle school aims to orient toward further studies through educational experiences that are not folded in on themselves, but are open and stimulating, aimed at arousing the pupil's curiosity and making them test their abilities. The school should aim to foster students' autonomy of thought by orienting its teaching to the construction of knowledge from concrete training needs.

The strategy on orientation that the Ministry of Education (Decree 328 of 22/12/2022) promoted the Orientation Guidelines, implementing the reform National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR, 2021), which contain several new elements. From the school year 2023/2024 is planned 30 hours of orientation for a year, including extra-curricular; for the last three years of Secondary Schools, 30 curricular hours for school year will be introduced. (Evangelisti, 2023).

Among the various initiatives is the e-Portfolio, which provides an orientation module of at least 30 hours with personalized learning, which is recorded in the portfolio that accompanies children and families in the reflection and identification of the student's greatest strengths within the educational path.

In the next school years, therefore, guidance will be a strategic priority of training for teachers of all educational grades, in the trial year and in service. For tutor teachers in first and school, specific training initiatives are planned, also coordinated by Re-

gional School Office. Experimentally, training campuses will be activated to offer a comprehensive overview of all secondary paths, a single digital platform for orientation where students and families can view useful information and data.

A figure has been scheduled in the framework of each educational institution who can keep a dialogue open with families and students with a view to facilitate the continuation of the course of study, entry into the world of work, or facilitating the match between students' skills and the job application.

Schools can use the resources offered by national and European plans and programs under the Ministry of Education and Merit and by local and national initiatives promoted by regions, universities, local authorities, employment centers, employer associations, and territorial bodies and organizations.

Specific investments were made in the figures of the tutor and the guide teacher. The tutors will help each student to become aware of their potential and will support families in choosing the educational and/or professional paths of the students. Counsellors will facilitate the matching of students' skills, educational offers and job demand to enable an informed choice of study or career path.

The guidelines of the Ministry of Education and Merit (MIM, 2023) were intended to implement a structured and coordinated system of interventions in the field of guidance. The assumption from which the guidelines start is that guidance should become part of school education in every order and grade. This seems extremely important, but only if this choice became a real orientation function rather than teaching, and especially if this function can also be extended to students with disabilities, given their specific needs.

4. Educational guidance and disability. Individualised educational project guidelines, guidelines on educational guidance and Pathways for transversal skills and orientation.

Counselling has played an increasingly important role in schools and has become more formalised. As a result, specific guidelines, certain methods, and particular resources have been developed, as well as digital tools to monitor processes and activities.

In the Italian context, educational guidance has been implemented in schools via two different services. On the one hand, we have the Pathways for Transversal Skills and Orientation (PTSO) (Mim, 2023); on the other hand, the Guidelines for Educational Guidance (Miur, 2022).

The educational guidance parameters refer to many different areas of activity and content related to life skills (Magni, 2023; Giusti & Batini, 2023) and to the European Commission's key competences (Council of the European Union, 2018). In contrast, PTSO activities aim to establish a stronger link with the labour market. Previous legislation acknowledged the change between school and work (Carletti, 2023; Lisimberti & Montalbetti, 2019; Pastore & Maisto, 2019). However, for both educational guidance and PTSO, the Ministry's guidelines say nothing about the link with inclusion pathways for students with disabilities, although the scientific literature contains some examples of its use in an inclusive key (Amoia, 2021; Tino & Ruzzante, 2016, Zappella, 2017).

This shortcoming was remedied when the Ministry of Education approved the Individualised Education Project (IEP)—a tool for planning educational and teaching activities for children and young people with disabilities—for use in all schools in

Italy. In the ministerial guidelines that adopt the IEP model, guidance competence is dealt with much more comprehensively; in fact, it is an integral part of educational planning, which is the responsibility of the school. Article 7, paragraph 2 states that, "The IEP [...] e) shall define the tools for the effective implementation of transversal competences and guidance pathways and ensure the participation of those involved in the inclusion project." Participation in the IEP must therefore be effective and the IEP is tasked with monitoring its successful implementation.

Section 8 of the development guidelines of the Individualised Education Project (Mim 2023) deals with participation in educational guidance activities by students with disabilities—it focusses on the importance of the transition phase between school and work. Schools should recognise that PTSO (the school-to-work transition tool in the Italian context) can be a planning aid for students with disabilities in three different ways: in a workplace context, a school context, or other places.

The first option (company context) should be preferred for students with disabilities from schools. The ministerial guidelines underpin that "the experience in a company is generally considered to be the one that best enables the growth objectives underlying the Ptsso experience to be achieved" (Mim, 2023, p. 43). Due to organisational reasons and the specific conditions of young people with disabilities, PTSO cannot always be carried out within a company. In such cases, the guidelines suggest an "equivalent procedure." They assume that the school could provide activities for students with disabilities outside the company, in a service intended only for people with disabilities, and in this case—according to the guidelines—the experience is considered equivalent. Presumably, the guidelines are concerned with a day care centre for people with disabilities or, alternatively, a self-managed facility run by a parent association. If this activity cannot yet be provided, the guidelines offer the opportunity for a PTSO at school which must be conducted such that it simulates a work environment, at least in organisational terms (e.g., as far as rules, schedules, and reference persons). It is sometimes possible to consider a context other than a company or a school to carry out the PTSO—but this is only a residual, such as when IEPs define teaching and educational activities in home schooling.

This formulation of settings in which PTSO activities can be conducted seems problematic. If it is clear that a company activity can be a challenge for some young people, it is equally obvious that students with disabilities need a link to employment for the same reasons that accessing PTSO in the workplace is difficult. When schools reduce PTSO to a care centre activity or something reserved for a school context, they forgo opportunities to maximise their abilities in the future.

In the case of children with disabilities, it is imperative that education be designed with adult life in mind. In order to support personal and social autonomy, guidance must be a pedagogical practice aimed at promoting both individual and collective development.

For this reason, it is necessary to design educational guidance teaching for young people with disabilities on the basis of a number of key criteria which we believe constitute basic cultural premises, and are summarised as follows:

First, guidance intervention must be conceived within the framework of a holistic vision based on a life project (Chiusaroli, 2023) and a philosophy that considers the child a mature subject.

Also, it is necessary for the didactics of orientation—as for any didactic perspective in the school inclusion field—to define it from the perspective of the In-

ternational Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (World Health Organisation, 2001). In this view, ICF is a cultural framework based upon consideration of the person in terms of the functions they can perform in relation to contexts, relative barriers, and facilitators. From an ICF viewpoint, orientation means recognising the individual as a capable person (e.g., capable in a domain, in an activity, in a particular social context) and not identifying them with an impairment. This assessment must envision the child in adulthood and promote their autonomy. Look at me as an adult, look at me as I am—capable: this is the need that young people with disabilities bring with them. It is the need to be valued and recognised in one's abilities and not to feel like something is lacking.

Thirdly, it is essential that the planning of educational guidance be implemented within a system of interventions and services characteristic of the Italian Republic—not only because municipalities, provinces, and large cities provide services or activities, but also in terms of the efforts of individual and associated citizens (Nicodemo, 2022). A vision of guidance as a system to which different institutions contribute is found in the agreement of the Unificata Conference of November 2014 (Conferenza Unificata, 2014), which refers to five functions of guidance—educational; informative; accompanying specific transition experiences; counselling; and system guidance) to which a variety of different subjects with disparate focusses contribute. The array of institutional actors addressed by this unified conference agreement are schools; tertiary education institutions (universities, art and music colleges, other tertiary institutions); vocational schools; employment services; and social inclusion agencies.

A fourth premise related to school inclusion and guidance concerns the professionals involved in guidance activities. In the inclusive institution, the function of educational guidance cannot be the sole responsibility of the teacher; it must be attributed to a wide variety of contributing subjects. Of course, all teachers are involved and among them, not just those working specifically with students with disabilities. Other professionals should also be considered part of the guidance system. In secondary education, the contribution of janitorial staff to education is uniquely important. They are often in a position of greater continuity with the children and, if they have the personal qualities, frequently manage to penetrate the world of young people more effectively than teachers. In addition, educators working in services to support the autonomy and communication of students with disabilities have an orientation function (Nicodemo, 2019).

5. Conclusions

Guidance is a fairly recent acquisition in school legislation. It is even more recent in the context of school legislation concerning the inclusion of students with disabilities.

The study showed that, while this framework is evolving positively, it is still insufficient to guarantee adequate educational activities for children with disabilities. For this evolution to become concrete, the realization of structured activities it is necessary to provide personal and family support for students and their families.

The primary objective is to bring out the abilities and potential of a young person. This should also be taken into consideration when choosing a secondary school, as well as when helping pupils with disabilities feel integrated and included in their new school. Students should be provided with guidance counseling that is structured

in three main phases: reception, in itinere monitoring, and the return and collection of ideas and observations.

Students' future planning can be stimulated by reflecting on their own skills, specifically on those needed to achieve their professional goals and on the work they wish to do. They need to broaden their knowledge of the professional world. Thus, the adults who are guiding these students should encourage a process of self-assessment of their own resources and limitations, stimulate networking in support of disabled students and their families, and promote work to raise awareness of 'diversity'.

Career guidance is a problem that seriously engages adolescents and young people, committed as they are to seeking adequate solutions to the current existential situation on the path to maturity. If the stimulus of their growth energies does not find an outlet, and if the demand for responsibility does not find an adequate response, young people may feel frustrated and are thus prone to easy escapism.

Directing growth, on this psychological level, basically means assisting the development of the personality from within, taking into account the initial dispositions and perspectives of life and the conditioning to which the young person is subjected by the social environment. It is therefore not a matter of imposing orientation choices from the outside.

"Orientation consists in a perspective of permanent education, of a rapid change in social structures and in the needs of populations, of an accelerated evolution of sciences and technology, of a massive development of information means and of an effective use of resources, in putting the individual in a condition to become aware of his own personal characteristics and to develop them in view of the choice of his studies and professional activities in all the circumstances of his existence, with the joint concern of serving the development of society and the expansion of his own personality" (Bratislava Conference, Unesco, 1970).

Guidance is not to be considered as a diagnostic fact that falls on the pupil at the end of a cycle of studies. Rather, "it is a process through which help is given to people so that they can achieve the knowledge and control of themselves that are necessary to achieve the best possible insertion in the school, in the family and in the community; the implementation of guidance constitutes a global process, as unified as the life of the person it involves; therefore it requires continuous, organic, complete educational action" (Rui Foundation).

Orienting does not merely mean directing, but rather bringing out, with modes and styles of behavior that we could define as Socratic, that which from within demands to be identified, brought to maturity, and valorized. Underlying a correctly conceived and configured orientation is a 'know thyself' and also a 'become what you are'. Therefore, there is nothing extrinsic, and no instrumental reason except insofar as it is demanded by a strategy of free formation and individual liberation.

Guidance is a necessary and delicate activity at a time when certainties are disappearing. For young people, there is no certainty of obtaining a profession corresponding to their qualifications. The labor market is constantly changing and it is often necessary to reorient choices.

Schools must strengthen cognitive and relational foundations, particularly for the weaker groups of students. Guidance cannot only consist of recognizing individual aptitudes in individual pupils. It must be flexible, corresponding to the complexity and articulation of society. In this sense, orientation is an activity that concerns the school

structure and the entire curriculum, not only the final classes. It is analogous to the concept of lifelong education, and long life education. Orientation becomes an action capable of empowering the individual student and the classroom as a "learning community", strengthening skills and self-esteem, and creating a network of relationships that extends over space and time.

Guidance is not just an instrumental reflection on the choice of high school. It is part of a vast framework in which the students' aspirations, their relationships both in and out of school, their clarity regarding study paths and the world of work, and the conditions and aspirations of the family, etc. are located. Proposing to pupils the complex vision of reality is the task of the adult society, as represented by the teachers, the family, and the local authorities. The teaching activity in all disciplines aims at achieving this..

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