

REMOTE LEARNING AND DROPOUT RATES: A STUDY OF THE QUALITY OF INCLUSIVE PROCESSES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF REGGIO CALABRIA

DIDATTICA A DISTANZA E DISPERSIONE: INDAGINE ESPLORATIVA SULLA QUALITÀ DEI PROCESSI INCLUSIVI NEL CONTESTO UNIVERSITARIO DI REGGIO CALABRIA

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Abstract

The present study stresses our need to foster inclusivity-based educational actions and practices at the university of Reggio Calabria. Designing inclusive education practices, however, entails distancing ourselves from all those actions deriving from an impairment-correction-oriented teaching logic. This logic involves an absolute coincidence of disability and impairment, whereas an inclusive mentality embodies the notion of disability and places the impairment within the disabling processes that contexts produce. In the light of all the above considerations, it is vital to stress that even at university the design of a universal routes for all students could pave the way for our developing new interesting inclusivity-based educational scenarios.

Nella presente indagine viene messa in evidenza l'esigenza di voler adottare, nei contesti universitari, azioni e pratiche didattiche più inclusive. Tuttavia, progettare interventi didattici inclusivi significa prendere le distanze da tutte quelle pratiche ancora pensate secondo un'epistemologia del deficit. Le azioni didattiche progettate secondo questa logica vedono infatti una assoluta sovrapposizione fra disabilità e deficit mentre l'ottica inclusiva fa proprio il concetto di disabilità collocando il deficit all'interno di processi disabilitanti prodotti dai contesti. Alla luce di tali considerazioni è importante sottolineare come anche nell'ambito della didattica universitaria, la creazione di un percorso universale, quindi rivolto a tutti gli studenti, possa consentire lo sviluppo di nuovi ed interessanti scenari inclusivi.

Keywords

Remote learning, dropout rates, inclusivity, university, Universal Design.
Didattica a distanza, dispersione, inclusione, università, progettazione universale.

Inclusivity: a comparison of the various European policies

A crucial element of modern inclusivity-based education in the international debate is the *Index for Inclusion*, which focuses on context-based limitations and arises from a broad idea of overall inclusivity (Demo, 2017) which can welcome everybody with its flexible educational modes and practices.

Another international document placing so much emphasis on inclusivity-based learning is the Luxemburg Charter, which was approved by the Helios community program in 1996 and is primarily looking to create a “school for everybody and anybody”.

In 2009, also the “*Assessment in Inclusive Settings*” European Project, which was promoted by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, elaborated a universal notion of inclusive assessment in order to foster learning and backup processes centered on including everybody. Still in 2007, the Treaty of Lisbon enforced the principle of non-discrimination against the disabled, with a view to promoting quality inclusive education for everybody, guaranteeing the respect of anybody's differences and envisaging any possible intervention on the context to eliminate all remaining prejudices to the dignity of the individual.

Inclusive education has been recognized as a founding element even within the new UN *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*, where the 4th point in the 2030 Agenda provides a clear orientation of the international policies to follow up until 2030.

In May 2015, even the *World Education Forum* which took place in Korea, has been a momentous step that solemnly stated our need to add education among the objectives that fall under the principle of equality and inclusion, thus drawing our attention on the most disadvantaged social partners.

European documents and data on education systems and EU policies clearly show a definite picture of the evolution of school inclusivity processes which have been developed in the various European countries.

However, inclusion requires a new operational philosophy, a new way of looking at and conceiving of the other which can be adopted only if we have become aware that we should provide many different students with many different modes of learning and social participation.

Remote Learning and Inclusivity-based Processes in University Classes

The drift from offline traditional classes to remote learning has undoubtedly made us aware that there is more to it in teaching and learning than mere teacher-student interaction, which is a process that involves everybody and anybody.

The Italian Prime Minister's Decrees (DPCM) of 8th and 9th March 2020 on urgent measures for managing the Covid-19 crisis envisaged the suspension of all educational activities in all Italian schools, as well as the attendance to all higher education classes, including universities, conservatories and acting studios, training courses, Masters' Degree courses, nursing schools and permanent education centers.

The Italian Public Education Department (Miur) later issued a statement titled “*Emergenza sanitaria da nuovo Coronavirus. Prime indicazioni operative per le attività didattiche a distanza*” (Health Emergency from Covid-19. First operational advice for remote learning activities) and published in an attempt to give sound educational support during the crisis. The statement advises that teachers and students carefully interact to reconsider teaching and learning strategies in designing knowledge-building activities for online classes. Thus, traditional educational paradigms are modified to suit forms of online teaching and learning that take into account the special needs of disabled students.

Therefore, the creation of an inclusive university context induces us to consider adopting forms of teaching and learning which are not only devoted to one single student, but can include strategies oriented toward the whole class.

The above observations let us hope that remote learning in Italian universities will later entail educational contexts where new interesting instances of co-building, co-designing and co-assessing can be experienced to create more and more inclusive educational scenarios.

Descriptive Study

Objectives

The present study has entailed the creation of a questionnaire on the following points:

- check whether inclusivity-oriented action is taken in Italian universities at all;
- see if Italian universities have inclusive spaces and facilities;
- understand if online education has really hindered the development of inclusivity-based processes;
- verify the impact of inclusivity-based processes on university dropout rates.

Methods

The present study involved 120 students majoring in Primary Education Science (LM-85 BIS) at the University of Reggio Calabria.

The research has entailed the administration of a questionnaire which had been drawn in *Google Forms*, an application that enables users to create online questionnaires whose answers can be recorded in Excel-exportable Google Sheets files.

The questionnaire was divided into 2 sections/parts:

- Part 1: Inclusivity and Educational Context;
- Part 2: Dropout Rates and Inclusive Processes.

Results

An accurate perusal of the most significant data clearly evinces that:

- ✓ 93.4% of the students say they do know inclusivity and the processes related to it;
- ✓ 72.2% think inclusivity guarantees equal dignity to all students;
- ✓ 65% maintain there is an office in their university that welcomes students with disabilities or specific learning disorders;
- ✓ only 30% believe remote learning (especially in senior classes) has not contributed to valorizing differences;
- ✓ 76.8% believe their own university already does implement more inclusive measures and provisions;
- ✓ 45% assert their university building still has some (albeit minor) architectural barriers;
- ✓ 60% affirm a lot of teachers do contribute to the creation of an inclusive atmosphere at university;
- ✓ 68% say traditional offline education is the formula that best meets the needs of students with disabilities or specific learning disorders;
- ✓ 50% consider traditional offline education more inclusive than remote learning, while 38.7% think it is exactly the other way round;
- ✓ 51% believe dropout rates strictly correlate with the students' difficulties trying to continue studying;
- ✓ 28% believe the students' difficulties trying to continue studying depend on inefficient orientation services, whereas 21% ascribe these difficulties to the students' not feeling so welcome at university (relative to the other data, this datum is in clear decline);
- ✓ 75.5% believe that an inclusive university context could contribute to tackling dropout rates quite effectively.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results above evince our need to sensitize everybody to the various inclusive processes at university.

The designing of an inclusive educational environment requires careful consideration of contents, methods and materials as well as an adaptation of educational practices to the new teaching and learning situations (Dainese, 2019). So, the future idea is that of trying to propose inclusive actions within some sort of universal design for higher education.

More specifically, the objective we are trying to pursue is the construction of a holistic model encompassing all the various aspects of teaching and learning.

To this end, future inclusivity-based higher education should focus upon the creation of contexts which are in line with inclusive practices and with the Universal Design for Learning framework. UDL aims at building educational routes that everybody can tread – instead of promoting personalized educational initiatives to meet single students' special needs, educational designing should focus, from the very start, upon learning actions and strategies devoted to everybody.

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