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## Special educational needs and evaluation

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### Abstract

The Italian school is dealing with the matter of the evaluation of Special Educational Needs (SED). Since there are no legislative references that indicate which procedures to follow, it is left to the teachers' discretion. Recent ministerial documents, though, suggest to refer to the existing normative on Specific Learning Disturbances, in particular to prepare the PDP, and to use the necessary tools to reach the estimated requisites for the SED.

One of the main problems is still that of evaluation. Despite all the debates, even when evaluation is not used in a selective function it is not correctly used in an educational perspective, as a mean to teach, to improve the learning processes more than to penalize the results.

In the following work, we aim at indicating some evaluating tools and approaches useful in the delicate assessment activity of teachers, mostly intended in its educational value.

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## 1. Introduction

The term "Special Educational Needs" came into widespread use in Italy after the enactment of the Ministerial Directive of 27 December 2012 "Instruments of intervention for pupils with Special Educational Needs and territorial organization for educational inclusion." The Directive itself gives a synthetic outline of the meaning, since the area of educational disadvantage is much broader than the one expressly referred to the presence of a deficit. In each class there are students who submit a request for special attention for a variety of reasons: social and cultural disadvantage, specific learning disabilities and / or developmental disorders, specific difficulties arising from the lack of knowledge of the Italian language and culture because they belong to different cultures.

The use of the Acronym SED therefore indicates a large groups of pupils for whom the principle of personalization of teaching, in accordance with Law 53/2003, must be applied with particular emphasis in terms of features, intensiveness and duration of changes. The ministerial directive is an important document because it gives a clear outline of the inclusive strategy of the Italian school. According to this document, in fact, the area of the educational disadvantage is much wider than that the one explicitly referred to the presence of a deficit.

The ministerial directive is a response to what is becoming increasingly clear: that is the steadily increasing number of pupils who submit a request for special attention. This paper concludes and completes the speech that was started in 1992 with the Framework Law 104 and continued with the L. 53/2003, L. 170/2010 and subsequent amendments for children with learning difficulties. In dealing with the speech on the discomfort and difficulty, the Directive moves the focus from the certification procedures to analyze the needs of each student and permanently extends the right to all those in need - and therefore the duty of all teachers – of customization of their educational project. The area of specific learning disabilities is extended to different problems such as: the deficit of language, non-verbal skills, motor coordination, attention and hyperactivity, intellectual functioning to the limit and the socio-economic disadvantage, linguistic, culture.

The attention that, in recent years, is placed to the SEN has the purpose of trying to remove all those obstacles present in learning pathways: this is made possible through the important activities of observation and careful reading of the signs of discomfort, dialogue with the family and the offer of adequate and personalized responses, all in order to promote the full inclusion of all students and their educational success.

The ministerial directive states that pupils are identified with special educational needs after the examination of the clinical documentation submitted by the families and on the basis of psycho-pedagogical and didactic considerations. Individual class councils can make decisions to enable them to use compensatory and dispensatory measures under the provisions already in place for pupils with specific learning disorders.

A very delicate and complex case is when teachers take the decision to communicate to parents that their child has a learning disability, suggesting a systematic evaluation of academic skills. Delicacy and complexity arise from the risk of hinting to the parents that their child is in a psychopathological condition. In some cases it is already known, but in most cases it is totally unexpected.

These considerations also arise from the fact that the term "developmental disorders" refers to the SEN and deficit of language, non-verbal skills, motor coordination, attention and hyperactivity (ADHD). Pupils with reduced intellectual potential, indicated generally by the expressions of cognitive / intellectual borderline or with "mixed specific developmental disorder", require special consideration.

Even if these particular issues are not covered by Law 104, the n.170/2010 on SEN represents a turning point in this direction as it gives a different interpretation to the concept of "educational care", suggesting the principle of personalization of courses set out in L. 53/03, with care of the pupils by regular teachers.

We should, therefore, identify those at risk of difficulties with tools and methods specific for each order of school; we need to upgrade and increase their specific requirements of learning or academic skills not related to those expected for each age and level of schooling. In this perspective it is possible to avoid focusing exclusively on the formal aspects of medical nature-based certifications and to develop customized programs. In any case, the

focus is moved towards the educational level and the process of inclusion becomes relevant to the whole educational staff.

The latter directive, in fact, seen in a new light the inclusion model because it is directed not only to the students with certified disabilities, but also to those with conduct or attention disorders, those with language delays or with an IQ just above the limit.

## **2. Learning Environments**

Pupils with Special Educational Needs live in a particular situation, which hinders their learning and development: this negative situation can be on different levels: organic, biological, or family, social, environmental, contextual, or combinations of these.

These situations, thanks to the work of other mediating factors of a personal nature and / or contextual nature, cause directly or indirectly obstacles or delays in learning processes. These difficulties can be global and pervasive as autism or more specific such as in dyslexia, sectoral as in language disorders and psychological disorders as mild or severe, temporary or permanent anxiety.

A very important aspect is the educational alliance with the family, marked by mutual agreement, with participation in the development of the IEP and PDP that are signed by the family for sharing, not just for acknowledgment.

An important role can be played by the family who is called to follow homework taking care of the child to perform the tasks, supporting the activities of study, accompanying him in the research and discovery of its modes and ways of learning, trying, along with him and the teachers, personalized and effective paths.

To implement effective learning environments in terms of teaching, but even more significant from the socio-relational point of view is important that teachers operate with unitary purpose and, simultaneously, cure attitudes and approaches that contribute to a positive construction of the student identity with SEN, through the creation of a positive environment in class, encouraging dialogue in all activities with their classmates in the class, stimulating and supporting intrinsic motivation.

It is also necessary that teachers act to build "learning environments" in which the student with SEN, feeling welcomed and heard to develop self-esteem and confidence in their abilities, to adopt positive attribution styles.

The teacher in his educational action should take into account an important prerequisite and that is what "works" for the pupil with SEN, it is equally effective for others, so in reorganizing its educational intervention he must necessarily activate and implement strategies useful for enhancing the strengths, as intuition, visual and creative thinking, and minimize those weaknesses as misspellings, memory deficits, executive sluggishness, fatigue, lack of autonomy in reading etc.

So the intervention of the teacher in order to facilitate learning could use primarily the visual and auditory canal. For the first you can take advantage of graphics such as diagrams, maps, pictures, movies and colors, in these cases a whiteboard is very useful, while for the hearing field you can resort to audio books, recordings, speech synthesis, digital textbooks. The teacher can also take some measures to increase working time for homework, exercises, tests, etc.. or reduce workload or even divide into several parts the verification procedures that should be predominantly oral.

Among the measures that could be adopted by the teacher, we suggest to begin the activity with a summary of the previous lesson, involving everyone with flash "warm up" questions or using visual and graphic brainstorming for orientate in information, creating a map of the lesson to be followed during activity. Or, also, varying actions and contents, developing the different abilities, so that everyone can find his own space, and encouraging motivation. Sometimes it might be useful to stop and make a synthesis of content; resume and repeat in different ways the most important concepts or frequently check if pupils follow or if the issue is clear. Another trick that the teacher can adopt is to prefer cooperative learning strategies such as provide recorded material to

listen to the lesson or working in pairs, in which the cognitive abilities of the pupil with SEN can be expressed in interaction with their peers, that act as mediators.

Exclusive frontal lessons should then be avoided, as well as long explanations, copying from the blackboard, tests and corrections in italics or small fonts, highlighting the mistakes, separating classes and organizing them for level. Interactive lessons, reflections and sharing between the students should be privileged, as well as providing the photocopied material, not punishing mistakes but trying to locate only the cognitive processes and the underlying reasoning, and giving rewards.

### **3. Learning styles**

Teachers should start from the knowledge of the mode of operation of the student with SEN to try to contain and overcome the difficulties, and to focus on their potential. To facilitate an individualized teaching that considers learning styles. In students with SEN, in fact, the disorder unconsciously affects learning style preferences, "forcing them to switch to other styles, that become favorites." The concept of "multiple intelligences" (Gardner, 2005): intelligence is a factor composed of different cognitive modes, which allows you to deal with and understanding of the reality. They vary from person to person, based also on cultural and environmental factors to promote effective learning. The teacher must know their learning styles and preferences, as they affect his teaching method, and he should help students to explore the different learning and cognitive styles for a shared construction of knowledge.

Learning styles are characteristic cognitive, affective and physiological behaviors that function as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive the learning environment, interact with it and respond to it (Keefe, 1979).

Stewart and Felicetti (1992) define learning styles as those educational conditions in which a student is more likely to learn. So learning styles do not affect the content of learning, but rather, on how he prefers to learn.

Teachers, therefore, should diversify teaching proposals, experimenting with different strategies, training the different access channels according to the way of learning of their pupils, using concept maps, engaging students to an oral exposure with visual support from the maps during interrogations, teaching the students multiple modes for each required task such as taking notes, studying a text, using bullet points, etc.. Furthermore, proposing multiple ways to gather information suggesting, for example, the use of different colors or graphics for different content categorization of the written text.

### **4. Learning assessment**

For the evaluation of pupils with special educational needs, it can be said that there is no single criterion or tool, it is necessary, however, to adopt measures taking into account the characteristics of these students, such as, for example, evaluating more content, avoiding to consider spelling mistakes, bearing in mind that the student with SEN needs a longer time to complete homework. A teacher may assign less homework and keep in touch with the family in order to avoid stressful situations, not allowing them to carry other extracurricular activities.

Educational activities may be concentrated in class, in order to allow, for example, more time to organize thoughts and to complete the job. As already mentioned, the teacher should strive to identify strengths favoring those activities in which the student is good and supporting them.

Teachers should pay attention to the type and level of tests, for which it is appropriate to ensure that they have understood correctly.

As far as the objectives of the educational program, there are no exceptions for SEN except in cases where there are also disabilities. However, learning for the pupil with SEN is a great effort and is necessary, therefore, to ensure maximum freedom and flexibility to learning styles. The teacher in setting objectives must be sure that

they are practical and realistic, and also check the adequacy of teaching materials such as reading with reference to the lexicon, the syntactic structure and the graphic impact. Very useful could be the use of a compensatory educational software, such as voice synthesis, digital books: many textbooks have a digital version, audiobooks, reading books on CD, digital dictionaries, specific software.

For the evaluation a very important document is the personalized learning plan. The school guarantees and explicit, towards pupils and students with SEN, educational interventions individualized and customized through the preparation of a personalized learning plan and also indicates compensatory and dispensatory measures, the customized forms of evaluation and assessment.

The document is drawn up by the class council or team of teachers and is agreed with the family, the privileged ally, which must actively participate in the educational project of the school.

## 5. Indicators for evaluation

For the definition of a correct approach to the assessment we may refer to a major report of the 'European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education in 2009, Development of a set of indicators - for inclusive education in Europe.

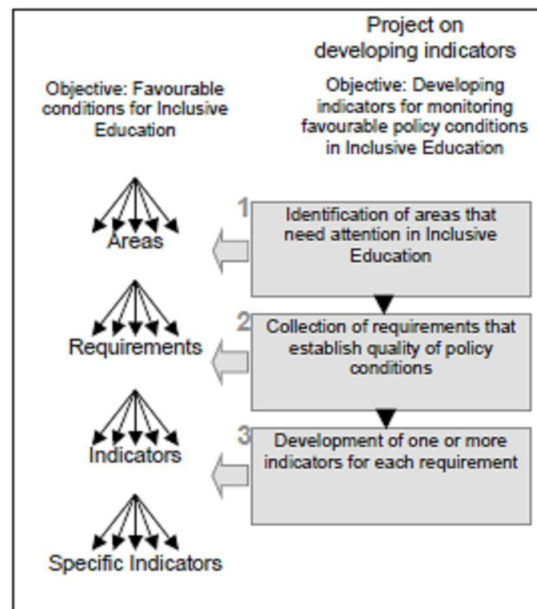


Fig. 1 - Development of indicators

The report identifies several areas within which there are the requirements and the corresponding indicators. For the assessment system of individual disabilities, the identification of the educational needs are considered important, as well as the systems of evaluation of teaching and supporting inclusion.

The assessment procedures should not be discriminatory. The original identification of the discomfort of the students should be conducted with a holistic approach and be based on the principle that teaching and learning

are a common tool in the fight against discrimination. Finally, even the rules for the identification of disability should promote and encourage the educational experiences of each student.

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