

United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

United Nations Children's Fund

Expert meeting on statistics on children

Geneva, Switzerland, 4–6 March 2024

Item 3 of the provisional agenda

Improvement of coherence and comparability of data on children with disabilities

On the road to inclusion: a survey on schools and students with disabilities in Italy

Note by the Italian National Institute of Statistics*

Abstract

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD art.24) establishes a commitment to inclusive education for persons with disabilities to prevent their isolation and exclusion from society while giving them greater independence. Italian law appears to be in the vanguard on school inclusion issues, whereas, from an operational point of view there is still a long way for affirming the real inclusion of students with disabilities in school life. Administrative data provide information on the number of students with disabilities and learning support teachers in the school, but there is an information gap regarding the inclusion process of pupils with disabilities.

In order to ensure better monitoring of the UNCRPD, the Italian National Institute of Statistics has implemented a Survey: "School inclusion of students with disabilities". The Survey (started in 2008) is carried out, annually, in cooperation with the Italian Ministry of Education in all Italian schools (of all levels). The survey, which is census-based and has a sample part, strives to consider as many elements of school inclusion as possible such as buildings' accessibility; support tools for the students; role of learning support teachers and other professional figures; students' participation.

*Prepared by Sara Corradini, Lucia Martinez.

NOTE: The designations employed in this document do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

I. Introduction

1. “Inclusion is a transformative process that ensures full participation and access to quality learning opportunities for all children, young people and adults, respecting and valuing diversity, and eliminating all forms of discrimination in and through education. The term inclusion represents a commitment to making preschools, schools, and other education settings, places in which everyone is valued and belongs, and diversity is seen as enriching” (UNESCO, 2019). Inclusive education differs from the other approaches in terms of placement and practices. In fact, when the students are placed in schools or educational settings with peers of a similar age but are required to adjust to the mainstream – no adjustments are made to meet their individual needs - it is called integration. This limits their ability to fully access or participate in learning. Integration is not necessarily a step towards inclusion. When the students learn in separate environments, designed or used to respond to their particular needs or impairment, in isolation from other students, we talk about segregation. In the end, when the students cannot access any form of education, we have exclusion.
2. The Italian school system has a long tradition of inclusive education; indeed, the first experiences of integrating students with disabilities into regular schools began in the 1970s. From that point, legislation has evolved to guarantee students with disabilities and those with other special educational needs the right to individualization and personalization of education. The policies developed in the 1970s positively affected some aspects of the Italian education system. However, the way in which rights and benefits were conceived was rooted in a medical-individual model of disability that remains visible, even in recent legislation, slowing innovation in this area (Ianes, Dremo, Dell’Anna, 2020).
3. The regulations of the Italian school system are based on its Constitution, which gives great importance to the removal of obstacles that may limit personal development or the possibility of participating in social activities (art. 3). The Italian school system was designed as free and compulsory for all (art. 34).
4. Until the 1970s, students with disabilities were excluded from the “school for all” but with the Basaglia deinstitutionalization movement (Basaglia 1968), schools began to admit pupils with disabilities. School integration laws (Law 118/1971; Law 517/1977) supported this development. Inclusion in “schools for all” had a strong impact on people with disabilities.
5. Law No. 104 of 1992 established the “Individualised Educational Plan”. This plan describes, for each young person with disabilities, the interventions, educational and rehabilitative projects, socialisation, as well as the integration methods between school and extracurricular activities helpful in promoting school and social inclusion.
6. The Italian legislative framework is in line with the Convention on the Right of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The Article 24 defines the right to education for persons with disabilities as a tool for the development of their potential, a guarantee of their human dignity, and an indispensable means for their self-autonomy and the ability to make choices in conditions of freedom and equal opportunities. Hence, the recommendation to implement interventions that enhance the effectiveness of the educational training of persons with disabilities and ensure accessibility to educational facilities. In addition, inclusive education has also been promoted in Italy following the principles of the Salamanca Declaration of 1994. In the respect of the fundamental principle that “the differences between people are normal, the education must adapt to these differences and to the specific demands that derive

from them, rather than forcing the child to adapt to certain prefabricated assertions regarding the purpose and nature of education” (UNESCO,1994).

7. In 2015, world leaders adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It outlines 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹ that aim to provide a better and more sustainable future for all people, addressing challenges related to poverty, climate, peace, and inequality. The Agenda aims to achieve each goal and target by 2030. For the first time, disability is explicitly included in global education targets.
8. In Italy, subsequent legislative measures have moved in the same direction as the UNCRPD and the Law 104/92. Compulsory education was extended by two years also for young people with disabilities (Law No. 9/1999); the participation and collaboration of families and associations in the inclusion processes were regulated (Legislative Decree No. 96 of August 7, 2019); teacher training was strengthened, and the value of educational continuity was reaffirmed (Ianes, Dremo, Dell’Anna, 2020).

II. The dimensions of inclusion in Italian context

9. Recognizing that some students may have unique needs, an inclusive school must be attentive to these special needs. This calls for providing appropriate support and resources for students with disabilities, specific learning disorders, or other educational needs. The goal of an inclusive school is to ensure that these students are not only included but also able to participate fully and succeed in their education.
10. The detection of the level of inclusion of the students, as is well known, is a complex task because the elements to be investigated are numerous and not always easily observable. The Istat survey “Scholastic inclusion of students with disabilities” explores some of the dimensions of inclusion, allowing a picture to be drawn that, although not exhaustive, highlights some critical points of the Italian school system.
11. Furthermore, in order to monitor the UNCRPD, it is important to define some areas to be analysed and in which to place the main dimensions of inclusion. Specifically, the Convention underlines the following main aspects: “Persons with disabilities can access an inclusive, quality and free primary education and secondary education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live (art.24b). Reasonable accommodation of the individual's requirements is provided (24c.). Persons with disabilities receive the support required, within the general education system, to facilitate their effective education (24.d). Effective individualised support measures are provided in environments that maximise academic and social development, consistent with the goal of full inclusion (24.e)”.
12. Thus, the main areas of inclusion that the survey investigates are (a) accessible environment, (b) the role of the learning support teacher and other professional figures, and (c) technology and learning tools or learning materials, (d) students’ learning and social participation, and (e) network: collaboration among school, families, community and territory.

¹ SDG 4: ‘Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’.

A. Accessible environment

13. An inclusive society is one that overcomes, among other things, the disabling use of space and implements changes to include those who would otherwise be excluded (Dovigo, 2008).
14. The school environment thus becomes a factor of inclusion since, according to its level of accessibility; it favours or prevents the full and equal participation of pupils in educational, didactic and relational activities.
15. With specific reference to physical accessibility, in school buildings, in order to be inclusive spaces must guarantee accessibility to anyone with limited motor and/or sensory capabilities. This means not only the removal of architectural barriers but also the installation of the necessary aids to ensure the performance of teaching activities and the use of spaces and equipment in conditions of adequate safety and autonomy.
16. From an inclusive perspective, it is indeed necessary to break down physical barriers and all those obstacles that prevent mobility and the use of environments by persons with reduced sensory capacity.

B. Role of the learning support teacher and other professional figures

17. In the Italian school system, there is a clear distinction between two main types of teachers: classroom teachers and learning support teachers. The learning support teachers are assigned to classes that include students with a “certified” disability. By law, these two groups of teachers have different tasks but they have the same responsibilities for all the students in the class.
18. One dimension of inclusion is clearly related to the implementation of teaching methods that can be carried out in a wide range of learning styles and abilities. It is extremely important to differentiate the teaching methods to meet the varied needs of students, including those with disabilities, learning difficulties, and other special educational needs. The goal is to make all classroom activities accessible to every student. There is a general lack of teachers, especially well-trained ones, who are able to include students with disabilities. To develop their skills, experience and confidence in the inclusion of all students, teachers need to learn and practice inclusive education during their initial and ongoing training. (Balint, Adam; 2019).
19. In this framework, the continuity of teacher-student relationship is particularly important. The concept of educational-didactic continuity emphasises how each educational moment should be legitimised by the previous one, without jumps, in a harmonious functional integration of the student's experiences and learning. This is true for any student and is even more true in cases of students with special educational needs.

C. Technology and learning tools/learning materials

20. Technology can play an important "facilitator" role in the school inclusion process, supporting the students in the learning pathway and increasing the comprehension levels. According to the national system, inclusive teaching in Law 170/2010 (art.5 paragraph 2)

guarantees “the introduction of compensatory tools, including alternative means of learning and information technology (...)”. In this regard, it is important to emphasise the need to develop a series of inclusive teaching strategies that integrate the use of technology to facilitate informed study and, more generally, to foster student autonomy (speech synthesis, video-writing programmes, Optical Character Recognition, voice recognition and so on).

D. Students learning and social participation

21. Inclusion is also a socialisation process; for this reason, the peer group assumes a significant value at the relational and educational levels. Indeed, establishing supportive relationships can be an additional resource for inclusive teaching. A widespread phenomenon is the “push and pull out, that describes all those situations in which a pupil or a group of pupils carry out activities physically outside their peers’ classrooms or carry out activities separately from their classmates, although within a common space” (Nes, Demo and Ianes, 2017). Therefore, to ensure e inclusion, are fundamental the moments that students with disabilities share with peers in the classroom and also out of the school, so it is important to investigate the participation of students with disabilities in various activities, such as trips, (including those with an overnight stay), motor activities and so on.

E. Network: collaboration among school, families, community and territory

22. An additional essential element of inclusion is the participation of the families and community in educational planning and the school life of students with disabilities. It is crucial to pursue the goal of building alliances with families and the territory as a part of a clear, transparent and shared project. A significant contribution in this direction are the Inclusion Working Group (GLI) and the Operational Inclusion Working Group (GLO) (ESN legislation and Legislative Decree 66/2017); these are bodies that have a strategic role in fostering greater synergy at the school level and territorial networks (Ianes, 2013).
23. The GLI, appointed by the school head, consists of representatives of all the actors involved in the educational and training process: teachers, parents or family members, educational assistants for autonomy and communication, school staff, institutional or external experts under agreement with the school, representatives of Local Health Authorities, Parents’ Associations, Local Authorities. Instead, among the most important tasks of the GLO is the preparation and definition of the Individualised Education Plan (IEP).

III. Methodology

24. The survey “Scholastic inclusion of students with disabilities” (started in 2008) is carried out annually; it allows monitoring, at least in part, various aspects of the inclusion of students with disabilities, also observing its evolution over time. Initially, focused only on primary schools, it now involved all levels and grades of schooling, from kindergarten to upper secondary school, including both public and private schools.

25. The survey is composed of a census part, addressed to all schools in Italy, aimed at assessing the more objective aspects of inclusion contained in the educational/learning offer (accessibility, the technological tools available and dedicated staff), and a sample part, addressed to a sample of students with disabilities (who need a learning support teacher), representative of the reference population. The sample part aims to detect various aspects of inclusion, such as participation, relational aspects and satisfaction with the adequacy of the tools provided by the school. Students with functional limitations, impairments or health problems who do not need support are not included in the target group under analysis. The sampling design is two-stage, with stratification of the first stage units. The first stage units are schools, stratified by geographical region and type of school. The second stage units are students with disabilities. The total sample size in 2022/2023 school year is 26,799 students. The survey is conducted online (CAWI) through two electronic questionnaires: the first is directed to the school (filled in by student secretariats or headmasters) and the second is addressed to the selected student with support. The learning support teacher or the school's disabilities representative fills in this one.
26. Both questionnaires consist of closed-ended questions, with filter questions guiding the response pathway. In constructing and revising the survey instrument, Istat has always collaborated with thematic experts (e.g. representatives of associations of people with disabilities).
27. The student's questionnaire also contains a series of items by the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF) that has become the diagnostic model of reference in designing inclusive educational actions. As known, the ICF focuses the assessment of health conditions on the positive-active aspect of the person, i.e. functioning, which result from the interaction between physical, psychological, personal and environmental components. Through the multidimensional analysis, it is possible to observe the levels of functioning of students with support in some domains of the ICF considered most relevant within the school context, relating them to the characteristics of the school and specific aspects of inclusion.

IV. Indicators and main findings of the survey

28. The characteristics and quality of the educational services play a key role in an effective inclusion process. From the survey's main indicators, information emerges relating to the different dimensions of inclusion previously described.
29. In particular, the survey analyses the following aspects of accessibility:
 - the presence of physical barriers
 - the presence of sensory barriers
30. Through an index that summarises the individual variables on the accessibility of spaces (presence of accessible lifts, ramps, stair lifts, tactile paths for the blind and specific signs for the deaf) it is possible to define the accessibility characteristics of schools in the area.
31. Unfortunately, in the 2022-2023 s.y. there are still too many physical barriers in the Italian schools: only one out of 3 schools is accessible for pupils with physical disabilities. The lack of an elevator or the presence of an elevator not suitable for the transport of people with disabilities are the most common barriers (50%). Schools without internal ramps to

overcome level differences are also common (24%) as those without accessible toilets (26%). The problem of accessibility is worst for students with sensory disabilities: only 17% of schools have visual signs for students with deafness or hearing loss, while relief maps and tactile pathways, necessary to make spaces accessible to students with blindness or low vision, are present in only 1,2% of schools.

32. The second dimension of inclusion investigated concerns the role of the learning support teacher and other professional figures: in fact in addition to the technological and structural resources of the school, inclusion is also based on the presence of professional figures who accompany the students with disabilities in their school career.
33. On this aspect, the survey highlights:
 - The availability of qualified teachers and other professional figures for support;
 - Number of learning support teacher assigned later
 - Number of learning support teacher deepen their knowledge by attending training courses on inclusive education
 - Continuity of the teacher-pupil relationship.
34. In particular, in the 2022/20223 school year, there are almost 228 thousand learning support teachers in Italian schools. At national level the student-teacher ratio is better than this provided by Law 244/2007 (two students each teacher for support) with a value of 1.6. Of these, it is possible to know how many are specialised in support, how many were assigned late (12%) and how many deepen their knowledge by attending training courses on inclusive teaching (8% of school with no teachers who attended courses).
35. Another important aspect of this dimension is the continuity of the relationship between learning support teachers and students: in order to carry out education according to a logic of progressive development, there must not be frequent changes of teachers. In the last school year, the proportion of pupils who changed support teachers compared to the previous year was 60%. In these cases, it is difficult for teachers to establish a relationship of trust with students and to carry out their work within a broader educational project aimed at inclusion and the enhancement of specific aptitudes.
36. The third dimension observed is the role played by technology as a “facilitator” in the process of school inclusion. In this case, the survey detects:
 - Technology and learning tools/learning materials available
 - The aids provided to pupils with disabilities by the school to facilitate the learning process
 - The utilisation of braille/SL(sign language) for blind/deaf pupils (art. 24.3 UNCRPD)
 - The satisfaction about the aims
 - The unfulfilled needs.
37. In Italy, one out of four schools has fewer computers suitable for students with disabilities than are needed. Furthermore, there are various aids provided by the school to pupils with disabilities to facilitate the learning process: the survey reveals that the most used are IT and multimedia devices for personalising teaching and educational software for learning, used respectively by 41% and 31% of students. Among the available indicators there are also levels of user satisfaction for some aspects of inclusion: for example, teaching aids are adequate for 92% of students, 7% of students do not have aids, but they would need them. The most lacking aids are computer systems for reading and studying (15% of students do not have them) and software that supports basic skills development.

38. Teacher training in specific educational technologies for pupils with disabilities is also investigated. Only one school out of four (24%) have all teachers that had attended at least one course, in 8% of schools no learning support teacher has ever participated a specific training course for the use of these technologies. Also, the use of these tools by learning support teachers is not very widespread: only in half of the schools all teachers use technology to support inclusive teaching; in the rest of the schools the use is limited to a few teachers or completely absent. As the literature on inclusion recommends, training must not exclusively concern learning support teacher, but must also address curricular teachers who must take into account the specific needs of pupils with disabilities when preparing teaching material. However, curricular teachers who, using new technologies, prepare accessible materials are just 7% of the teaching staff.
39. Inclusion is also a process of socialisation and for this reason, the fourth dimension investigated concerns precisely the importance of the relationship with the peer group; interaction takes on a very important value on a relational level, but also on an educational level since the establishment of supportive relationships can represent a further resource for inclusive teaching. For these reasons, the Istat survey detects, as a proxy for the participation of pupils with disabilities in school life:
- The time that they spend in the classroom - with their peer group.
 - The participation in educational trips (including those with an overnight stay).
 - The participation to sport/motor activities.
 - The presence of learning tools out of the classroom (eg. computer workstations suitable for inclusion).
40. It would be useful that all the activity with the learning support teacher would take place in the classroom together with the peers. Students with disabilities spend most of their time within the class (28 hours per week) and carry out teaching activities outside the classroom only for a residual number of hours (3 hours per week). However, if the student has serious limitations, the number of teaching hours spent outside the classroom increases considerably (7 hours per week).
41. In some cases, it may be the school's organisation that hampers this aspect of inclusion. Computer workstations adapted for integration, for example, are not always located in the classroom (52% of schools) but in specific support classrooms or in dedicated laboratories; this forces students with disabilities to have to separate themselves from the class group in case they need technological support for educational purposes.
42. Participation in short educational trips (without overnight stay) organised by the school is quite frequent (87%). When educational trips include overnight stays, participation becomes less frequent: 32% of students with disabilities stay at home. The main reason is related to the disability condition for both types of trip (19% and 31% respectively). 52% of students with disabilities do not participate in extra-didactic activities. In contrast, participation in physical activities is widespread: 92% of students with disabilities.
43. The last dimension analysed concerns the ability to create a network around the child with difficulties. Sharing the individual pupils' didactic and educational project with their families is important in order to acquire precious information on the pupil and to ensure continuity between the school curriculum and those of other life contexts.
44. For this reason, the indicators used concern:
- the number and frequency of meetings between families and teachers;

- participation of families and specialists in the drafting of individualised educational plans.
45. Fifty-five per cent of the families of the students with disabilities have less than one meeting per month with the curricular teachers out of the Working Group for Inclusion (GLI), while a considerable proportion of families (21%) do not have any meetings. More frequent are the meetings between family members and the learning support teacher, which for 17% of families take place more than once a month. Family involvement is also very frequent in the drafting of the Individualised Educational Plan (IEP), in fact it occurs for 90% of pupils. The IEP is the fundamental tool for enabling each pupil to participate fully in school life by realising his or her potential. Hence, it is essential that it be drawn up in collaboration also with the specialists of the reference ASL, who participate in 61% of cases, and with territorial specialists (such as communication assistants or psycho-pedagogists) present in 39% of cases.

V. Conclusion

46. Research on the conditions that facilitate school inclusion emphasises the importance of investigating not so much the characteristics of students with difficulties, but the attitudes and skills of the teachers working in those contexts. It is, therefore, essential to focus on the social and material conditions, technologies and human relations that contribute to the increase of accessibility and inclusiveness of school contexts (Romano, 2023).
47. For these reasons, the Istat survey focuses on the various aspects of inclusion, with particular attention to the evolution of the phenomenon. This has allowed us, for example, to adapt the survey to the pandemic period, i.e. to promptly include, during the Covid-19 pandemic, questions capable of detecting the aspects of inclusion in a new context such as that related to distance learning. Finally, the use of the ICF, as the battery of questions included in the survey, allows us to have a wider reading key, which highlights the students' characteristics not because of the certifications that label their condition, but of their real "functioning" within the school context.

VI. References

- Balint Nela T., Adam I. (2019), *The Dimensions of Inclusion in the Context of Cultural and Educational Diversity*, Gymnasium -Scientific Journal of Education, Sports, and Health , XX, vol.2.
- Cottini L. (2017), *Didattica speciale e inclusione scolastica*, Carocci, Roma.
- Genova A. (2023), *Disabilità. Tra barriere istituzionali e violenza simbolica*, Il Mulino, Bologna.
- Ianes D., Dremo H., Dell'Anna S. (2020), *Inclusive education in Italy: Historical steps, positive developments and challenges*, Prospect 117, 2020 - 49:249–263.
- Istat (2023), *L'inclusione scolastica degli alunni con disabilità a.s. 2022/2023*.
- Nes, Demo and Ianes, (2017) *Inclusion at risk? Push- and pull-out phenomena in inclusive school systems: the Italian and Norwegian experiences*, International Journal of Inclusive Education

Romano A. (2023), *Prospettive trasformative per lo sviluppo professionale degli insegnanti di sostegno. Condizioni per apprendere dall'esperienza*, in D'Alonzo et al. (a cura di), *Didattica speciale per l'inclusione: prospettive innovative*, Franco Angeli, Milano.

United Nation (2006), *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.

UNESCO (2019), *Cali commitment to equity and inclusion in education*, International Forum on Inclusion and Equity in Education, Cali, Colombia, 2019.

UNESCO (1994), *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*, World Conference on Special Needs Education: Access and Quality, Salamanca, Spain, 1994.

WHO (2001) *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health*.