

Who's listening to students' voices?

The need for enhancing inclusive learning environments in lower secondary schools through learning to learn teaching approach

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Although the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO 1994) recognized the urgency of guaranteeing the education for all children through inclusive learning environments, there are still many difficulties in creating classes which are truly inclusive (Nilholm 2020). These difficulties seem due to the occurrence of different meanings of the word "inclusion" (Barton 1997; Slee 2011; Lindqvist, Nilholm 2014; Magnusson 2019). On another side, it is necessary to consider that inclusion is a complex and multidimensional subject and every country has specific legislation in this respect (Artiles, Kozleski 2007). Some studies showed, also, that peers with a typical development could have negative behaviors towards schoolmates with disabilities, hindering the creation of a serene atmosphere during classes (de Boer, Pijl, Minnaert 2012; Bates et alii 2015; Roberts, Simpson 2016).

Different studies underline the importance of peer education in enhancing an inclusive learning environment, with very positive results for pupils with emotional and behavioural disorders and students with learning difficulties (De Vroey, Struyf, Petry 2016; Kaya, Blake, Chan 2015; Reichrath, de Witte, Winkens 2010). Peer education combined with co-teaching strategies (Fluijt, Bakker, Struyf 2016; Giangreco, Suter, Doyle 2010) could help to gain the goal of social participation (Bossaert et alii 2013; Koster et alii 2009). Many studies seem to agree about the key role of teaching strategies in improving inclusion (de Boer, Pijl, Minnaert 2010, 2011, 2012; Qi, Ha 2012; Armstrong 2014; Theoharis, Causton 2014).

It is very interesting to underline that there are lots of studies that remark the importance of considering the students' point of view and stress a lack of investigation about this issue (Göransson, Nilholm 2014; Messiou 2017). This issue seems to be relevant now more than ever. Indeed, the COVID 19 pandemic showed the difficulties in ensuring the continuity of education for children with syndromes, mental health problems (Lee 2020), learning disabilities and in poor circumstances. Although the Italian Constitution guarantees the right of education (Art. 34 "free access to education for all, without any discrimination"), the COVID 19 pandemic showed that the disparities in distance learning could invalidate the goal of maintaining an inclusive learning environment. Now, another aspect to be considered is that 12,4% of

the Italian children don't own a personal computer and 41, 9% of children live in overcrowded places. At last, a worrying statistic is that two out of every three adolescents have poor digital competences (ISTAT April 6, 2020). The next years will be challenging for schools and probably it will be necessary to rethink the traditional school activities and to pay attention to inclusion and diversity for encouraging new strategies in learning. The uncertain future gives us the opportunity to understand how to integrate two models of teaching: face-to-face and distance learning, expanding the research field starting with the issue that Messiou (2017) underlines: where are students' voices?

I believe that the main focus of post COVID-19 researchers in education should be the relation between teaching strategies and models for inclusive education, focusing on implementing metacognitive abilities and the recognition of emotions involved in learning processes in preadolescents.

It may be important enhance action-research projects: after collecting data that could show critical issues but also strengths in this situation of emergency, the aim is to set up an educational intervention. Planning new learning actions and strategies, indeed, can give information about the hypothetical improvement of learning skills with the help of teaching programs aiming at enhancing inclusion.

I want to identify some issues which must be addressed:

Pre-adolescence and lower secondary school as a target, a choice that has a definite innovative side. Preadolescence can last up to the age of 12-15 years and the development of the human brain – especially the prefrontal cortex, which is extremely involved in decision-making and risk assessment processes (Ammaniti 2010) – covers the entire growth span, beyond the age of 20 (Giedd et alii 1999). In the literature, indeed, there seems to be an empty space of investigation on that precise period of time that are the years of middle school, the delicate passage between childhood and proper adolescence, starting from recognizing the identity of these precise group of people. It is fundamental to recognize pre-adolescents as a category of main interlocutors because they are digital natives and they use technologies daily, with a better expertise than most of their teachers and parents. At the same time, as we have seen, during preadolescence, students are in the process of developing cognitive processes – such as impulse control, planning abilities and the analysis of feedback (Nelson et alii 2005; Sowell et alii 2002) – and therefore they strongly need support by teachers and caregivers. The relation with learning environments, inside and outside school, has a strong effect on brain development (Greenough, Black 1992; Siegel 1999) The role of emotions in the learning process. Indeed, emotions influence the cognitive operations and our behaviors and they are involved in developing of learning strategies, modulating attention and motivation (Tyng et alii 2017). It is also demonstrated that the introduction of emotionally information into learning environment can help exploring the relation between learning strategies and elaboration of emotions (Kearney et alii 2013);

The importance of the “learning to learn” competence, allowing the shifting of the research aims from training to the development of metacognitive competences. The traditional teaching paradigm is based on the assumption that a person more qualified in terms of knowledge is invested with the role of teacher towards a group of less qualified people. Here the role of the teacher is conceived as the one of transmitting knowledge. This paradigm has worked for a long time in the school system and has rarely been questioned. A metacognitive approach could help in putting to the center of attention all students' needs regardless of learning difficulties or childhood deprivation. The development of students' new skills can be supported by the mediation role of teachers.

The role of technologies in learning and creating an inclusive learning environment. There are many studies that show the positive effect of digital tools on developing learning abilities (Açıkalın 2009;

Herron 2010; Lin, Yang 2011), increasing collaboration and helping to create a positive sense of community (Miller 2011; Coffey 2012). At the same time, there are also many risks, such as cyberbullying. Indeed, the 2015 ISTAT report about cyberbullying in Italy shows this interesting data: preadolescents seem to be more vulnerable than adolescents. The 7% of preadolescents (11-13) has been victim of cyberbullying rather than 5,2% of adolescents (14-17).

Currently, as far as the school is concerned, the situation in Italy is still unpredictable and no one knows how the situation will evolve until the distribution of COVID-19 vaccine. For these reasons, a metacognitive approach may be fully flexible and versatile, as widely known in the scientific literature (Perry, Lundie, Golder 2019), especially as regard preadolescents group. Currently, the majority of studies support the applicability of a metacognitive approach to every learning areas not only to logical-mathematical disciplines, as originally envisaged (Mannion, Mercer 2016; Zohar, Barzilai 2013; Perry, Albeg, Tung 2012). It is desirable to build research projects to provide supporting data about metacognition and learning in Italian school system. At the same time, focusing on metacognition could give researchers information about the relation between learning to learn approach and performance, with the aim of supporting encouraging data collected (Veenman, Wilhelm Beishuizen 2004; Hattie 2013) and evaluating if the sense of self-efficacy will increase (Stankov, Morony, Lee 2014).

According to literature, it is not possible to determine a causal relationship between metacognition and increase of learning abilities (Muijs et alii 2014; Georghiades 2004), but involving many students, measuring performances in a reasonable spare of time and, most of all, developing good practices would help to give an impetus to discussion about the benefits of the metacognitive learning (Perry et alii 2019). It can also be assumed that metacognitive abilities increase thanks to peer education activities during classes. Furthermore, peer education can give students with learning difficulties a sense of inclusion and belonging.

I strongly believe that a learning to learn approach – promoted by cooperation and creativity during classes – may emphasize students’ point of view and open up a new and full of potential area of research.

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