



INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (IECE) PROJECT

EXAMPLE OF IECE PROVISION: ITALY (2 OF 2)

1. Abstract

Quality criteria

1. An inclusive Italian school does not provide special classes for children with disabilities, but instead promotes inclusion as early as kindergarten, even though education is not compulsory at this point.
2. The kindergarten is presented as a place of inclusion as it receives children of different ages with different needs, which by law must all reach the same goals:
 - Develop the prerequisites for transition to primary school;
 - Establish emotional and affective relationships with peers and adults;
 - Adapt behaviour to class routines;
 - Develop positive social behaviours.
3. The kindergarten is inclusive in the activities it performs, it welcomes diversity and provides support through a collaborative teaching team (class teacher, specialist teacher, all school staff) which in turn encourages child participation and individual development.
4. The provision for inclusion is based on national standards that define how disability is identified, allow the implementation of necessary provision and certify all children with special educational needs (SEN).
5. An individual education plan (IEP) is created by the teaching team of class teachers and teaching support, modelled on the curriculum. The path to inclusion in accordance with national provisions follows this process:
 - Asperger's syndrome is diagnosed (21 July 2014) and certified by the TSMREE (Mental Health Protection and Developmental Rehabilitation Service) neuropsychiatrist, with diagnosis code ICD10 F84.5 (International Statistical Classification of Diseases).
 - A certificate is issued by the INPS (National Social Security Institute) medical commission on 14 October 2014, recognising entitlement to the conditions of law L104/92, article 3, paragraph 3, which determines the need for public bodies to assist disabled people who require specific care and intervention.



- School inclusion certificate gives entitlement to support staff.
- In mid-July 2014, the educational institution requests the maximum number of hours of support allowed by law from the USR (Lazio Regional Education Office).
- At the start of the 2014/2015 academic year, the USR awards the middle level of support (12.5 hours per week, 1:2 child to teacher ratio).

The inclusion process is then applied as follows:

- The head teacher identifies and co-ordinates instrumental roles in the POF (academic plan), managing available class teachers, faculty support and AEC (municipal teaching assistant), assigning them to different tasks and to specific SEN cases and chairing various committees.
- The Inclusion Working Group consists of: head teacher, instrumental roles in the academic plan for inclusion and support, neuropsychiatrist, ASL (local health authority) co-ordinator, parents, teachers, curriculum and faculty support, local authorities, representatives of the AEC (cultural educational assistance programme), public and private associations. This group has the task of examining special needs education situations (disabled according to law L104, article 3, paragraphs 1 or 3; specific learning difficulties, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, borderline intellectual functioning, socio-culturally disadvantaged foreigners) and the action plan for their inclusion. At the end of the academic year the group processes the annual inclusion plan which indicates actions for the implementation of the inclusion process undertaken by the school.
- The GLHO (disability working group) holds meetings to develop and monitor the IEP for each pupil with disabilities. It is made up of representatives including the head teacher, parents, the class team, ASL operators and operators of private centres, AEC educational assistants.

The head teacher co-ordinates the roles that are instrumental to the POF (supply-side training) including those responsible for inclusion and support. These individuals then support specialist employees who supervise classes where there are children with learning difficulties and other special needs. They also develop, collect and archive documents and promote activities and objectives aimed at developing the personality of the children with SEN. The on-going IEP monitors the child's physical and cognitive development and allows for targeted intervention in the most deficient areas, allowing for the development of a holistic curriculum.

6. The team involved in the project consists of the curriculum faculty and support staff. In the Italian school system support teachers have a degree in primary



education specialising in support activities (specialist education, developmental psychopathology, neuropsychiatry, psychology of disability and rehabilitation, specialist teaching methods and learning), which supports the teaching curriculum and keeps up to date with developments in special education.

7. The family is active, conscious and co-operative in the project and is involved in the training process.
8. The child is expected to continue the training from kindergarten to primary school, through the active exchange of information between teachers and the participation of children in primary school workshops with exchanges of activities and materials.
9. Local agencies, such as the local health authority, city hall, accredited hospitals and other local organisations, support the school and family throughout diagnosis and rehabilitation.
10. The head teacher promotes and drives the processes of inclusion by co-ordinating the teaching staff (teachers and support teachers) and non-teaching staff (administrative staff, other school staff, AEC), facilitating contact with the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, University and Research), local government agencies and private institutions and meeting teachers' training needs to ensure they are professional and up to date. The head teacher also implements the plans laid out in the new 'Good School' reform approved in July 2015, with special attention to paragraph 181c, which provides compulsory initial and in-service training for managers and teachers on the pedagogical-didactic and organisational aspects of inclusive education and provides flexibility of the curriculum for each student through family feedback.
11. Through the RAV (self-assessment and evaluation report) the educational institution is, over time, able to confirm the course of action on the route to inclusion and allows the problem to be overcome.

2. Inclusive features

The child's road to inclusion started in the 2013/2014 academic year.

The 3-year-old child followed the normal entry route into kindergarten, that is, without any indication of disability from the family. The child's class was composed of 20 children aged between three and five, who attended kindergarten for the standard 30 hours per week.

On only the second day of school, the teacher noticed stereotyped and repetitive behaviour, which increased over the following days. The teacher decided to carry



out a systemic observation, noting all of the child's abnormal behaviour, which allowed the teacher to confirm that this child was different to the others.

In October, the teacher contacted the child's parents who proved co-operative and aware of the problems exposed, but also faced a situation that they did not know how to handle. The educational institution advised them to have a medical evaluation and diagnosis, which resulted in the recognition of disability, through the steps indicated in point 5 above.

Early diagnosis and early intervention can limit the social and educational effects of a disability in school. If not recognised in good time it can also inhibit progress, with the child bypassing the ordinary curriculum of all other learners. Targeted work in kindergarten reduces care interventions, which is critical throughout school education.

The process of inclusion for the child had begun. The diagnostic process was complete, the specialist teacher was in place (see point 6) and the team started observing, drawing up an individual plan which, in valuing diversity, has transformed the strengths of the learning process.

As a result of various innovations in schools (point 10), the head teacher started to experiment with specific inclusive education training for teachers. A series of training sessions on the subject were held, led by an Executive Officer from the IV Ministry of Education, who also attended other schools in the municipality school network, which this institution leads.

3. Inclusive highlight

From these sessions the teachers have developed a horizontal curriculum for all learners. An IEP was developed, of which the pilot project for inclusive education naturally became a part, in addition to the observations, techniques, inputs and the use of TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children) to improve the child's environment. The doors of learning were opened, and through the PAPEC (Plan para la Aplicación de la Prosocialidad en Escuelas de Catalunya) methodology soft skills and peer emotions have improved, thus establishing an inclusive environment.

In particular, the above activities have strongly motivated the young pupil to work, resulting in better behaviour control. The other children have also benefited from the individual plan, adjusted to their needs.

The following have been used to channel the behaviour and stereotypes of the child:



- Songs
- Stories
- Manipulation activities
- Psycho-motor activities
- Watercolours.

These methods were used in the late morning or afternoon, before the various curricular activities in which the child often displayed unsuitable behaviour. A song preceded the activity and was used to calm the learners. It particularly relaxed the specific child, which allowed the child to be integrated into the class ready for the subsequent teaching.

The watercolour was both cathartic and motivational, awarded as a prize for good work.

The initial concern was that the project may neglect the class group as the teacher's attention was focused on the child and others who presented problems. On the contrary, it soon became clear that these activities helped all learners to build and strengthen their self-esteem, allowing for a holistic and harmonious personal development. Once fully included in the class, the child's behaviour was under control and the stereotypes almost disappeared.

The current 2015/2016 academic year will be critical to the child's path, but a foundation has been laid for a future in which inclusion is possible for all children.

In conclusion, the IEP and the aforementioned experimental project on inclusion, combined into a 'life plan' for the child, had several values:

- it allowed for the understanding of the child's cognition and perception;
- it helped to define, develop and plan learning activities based on harmonious personal development;
- it favoured peaceful and co-ordinated class management.

In the European Inclusion guidelines, based on the new classification used to define disability, there is talk of environmental action for the better functioning of the whole person. As such, the IEP this year will be based on ways to change the environment and to take action on class reports to develop a harmonious and inclusive environment.

The desired outcome is that children from kindergarten are ready to face the next stage of education, with adequate tools and reduced operational problems related to disability.



4. Other evidence of quality IECE

- There is external recognition when a child is able to access facilities and agencies outside the school. Even non-disabled children sometimes fail to reach secondary schools, gain access to universities, find jobs or their place in society. This is why the United Nations and current Italian laws put special emphasis on the language of disability and the 'life plan'.
- The example of inclusion given is to be extended to all grades of school and family. This case shows that children with different needs can improve their performance, attention spans and interpersonal skills.
- The most important qualities in staff taking part in inclusion projects are the ability to collaborate, to know how to co-ordinate, to be targeted and specific, and to keep their knowledge and best practices up to date. Agencies with relevant skills should take part.
- The school must initiate and co-ordinate the process of inclusion. The first opportunity for inclusion that parents of children with special needs receive is the school. The school staff with its expertise may be able to identify issues that parents cannot see. Collaboration can then begin early, as the school has relationships with local authorities, agencies appointed to the recognition of special educational needs, communities that welcome school children, bodies involved in rehabilitation and specific associations that give valuable information and operational guidance to educators.
- The last and most important quality characteristic of this IECE is that the process centres on the children and their own needs, peculiarities and potential, transforming all forms of diversity, disadvantage and possible weakness into strength.

The high-functioning child has been a valued member of the class and will be for years to come. The child's skills and knowledge will be well-used in his future employment.

Autism is seen as creating difficulties when it comes to effective communication and functional use of skills. However, the fact that the child described above reads his class of 4- and 5-year-olds stories and fairy tales and completes many activities bodes well for a future in which diversity is viewed as personal wealth and an appreciation of individual personality.

The head teacher

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