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**From the person to the learning environment, through an ecological social human approach. The IEP as a real planning tool to promote inclusive education through multiple pluralistic proposals<sup>1</sup>**

**Dall'individuo ai contesti attraverso un approccio umano, sociale ed ecologico. Il PEI come strumento reale di progettazione per promuovere l'educazione inclusiva, attraverso molteplici proposte plurali**

*di*

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**Abstract:**

According to the current lines of contemporary research, the aim of the framework of inclusive education is to respond to the diversity and learning differences of all students, through a different environmental organization for everyone. The IEP can represent an extremely important educational

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<sup>1</sup> The article is the result of research and reflection shared by the two authors, specifically the introduction, paragraphs 1 and 2 were written by Elena Malaguti, paragraphs 3 and 4 by Maria Antonietta Augenti. The conclusions from both authors.

and teaching planning tool to start an inclusion learning process with individual proposals and flexible environment. In this paper we will suggest describing how, in our view, the IEP, with ecological and a bio-psycho-social approach, can become a real tool for observation, planning and development of inclusive processes. We would like to highlight, how an inclusive learning environment is based on the use of multiple teaching, different educational methodologies for learning's need of students.

**Keywords:** IEP, Disability, Bio-social-psycho perspective, inclusive learning environment

**Abstract:**

Secondo le attuali linee di ricerca contemporanee, la cornice dell'inclusione educativa si pone la finalità di rispondere alle diversità e differenze di apprendimento dei singoli allievi, attraverso l'organizzazione di ambienti tesi ad accogliere tutti. Il Progetto Educativo Individualizzato può divenire un potente strumento per avviare processi di inclusione che intrecciano proposte mirate in relazione a quelle dei contesti. In questo articolo, descriveremo come, a nostro avviso, il Pei secondo un approccio bio-psico-sociale ed uno ecologico può divenire uno strumento concreto di osservazione, pianificazione e realizzazione di processi inclusivi. In particolare, si illustrerà come la costruzione di un ambiente di apprendimento inclusivo sia determinato da scelte formative, didattiche e metodologiche che rispondano alle istanze di tutti e di ciascuno.

**Parole chiave:** PEI, disabilità, approccio bio-psico-sociale, ambiente di apprendimento inclusivo

## 1. Introduction

Since the 21st century, the theoretical and methodological framework related to disability issues has profoundly changed and expanded. Fundamental indications for rethinking the perspectives and projects underlying individualized educational planning (IEP), according to the perspective of inclusive education, based on the bio-psycho-social and the ecological approach, are provided by national and international guidelines and researches such as those of the United Nations (UNESCO, 2017; ONU, 2016; United Nations, 2015), of the European Union (EU 2009, 2017), the World Health Organization (OMS, ICF, 2007;) and Save the Children (2021). In the different countries of the world, there are situations where the processes of exclusion, integration and inclusion are denied and where the difficulty of their implementation remains (European Commission, 2014). The inclusion framework should become clear inside the organization, to avoid the risk of creating inconsistencies between stated assumptions and actual practices in contexts. The concept of inclusive education and social inclusion refer for reflection on the role attributed to culture and the structuring of different systems (social contexts, schools, services, institutions, etc.) in their relationship with the lives of people (Ainscow, Sandill, 2010). Estimates derived from international documents reveal that people with disabilities make up around 15% of the global population - over a billion people - and this number is expected to double to 2 billion by 2050 (WHO, 2011). There are an estimated 93–150 million children with disabilities around the world (UNICEF, 2021; Save the Children, 2021). Children with disabilities are more prone to experience discrimination, exclusion, violence, stigma,

abuse and neglect. They are three times more likely to be underweight and twice as likely to suffer from stunting and wasting (Barrantes, 2020). They are often deprived of appropriate care, education, healthcare, play and recreation and participation in their communities. They are also at much higher risk of violence, abuse, exploitation and infanticide. Disability in intersection with gender and other aspects of an individual's identity and circumstances often further marginalizes already excluded children. Implementing the Sustainable Development Goal requires putting in place an inclusive education system. This demands structural measures across all educational levels that relate to all of the SDG targets and the principles and provisions of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN, 2006). For Italy, it is a question of orienting interventions by placing them within a perspective that is not only local but national, European and international.

## **2. From the individual to contexts: a complex idea of a human being**

From a neurobiological point of view, the development of the human being depends on a certain socio-cultural context, with a historical genealogy, with a specific reality. In the human being, development is triggered by innate biological components (of genetic origin), but it can only be brought to completion through a long learning process that requires a social-relational context to be implemented (Galanti MA, Sales B, 2017). The incipit of this article arises, therefore, by clarifying a question that, in Italy and in Europe, seems obvious, but in the contests does not always seem to be or does not seem to be treated with due attention when preparing to design an individualized educational planning (IEP), according to the inclusive education prospective, to try to understand how today it can become a real concrete tool for the implementation of inclusion processes. The Italian Inclusive System dates back to the 1970s and involve in regular classes, also, students with disabilities (physical, sensory, and intellectual or developmental disabilities) or with special needs or with specific learning disabilities (dyslexia, dysorthography, dyscalculia, etc.). The steps that characterized it, by agreement in the scientific community, evolved in a continuum that moved from processes of exclusion (up to the 1950s) of medicalization (between 1960 and 1970), of insertion (from 1971 to 1977), of integration (from 1977 to the 2000s) up to the current prospective of educational inclusion in the school and social area (from the 2000s to today and beyond). The process of inclusive education and social inclusion lends itself to being investigated according to Bocci (2021) in a dynamic way, placing synchronic aspects (linear and ordered in specific areas and stages) in dialogue with the diachronic ones (analysis of the process in its entirety). The connections between the model underlying inclusive education and the integration model promoted in Italy since the beginning of those years are manifold: they refer, in today's scientific and cultural landscape, however, to two complementary but not superimposable actions. The integration construct required a commitment that concerns the improvement of the dynamics of adaptation between the individual subject and the proximal context (Canevaro, 2013). Despite the enormous efforts made, in Italy, in underlining that disability is the result of a dynamic, multidirectional and complex interaction with the environment (Severi 1986; Zanelli 1990; Canevaro 1986, 1999), the perspective of integration has not only been achieved in an uneven way, but has referred to the framework law on handicap (Law n.104 of 5 February 1992), based on a medical model with a compensatory and deterministic approach (WHO, ICDH, 1980). Above all, we owe to Andrea Canevaro (2010), the commitment to

always focus on the recognition of differences, of the plurality of identities and not only on the deficit (impairment), to implement a dialogic process which, at least in Italy, has made it possible to achieve the current concept of educability for all (EFA 2015; Nota & Soresi, 2017). From the education perspective, the Italian integration approach, was understood as an active process, which had to involve all the members of a group and all the elements of a context. Special pedagogy and didactic, whose foundations are historically based on the dynamic interaction between people with disabilities and proximal contexts, has underlined a vision not only disabling and based on the concept of need but on the detection of abilities, adopting a language that therefore, it grasps the resource through using targeted methodologies and tools. The passage from the term "integration" to that of "inclusion" constitutes a signal, an indicator of a path that is taking place, in existence and in progress. These are two different approaches, in which one does not exclude the other, which have different roots. Inclusive education proposes a perspective that provides for a change of the principal paradigm about it (from the individual to the contexts) and through using teaching methodologies and tools capable of responding, basically, to the needs of all individual students, even those with disabilities. These principles shift the founding structure of individualized educational planning: from linear and causal models to multifactorial and multimodal models. Furthermore, the Italian legislation, together with the founding contribution of special pedagogy, clearly indicates that there is no parallel and separate curriculum for pupils with disabilities, but instead there is an IEP, with the function of building points of contact (Cottini, 2011, p.32), a "hinge" between everyone's curriculum and the specific needs of children and young people with disabilities (Chiappetta Cajola, 2007). The Legislative Decree n. 66/2017 and its subsequent amendments through Legislative Decree n. 96/2019, as well as the Decree n. 182 of 2021, introduced, for the entire country, the idea of an IEP based on the bio-psycho-social perspective of the human functioning, underlying the ICF (WHO, 2001). The World Health Organization, with the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (2001; 2007) has promoted a multidimensional vision of health and human functioning. The ICF model (WHO, 2001) considers as a central element the concept of health, which represents an ideal that no individual experiences in a complete way, since, the human being, in different moments of his existence, can manifest difficulties in certain dimensions of its "functioning", capable of making the process of social participation complex. The term "bio-psycho-social" highlights how human functioning is the result of rich and complex interactions of the individual elements that characterize the person (biological and innate) with elements of one's life context, which can facilitate or make it difficult to a person to carry out personal activities or participating in different social situations (Ianes, Demo, 2021). The reflection on the contribution of this vision to individualized planning for pupils with disabilities, as outlined above, has a much longer tradition in Italian pedagogical approach (Ianes and Cramerotti, 2009; Chiappetta Cajola, 2015; Lascioli 2018; Cottini 2011) which has led, in 2008, the recognition of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF, 2001), in its specific version for childhood and adolescence (OMS, 2007) that is a theoretical background for the Operating profile (PDF) and IEP, in agreement to the State-Regions. The bio-psycho-social approach is linked, in the contemporary panorama, to the Quality of Life (QdV) model (Verdugo, Navas, Gómez, & Schalock, 2014). The concept of quality of life (QdV) can represent a valid reference point for guiding and addressing the various contributions on capability

approach, advocacy, self-determination, on the ICF (WHO, 2001) and on the model of skills from a pedagogical and didactic perspective. In this sense, according to Cottini (2021, p.32) the construct should be the goal of any intervention and the parameter by which to verify its effectiveness and efficiency. The perspective of inclusive education, alongside a biopsychosocial approach, proposes an ecological-social model that aims to consider multiple dimensions and analysis plans (UNESCO, 2017). It starts from a complex idea of a human being that grows and evolves in relation to their living environments where the improvement perspective, referring to individual needs, is related to the reorganization of contexts. From this point of view the report produced by the International Disability Alliance (2020) inclusive is significant, which shows: [...] considers inclusive education as an ingredient of social transformation, which can lead to societies that better embrace the diversity of their citizens. Responding to both the schooling and learning crises, inclusive education systems contribute to future generations greater ability to embrace diversity and achieve gender equality, to promote sustainable development, peace and non-violence, and to develop a wider range of skills required in future economies. Inclusive education is the only way to achieve SDG for all children - including children with disabilities - whomever and wherever they are. Inclusion is not a placement, but rather an experience with a sense of belonging. Inclusive education requires an educational transformation, with accessibility to enable full participation; it is not an add-on to existing education systems [...] (Inclusive Education Global Report, p.11). From an educational point of view, it is a perspective that undertakes to grasp a global vision of the person that consider the intersection with multiple dimensions of identity, such as those relating to gender and the cultural one. This perspective contemplates also the interconnections between relative functional aspects to the peculiar neurobiological condition, placed in relation to the life history of the person and his family, in relation to the organization of the contexts and the kind of support provided. It is therefore a question of a specific duty and commitment, in the educational and social field, which must be assumed when one intends to design and plan educational interventions, pedagogical devices and didactic actions according to an inclusive perspective.

The ecological and social approach on disability rethink the disability construct not only from a medical or social point of view. It precisely contemplates the multiple relational aspect that linked to the peculiar profile of the individual functioning such as the person interacts with the environment, in which the context is designed, and the actors interface with people with disabilities (Malaguti, 2020; European Schoolnet 2022).

The IEP, according to the perspective of inclusive education, based on an ecological approach, should be the result of a joint work in the socio-health (focus on bio-psycho-social approach), educational-didactic and cultural environmental fields based on the perspective of the Life Project. This approach allows us to overcome the individual medical-clinical vision or only the bio-psycho-social vision and outlines new ways to understand the person in relation to the environments and contexts in which they live. For this reason, the IEP should be drafted by different actors who manage the project through the active engagement of the student with disability and their family and the multiple relation in the environment. A fundamental assumption to design an IEP is that an inclusive system cannot exist if actions of convergence and collaboration are not promoted among the whole community, recognizing the benefits and repercussions for everyone involved. According to this view, the teachers



in articulating the IEP project should be planning it, in interaction with the planning of the school and the pedagogical context through multiple and active methodology of teaching.

The bio-psycho-social perspective that underlies the Quality of Life Model (QdV), and the Ecological Social and Human approach that underlies the right to education and a transformative perspective of contexts, are not to be read in opposite directions. These are two approaches that aim at improving a sustainable Life Project of people with disabilities which, on the one hand, follow the evolution of the perspective of health, on the other, a conception of inclusion as a device for rethinking the school as a “pedagogical agora” (Goussot, 2015). The latter approach considers learning and the teaching-learning process, not the result of personal characteristics but of complex systemic and contextual interactions. An individualized educational planning (IEP) should be link also with the interactions of other living environments: social, cultural, organizational of the person with disabilities, to strive for a sustainable Life Project.

### **3. Possible inclusive dimensions of the IEP**

In order to make the concept of quality of life interact with an inclusive perspective and an ecological social approach, some aspects must be kept in mind. In the first place, planning inclusion, welcoming an IEP in interaction with the environment, involves an overall planning of the learning contexts, and does not refer only to the single individualized educational project. Secondly, the future design directions should move along two main axes, or areas of intervention, linked and jointly designed. The first, the implementation of targeted and specific interventions, for the improvement of the individual skills of the student and his family, also according to the approach of skills and capability, considering the interactions between students and the suggestions made to the school by external experts. The second is the analysis and planning of educational environments, also through the identification of possible mediators (tools, material, technologies, cultural and human resources) useful for improving the learning of each child, in synergy with the actors and resources of the territory (social, health, cultural), also in order to promote a real inclusive educational community, making students and parents active protagonists (Malaguti, 2017). In this perspective, the area of the IEP dedicated to the context and, more specifically, to the recognition of barriers and facilitators of the school environment and the activation of strategies for the construction of an inclusive environment, are central to the IEP on inclusive education approach. If we read this section through the principles and guidelines of *Universal Design for Learning*, and from the studies of the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST, 2011; Cottini 2011,) through the three fundamental principles of intervention (1- provide multiple means of representation ; 2- provide multiple means of action and expression; 3- provide multiple means of involvement), we can grasp the change of gaze and perspective in this new model of IEP. In order to address the planning of the IEP, therefore, it becomes necessary to transform the school community assessment, the teaching methods and the learning environments to respond to the interest and preference of each student and their right to an effective education process. From this point of view, the initial inclusive education training of teachers and support teachers, in their curriculum is fundamental. If the teacher uses collaborative and inclusive teaching, with a co-teaching, they could become the fundamental reference for each student and for the group, the teacher guides the student through research the learning processes of

knowledge and skills that involve different times and ways of setting the relationship between teachers and students. In this vision, the management of a heterogeneous class involves a global reorganization not only about the relationship between teachers, including support, and student with disability but with the reorganization of policy, culture, and practices (spaces, materials, methodology, tools) of the school based on inclusive pedagogical and didactic perspective.

The idea of the new IEP model on a bio-psycho-social approach, proposed in the Interministerial Decree n. 182 of 2020, introduces the synthesis in four dimensions in which the activity of a person develops:

1. Dimension of Socialization and Interaction
2. Dimension of Communication and Language
3. Size of Autonomy and Orientation
4. Cognitive, Neuropsychological and Learning Dimension

These dimensions, even if the model was rejected by the Regional Administrative Court (with sentence no. 9795 of 14 September 2021), can still be considered basic concept in the construction of an IEP that promote a path of inclusion by "the all-school community ". In the transition from integration to inclusion, these dimensions become fundamental elements of educational-didactic planning for the creation of a *learning environment* that responds to the educational needs of each pupil. Observing children based on these four dimensions allows us to highlight the strengths on which to move the didactic-educational action. At the same time, it's fundamental to promote a complex reorganization of the whole school assessment according to the Global Education Guidelines (CE, 2019). The link between the person and the contexts of life, in line with the bio-psycho-social and ecological approach, is investigated and valued here, in relation to the barriers and / or facilitators present within it, which are determined also for the individual performance. This means understanding that the potential of a person does not depend only on his abilities, but above all on the opportunities (facilitators) given by the contexts in which the person lives. In this way, the school design can become a barrier to the learning process, or can promote the potential of pupils with disabilities, for improving their performance, increasing the activities and participation (Lascioli, 2021). On an educational level, the positive action of environmental is a crucial element not only in the life of a student with disabilities but also for all students. The creation of an inclusive environment, without physical and mental barriers, equipped with the necessary aids and full of opportunities, can improve the performance of all. Consequently, an IEP model, based on a bio-psycho-social and ecological approach, which values the individual and the contextual dimension, can become an opportunity not only to reflect on the teaching-learning processes for students with disabilities. It could also become an opportunity to improve the learning success of the whole community.

#### **4. Didactic and methodological innovations for an inclusive school**

An important aspect in the IEP, from a bio-psycho-social and ecological approach, are the sections dedicated to the context and, more specifically, to a planning that focuses on the recognition of barriers and facilitators in the school environment through the development of methodologies that responding to the demands of all students, and also of those who have peculiar learning profiles. In the field of education, the current search is for new approaches and training models to promote a framework of skills that can also be used at the work level, which allow students, even with

disabilities, to accept the challenges of the XXI century (Sterling, 2009; Frisk & Larson, 2011; Jennings and colleagues, 2011; Ferkany & Whyte, 2012). It formed through that student will need completely new skills in addition to traditional skills: broad and interconnectable. Disciplinary knowledge will continue to be important, as prerequisites from which new knowledge is developed. Together with these, it becomes essential to promote a framework of skills that help young people to face social, professional, and human challenges. They correspond to a wide range of skills (sources), including meta-cognitive ones (critical thinking, creative thinking, learning to learn through experience and self-regulation); social and emotional ones (empathy, self-efficacy, flexibility and collaboration, motivation, trust, respect for diversity and cultures of origin); practical and physical skills (use of new technological information and communication devices). The use of different methodologies, tools and the organization of the environment can allow all pupils to be protagonists of their own learning process. Cooperative learning methodology is, for example, one of the best evidence-based strategies known in education, effective for creating a real inclusive context (Murphy et al. 2005; J. Hattie 2009; Bowman-Perrot et al., 2013; Mitchell, 2008, 2014) but in the today's school it is not yet very much using for the teachers. In cooperative learning, each member of the group, with unique and special characteristics, can contribute to everyone's learning, and everyone can become a resource for others. Through this methodological approach, everyone is valued for what he/she can do, and at the same time finds compensation in their partner for what he/she cannot do. In a cooperative learning environment everyone has something to give to others and something to receive, and for this reason it allows to create an equal and real inclusive learning, through the creation of a positive interdependence: "positive interdependence" is to be considered achieved when the members of the group understand that the collaborative relationship that unites them is such that individual success cannot exist without collective success, "The failure of the individual is the failure of the group" (Johnson D. W., Johnson R. T., Holubec E. J., 2015). The didactic choice of using a cooperative approach has a long pedagogical tradition and refers to institutional pedagogy and a co-evolutionary approach to learning (Canevaro, 1988; Vygotskij 1934; Freinet 1963; Buber 1923; Johnson D.W., Johnson R.T. e Holubec E.J. 1996; Dewey J. 1938). The cooperative approach stems from the idea to see the classroom and the school as a laboratory that interacts with local resources, a place where pupils exchange points of view, negotiate meanings, create meaningful shared experiences. In this view, the laboratory is the best way of working that encourages research and planning, involving pupils in thinking, implementing, evaluating activities lived in a shared with others. With laboratory teaching and active methodology of teaching (Dewey J. 1940; Frabboni F., 2004; Luis et al. 2018; Moya et al. 2020), the teacher is a learning mediator, to support pupils to discover their own knowledge. In this way the pupil becomes an active builder of their own knowledge, according to their own learning style and through the use of different intelligences. Through active, multi-perspective and diversified learning, which uses open and reusable materials, simulations and didactic games, the school wants to put pupils in situations of continuous learning, which allow them to learn to argue their thinking, to correct it and to present it to the others, even through personalized methods. This learning context, flexible and with redundant and plural proposals, does not exclude personalized interventions for pupils, which, however, if necessary, will be much simpler to organize, more effective, and if there are possibility, oriented towards a substantial



autonomy in which personalization is no longer a priority. The cooperative approach relates to active teaching methods have the advantage of making the disciplinary contents more current, of promoting knowledge, improving the processes of attention, memory, curiosity, motivation, creativity, favoring the full implementation of the process of education and training.

## 5. Conclusions

Designing an IEP according to the bio-psycho-social and ecological approach can represent an opportunity to rethinking on the practices of inclusion, the role and responsibility of teachers, from a perspective of the right to study, participation, and active citizenship. Even if it is designed for pupils with disabilities, it is not a tool "reserved" only for them. Overcoming this individualistic perspective would allow to undertake processes of change that would affect the school in its complete organization. For this reason, the IEP should not be understood by teachers as a bureaucratic burden, but as a concrete tool for implementing inclusion processes. In the analysis produced in this contribution, it is clear how in today's school, all teachers should be trained on the issues of education and inclusive teaching, and how this becomes an ordinary component of the teaching action of each teacher (European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012; MIUR, 2020). In addition, it is necessary to reflect on the training of the specialized support teacher. The real challenge is the joint work between the support teacher and the curricular teachers. Building an IEP, according to this paradigm, and through the perspective of the inclusion, makes it possible to identify the different areas in the functioning profile of a student, and to take a step forward. The aim is not to connect individual teaching objectives with the class, but emphasizes educational co-responsibility based on the building of contexts, activities, and teaching methods, co-designed with a view to responding to the different functioning profiles in the classrooms. For this reason, the search for organizational, managerial, educational, didactic solutions makes the principle of inclusion effective, experimenting with creative, innovative, plural ways that allow true participation, where the value of difference can be positively considered. The educational community is therefore called, today more than ever, to respond to a challenge that can generate new approaches and experiments, overcoming the logic of only individualized intervention. Here, educational policies, cultures, organizational choices, governance, which establish the concrete realization of these new modalities, become decisive. Today, speaking of inclusion in our country, we should refer to "broader" definitions that also concern the ability of the educational and school community to develop teaching and organizational practices, that enhancing the individual differences of each pupil. The aim is not only to welcome all but instead to create learning and socialization experiences for all. In this context, the IEP is still a design tool of great relevance, as long as it can take on perspectives of evolution, development, resilience and change, avoiding references that close it back on itself. The approach to integration and inclusion pursued in Italy over the past 40 years, if redesigned in the light of new research perspectives, can help raise the quality levels of educational processes in Europe.

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