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third international conference
of the journal *Scuola Democratica*

education and/for social justice

University of Cagliari
June 3-6, 2024



PROCEEDINGS

Published by



ASSOCIAZIONE PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA
Via Francesco Satolli, 30
00165 – Rome
Italy



Published in Open Access

APA 7th citation system:

Scuola democratica (Ed.) (2025). *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the journal Scuola democratica. Education and/or Social Justice. Vol. 2: Cultures, Practices, and Change*. Associazione Per Scuola Democratica.

Please cite your contribution as follows:

Smith, A. (2025). *Closing the Gender Gap in Education. Symmetrical Practices from a Didactical Laboratory in STEM Fields*. In Scuola democratica (Ed.), *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of the journal Scuola democratica. Education and/or Social Justice. Vol. 2: Cultures, Practices, and Change* (pp. 72-84). Associazione Per Scuola Democratica.

This book is digitally available at:

<https://www.scuolademocratica-conference.net/conference-proceedings-iii/>

ISBN 979-12-985016-3-8

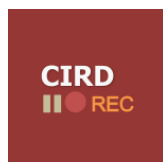
3rd International Conference
of the journal *Scuola democratica*
Education and/or Social Justice
3-6 June 2024, Cagliari (Italy)

PROCEEDINGS

Vol. 2

**Cultures,
Practices,
and Change**

Organizers and partners



PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS AND INCLUSIVE TEACHING: DEVELOPMENT OF A FORMATIVE SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL

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Based on results from the Erasmus+ project Enabling eXtremely Creative, Inclusive, Inspiring Teachers for Europe (EXCIITE), which aims to assist educators from primary to secondary school, we present a tool to support teacher PD concerning inclusion. From our analysis of existing models of PD and educational practices in partner countries, we have derived the “Good Practice Elements” (GPE), which are relatively independent of their socio-cultural contexts, thus enhancing reproducibility across different settings. These components reflect the concept of “inclusion” as a process of reducing obstacles to learning and participation for all students and involve: the design of educational spaces; the creation of supportive environments; building collaborative relationships; fostering a vision of learning in which everyone is engaged; encouraging student agency; rethinking organizational aspects; and creating a democratic environment. As reflection constitutes a continual posture that enables teachers to experiment with reasoning to recognize regularities and register changes, the tool is designed to accompany teachers—reflective practitioners—through PD aimed at improving the quality of inclusion in the classroom context and inclusive education teaching.

teachers’ professional development; self-assessment; quality; inclusive teaching; good practices;

INTRODUCTION

Teachers’ professional development is a key component for improving and innovating the education system (MIUR, 2016) and for supporting change concerning knowledge systems, attitudes and beliefs in a democratic way. This contribution outlines a tool to support professional development starting from some actions that emerged in the three-year European Erasmus+ project Enabling eXtremely Creative, Inclusive, Inspiring Teachers for Europe (EXCIITE), which focuses on enhancing the competencies of primary and lower secondary school teachers, starting from the analysis of their training needs, in the areas of inclusion, creativity, digital and innovation. An important aspect of the Project, which offers significant elements for reflection and implementation on and of the research, is the identification of ‘Good Practices Elements’ (GPE) that are relatively independent of the socio-cultural

context from which they emerged, therefore with a greater possibility of being reproduced (Mellone et al., 2019). This outlines a path addressing the limits of research tied to good practices (GP) while enhancing their potential to improve professional quality and teaching-learning processes. In the pedagogical perspective underlying the EXCIITE Project, it is necessary to recall the need for the critical consideration of a construct emanating from the managerial economic culture (GP), in the context of educational action. More generally, the issue of effectiveness closely related to the topic of GP has opened up several fronts for reflection and research: from a teleological perspective, it poses at least three types of problems inherent to the epistemological, ontological and practical dimensions of the discussion (Biesta, 2010), strongly connected to the framework of our project. Indeed, in addition to the problem of ecological validity and transferability, GPE as relatively context-independent elements, requires attention from an epistemological perspective about the very idea of context. The concept of context is central to research on the development of inclusive educational practices and its open relational and dynamic nature is placed at the basis of this work. It is therefore necessary to reconsider, from a research perspective, also the ‘physiological’ dependence on the sociocultural (but not only) contexts from which good practices originate and develop. As Michellini (2018) argues, scientific findings should not be reduced to rules of action: GP reflects complexity, requiring a dynamic approach that bridges theory and praxis, context-specificity, and the formalisation of solutions, integrating diverse aspects of reality and problems. The self-analysis tool was developed for this reason: starting from the valorisation of the shared knowledge on GPs co-constructed with the European partners, supporting the skills and agency of individual teachers and specific contexts.

1. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In aiming at enhancing and extending the EXCIITE Project’s idea of inclusive education, the scientific principle underlying this paper refers to the extended, dynamic and connected nature of the learning environment¹. This principle makes it a priority to support teachers’ awareness of its implications on GP for the quality of inclusive teaching. Franco Frabboni highlighted the Italian emphasis on the environmental dimension and the school’s openness as key achievements. Drawing on Winnicott’s “mother-environment”, the pedagogical approach incorporates affective and relational dimensions into the complexity of education. More recently, the focus on expanding learning times, spaces, and modes has elevated lifelong and life-wide learning as central global paradigms (Jackson, 2011).

Realising an equitable, inclusive and effective learning environment is an indispensable condition for achieving a quality school (UNESCO, 2015). Educational neuroscience, in particular Embodied Cognition (EC), contributes to enhance the

¹ The term *learning environment* is used here in its commonly understood meaning as the context in which the process of acquiring knowledge, skills, and competencies takes place.

complexity of the interconnected dimensions characterising learning environments. The construct of the 'Wide EC Environment' (WEE) (Damiani, Gomez Paloma, 2018; 2021), identifies these dimensions in a threefold perspective: personal (mind-body of the subjects as an internal environment); physical-material (spaces and places of learning as environments outside and inside the school); pedagogical-didactic (EC-based educational and didactic devices). The quality of the school and the educational success of its pupils are influenced by the characteristics of these elements and, above all, by the quality of the relationships between them. The characterising aspect of the EC perspective is the continuous interconnection between the three dimensions (internal, physical and pedagogical environment) and the constituent elements; In line with the model of the International Classification of Functioning (WHO, 2001), the key element is the interconnected context of personal and environmental factors. It represents the physical, psychological and relational dimensions where the educational process develops. Inclusion, understood as change, aligns with a dynamic vision of the learning environment. The *Index* serves as both a theoretical and methodological framework, emphasizing active inclusion by leveraging contextual resources, diverse dimensions, and collective agency for the ecological application of GP. The general structure and the reflective-transformative Index method provided the framework for the development of our tool. The GPEs outcome of the EXCIITE project were reinterpreted through the Dimensions and Indicators on the three macro-areas (cultures, policies, practices), identifying targets of inclusion with a focus on teaching practices at class level.

The multidimensional construct of learning environment is a magnifying glass to broadly explore the processes involved in everyday teaching, in the interaction between the teachers and the class.

The use of GPE reinterpreted, and framed in the Index approach mitigates the risks of their uncritical use, decontextualised and with little respect for the differences and limitations and the different dimensions, explicit and implicit, that intervene at the level of the learning environment. In this way, a process of democratic change is supported, which is characterised as a true transformative research-education process (Viganò, 2002):

A democratic research method allows for the democratic dimension to be voiced and fostered in all research and action; it motivates the researcher and practitioner to make explicit the intentionality, strategies, and powers they exercise over their context, thus allowing for the singularity that is in every research or intervention instead of placing emphasis only on what is uniform and generalisable. There is no single good way of doing research or acting. Intervention is linked to an epistemological and political choice that defines an operational model based on a certain representation of the world and regulates the role of subjects (p. 135).

2. INCLUSION TOOL'S STRUCTURE: DIMENSIONS, INDICATORS AND QUESTIONS

The choice of constructing a tool for the self-analysis of inclusive teaching practices at class level is based on a twofold objective: 1) to adapt and enhance the GPE as a resource for teachers, elaborating the targets of inclusion; 2) to intervene at the micro level, in the awareness that the Index is based on a relational ecological approach at school system level. The objective is not to replace the Index but rather to complement it, focusing on essential dimensions to guarantee inclusion and change in the perspective of removing obstacles to learning and participation at the level of planning and action in the classroom, which is one of the levels of a broader system of relationships and is also the one in which teachers mainly operate, most of the time and generally alone. The use of GPE reinterpreted as target of inclusion, and framed in the Index approach mitigates the risks of their decontextualised use. In particular, the inclusive targets for promoting inclusive teaching concern: designing educational spaces; creating supportive environments; building collaborative relationships; supporting a vision of collective involvement; encouraging student agency; rethinking organisational aspects; creating a democratic environment (Bertolini et al., 2022).

The questionnaire thus provides enrichment for the use of the Index, justified by the flexibility explicitly acknowledged by its authors and by the examples of use already implemented in a field for which the Index appears to be less equipped, with only a limited number of indicators and questions. The aim is also to support teachers in improving aspects that define their professional role (classroom teaching) within the Index's perspective of authentic change. This focus is particularly significant as the literature highlights the persistence of pedagogical biases, and prejudices in this domain, which lead to phenomena of micro-exclusion.

To develop the questions, a literature review was conducted for each target of inclusion, identifying key scientific concepts that informed the selection of indicators and questions. The questions included in the questionnaire are simple, focused, and unambiguous, presenting meaningful content designed to ensure that respondents do not feel negatively judged (Roccato, 2023). Due to space constraints, we present only one of the seven targets of inclusion, focusing on the dimension of Creating a welcoming environment, which entails making schools supportive and stimulating places for both adults and children while embracing individuality.

Evidence-based literature identifies "Creating a safe, positive, and motivating classroom environments" one of the effective strategies for fostering inclusion (Mitchell & Sutherland, 2022). Classroom climate is linked to the psychological climate of the environment and the cultural atmosphere of the class institution. The quality of classroom climate is established through two fundamental actions: creating an emotionally safe environment through meaningful relationships and supporting personal growth and improvement. The European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2012) highlights inclusive environments as both welcoming disadvantaged students and valuing heterogeneity. Trust and embracing mistakes as learning opportunities create a climate fostering effective learning

(Hattie, 2012). This target of inclusion is thus connected to the relational context dimension (Damiani, Gomez Paloma, 2021; Cottini, 2021) and the evolution of inclusive practices. The questions developed for the questionnaire reflect these core aspects (Tab. 1).

Tab. 1. Creating a welcoming environment – Questions.

Indicators	Questions	
Building meaningful relationships	1	I check the emotional state of all students before starting an activity
	2	I address any emotional difficulties expressed by students before starting or continuing the learning activity
	3	I take into account how students emotionally perceived a completed activity
	4	I strive to convey to all students the awareness that they are valued and accepted individuals, regardless of any difficulties they may encounter in their learning journey
	5	I know how to use humor to make learning enjoyable and ease tensions
Sustaining personal development	6	I believe that all students can learn, without exception
	7	I reflect with students on their progress toward achieving their goals
	8	I help students believe in their own abilities
	9	Students’ interests, knowledge, and independently acquired skills are valued and incorporated into the lesson
	10	Learning activities highlight the characteristics of each individual, promoting an understanding of social, cultural, linguistic, gender, ability, and religious differences, among others

Inclusion is conceived as a dynamic process triggered by a reflective-transformative cycle that involves the participation of all stakeholders and leverages the resources of the context, fostering a reflective stance (Schön, 1983). Given that the primary goal of adult education is “to help those whom society deems fully responsible for their actions to become more reflective in formulating and solving problems, to participate more fully and freely in rational discourse” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 107), the aim is to support democratic and critical participation in dialogue. This process initiates transformative learning, defined as the re-elaboration of both implicit and explicit elements of communication to acquire meaning perspectives open to diverse viewpoints and generate new meaning structures capable of guiding future actions through the reworking of problematic frameworks. The tool supports teachers in a training pathway aimed at enhancing the quality of inclusion in the classroom and teaching by fostering a reflective posture through opportunities that help teachers identify patterns and track changes (Nigris, 2018). Reflection, a

fundamental characteristic of professionals, enables the identification and resolution of problematic situations, reinterpreting them through a heuristic and generative perspective via reflection during and on action. The training pathway for using the tool aligns with the process identified by Booth and Ainscow (2002) and is designed as a Research-Based PD approach (Vannini, 2009; Nigris et al., 2020) consisting of several phases: Familiarization with the tool through an introduction to the framework and inclusive values (1); Exploration and group discussion of the findings to surface hidden elements and analyze differing perspectives (2); Identification of training objectives, based on recognizing the needs of stakeholders, areas for improvement, and co-designing an inclusive plan (3); Collaboration between teachers and researchers as co-developers of the process, supported by shared/co-created tools (4); Reassessment of the process using the questionnaire to highlight changes in inclusive dimensions related to the initial objectives (5). The training path is embedded in the framework of the transformative development model, as it is based on shared responsibility and the assessment of training needs starting from the specific context.

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