

STUDENTS EXPERIENCING DISADVANTAGES DUE TO PROBLEMATIC SOCIAL OR ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS. THE TERRITORIAL SERVICES GAZE

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Abstract

The expression “Special Educational Needs” (SEN), coherently with the ICF model, offers an inclusive perspective to all the issues that, in a different way, cause to students’ difficulties in learning and the development. School disadvantage does not concern only children and young people with certified disabilities or with specific disorders related to the learning processes, for which there is a medical diagnosis that identifies the pathology they suffer. There are educational fragilities that cannot be endorsed by a certification by an expert, as their difficulties do not match the list of signs / symptoms of diagnostic manuals. The article 3 of the presidential decree n. 17-124/2008 aims at disciplining interventions to promote the full exercise of the right to education and training of students with SEN. It identifies different categories of SEN, included “students attending school and training institutions and presenting disadvantages, [...], determined by social or environmental conditions and learning difficulties which significantly compromise the frequency and the successful development of the education and training pathway”.

The research project, aimed at identifying useful elements to outline an interpretative framework on the educational fragilities of disadvantaged students and the school contexts where they study and live, as well as formulating suggestions for any changes in school policies and training activities for teachers. It was planned jointly with IPRASE (Provincial Institute for In-service Training and Educational Research and Experimentation) and the Department of Knowledge of the Autonomous Province of Trento, and it involved 105 schools of every order and degree, from primary to high school, including vocational training centres. Given the need to investigate the phenomenon in the context where it is experienced, the project was developed within the ecological paradigm. The research design has been structured around two parallel paths: the school track and the territorial services which play around students with educational fragilities.

The primary object of this contribution is to focus the attention on the territorial services track. The choice to undertake this path of investigation is related to the concurrent emanation of the Provincial Council Resolution n. 432/2016. It is considered a milestone that researchers have strongly considered reflecting around students with educational fragilities because it places emphasis on mental health and, in a preventive perspective, on the several psychiatric, neurological, and psychological disorders that usually arise in the developmental age. It stresses the need to activate integrated paths by specialized services, networked with health, social and educational services.

Therefore, it has been considered necessary to include in the research process the local services that work directly or indirectly with the school institutions to contribute to the projects of life of these students. The aim of this investigation was to understand what elements facilitating or hindering the development of the “project of life” of children and young people with the support of these key informants’ voices. It is indeed crucial to be able to see not only the pupil but the child/kid/young man and woman in his/her complexity as a person, as well as to work in an inter-institutional perspective, taking the viewpoint of the different subjects that are part of the system. To this aim, a parallel, convergent research design was planned, using a single qualitative methodology for data collection and analysis. It allowed researchers to work in parallel with different kind of professionals to obtain complementary information.

The full paper presents methods and instruments of research, as well as the results of this specific research path.

Keywords: special educational needs, educational fragilities, territorial services, inclusive perspective.

1 THE STUDY SUBJECT: STUDENTS WITH EDUCATIONAL FRAGILITIES

In the conversations with school professionals – teachers, executives, auxiliary personnel, administration officers – a question echoes more and more often: *“what are the difficulties, the types of distress, the deficit situations experienced by the children and kids who attend school today?”* Conceivably, they are as many as the students attending such schools, if we consider that every one—even if only for a brief time in our life – lives a moment of fragility.

The area of school disadvantage is much wider than the one that we can explicitly attribute to the presence of a deficit. It does include children and kids beyond those with certified disabilities or specific disorders, especially involving the area of learning disorder (LD), for those, there is a psychological and/or medical diagnosis that identifies the pathology affecting the student, and often it also identifies its physiological source. The attention is also addressed to those students that, even in the absence of any medical certification, *‘can not make it by themselves’* – this is often a teacher-reported condition – that requires personalized planning and attention. These are Special Educational Needs (SEN) that can be traced back to non-specific disorders, to a threshold cognitive function, to a socioeconomic, language, cultural deficit; more often than not there is no clear-cut psychological and/or medical diagnosis since the difficulties met by these children and kids *“do not correspond to the symptoms/signs of diagnostic handbooks; their situation escapes these scientific criteria, nor they have comforting organic etiologies. But these students exist, they have issues and generate issues”* [1]. It is evident, moreover, pervasive and ever-increasing distress, intended as *“difficulties in growing that all minors meet while dealing with the developmental tasks belonging to each age, within the conditioning of a complex society”* [2].

Aiming at a detailed identification of the children and kids with SEN in the province of Trento (Italy), the context where the current research has been implemented, the legislation refers to the Decree of the President of the Province from May 8, 2008, n.17-124 [3], which objective is in turn to put into practice the Article 74 of the n.5 provincial law from August 7, 2006, which disciplines *“the interventions to promote the full exercise of the right to education and training of the students with SEN and to ensure the integration and inclusion of such students into school”*. Specifically, Article 3 identifies the recipients of these interventions, that is:

- a) students attending the educational institutions that suffer from a certified disability, as per the law n.104 of 1992 and the provincial legislation on assistance [...]; in such a situation also students showing language and communication issues arising from visual and hearing impairments are included;
- b) students attending the educational institutions that do not suffer from a certified disability, but show a LD ascertained by a neuropsychiatrist or from a developmental psychologist [...];
- c) students attending the educational institutions that find themselves in disadvantaged situations [...]; determined by unique social or environmental conditions and learning difficulties capable of significantly compromising the attending frequency and positive carrying out of the educational process.

2 THE RESEARCH QUESTION

The research presented in the current publication -defined together with the Province Institute for Educational Research and Experimentation (Istituto Provinciale per la Ricerca e la Sperimentazione Educativa, IPRASE) and the Knowledge Department of the Autonomous Province of Trento- posited as its subject of inquiry the students with special educational needs of the C category, enrolled in the schools and educational institutes of the province of Trento [4]. In fact, while for students within categories A and B the legislation and the practices -while still presenting some criticalities- allow a more uniform interpretational and operational frame, the recognition and intervention methods to help students included in category C are still a poorly investigated and poorly visible “grey area” within the context of the educational system, marked by a tremendous diversity of points of view and functioning, from school to school, with respect to this phenomenon.

For these reasons, the questions that determined the start of the research were the following:

- Who are the students included in the C category or that nevertheless experience a situation of fragility, such that schools should turn particular care on?
- What are the students’ inclusion criteria in this category?

- What planning do schools put into actions to answer the educational needs of these students?
- What are the needs, at every level, that schools recognize as their own and that require specific supports to correspond, with increased efficacy, to the educational demands posed by the presence of these special students?

The main objective of the research has been therefore to identify the elements concurring to build an interpretative framework by the educational institutions with respect to:

- elements of the educational fragility of these students in deficit situations (category C, academic failure and school drop-out);
- organizational set-ups and methods of intervention implemented in the educational context that embrace them;
- indications with respect to possible changes of educational policies and existing legislation;
- indications for the planning of training activities for teachers.

Given the need to investigate the phenomenon in the context where it is experienced, the project was developed within the ecological paradigm. The research design has been structured around two parallel paths: the school track and the territorial services which play around students with educational fragilities.

3 THE TERRITORIAL SERVICES' PERSPECTIVE

The concurrent promulgation of the Directive of the Provincial Executive n.432/2016 [5] on the topic of fragility in the developmental age, giving specific attention to mental health and, in the perspective of prevention, to the numerous psychiatric and neurological pathologies, plus the psychological disorders that have a development age onset, induced the research team to include in its project as well the territorial services that, on several fronts – from the charge taken by social and health professionals, to the reception in daily and residential out-of-school facilities, to the support for purely didactic and educational actions – directly or indirectly collaborate with the educational institutions to contribute to the students' life plans. In the directive, in fact, it is remarked how necessary it is to activate paths of charge-taking integrated by the specialized services, networked with health, social and educational services.

3.1 The ICF point of view

For all students with special educational needs, particularly for those within category C, whose difficulties often cannot be represented in terms of a “diagnosis” or a “certification” it is considered essential to remark how these needs must be read within the World Health Organization ICF (International Classification of Functioning) model, in tight correlation with the concept of the bio-psycho-social health of the individual. The definition of special educational need as proposed by lanes, in particular, emphasizes this aspect: the Special Educational Need is every development difficulty in the educational and learning sphere, expressed as a functioning (within the different health areas, following the ICF model of WHO) which is problematic for the subject as well, in terms of social damage, impediment or stigma, independently from its etiology, and that requires a special individualized education [6]. Such a perspective makes the focus on the educational-learning functioning of the subject easier, since it is important to be aware of how the subject works regardless of the cause of its difficulties – even if those, nevertheless, have to be known – to plan a proper educational intervention [7].

To realistically interpret the dysfunctional behavior of kids and children in the C category, whose needs can be traced to a vast range of motivations, either relative to the subject or external to it, it is important to remember moreover how the ICF conceptual structure refers to the global subject functioning, that is to how “the functioning of a person needs to be read and understood in a global, systemic and complex fashion, from different perspectives, in an interconnected and reciprocally causal way” [8].

3.2 Research aims and design

The specific aim of this research action was the understanding of how supporting school in its taking care of difficult situations, outlining, through an ensemble of external views -those of other territorial

services caring about these subjects – what elements help or hinder the development of the life plans of kids and children in the school. It is, in fact, essential to look not only at the student, but the child/kid in their own complexity as a subject/person, and moreover to work from an inter-institutional angle, capturing the point of view of the different subjects that are part of the system. This allows to get out from self-centeredness, considering the life plan of a child/kid from a global person dimension, integrated with respect to their living areas, decreasing the risk of a focus unbalanced completely, or almost completely, on the purely school-related aspects.

A parallel, convergent research design has been implemented [9], resorting to a single qualitative data collection and analysis methodology, to arrive at a better understanding of the phenomenon, working in parallel on different sources, to the end of obtaining complementary information (Fig. 1).

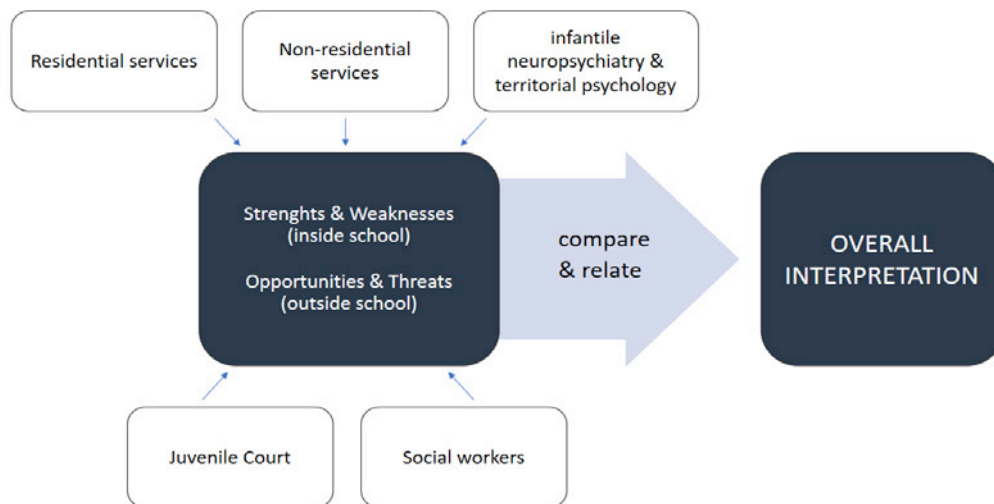


Figure 1. Research design – territorial institutions.

Specifically, for each type of territorial institution involved in the research, a specific meeting has been organized with a three-fold goal: informing about the research path implemented with the schools, engaging the professionals, and validating their point of view and their experiences. The meetings were attended by 12 referents from the residential educational services and 19 referents from the non-residential educational services active in the province of Trento; 19 referents from child neuropsychiatry and territorial psychology belonging to the Province Authority for Health Services of the Autonomous Province of Trento, 11 referents (social workers) of the social politics service, plus the Social Welfare Officer of the Juvenile Court in Trento.

3.3 Research methodology

In every meeting, after a general introduction on the research framework, two insight devices have been proposed to turn on a discussion between the participants, to let their experience emerge and collecting qualitative data on the phenomenon. First, the collective building of an extended conceptual map has been proposed. Participants, divided into groups of 4-5 people, wrote on a poster - individually and in silence, therefore without a discussion before or during writing- some significant elements referring to the key expression located at its centre, that is “students with fragilities”. The posters were then passed to each next group and, through reading the new poster, a discussion was launched within each little group. When the group recovered its own poster, it could then improve it with new suggestions, blooming from both the direct dialogue within their group fellows and the indirect dialogue with the other groups. Once the conceptual map has been completed, the groups have been asked to categorize the significant units written in the poster and to formulate, in the end, a definition of “students with fragilities” that summed up what emerged during the first phase of the meeting.

In the second insight device, professionals have been asked to think and discuss, within a small group, on the study subject – that is, “students with fragilities” and to the strengths and weaknesses within the school institution, plus opportunities and threats external to it.

The adopted technique is the SWOT analysis, which aim here is, however, not the analysis of a specific initiative and a feasibility evaluation, but the collaborative construction of a picture of the school institution today, through one or more points of view external to it all concurring in the definition of its actual state. It is a useful instrument for its synthetic yet representational value, that allows focussing on the elements characterizing the phenomenon under research by correlating it with the external areas, that is the different educational agencies with which it communicates every day. The frame emerging from it can offer multiple suggestions for future strategic planning.

4 RESULTS

To yield a complete macro-analysis, all the relevant elements collected by professionals with whom we have activated a discussion in the meetings, of which we proposed a summary, were merged into a single matrix, so to cross-reference the multiple points of view.

Starting from this overarching document, it has been possible to make a cross-analysis of the four areas, to bring into focus and understand the relationships between the educational environment and the external territorial institutions, therefore identifying some of the possible improvement strategies.

We briefly anticipate, to help to parse the following information and their connection with the previously listed elements, the structure of the relationship analysis between different quadrants of SWOT:

- a) Gain area: defined by the meeting of internal strengths and external opportunities;
- b) Stability area: defined by the meeting of internal strengths and external threats;
- c) Growth area: defined by the meeting of internal weaknesses and external opportunities;
- d) Crisis area: defined by the meeting of internal weaknesses and external threats.

4.1 Gain area

Gain area includes all the strategies that are considered useful to maximize the external opportunities in the territory, pivoting on the internal strengths of the educational institutions.

- a) Strengthen inclusive didactic, promoting and stimulating the adoption of cooperative methods and techniques, both by exploiting laboratories and direct experiences, also thanks to the support of territorial working environments in which students could develop both professional and lateral skills.
- b) Implement support actions between peers planning together (educational agencies both within and outside the school institution) time intervals and spaces dedicated to peer-oriented activities, aimed at the development of inclusive contexts where to experience individual and group growth experiences of well-being.
- c) Create or expand the overall educational network supporting the child or kid with fragilities, pivoting on the perception of the school institution as the central node of the network, and on the aspiration of all other educational agencies to strengthen the collaborative connections and planning work; essential, in this respect, appears to be the collaborative construction of charge-taking paths and the activation of working desks, memoranda of understanding and joint guidelines. In this respect, a central role can also be met by SEN referents.
- d) Efficiently use the overall resources through a broad-look co-planning including all resources available to the different educational, school and territorial agencies. In this context it is precious to adopt a broader vision concretely, taking into account also the neighbouring territories.
- e) Embrace a pro-active planning attitude, stimulating the different educational agencies to apply a broader vision of the territory and its services, through communication, reflection and discussion moments. In this context it is central the “entrepreneur feel” of every professional, not only when implementing innovations and experiments, but also when participating actively in the initiatives of other agencies within the territorial network.
- f) Work from a perspective where one cares for the life plan of the student, exploiting and strengthening the outlook on their overall child or kid life, also outside of the school buildings and beyond the single course of study. Tested educational networks are surely an added value, that shall facilitate the intersection of different points of view on the same subject.

4.2 Stability area

Starting from the internal strengths of the educational institution, it is possible moreover to identify strategies aimed at reducing the outside threats.

- a) Exploit the central role of the school institution and of SEN referents who are “sensitive, active and informed” (PSI) to build and/or strengthen the educational network (along with families and other territorial agencies) where it is lacking or shows problems such as lack of a common language, prejudices towards certain classes of institutions, communication issues or “ping-pong” of responsibilities.
- b) Pivot on an open and available discussion attitude and on an inclusive vision of each subject belonging to the educational network, to overcome both fragmentary and impromptu forms of planning and the stiffness of the system.
- c) Value the attitudes of each teacher (listening and organizational skills, awareness), inclusive didactic strategies and the presence of supporting services for students (counselling services, psychological counselling) to contain quitting attitudes. In the most serious cases of subjects at risk of school drop-out, it is also strategic the creation of a network capable of accommodating all students, avoiding thus definitive school abandonment.
- d) School resources (adequate spaces, structural resources and professionals with specific educational skills) can be a starting point to fill in, even if partially, the shortcomings in the territory’s offer.
- e) The specific family fragilities can be limited thanks to the support of SEN referents and the support of teachers and executives both sensitive and open to discussion. Schools can also work as a liaison towards educational and social health services of the territory. The adoption of inclusive didactic strategies can play, indirectly, towards families’ help as well, facilitating better integration of children and kids, stimulating their motivation and attempting to support them in the development of their overall life plan.
- f) Recovering the pedagogical approach in meeting the issues of children and kids’ with educational fragilities means, for an educational professional, to identify the needs of a subject starting from their own behaviours and not from a “diagnosis” or another label that is consequently attached. Putting aside a clinical approach, recovering the educational role and the planning capacity, in this respect, of the educational institutions, can contribute to easing some of the tensions nowadays perceived by the health services, especially about the topic of medical certifications.

4.3 Growth area

Through SWOT analysis, it is possible to hypothesize strategies to intervene on the internal weaknesses of the school institution to maximize external opportunities.

- a) Rigidities identified in the educational area and the network-building issues can be overcome, provided it is possible to activate educational pathways with a multiplicity of services with whom a shared project can be elaborated. The experience of networking strategies, already positively tested, can be useful as well, helping support also thanks to already stipulated protocols and arrangements which could not be known in advance.
- b) The school curriculum priority could take a back seat if one focuses on the advantages from the activation of inclusive and value-building pathways, also personalized, collaborating with institutions from the territory.
- c) Problems due to resource scarcity -economical and material ones in particular- can be tackled by joining the resources of different territorial services through the activation of networking project that envisages comprehensive and unified resource management.
- d) Problems identified within classes (number of students, heterogeneity) cannot perhaps be overcome by themselves, but they can be hopefully better tackled by resorting to didactic strategies allowing a better management of the classroom, for example by didactic methods and techniques aimed not only at acquiring skills and knowledge specific to the discipline, but also cross-cutting, working therefore in terms of the classroom climate well-being.
- e) Problems connected to the role of the individual educational professionals (teachers, SEN referents, executives) -fragile professional identity, poor or no recognition, low self-awareness of

the responsibilities, improper delegation – can be tackled whenever the workers responsible for other hubs of the networks incentive the school institution to find a specific partner that really and effectively takes the kids with educational fragilities in their charge; analogously, every school professional, at all levels, must be called on to answer upon their own role and offer their own contribution to building more effective networking strategies. To this aim, it is desirable the activation of role training, enhancing the middle management perspective.

- f) The lack of a more global vision of the student can be overcome through joint work between all the involved educational and territorial agencies, geared towards capturing all the aspects of the life of a child or kid, beyond mere study and work within the classroom, to work together for their life plan.
- g) The lack of formation and specific skills of school professionals on inclusion can be overcome by every territorial institution by putting into play their own professionals, through training meetings aimed at the sharing of knowledge and skills and building common languages and objectives.

4.4 Crisis area

The crisis area results from the meeting of internal weaknesses of educational institutions with outside threats. The author intends to interpret this area not in a static, but in an operational way, attempting to capture and formulate useful suggestions to mitigate internal weaknesses with the aim of also reducing the external threats.

By lowering the stiffness that often characterize educational institutions, it is possible, conceivably, to facilitate the setup of a more open and effective educational network, reducing therefore also the renounce attitudes and identifying new dialogue and collaboration methods with the other “problematic” network hubs, such as family, health services and the students themselves. Mitigating educational institutions stiffness can also contribute to decreasing the stiffness of other territorial institutions as well.

Working from a perspective looking at the life plan of the kid -going beyond the priority of the “curriculum to go through” and viewing the child or kid globally- can boost the implementation of plans by the educational institutions; plans that are not simply ad-hoc or fragmentary but involving all the educational agencies and territorial institutions that take care of fragile subjects.

Educational institutions, by adopting a pedagogic point of view, instead of a medicalized one, on the problems of children and kids with fragilities, can plausibly support a better understanding of the real medical certification need, with a consequent improvement in the relationship with health services, families and students themselves, thus avoiding also labeling and stigmatization.

Going beyond the lack of training and specific skills identified in the school professionals, by activating a wider and more cross-cutting educational offer, can help in the activation of better dialogue between all the nodes of the territorial networks, from students to families to the different educational agencies. In particular, we theorize to formulate better primary, secondary and tertiary prevention strategies against the identified educational fragilities. Finally, a school more informed and self-aware of its own territory could certainly use more effective planning strategies to use the available resources.

5 CONCLUSIONS

From the analysis of the four areas previously laid out, it is possible to grasp how some cross-sectional development trajectories exist able to orient planning towards a better promotion and inclusion of the children and kids with educational fragilities. The implementation or the enhancement of the networking between educational agencies and territorial institutions involved in taking charge of the children and kids with fragilities turns out to be, from the previous analysis, the key strategy to work more efficiently and successfully on multiple fronts. First, it appears to be central for the activation of a joint process of information gathering and intervention planning, geared towards children and kids with educational fragilities. Second, working together also allows to see and use better all the overall available resources. In the collaborative building of network projects the role of middle management is essential: the SEN referents, for example, play a key role in connecting the student, their family, the educational institution and the territorial institutions. The network is, in the end, an ideal operational conformation to strengthen both didactic strategies, of improved inclusiveness, helping the co-planning of training pathways by educational and territorial institutions

(cooperative, companies, administrations, to make a few examples), and training pathways geared towards professionals involved in the network. All these actions contribute to a better focus on the global life plan for children and kids with educational fragilities and on the answers to their needs.

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