

DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIO-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCIES IN AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT: STRATEGIES, PRACTICES, AND EDUCATIONAL IMPACT

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***Abstract:** This paper explores the importance of developing socio-emotional competencies within inclusive educational environments. It highlights how skills such as empathy, self-regulation, and effective communication contribute to students' overall development. The study emphasizes the role of inclusive education in supporting diverse learners, including those with special educational needs. It examines various teaching strategies that foster socio-emotional learning in the classroom. Practical approaches such as collaborative activities, role-playing, and reflective exercises are discussed. The paper also considers the challenges educators face when implementing inclusive and emotionally supportive practices. It underlines the importance of a positive and safe classroom climate for effective learning. Furthermore, it analyses the impact of socio-emotional competencies on students' academic performance and social relationships. The findings suggest that integrating socio-emotional learning into the curriculum enhances both individual and group outcomes. The paper concludes with recommendations for teachers and policymakers to support sustainable inclusive education practices.*

***Keywords:** socio-emotional competencies, inclusive education, empathy, self-regulation, collaborative learning, classroom climate*

In recent decades, the growing emphasis on inclusive education has led to a profound reassessment of the values, practices, and goals of modern education. At the core of these transformations lies the concept of well-being—a complex construct that goes beyond the boundaries of mental and physical health, encompassing dimensions such as a sense of belonging, emotional safety, intrinsic motivation, and positive relationships.

In the school context, well-being is not merely a moral aspiration, but a fundamental condition for learning, development, and sustainable inclusion.

For students with intellectual disabilities, the transition to lower secondary education can be particularly challenging. They face cognitive, emotional, and social difficulties that may be exacerbated by a rigid, standardized educational environment or by the lack of appropriate support. In this context, well-being can no longer be regarded as a secondary element; rather, it becomes a key instrument for integration, personalized learning, and educational equity.

Contemporary educational paradigms—from student-centered education to inclusive pedagogy—provide both theoretical and practical frameworks for fostering well-being among all students, including those with intellectual disabilities. These paradigms emphasize individual needs, curricular differentiation, multidisciplinary collaboration, and a positive

school climate. Thus, they create real opportunities to transform the school into a space where every child is genuinely seen, heard, and supported.

Well-being in the educational context

This represents a key indicator of a school's institutional health and of students' psycho-emotional balance, encompassing multiple dimensions: emotional well-being (a sense of safety, recognition, and appreciation), social well-being (positive relationships with peers and teachers), cognitive well-being (motivation and satisfaction with learning), and physical well-being (access to safe spaces, rest, and healthy nutrition). In the school environment, well-being is influenced by factors such as teachers' instructional styles, the relational climate, school culture, the degree of student autonomy, and constructive feedback. For children with intellectual disabilities, these dimensions may be distorted if the environment is not adapted to their specific rhythms and needs [1].

Thus, a systemic approach that places well-being at the center of educational practice becomes essential for the success of inclusion.

The assessment of students' well-being can be carried out through standardized questionnaires, systematic observation, emotional portfolios, and reflective dialogues. The implementation of socio-emotional learning programs and the promotion of a cooperative learning climate are recommended strategies for enhancing well-being.

Intellectual Disabilities and Inclusion at Lower Secondary Level

Intellectual disabilities encompass a wide range of cognitive conditions that affect the learning process, behavioral adaptation, and social interaction. At the lower secondary level, students face challenges related to identity, autonomy, and social relationships. The educational system must provide personalized support and adapted interventions in order to promote inclusion.

Intellectual disabilities represent a broad category of disorders affecting cognitive, emotional, and adaptive development, including intellectual developmental disorders, autism spectrum disorders, learning disabilities, as well as other impairments that significantly influence how students learn, interact, and adapt within the school environment. At the lower secondary level, these challenges intersect with the characteristic changes of early adolescence: the need for autonomy, a sense of belonging to a peer group, the consolidation of self-image, and adaptation to increasingly complex curricular demands.

The inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities at this level involves much more than their mere physical presence in a mainstream classroom. It requires individualized educational intervention, continuous support from teachers and specialists (such as support teachers and educational psychologists), as well as a school culture grounded in respect, understanding, and cooperation.

Difficulties may include challenges in understanding school tasks, a slower learning pace, attention and concentration deficits, difficulties in expressing ideas, emotional and behavioral adjustment issues, as well as a lower level of social autonomy. In order to address these challenges, schools must adopt differentiated strategies: clear structuring of activities,

the use of visual and sensory methods, reducing the volume of tasks, providing additional time, and offering continuous positive feedback.

Classmates also play a crucial role. Promoting empathy, understanding of differences, and mutual support significantly contributes to the emotional and social integration of students with intellectual disabilities. At the same time, effective communication between family and school strengthens the student's sense of continuity and security.

Thus, inclusion at the lower secondary level goes beyond acceptance—it involves adaptation, pedagogical innovation, and a profound transformation of the educational relationship, so that every student, regardless of their cognitive particularities, feels part of the school community and is able to thrive at their own pace [2].

New Paradigms in Inclusive Education

Contemporary educational paradigms are moving away from the traditional model focused on content transmission and advancing toward a flexible, adaptable, and inclusive model. Student-centered education involves recognizing diversity as a value and provides a framework in which each child can progress at their own pace through personalized learning pathways.

One of the central paradigms in inclusive education is the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) model, which promotes equitable access through three fundamental principles:

1. providing multiple means of representation,
2. providing multiple means of action and expression, and
3. providing multiple means of engagement.

Thus, students with intellectual disabilities can access learning through visual, tactile, interactive, or sensory methods, depending on their cognitive and emotional profiles.

Relational pedagogy, the strengths-based approach, and formative assessment represent other important dimensions of the inclusive paradigm. These approaches encourage an egalitarian relationship between student and teacher, support students' self-efficacy, and foster confidence in their own potential. Furthermore, the use of assistive technologies, the adaptation of curricular content, and the collaboration between mainstream and support teachers become key strategic elements of the modern inclusive school.

Opportunities for Promoting Well-Being:

- creating a positive classroom climate based on mutual respect and empathy;
- training teachers in emotional intelligence and inclusive education strategies;
- establishing partnerships with families to support the coherence of interventions;
- using the school psychologist as a resource for emotional balance;
- adapting the curriculum and using interactive digital tools.

Psychological Mechanisms for Promoting Well-Being in the Context of Including Children with Intellectual Disabilities

Promoting well-being among children with intellectual disabilities in the educational environment involves activating essential psychological mechanisms aimed at supporting their harmonious development and authentic integration into the school community.

a) Developing a sense of belonging and safety – children with intellectual disabilities need an environment in which they feel accepted, protected, and valued. Creating a safe emotional climate, free from social disapproval, supports inclusion, reduces anxiety, and encourages active participation in school life.

b) Fostering autonomy and self-determination – encouraging the expression of choices, participation in decision-making, and adapting tasks to each student's level of development contribute to building a positive self-image and increasing intrinsic motivation. Students learn that their voice matters and that they are capable.

c) Focusing on strengths and individual potential – by identifying and valuing each child's unique abilities, schools can help strengthen self-esteem and the sense of competence. This approach counteracts the traditional emphasis on deficits and limitations.

d) Building educational relationships based on empathy and emotional support – teachers play a crucial role in promoting well-being by developing positive relationships characterized by unconditional acceptance, patience, and encouragement. Empathy and openness to understanding the perspective of the child with disabilities reduce feelings of exclusion.

e) Implementing social and emotional learning (SEL) – programs adapted to the needs of students with intellectual disabilities support the development of self-regulation, communication, and conflict resolution skills. These competencies facilitate positive interactions and enhance inclusion.

f) Active collaboration with families and specialists – the involvement of parents and educational specialists (such as special education teachers and psychologists) contributes to the development of a coherent educational plan centered on the child's emotional and cognitive needs. This integrative approach supports balanced development and successful adaptation to the school environment [3].

Challenges and Limitations:

- lack of specialized human resources;
- negative attitudes or resistance toward inclusion;
- inadequate infrastructure;
- pressure for uniform academic performance.

Well-being has become an essential component of modern education, especially in the context of the school inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities. This dimension can no longer be considered a secondary outcome of the educational process; rather, it must be intentionally integrated into all educational policies, practices, and relationships. Promoting well-being contributes not only to improved academic performance, but also to the development of autonomy, emotional resilience, and a positive self-image [6].

In an inclusive school, well-being means more than the absence of discomfort—it involves active participation, student voice, a sense of belonging, and continuous support.

Students with intellectual disabilities directly benefit from a positive emotional climate, pedagogical flexibility, and supportive relationships with both peers and teachers.

By embracing new educational paradigms such as student-centered education, Universal Design for Learning, and relational pedagogy, the education system can become more responsive to diversity, more empathetic, and more equitable. Investing in well-being is, in essence, an investment in the future of every child and in the health of the entire educational ecosystem [4].

Inclusive Educational Practices for Students with Special Educational Needs

The teaching methods employed within inclusive education must be flexible, interactive, and tailored to the needs of each learner, in order to support the development of all students, regardless of their educational requirements. Among the appropriate methods and techniques are: **Collaborative learning** – Students are encouraged to cooperate and work in teams, with each individual's abilities being recognized and valued. For example, in a group activity, students may be assigned the task of solving a problem together, each contributing according to their competencies. Thus, students who experience difficulties in reading may create drawings or explanatory diagrams, while those with more advanced calculation skills can verify the results. In this way, every student is actively engaged, their contribution is acknowledged, and a classroom climate of cooperation, respect, and empathy is gradually developed.

Differentiation of activities – This method involves adapting learning tasks according to the developmental level and individual characteristics of each student. For example, the teacher may provide texts of varying levels of complexity to students studying the same literary topic. Students with special educational needs may receive shorter materials or materials supported by visual aids in order to facilitate comprehension. Additionally, instructional tasks can be adjusted in terms of difficulty, and students may be given additional time to complete assignments, thus making the learning process more accessible and effective for each learner.

Use of technology

Digital devices and applications can effectively support the learning process. For example, students with writing difficulties may use speech recognition applications, while those with visual impairments can benefit from text-to-speech software to access lesson content. Instructional materials can also be uploaded to an educational platform, making them accessible at any time to both students and parents, thereby facilitating the learning process [5].

In order to support the inclusion of students with special educational needs, educational activities must be diverse and tailored to the needs of each learner. The following are examples of activities that can facilitate the integration of students with special needs:

Students with hearing impairments

For students with hearing impairments, it is essential to employ visual methods and activities that encourage nonverbal communication and collaboration.

Activity: The Language of Friendship.

Objective: To encourage visual communication and to familiarize students with basic sign language.

Description: Students learn a set of simple signs from sign language, such as “hello,” “friend,” “thank you,” or “do you want to play?” The teacher introduces these signs and encourages students to use them in daily activities, thereby facilitating the inclusion of peers with hearing impairments and helping them feel more integrated within the group.

Didactic game: Silent Telephone.

Objective: To develop visual communication and attention skills.

Description: One student conveys a message through gestures (without speaking) to the next peer. The message is passed sequentially from one student to another until it reaches the last participant, who attempts to express aloud what they have understood. This activity helps students recognize the importance of nonverbal communication and fosters empathy toward peers with hearing impairments.

Students with visual impairments

For students with visual impairments, multisensory activities and those based on verbal description are particularly beneficial.

Activity: Guided Journey through the Classroom.

Objective: To develop orientation skills and cooperation.

Description: One student is blindfolded, while a peer guides them through the classroom, describing the objects and the surrounding space. After the activity, students reflect on the difficulties encountered and discuss ways in which they can provide support. This activity helps students better understand the challenges faced by peers with visual impairments and fosters empathy.

Students with learning and attention difficulties

Students with learning or attention difficulties require varied activities that actively engage them and sustain their interest. Alternating tasks and incorporating short breaks are particularly beneficial.

Activity: Attention Race.

Objective: To develop concentration and memory skills.

Description: The teacher presents students with a sequence of images or words arranged in a specific order. Students are given a few seconds to memorize them. The teacher then changes the order or replaces some elements, and students must identify and describe the modifications. This activity stimulates both attention and memory.

Didactic game: Draw What You Hear.

Objective: To develop attention and listening skills.

Description: The teacher describes a simple scene, and students are required to draw it by following the given instructions. Students do not see the image; instead, they rely solely on what they hear. This activity helps them improve their attention and their ability to follow instructions.

Students with motor impairments

For students with motor impairments, it is essential that activities are adapted in such a way that they can actively participate without physical barriers. Emphasis should be placed on participation, cooperation, and the recognition and valorization of each student's potential.

Didactic game: Let's Create Stories Together

Objective: To stimulate creativity and collaboration.

Description: Each student contributes orally with one sentence to build a collective story, without the need to move from their seat or to write. The teacher records the ideas on the board or on a sheet of paper, while the entire class participates through verbal expression. This activity is inclusive, as it eliminates barriers related to mobility or writing and capitalizes on students' imagination, communication, and collaborative skills.

The inclusion of students with special educational needs requires the continuous adaptation of the teaching–learning process to the needs of each learner. A key role is played by the collaboration among teachers, students, parents, and the entire school community, which contributes to the creation of an open and supportive educational climate.

The implementation of diverse instructional methods—such as collaborative activities, adaptation of the learning environment, the use of visual support, and individualized assessment—provides all students with the opportunity to actively participate in the educational process. In this way, students with disabilities can develop their abilities, capitalize on their potential, and integrate harmoniously into the classroom community.

Through the consistent application of these practices, the school contributes to the realization of authentic inclusive education and to the formation of future adults who value diversity, cooperation, and equity in society.

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