

Inclusive Leadership In Action: Headmasters And Educating Communities Driving Change In Italian Schools

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Abstract

This article examines the pivotal role of the headmaster and the educating community in fostering inclusive school guidance and supporting students in building their life plans, with particular attention to students with disabilities. The Italian school system is inter-nationally renowned for its integrative approach, which guarantees students with disabilities the right to attend mainstream schools. Within this framework, the headmaster plays a strategic role in coordinating the implementation of key tools such as the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), standardized nationwide through Ministerial Decree 182/2020, and advancing innovative educational practices in accordance with the 2022 guidelines on school guidance.

The 2024 National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) introduces new challenges and opportunities, emphasizing the need to reform and strengthen educational systems to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving society, with a special focus on inclusion, guidance, and school-to-work transitions. This article analyzes how school guidance, framed within a social justice perspective, contributes to autonomy and inclusion, and how the headmaster, in collaboration with the educating community, can lead schools toward personalized and student-centered teaching that helps all students realize their life projects.

Keywords: leadership, headmaster, educating community, inclusion.

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I. Introduction

The Italian school system stands out internationally for its inclusive approach, which ensures that students with disabilities can attend mainstream schools. This policy, rooted in constitutional principles and reinforced by extensive legislation, reflects an educational model that prioritizes equity, participation, and respect for diversity (de Anna, 2014; Della Volpe, 2014). The recent 2024 National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) reaffirms the importance of investing in inclusive and innovative education, emphasizing the central role of schools in preparing students for a complex and interconnected society (MIM, 2020). Among the key tools is the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), redefined nationally through Ministerial Decree 182/2020, which serves as a cornerstone in designing tailored and inclusive educational pathways.

This article seeks to explore the role of the headmaster and the educating community in promoting effective school guidance that supports students in building their life projects, fostering self-awareness, self-determination, and autonomy. Based on the regulatory framework and the recent 2022 guidelines on school guidance, the headmaster emerges as a pivotal figure in steering schools toward inclusive and personalized educational strategies. Pasquale Moliterni, in his study *The role of the headmaster for the quality of school inclusion: teachers' perception* (Moliterni & Covelli 2020), highlights the pivotal role of the headmaster in fostering the quality of inclusive practices. According to Moliterni, the headmaster acts as a bridge between policy and practice, ensuring that inclusion is not merely a legal obligation but a guiding principle of school governance.

II. Methodological Approach

This article employs a qualitative review of existing literature and policy documents to examine the role of headmasters and educating communities in fostering inclusive education for students with disabilities in Italy. Drawing on key legislative frameworks, such as Ministerial Decree 182/2020 and its corrective provisions, this review synthesizes findings from national case studies, reports, and international research on leadership in education. The analysis integrates perspectives from transformational leadership theory and inclusive education practices to contextualize the Italian approach within a broader global framework.

The review also references international studies, including those by Hallinger (2018), Harris and Jones (2019), and Robinson (2021), which examine how leadership styles influence inclusivity and collaboration in schools. Additionally, the analysis incorporates perspectives from Italian scholarship, including Moliterni's on the pivotal role of headmasters in implementing Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs), fostering shared responsibility among educators and families, and advancing inclusive educational strategies. This synthesis highlights the significance of collaborative planning, formative guidance, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in fostering inclusive school environments. These approaches emphasize the need for strategic educational planning, adaptability, and the creation of supportive frameworks that accommodate diverse student needs. By integrating these perspectives, the article presents a comprehensive analysis of the strategies and challenges inherent in advancing inclusive leadership within the Italian school system.

III. The Headmaster's Leadership In Advancing Inclusive Education

The headmaster serves as a strategic leader in implementing inclusive educational policies. Their leadership entails coordinating and leveraging all available resources to ensure that every student can develop their life plan in line with principles of social justice and equality. The nationwide standardized IEP, introduced through Ministerial Decree 182/2020, exemplifies the headmaster's responsibility in crafting tailored educational paths that address the unique needs of each student with disabilities. This tool, created in collaboration with families, teachers, and professionals, not only defines educational objectives but also incorporates strategies to foster student participation and autonomy. The headmaster oversees this process, ensuring that the IEP reflects the principles of the bio-psycho-social model and aligns with the International Classification of Functioning (ICF) promoted by the World Health Organization (2021).

In the context of the NRRP, the headmaster is also tasked with implementing school guidance practices that address the critical challenges of school-to-work transitions, particularly for students with disabilities. Through governance that integrates the Three-Year Educational Plan (PTOF), the Improvement Plan (PdM), and pathways for transversal skills and guidance (PCTO), the headmaster must create a school environment that values diversity as a resource and promotes accessibility and participation for all students. Moliterni's research highlights how teachers perceive the headmaster as a critical figure in the successful implementation of inclusive policies. By providing clear guidance and fostering a culture of collaboration, headmasters ensure that all stakeholders contribute effectively to the inclusion of students with disabilities.

The headmaster for inclusion embodies a form of leadership that can be identified as transformational, characterized by an ability to inspire, guide, and engage the entire school community toward the shared goal of inclusive education and social participation for students with disabilities. This leadership approach involves crafting and communicating a vision of inclusivity that becomes a driving force for collective action. Through this vision, the headmaster fosters an educational culture where diversity is embraced, and every student is given the opportunity to thrive.

A defining feature of this leadership style is its collaborative nature. The headmaster brings together teachers, families, and external professionals to ensure the implementation of effective inclusive practices. This collaboration is rooted in shared responsibility, with the headmaster acting as a catalyst for the collective commitment needed to address the individual needs of students with disabilities. By actively engaging stakeholders, the headmaster creates an environment of trust and cooperation, which is essential for the successful realization of inclusive education.

In addition to collaboration, this leadership style places a strong emphasis on instructional guidance. The headmaster ensures that teaching practices are aligned with the principles of inclusivity, particularly through the effective use of tools such as the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). This role involves not only oversight but also strategic planning to ensure that all interventions are tailored to the specific circumstances and needs of the students.

Another hallmark of this leadership approach is its responsiveness to change. In the context of recent updates to Italian educational policies, including the corrective provisions to Ministerial Decree 182/2020, the headmaster demonstrates adaptability and a forward-thinking mindset. This capacity to lead change reflects a deep understanding of the dynamic nature of educational needs and policies, ensuring that the school remains a leader in inclusive practices.

The headmaster's leadership is also ethical and rooted in principles of social justice. By advocating for equity and the rights of students with disabilities, the headmaster ensures that inclusion is not just a legal requirement but a moral imperative. Recent international studies, such as those by Leithwood, Harris, Hopkins (2019) and Day and Gu (2020), underscore the importance of transformational and instructional leadership in creating inclusive educational environments. Similarly, Robinson (2021) highlights how leadership focused on collaboration and equity can significantly improve student outcomes in diverse settings. Other international studies on transformational leadership in schools, such as those by Leithwood and Sun (2020), have emphasized the ability of school leaders to adapt and innovate in response to systemic challenges. Research by Hallinger

(2018) highlights how transformational leadership in education can bridge the gap between policy and practice, particularly in contexts that require complex, collaborative approaches like inclusive education. Meanwhile, Harris and Jones (2019) underscore the significance of shared leadership in fostering a sense of collective efficacy among educators, which is crucial for implementing and sustaining inclusive strategies.

This blend of vision, collaboration, instructional guidance, adaptability, and ethical commitment positions the headmaster as a transformative leader in the Italian school system. By drawing on both national and international best practices, this leadership approach ensures that inclusive education becomes a cornerstone of the school's mission and a lived reality for all its students.

IV. The Individualized Educational Plan And Inclusive Practices

The Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) is a cornerstone of inclusive education in Italy, mandated by Ministerial Decree 182/2020 and further clarified by its corrective provisions. The IEP is developed by the Operational Working Group (GLO), chaired by the headmaster, and serves as a comprehensive tool for planning educational goals, interventions, and resource allocation.

The corrective provisions emphasize greater flexibility and precision in the IEP process, ensuring that it remains responsive to each student's evolving needs. The headmaster plays a central role in overseeing the GLO's work, ensuring that the IEP incorporates detailed observations of the student's abilities and the barriers they face. This includes tailoring support strategies to promote not only academic success but also meaningful participation in social and community life.

As Moliterni points out, the headmaster's ability to coordinate and inspire the school community is critical to translating the IEP from a document into actionable steps that enhance inclusion. By actively engaging teachers and other stakeholders, headmasters create a shared commitment to inclusive education.

V. The Educating Community As A Collaborative Network

The Italian school system is based on a holistic and cooperative vision of education, where the educating community plays a vital role in shaping students' life projects. This concept materializes through collaboration among teachers, families, local authorities, and socio-health professionals, working together to create an environment that supports students' holistic development. The educating community is not merely a collection of individuals acting in concert but an integrated system in which each component contributes to developing educational pathways that foster autonomy, self-awareness, and active engagement in social life.

The headmaster, as an educational leader, must cultivate a culture of shared responsibility, involving all stakeholders in planning and decision-making processes. The recent school guidance guidelines emphasize the importance of a personalized approach that considers each student's inclinations, aspirations, and skills. This requires close cooperation between schools and local communities to build support networks that ensure educational success and social inclusion.

Moliterni's research highlights the significance of this shared responsibility, noting that inclusion is most effective when headmasters actively engage with their teams and the broader community. By cultivating trust and open communication, headmasters ensure that inclusive practices extend beyond the classroom to support students in all aspects of their lives.

VI. School Guidance Paradigms And Active Pedagogy

School guidance goes far beyond offering students advice about academic pathways; it is an enduring and transformative educational process. It equips students to uncover their potential, navigate personal and professional growth, and adapt to the evolving demands of modern life. Drawing from active pedagogy, this process incorporates principles of experiential learning, as theorized by John Dewey, and emotional intelligence, as elaborated by Daniel Goleman (2011). The methodology emphasizes "learning by doing" through authentic tasks that bridge theoretical knowledge with practical experiences. These tasks, grounded in real-world relevance, foster not only cognitive development but also emotional and relational competencies crucial for overcoming life's challenges.

The Italian school system has established guidance as a fundamental element of its pedagogical mission, shaped by decades of national and international discourse. UNESCO's 2019 report, *Towards Inclusion in Education: Status, Trends and Challenges* (2019), underscores the importance of inclusive educational policies in promoting societal progress and individual development. These principles are deeply embedded in Italy's educational approach, where guidance is viewed as a lifelong process that cultivates self-awareness and equips students to navigate societal changes effectively. This approach fosters meaningful engagement in academic, familial, and social contexts, thereby advancing inclusion and personal growth.

Guidance is particularly vital in inclusive education for students with disabilities, requiring tailored strategies to address their unique needs while nurturing emotional awareness, self-determination, and autonomy. As Caldin (2003) emphasizes, collaboration between families and schools is essential to creating supportive

environments that promote student development. Mura (2018) highlights the importance of designing orientation practices that align with students' individual abilities and aspirations, integrating strategic educational planning. Additionally, Cottini (2019) underscores the value of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in creating adaptable, inclusive curricula that ensure equal access and participation for all learners. Together, these perspectives advocate for a comprehensive and inclusive educational system that empowers students, particularly those with disabilities, to navigate their personal and professional journeys effectively.

Authentic tasks stand at the heart of this pedagogical approach. These tasks transform abstract learning into meaningful, actionable knowledge, enhancing students' cognitive and metacognitive capabilities. Dewey's theories advocate for an educational focus on the learner's active role, where knowledge acquisition becomes a process of constructing identity and understanding aspirations. Inclusive, guidance-oriented education, particularly for students with disabilities, must integrate this philosophy. Tailored tasks and immersive experiences help students measure their competencies, fostering self-awareness and equipping them for the future.

In this context, the Italian school system commits to designing and implementing guidance strategies that enable students, including those with disabilities, to realize their full potential. By engaging in real-world problem-solving and creative exploration, students connect theoretical knowledge with practical skills, laying the foundation for lifelong personal and professional fulfillment. These methods highlight the essential role of the educating community in guiding students not only toward academic success but also toward comprehensive self-realization.

VII. Challenges And Future Perspectives

Despite significant advancements, the Italian school system continues to face challenges in achieving truly inclusive and guidance-oriented education. A persistent issue is the need for continuous professional development for school staff, including headmasters, as managing inclusive school environments requires specific skills and ongoing support. Another major challenge concerns the school-to-work transition, which demands more personalized pathways and stronger collaboration among schools, families, and businesses. These difficulties highlight the need to strengthen the role of headmasters as educational leaders capable of guiding schools toward more flexible and innovative models that embrace diversity as a core value.

The headmaster's responsibilities extend beyond administrative duties to include promoting a flexible and responsive educational environment that meets the needs of all students, especially those with disabilities. While Italian legislation does not explicitly outline the headmaster's duties in inclusion, it implicitly positions them as key figures in fostering a school culture that adapts to differences without leaving anyone behind. To achieve this, headmasters must implement five critical elements for educational inclusion, as recommended by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education: early intervention, inclusion as a universal benefit, highly qualified professionals, effective support systems and funding, and reliable data for real inclusion.

Headmasters play a vital role in implementing inclusive practices, such as promoting staff training, coordinating inclusive projects, and ensuring compliance with reference norms. They must also engage families in the development of Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs), involve teaching teams in IEP planning, and design orientation activities that ensure seamless transitions for students between school stages or into post-school life. Moreover, headmasters oversee the organization of students with disabilities within their institutions, addressing class assignments, scheduling, and the removal of architectural or sensory-perceptive barriers to inclusion.

An inclusive school system depends on an environment that values diversity as a resource. According to the World Health Organization, an adverse environment contributes to social exclusion, emphasizing the importance of creating supportive and inclusive contexts. For headmasters, this involves not only managing but actively leading efforts to cultivate a sense of shared responsibility among educators, families, and the community. This leadership model requires headmasters to foster a culture of empowerment and collective practice, transforming schools into communities of reflective learners and practitioners.

Looking forward, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) provides an opportunity to address these challenges through investments in infrastructure, technology, and training. By aligning innovative practices with traditional values, the educational system can support students in achieving autonomy and success. Ultimately the headmaster's role as a pedagogical leader is in ensuring that the foundational value of inclusion permeates all aspects of the school, fulfilling the constitutional rights of all students and enabling them to reach their full potential. This holistic approach reinforces the importance of inclusive education as both a foundational value and a practical framework for achieving equitable outcomes for all learners.

VIII. Conclusions

Life planning lies at the heart of inclusive education, engaging not only individual students but the entire educating community. In Italy, the right of students with disabilities to attend mainstream schools exemplifies how inclusion can be achieved through integrated and personalized educational policies. By coordinating tools

such as the IEP and fostering a culture of shared responsibility, they ensure that students with disabilities are fully integrated into both educational and social contexts. Recent updates to the regulatory framework, including the corrective provisions to Ministerial Decree 182/2020, provide additional support for these efforts, emphasizing the importance of flexibility and collaboration. The headmaster and the educating community are the main drivers of this process, responsible for creating a school environment that fosters autonomy and self-determination for all students. By working together, headmasters and the educating community can create schools that not only accommodate but celebrate diversity, setting a global standard for inclusive education. To fully achieve these goals, continued investment in training, resources, and innovative practices is essential, ensuring that the Italian school system remains a global model for inclusion and school guidance.

Inclusive education sits at the heart of a transformative and equitable school system, where the interplay of leadership and collaboration fosters environments that support the holistic development of students with disabilities. In Italy, the right to attend mainstream schools exemplifies how integrated policies can lead to meaningful educational and social inclusion. This requires headmasters and the educating community to use tools like the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) to ensure flexibility and responsiveness to individual needs. The recent corrective provisions to Ministerial Decree 182/2020 strengthen this framework by emphasizing collaboration and adaptability, reinforcing the critical role of inclusive practices in fostering autonomy and self-determination.

Leading in such a complex and dynamic context necessitates more than managerial competence. Headmasters must embody pedagogical leadership that emphasizes human resources, prioritizes effective teaching and learning conditions, and values continuous professional growth. Distributed leadership becomes central, involving teachers, families, and the broader educational network in shared responsibilities. By cultivating a community of practice where mutual trust, reflective dialogue, and collective action prevail, schools become engines of social transformation. As Sergiovanni (2002) posits, successful leaders are those who elevate the leadership potential of others, fostering an ecosystem of mutual empowerment and moral authority.

This shift from hierarchical to collaborative leadership reshapes the role of the headmaster into that of a "leader among leaders." By navigating the challenges of inclusion through reflective and adaptive strategies, headmasters act not only as visionaries but also as followers of values and ideas that advance collective well-being. This servant leadership model underscores the moral dimensions of authority, transforming schools into spaces of innovation, mutual respect, and continuous improvement.

The task of governing inclusive schools is a demanding endeavor, requiring headmasters to balance administrative, educational, and ethical imperatives. However, with the right frameworks and a commitment to shared leadership, schools can move beyond surface-level inclusivity to create genuine opportunities for all students. By fostering reflective practices and empowering educators and learners alike, inclusive leadership becomes a driving force for equity, innovation, and social cohesion, ensuring that schools remain vibrant communities that celebrate diversity and enable every individual to thrive.

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