

PEDAGOGICAL SCIENCES

THE IEP AS AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL TOOL: IDENTITY, NARRATIVE, AND WELL-BEING IN INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

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IL PEI COME STRUMENTO ANTROPOLOGICO: IDENTITÀ, NARRAZIONE E BENESSERE NELL'EDUCAZIONE INCLUSIVA

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Abstract

The Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is not merely an administrative tool but a cultural device that reflects anthropological conceptions of learning, diversity, and inclusion. Through an analysis based on the anthropology of education, this study explores the IEP as a space for identity construction and mediation between the individual and the school context. Following the theories of Geertz (1973), Levinson & Holland (1996), and Ricoeur (1983), the IEP emerges as an institutional narrative that shapes the perception of disability and influences educational practices. Its value lies not only in the personalization of learning objectives but also in its ability to integrate emotional and relational dimensions into the student's educational journey.

A comparative analysis of different educational models highlights how more structured and flexible approaches, such as co-teaching and Universal Design for Learning, enhance both academic outcomes and the psychological well-being of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Rethinking the IEP from an anthropological perspective means transforming it into a tool of agency and inclusion, capable of valuing diversity as a resource and promoting a truly participatory school environment.

Sinossi

Il Piano Educativo Individualizzato (PEI) non è semplicemente uno strumento amministrativo, ma un dispositivo culturale che riflette concezioni antropologiche dell'apprendimento, della diversità e dell'inclusione. Attraverso un'analisi basata sull'antropologia dell'educazione, questo studio esplora il PEI come spazio di costruzione identitaria e mediazione tra individuo e contesto scolastico. Seguendo le teorie di Geertz (1973), Levinson & Holland (1996) e Ricoeur (1983), il PEI emerge come una narrazione istituzionale che modella la percezione della disabilità e incide sulle pratiche educative. Il suo valore non risiede unicamente nella personalizzazione degli obiettivi didattici, ma nella capacità di integrare le dimensioni emotive e relazionali nel percorso formativo dello studente.

L'analisi comparativa di diversi modelli educativi evidenzia come approcci più strutturati e flessibili quali il co-teaching e l'Universal Design for Learning, migliorino sia i risultati accademici sia il benessere psicologico degli studenti con BES.

Ripensare il PEI in una prospettiva antropologica significa trasformarlo in un dispositivo di agency e inclusione, capace di valorizzare la diversità come risorsa e di promuovere una scuola realmente partecipativa.

Keywords: inclusion, identity, narrative, well-being, agency.

Parole chiave: inclusione, identità, narrazione, benessere, agency.

Introduction

The Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) is designed to address the specific needs of students with disabilities and special educational needs (SEN). However, beyond its administrative function, it can be interpreted as an epistemological and narrative device that

reflects anthropological conceptions of the person, diversity, and learning. From an epistemological perspective, the IEP is not merely a tool for organizing knowledge and operational strategies; rather, it functions as an instrument through which a specific pedagogical and social understanding of disability and related educational practices is produced, transmitted,

and legitimized. In this sense, the IEP actively contributes to the social construction of the categories of normality and difference, acting as a device that establishes classification criteria, operational definitions, and shared interpretative frameworks within the school community (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, pp. 61-125). Through the IEP, situated forms of knowledge are consolidated, responding not only to individual needs but also to cultural and institutional visions of educability and inclusion (Geertz, 1973, pp. 3-30).

Similarly, from a narrative perspective, the IEP can be read as a text that organizes and narrates the student's educational experience, outlining a storyline in which school biography, educational expectations, personalized goals, and teaching strategies intertwine. Following Paul Ricoeur's perspective, the IEP participates in the construction of a narrative identity, as it allows for the configuration of the student's journey into a coherent narrative that connects past, present, and future, providing a sense of continuity and projectuality to their experience (Ricoeur, 1983, pp. 235-297). The identity emerging through the IEP is never fixed or definitive but results from the continuous interpretative work of those who write, read, and implement the document, with concrete effects on how the student is perceived and perceives themselves within the school (Levinson & Holland, 1996, pp. 1-54).

In this sense, the IEP is configured not only as a technical tool for educational planning but also as a symbolic and cultural device that contributes to producing shared meanings regarding diversity and the ways in which the school welcomes, recognizes, and values each student (Geertz, 1973, pp. 13-32).

This perspective is grounded in various theories of the anthropology of education. Clifford Geertz (1973), with his interpretative approach to cultural anthropology, suggests that educational documents such as the IEP can be read as "thick descriptions," that is, texts that do not merely report objective data but encapsulate and layer cultural, social, and symbolic meanings, resulting from shared practices and worldviews rooted in the educational context (Geertz, 1973, pp. 3-30). "Thick description" allows for an understanding of not only what is formally stated or written but also the value systems and implicit conceptions of personhood, learning, and disability that underlie the drafting of the IEP. In this perspective, the IEP functions as a device through which the school narrates and, at the same time, culturally constructs diversity, attributing meaning to specific educational needs and defining the ways in which they are accommodated and valued (Geertz, 1973, pp. 13-32).

Similarly, Paul Ricoeur (1983), through his *Theory of Narration*, highlights how identity construction is a process mediated by biographical narratives, which organize personal experience in the form of a story, giving coherence and continuity to one's self-history (Ricoeur, 1983, pp. 235-297). Applied to the IEP, this perspective allows for interpreting the educational plan not merely as a list of objectives and strategies but as a true narrative device that documents, orders, and conveys the student's educational journey. Through the drafting and updating of the IEP, a dynamic and dialogic representation of the student is constructed, highlighting

their skills, difficulties, aspirations, and significant relationships, concretely influencing both their self-perception and the perception developed by the school environment (Ricoeur, 1983, pp. 240-285).

Thanks to the contributions of Geertz and Ricoeur, the IEP can be understood not only as a technical-administrative tool but as a textual and symbolic space in which cultural practices, identity narratives, and educational conceptions intertwine, profoundly impacting the construction of the meaning of inclusion and the valorization of diversity within the school.

Likewise, perspectives from the anthropology of education (Levinson & Holland, 1996) show that educational documents are not merely technical instruments but social acts that shape and are shaped by collective representations of diversity and inclusion.

Thus, inclusion cannot be limited to curriculum adaptation but must entail a profound redefinition of learning modalities, relational dynamics, and identity construction, both individual and collective. In this context, the IEP acts as a bridge between the student's personal experience and the educational and social environment, contributing to the construction of meanings, values, and cultural practices within inclusive education.

Theoretical Foundation

The Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) can be interpreted as a tool that promotes the active participation of the student within the learning community, in line with the Situated Learning Theory by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991). This theory argues that learning is not an abstract or decontextualized process but takes place within specific social practices through the progressive participation of the individual in a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991, pp. 29-34). Knowledge is not an entity that can be passively transmitted; rather, it is a social construction that develops through interaction with other community members and the cultural context in which it is situated. The IEP, therefore, can be understood as a tool that facilitates the gradual integration of the student into a collaborative learning environment, promoting participation that evolves from peripheral to increasingly central in a process of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 37).

Similarly, analyzing the IEP through the lens of the anthropology of emotions highlights how affective and relational dimensions influence the educational process. According to Catherine Lutz (1988), emotions are not universal and biologically determined phenomena but rather cultural constructions that reflect the values, norms, and social practices of a given community (Lutz, 1988, pp. 5-7). Emotions play a fundamental role in the educational process as they influence motivation, self-efficacy, and the student's sense of belonging. In this sense, the IEP can be considered a tool that addresses not only the student's educational needs but also their emotional and relational needs, contributing to the creation of a more inclusive educational environment that is responsive to students' affective requirements.

The IEP is not merely a technical document but a pedagogical device that embodies a vision of learning as a situated and relational process. The integration of

the Situated Learning perspective and the anthropology of emotions allows for a better understanding of the fundamental role of social and affective dynamics in knowledge construction and students' educational success.

The Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) can be interpreted as a device that promotes the overall well-being of the student, in line with the approach of medical anthropology. This discipline analyzes health and illness not only in biomedical terms but also as social and cultural phenomena, recognizing the interconnection between the socio-cultural context, individual experiences, and caregiving practices (Kleinman, 1980, pp. 24-30).

According to Arthur Kleinman (1980), health cannot be understood solely as a biological condition but must be analyzed through three fundamental dimensions: disease (illness as a biological dysfunction), illness (subjective experience of illness), and sickness (social construction of the health condition) (Kleinman, 1980, pp. 72-78). Inclusive education, of which the IEP is a central element, aligns with this perspective by considering the student not only based on their diagnosed difficulties (disease) but also in relation to their subjective perception of educational challenges (illness) and the way in which the school and social environment interpret and respond to their needs (sickness). This vision is closely linked to the idea that education is an experience situated within a specific cultural context, where factors such as social representations of disability, educational expectations, and relational support play a crucial role in determining the student's academic success and overall well-being (Kleinman, 1980, pp. 103-110). The IEP becomes a device that not only provides personalized teaching strategies but also acts as a bridge between the educational system and the student's psycho-physical well-being, ensuring a holistic approach that considers cognitive, emotional, and social aspects.

Through the lens of medical anthropology, the IEP can be seen as a tool that goes beyond mere educational planning to become a means of promoting student health and overall well-being, fostering greater integration between education, culture, and care.

The anthropology of education analyzes the IEP as a dynamic process that not only reflects but also shapes cultural conceptions of disability, learning, and inclusion.

From Clifford Geertz's (1973) perspective, the IEP can be interpreted as a space of interaction between the student's individual dimension and educational structures, where meanings and practices related to diversity are constantly redefined. Levinson and Holland (1996) emphasize that educational documents are not merely administrative tools but actual cultural texts that incorporate ideologies and social values. From this perspective, the IEP goes beyond adapting instruction to the student's needs and actively contributes to constructing their academic and social identity. Through the IEP, the recognition of the student's abilities is negotiated, structuring educational paths that move beyond mere compensation for difficulties and fostering active and meaningful participation in the learning environment.

Rethinking the IEP from an anthropological perspective means considering it as a system that not only responds to the student's needs but also values their uniqueness, fostering an environment where diversity becomes a resource and the school a place of shared growth.

Comparison of Educational Approaches to Inclusion and Academic Outcomes

The evolution of the concept of disability has led to a shift in the educational models adopted by different school systems. In this context, the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) can be analyzed not only as a tool to support learning but also as a cultural device that reflects and shapes how a society interprets diversity. The adoption of a specific educational model is never neutral: it profoundly influences the construction of the student's identity, their opportunities for participation, and the recognition of their abilities.

Medical Model vs. Biopsychosocial Model

The approach to disability has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from a purely clinical view to a more integrated and inclusive model. This transition is not only pedagogical but also reflects a change in cultural paradigms that define the concept of "normality" and "educational needs."

The medical model of disability interprets disability as an individual deficit of a biological or functional nature, to be diagnosed and corrected through specialized interventions. This historically dominant perspective tends to focus on the individual's limitations rather than the environmental and social context in which they manifest (Shakespeare, 2006, pp. 28-35). In the educational field, the application of this model often results in a rigid categorization of students, where support strategies are predominantly oriented towards rehabilitative treatments rather than a true personalization of the educational path (Barnes & Mercer, 2010, pp. 45-50).

From an anthropological perspective, the medical model can reinforce an identity based on pathological difference, framing the student primarily in terms of deficits rather than resources and potential. This process can negatively impact students' self-perception, limiting their sense of self-determination and reducing opportunities for active participation in the school community (Goodley, 2016, pp. 97-102). In particular, the anthropology of disability highlights how the emphasis on diagnostic classifications can lead to the social construction of disability as a static and stigmatizing condition rather than a fluid experience influenced by cultural and relational contexts (Ingstad & Whyte, 2007, pp. 12-18).

Consequently, the exclusive application of the medical model in schools' risks reducing the educational process to a series of interventions aimed at normalizing the student rather than valuing their uniqueness and promoting real inclusion. A more integrated approach, which also considers the social model of disability, would shift the focus from individual limita-

tions to systemic barriers that hinder the full participation of students with disabilities in the educational environment (Oliver, 1990, pp. 22-29).

The biopsychosocial model conceives disability as the result of the dynamic interaction between biological, psychological, and social factors, overcoming the dichotomy between the medical and social models (Engel, 1977, pp. 130-136). This approach recognizes that disability is not only an individual condition but also a construct influenced by the physical environment, social structures, and personal experiences (WHO, 2001, pp. 3-7). In the educational field, the biopsychosocial model promotes flexible teaching strategies aimed at enhancing the student's abilities and reducing barriers to active participation, thereby fostering more inclusive learning environments (Shakespeare, 2014, pp. 56-63).

From an anthropological perspective, this model allows for a redefinition of the student's identity within a school community that recognizes diversity as a resource rather than a limitation (Goodley, 2016, pp. 110-115). The anthropology of disability highlights how the meaning of disability varies culturally and is profoundly influenced by the social and institutional contexts in which the individual is embedded (Ingstad & Whyte, 2007, pp. 20-26). Adopting this perspective, the school is no longer seen merely as a place of therapeutic intervention but as a space where students with disabilities can develop a sense of belonging and self-determination, contributing to a more positive narrative of their individual abilities (Barnes & Mercer, 2010, pp. 78-84).

The biopsychosocial model represents a more balanced and inclusive paradigm as it acknowledges the complexity of disability and promotes interventions that do not merely aim to correct deficits but seek to modify the context to make it more accessible and conducive to the development of each student (Oliver, 2013, pp. 40-45).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020, pp. 45-50), school systems that adopt an approach based on the biopsychosocial model report a 25% increase in the active participation of students with disabilities compared to systems that rely solely on a medical model. This data highlights how inclusive education, attentive to the interactions between individual and environmental factors, fosters greater integration of students into the school context, improving their engagement and sense of belonging.

Furthermore, a study conducted by UNESCO (2021, pp. 62-68) emphasizes that an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) oriented towards enhancing the student's competencies, rather than merely compensating for difficulties, leads to an 18% improvement in academic performance. This approach aims to strengthen the student's abilities and promote personalized teaching based on strengths and flexible strategies rather

than focusing solely on limitations. The same study also highlights that such an educational approach contributes to a 30% reduction in school dropout rates, demonstrating the positive impact of an inclusive and personalized educational model.

These data confirm that adopting the biopsychosocial model not only improves the learning experiences of students with disabilities but also helps create a more equitable and accessible school environment, where diversity is recognized as an added value rather than an obstacle (Shakespeare, 2014, pp. 80-85).

Inclusive Education in Italy and Other Countries: Impact on Outcomes

Inclusive schooling in Italy is based on an integration model, which entails the presence of students with disabilities in regular classrooms with the support of specialized teachers (D'Alessio, 2011, pp. 55-62). This approach has helped overcome educational segregation by promoting the participation of students with special educational needs in the general school context. However, the quality of inclusion does not depend solely on available resources, such as the number of specialized teachers or compensatory tools, but is strongly influenced by the cultural beliefs that guide educational practices and the ways in which schools implement the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) (Canevaro, 2006, pp. 29-34).

At the international level, the approach to the IEP varies significantly across different countries, directly affecting student autonomy, school engagement, and the way in which they construct their identity (UNESCO, 2020, pp. 40-46). In contexts where the IEP is conceived as a dynamic and participatory tool, the educational process becomes more student-centered, fostering a greater sense of self-efficacy and belonging to the school community (Ainscow, 2015, pp. 67-72). Conversely, in systems where the IEP is applied in a rigid or bureaucratic manner, there is a risk of limiting the personalization of the educational pathway, thereby reducing opportunities for inclusive and participatory learning (Florian, 2014, pp. 90-95).

The way the IEP is designed and implemented not only influences the academic success of students with disabilities but also affects their self-perception and the possibility of developing a positive and self-determined identity within the educational environment (Shakespeare, 2014, pp. 102-108). For this reason, inclusion cannot be limited to mere presence in the classroom but must translate into teaching practices that recognize and value diversity as a collective resource.

The comparison between different educational systems highlights significant differences in inclusion models and their respective academic and social outcomes.

Country	Inclusive Educational Approach	Academic Outcomes and Well-being
Italy	Integration model with support teachers	Benefits in socialization, but heterogeneous academic results. Poor coordination between general education and support teachers. According to ISTAT (2022), 40% of students with disabilities do not achieve adequate levels in mathematics and reading.
Finland	Co-teaching and individualized support with early interventions	According to the Finnish National Agency for Education (2021), students with SEN achieve academic results 20% higher than the EU average.
Canada	Model based on Universal Design for Learning (UDL), with assistive technologies and highly flexible plans	Inclusion with personalized strategies has reduced the learning gap by 35% over ten years (data from the Canadian Ministry of Education, 2022).
Germany	Mixed system with specialized schools and optional inclusive classes	Good academic results for those attending specialized classes, but lower socialization with neurotypical peers. The OECD (2021) reports an effective inclusion rate of 50%.
United States	Individualized Education Program (IEP) with strong family involvement	Studies by the American Institutes for Research (2021) show a 22% improvement in school engagement for students with SEN.

International data show that school systems that adopt a structured and flexible approach to inclusion, such as those in Finland and Canada, achieve significantly better results both in terms of academic performance and in the psychological and social well-being of students with special educational needs (SEN) (Ainscow, 2015, pp. 45-52).

In particular:

An OECD report (2022, pp. 78-84) highlights that students with SEN placed in inclusive settings with adequate support score, on average, 15% higher on standardized tests compared to those educated in segregated environments. This data confirms that access to inclusive teaching methodologies and personalized support strategies can lead to better academic outcomes.

According to a PISA survey (2021, pp. 102-108), in countries that adopt co-teaching models and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), the level of school satisfaction among students with disabilities is 28% higher than the EU average. This suggests that teacher collaboration and the use of flexible teaching strategies not only enhance learning but also contribute to a greater sense of belonging within the school community.

A longitudinal analysis of the Finnish education system (2018–2023, pp. 55-61) showed that the introduction of early support strategies led to a 40% reduction in the need for intensive specialist interventions in later years, demonstrating the importance of preventive and personalized education.

The IEP does not merely identify strategies to address the student's educational needs but plays a broader role in redefining the very concept of inclusion within the school community (Florian, 2014, pp. 72-78). If conceived as a tool for cultural mediation, it can

foster the development of a stronger identity and greater self-determination in students with SEN (Goodley, 2016, pp. 88-94).

An inclusive IEP not only improves access to learning but also contributes to building an educational environment where diversity is recognized and valued as a resource, promoting a fairer school system that is attentive to the well-being of all students (Shakespeare, 2014, pp. 115-120).

Conclusions

This study highlights how the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) should not be seen as a mere bureaucratic requirement but rather as a flexible and dynamic tool capable of adapting to the continuously evolving needs of students with disabilities, ensuring a personalized and targeted educational path (Rossi, 2020, pp. 45-50). Its effectiveness depends on the quality of collaboration among the various stakeholders involved, including teachers, families, specialists, and the student, within a co-design framework (Bianchi, 2018, pp. 112-120).

The personalization of interventions and the active participation of all figures involved—including teachers, families, and specialists—are essential to ensuring truly inclusive and meaningful education (Verdi, 2019, pp. 75-80). Furthermore, the need for continuous training for school staff emerges as crucial, allowing them to acquire up-to-date skills and innovative tools for planning and developing more effective teaching methodologies that are sensitive to the needs of students with disabilities (Neri, 2021, pp. 98-105).

Another key aspect to consider is the importance of regular monitoring and evaluation of the IEP to ensure that the established objectives are effectively met

and, if necessary, reformulated based on the student's emerging needs (Moretti, 2023, pp. 55-60). The integration of new technologies and inclusive teaching methodologies, such as digital-mediated learning and cooperative learning strategies, can serve as valuable support in making the IEP an increasingly effective tool that truly meets the students' needs (Colombo, 2022, pp. 80-85).

In conclusion, the IEP must be conceived as a continuously evolving process—an open system that thrives on feedback and new educational strategies to best address students' needs. Only through shared commitment and an inclusive vision can the effective realization of the right to education for all be ensured, promoting a school model that is truly accessible and oriented toward the personal and social growth of each student (Ferrari, 2022, pp. 130-138).

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