Inclusion of students with disabilities and Educational Guidance in Italy: a comprehensive analysis of the 2022 guidelines and recent legislative developments

Valentina Della Volpe, PhD Special Education
University of Roma Tre, Italy

Abstract

The educational guidance and inclusion practices in Italian schools have undergone significant evolution over the last few years. Recent legislative updates emphasize equity, inclusion, and personalized educational paths, acknowledging the diverse backgrounds, languages, and abilities of students. The 2022 guidelines for school guidance, introduced within the framework of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR), further underline the importance of creating an inclusive educational environment. This article explores the most recent regulations from 2020 alongside the latest Eurydice reports to analyze their implications for inclusive education, the role of pedagogical frameworks, and strategies to advance equity and accessibility in schools.

Keywords: Educational guidance, inclusion, educational policy

Introduction

Educational guidance plays a vital role in shaping students' educational and professional trajectories, aiming to align their choices with their skills, aspirations, and the needs of the job market. In Italy, recent legislative measures have recognized the importance of equity, inclusion, and personalized pathways to cater to the diverse backgrounds of students.

One of the cornerstone changes in this landscape was the enactment of Law 92/2019, which integrated civic education across all educational levels. This reform emphasized active citizenship, sustainability, and the goals outlined in the UN's Agenda 2030 (Ministry of Education, 2020). Furthermore, the Interministerial Decree 182/2020 revised the framework for Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), emphasizing collaborative approaches among teachers, families, and support services to ensure effective learning strategies.

The 2022 Guidelines for School Guidance, a central component of the PNRR reforms, build on these efforts by emphasizing personalized educational pathways and lifelong guidance. Their primary goal is to create inclusive environments where students with disabilities can thrive. This article examines the implications of these guidelines, drawing insights from recent Eurydice reports and pedagogical research to evaluate their effectiveness in fostering inclusion and equity in Italian schools.

Background and theoretical framework
Inclusive Education: Legislative and Pedagogical Foundations

Inclusive education seeks to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students by addressing diverse needs within mainstream settings. Rooted in the Salamanca Statement (1994), this approach emphasizes the value of diversity as a resource for learning communities. In Italy, these principles were institutionalized through the 1977 Law 517, which abolished special education classes, and later through Law 104/1992, which guarantees the rights of students with disabilities to an inclusive education.

The 2022 guidelines reflect both national and European commitments to inclusion. Documents such as the Eurydice report Equity in School Education in Europe (2022) underline the importance of adaptive pedagogy and policy coherence in fostering inclusive environments. Italian policies, including Legislative Decree 66/2017, integrate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles, ensuring that instruction accommodates diverse learners through multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression (Burgstahler, 2020).

From a pedagogical perspective, inclusive education necessitates a shift toward student-centered practices that value individual strengths and contributions. Ianes (2020) emphasizes that effective inclusion is achieved through continuous collaboration among educators, families, and community stakeholders, supported by robust legislative frameworks like the Interministerial Decree 182/2020.

Educational Guidance and Inclusion

Educational guidance functions as a bridge between students' educational experiences and their future aspirations. According to Batini and Santini (2021), guidance must address not only academic progression but also the social and emotional development of students. The 2022 guidelines align with this perspective by embedding personalized guidance modules within school curricula, beginning at the middle school level. These modules aim to foster self-awareness, align educational choices with individual capabilities, and support students with disabilities through tailored interventions (Ministry of Education, 2022). So also the PCTO (Pathways for Transversal Skills and Guidance) program, restructured in alignment with the 2022 guidelines, strengthens connections between school and work. This integration aims to equip students with the skills necessary for professional success while addressing the needs of local labor markets. For students with disabilities, this involves tailored work-based learning experiences that align with their capabilities and aspirations.

Insights from the Eurydice Report on Guidance Systems in Europe (2021) reveal that early and continuous guidance significantly enhances students' capacity to make informed decisions. The introduction of tools such as the E-Portfolio in Italy provides a structured mechanism for documenting student progress and facilitating personalized planning. For students with disabilities, these tools ensure that their unique needs and achievements are adequately recognized and supported.

Research approach

This article employs a qualitative research approach to investigate the implementation and impact of Italy's 2022 Guidelines for School Guidance, with a particular focus on their role in promoting the inclusion of students with disabilities. The study integrates multiple sources to provide a comprehensive analysis of the guidelines' effectiveness and their alignment with inclusive educational frameworks at both national and European levels.

The research draws on a selection of primary legislative documents, including Law 104/1992, Legislative Decree 66/2017, Interministerial Decree 182/2020, and the 2022 Guidelines for School Guidance, which collectively form the backbone of inclusive education policies in Italy. These documents were selected for their direct relevance to the legal and institutional frameworks that underpin inclusive education and their explicit focus on guidance practices. The analysis also incorporates data from the latest Eurydice reports, including Equity in School Education in Europe (2022), Guidance Systems in Europe (2021), and the most recent publication, Key Trends in Inclusive and Adaptive Education in Europe (2024). The Eurydice 2024 report offers up-to-date insights into emerging trends and

policy innovations, providing a timely comparative perspective that contextualizes Italy's efforts within the broader European educational landscape.

Methodologically, the study employs a document analysis framework to examine these sources, focusing on three key dimensions: (1) the implementation of personalized guidance practices, (2) the alignment of Italy's policies with European standards, and (3) barriers to the practical realization of inclusive education. The qualitative nature of the research allows for an in-depth exploration of how legislative mandates translate into school-level practices, emphasizing the lived experiences of educators and students. Legislative documents were analyzed for their prescriptive content, with particular attention to provisions related to Universal Design for Learning (UDL), the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) framework, and resource allocation mechanisms.

In addition to primary documents, the Eurydice reports provide valuable comparative data that highlight best practices across Europe and identify areas where Italy's policies diverge from or align with broader trends. For instance, the Guidance Systems in Europe (2021) report underscores the critical role of early intervention and continuous support in preventing school dropout and fostering equity. This insight informs the analysis of Italy's focus on middle-school guidance modules and tools like the E-Portfolio. Meanwhile, the Key Trends in Inclusive and Adaptive Education in Europe (2024) report offers a forward-looking perspective, examining the integration of adaptive technologies and data-driven decision-making in inclusive education—a crucial consideration for the Italian context.

The analytical framework adopted in this study combines insights from special pedagogy and educational policy literature, drawing on works such as Ianes (2020) and Goussot (2015) to ground the discussion in established theories of inclusion and differentiation. By synthesizing legislative analysis with comparative policy insights and theoretical perspectives, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the 2022 guidelines' impact. This approach not only evaluates the current state of implementation but also identifies actionable recommendations for enhancing the inclusivity and effectiveness of Italy's educational guidance system.

Through this comprehensive methodological lens, the research offers a critical appraisal of how Italy's policies are evolving to meet the needs of students with disabilities, while situating these developments within the broader European push toward equity and inclusion in education.

Analysis and discussion
Lifelong Guidance and Personalization
        The 2022 guidelines emphasize lifelong guidance as a means of fostering equitable educational trajectories. Early interventions, introduced at the middle school level, help students identify their interests and strengths while preparing them for future educational transitions. The incorporation of personalized guidance modules aligns with Burgstahler's (2020) advocacy for UDL principles, which emphasize flexible teaching methods to accommodate diverse learning needs.
The use of E-Portfolios represents a significant advancement in promoting student-centered guidance. By documenting progress and achievements, these tools provide a platform for adaptive planning, ensuring that students with disabilities receive support aligned with their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). However, the Eurydice Report on Guidance Systems in Europe (2021) highlights disparities in the availability of such tools across different regions, underscoring the need for standardized implementation.

Inclusive Pedagogy and Equity
        Inclusive pedagogy forms the foundation of the 2022 guidelines, integrating UDL principles to create flexible and accessible learning environments. For students with disabilities, this approach ensures that their unique needs are addressed through differentiated instruction and collaborative planning. Ianes (2020) stresses the importance of tailoring educational strategies to individual capabilities, a practice reinforced by Italy's Legislative Decree 66/2017.
        Despite these advancements, challenges persist. Regional disparities in resource allocation and teacher training continue to hinder the effective implementation of inclusive practices. The Eurydice Report on Equity (2022) notes that schools in disadvantaged areas often lack access to assistive technologies, limiting the reach of inclusive policies.

Challenges and critical issues
        Despite the advancements represented by Italy's 2022 Guidelines for School Guidance, significant challenges persist that hinder their effective implementation, particularly in fostering the inclusion of students with disabilities. One of the most critical issues is the persistent regional disparity in access to resources, which continues to undermine the equitable application of inclusive education practices. Schools located in disadvantaged areas often lack the necessary infrastructure, including assistive technologies and adaptive tools, to meet the needs of students with disabilities. These disparities are exacerbated by broader socio-economic inequalities, which limit not only material resources but also access to

specialized training and support services for educators. As highlighted by Goussot (2015), this resource gap perpetuates systemic inequities within the education system, ultimately restricting the ability of schools to create inclusive environments that align with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the rights-based approach to education mandated by European and national frameworks.

Another major challenge lies in the inconsistent provision of professional development for teachers, particularly in the areas of digital competence and inclusive pedagogy. The National Digital School Plan (2020) underscores the importance of integrating technological tools into classroom practices to overcome learning barriers and promote accessibility for all students. However, the successful implementation of these technologies depends heavily on the skills and readiness of teachers to employ them effectively. In many schools, particularly those in under-resourced regions, educators report limited access to training programs that focus on the use of assistive technologies, differentiated instruction, and collaborative teaching methods tailored to the needs of students with disabilities. This lack of targeted professional development restricts the potential of inclusive pedagogical approaches to transform learning environments, as teachers struggle to adapt to the demands of a rapidly evolving educational landscape.

The disparity in teacher preparedness also reflects broader issues related to policy implementation and systemic support. While the 2022 guidelines and related legislation emphasize the importance of continuous guidance and personalized learning, the practical realization of these principles often depends on the availability of adequately trained staff and collaborative networks among schools, local authorities, and external organizations. Recent findings from the Eurydice Report on Equity in School Education (2022) highlight that the absence of cohesive support systems frequently results in fragmented efforts to support students with disabilities, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged areas. These challenges are further compounded by the uneven adoption of digital platforms such as the E-Portfolio, which are central to the 2022 guidelines' vision of personalized education. While such tools offer significant potential for tracking and adapting learning pathways, their effective deployment requires consistent access to technological resources, robust data management systems, and the active engagement of teachers and families in their use.

Furthermore, the integration of inclusive practices within the broader framework of school guidance requires a cultural shift that goes beyond legislative mandates. As Ianes (2020) points out, inclusion is not simply a matter of policy but a fundamental transformation of the school environment that demands the active participation of all stakeholders, including educators,

families, and students themselves. However, resistance to change and a lack of awareness about the benefits of inclusive education continue to pose barriers, particularly in schools with entrenched practices that prioritize traditional, one-size-fits-all teaching approaches. Addressing these attitudinal challenges requires not only comprehensive training but also the promotion of a shared vision of inclusion as a core value within the educational community.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted and, in many cases, exacerbated these challenges. The rapid transition to remote learning exposed significant gaps in digital infrastructure and teacher readiness, with students with disabilities disproportionately affected by the shift. Studies conducted during the pandemic, including findings from the Italian National Institute of Documentation, Innovation, and Educational Research (INDIRE, 2021), reveal that many students with disabilities faced increased isolation and reduced access to individualized support due to the limitations of virtual learning environments. These findings underscore the urgency of bridging digital divides and equipping schools with the tools and training needed to ensure that inclusive practices are resilient in the face of future disruptions.

To address these challenges, it is essential to adopt a multifaceted approach that combines increased investment in resources with systemic reforms to strengthen the capacity of schools to implement inclusive policies. This includes prioritizing the equitable distribution of funds to ensure that all schools, regardless of their geographic location, have access to the infrastructure and tools needed to support students with disabilities. Additionally, targeted efforts to enhance teacher training programs must focus on building expertise in inclusive pedagogy and digital competence, with an emphasis on practical applications that address the realities of diverse classrooms. The development of collaborative networks involving schools, local authorities, and third-sector organizations can also play a crucial role in providing holistic support for students with disabilities and their families, fostering a culture of inclusion that extends beyond the classroom.

Finally, robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are needed to assess the implementation of the 2022 guidelines and identify areas for improvement. By adopting data-driven approaches to policy evaluation, education authorities can gain valuable insights into the effectiveness of current practices and make informed decisions about resource allocation, training priorities, and the development of new initiatives. As the education system continues to evolve, these measures will be critical to ensuring that the promise of inclusive education becomes a reality for all students, regardless of their circumstances.

Proposals for improvement

To address the persistent challenges in implementing inclusive education and the 2022 Guidelines for School Guidance, a multifaceted approach is necessary to enhance resources, collaboration, and evaluation processes. Priority must be given to investments in infrastructure and assistive technologies, ensuring schools have access to digital platforms, adaptive tools, and training resources capable of supporting the diverse needs of students with disabilities. The equitable allocation of these resources is critical to reducing disparities across regions, particularly in under-resourced areas, where access to such tools often determines the feasibility of inclusive practices.

At the same time, fostering robust collaborative networks is essential for creating comprehensive support systems. These networks should integrate schools, local authorities, and third-sector organizations to provide holistic assistance to students with disabilities and their families. Such collaborations enable schools to leverage external expertise and resources, facilitating the development of personalized educational pathways and guidance tailored to individual needs. Additionally, the establishment of effective monitoring and evaluation frameworks is imperative to ensure the successful implementation of these initiatives. By adopting data-driven approaches, education policymakers and practitioners can systematically assess the impact of the guidelines, identify best practices, and address gaps in implementation. This iterative process not only enhances accountability but also supports the continuous refinement of inclusive practices to align with evolving educational goals.

Recent studies, including those by Batini and Santini (2021), emphasize the importance of using evidence-based strategies to bridge the gap between policy design and practical outcomes, underscoring the need for sustained professional development and targeted resource distribution. By addressing these interconnected aspects—resources, collaboration, and evaluation—Italy's education system can advance its commitment to inclusion, ensuring that every student, regardless of ability, has equitable access to quality education and opportunities for personal and academic success.

Conclusions

The 2022 guidelines for school guidance reflect Italy's commitment to fostering inclusion through innovative tools and adaptive pedagogy. By prioritizing lifelong guidance and personalized pathways, these measures aim to create equitable educational environments that empower students with disabilities to achieve their potential.

However, achieving these goals requires addressing persistent challenges, including resource disparities and uneven teacher training. By aligning national policies with European standards and investing in sustainable reforms, Italy can continue to lead in promoting inclusive education.

To fully realize the potential of these initiatives, Italy must commit to sustained investments in innovative tools, collaborative networks, and capacity-building programs. Aligning national policies with European inclusion goals ensures that every student, regardless of their abilities, has access to quality education and the opportunity to succeed.

References:
1. Bocci, F. (2021). Special Pedagogy as Inclusive Pedagogy. An instituting dialectic between risksand opportunities. Italian Journal of Special Education for Inclusion | Pensa MultiMedia Editor
2. Burgstahler, S. (2020). *Universal Design in Higher Education: From Principles to Practice*. Harvard Education Press.
3. D'Alonzo, L. (2019). Special education for inclusion. Torino: SEI.
4. Eurydice. (2021). Guidance Systems in Europe: Policies and Practices. European Commission.
5. Eurydice. (2022). Equity in School Education in Europe. European Commission.
6. Eurydice. (2024). Key Trends in Inclusive and Adaptive Education in Europe. European Commission.
7. Goussot A. (2015). Special pedagogy as a science of mediation and differences, Fano: Aras Edizioni.
8. Ianes, D., & Heidrun, D. (2023). Speciality and normality? Tackling the dilemma for a fair and inclusive school for all. Trento: Erickson.
9. INDIRE. (2021). Distance Learning and Inclusion During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Italy. INDIRE.
10. Ministry of Education and Merit. (2020). *National Digital School Plan*. MIM.
11. Ministry of Education and Merit. (2021). *Guidelines for Lifelong Guidance*. MIM.

12. Ministry of Education and Merit. (2022). *Triennial Plan for Guidance and Transversal Skills*. MIM.
13. UNESCO. (1994). The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education. UNESCO.
14. United Nations. (2006). Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Retrieved from [UN official website].
15. Law 92/2019: Civic Education Reform.
16. Law 104/1992: Framework for the Assistance, Social Integration, and Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
17. Legislative Decree 66/2017: Provisions for the Promotion of School Inclusion.
18. Interministerial Decree 182/2020: Regulation for Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).