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CLASSROOM CLIMATE IN INCLUSIVE SETTINGS



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1 Introduction, defining the concept of classroom climate

The growing need for reflection and debate on the issue of the Inclusive School emphasises the importance of a careful analysis of actual practices in the classroom framed on a perspective of the child/adolescent in development in a specific context (Rose, 2002). Inclusion promotes learning, participation and equal opportunities for all (Brodin, 2000). Inclusion and inclusive education include all children irrespective of gender, language, capabilities, religion, political opinion, national, ethnical or social origin, or disability and so on. Inclusion is always both a physical placement and a question of community and equal opportunities (Brodin & Lindstrand, 2007). Learning does not exist in a vacuum but in social interaction with other human beings and all children have the right to learn together with others (Sommer, 2005). Inclusion is accepting the reality that we are both similar and different; it is a process in which diversity is seen as a resource. An inclusive school includes all pupils, the teaching itself and the curricula (Brodin & Lindstrand, 2004).

We know that the individual pathways of children and adolescents, both when there are barriers for participation and learning and not, are determined not only early, not only by curriculum, but especially by the conditions in which all development takes place, including the multiple intra-individual factors and systems of social relations and discourses and condition of the environments in which they participate. Classroom climate concerns the affective-relational area; it observes, for example, feeling of meaning, participation, well being, respect, self-confidence, and

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perceptions formed in the interaction between pupils and school. All children have the right to feel that the school involves and welcomes them in a positive way. The impact of the classroom climate on learning processes through social interactions has been defined as;

the group of psychological and social characteristics of a classroom, determined by structural, personal and functional factors (...) The classroom climate has to do with characteristics and behaviour of the teachers, of the pupils, the interaction among these and, in consequence, the class dynamic is unique and particular to these elements (Rodriguez, G. 2004: 1).

The climate of the classroom is also described as a system comprising four sets of variables: *the physical involvement, the organisational objectives, characteristics of teachers and pupils* (Schmidt & Cagran, 2006). It is seen as a strong mediator of *values, beliefs and standards*, here called *the discourse*. The discourse steers what we recognise and respond to, in a normative context with coherent systems of meaning, where meaning is created, enclosed, and excluded. In this perspective, the behaviour of the teachers has a strong role, modelling the relationships within the group. It affects the teachers' self-reflection upon their perception of normality, identity and responsibility. Dror (2006) points to the involvement of 6 factors in the general climate of school (not specifically in the classroom), including: *supportive leadership; teachers' autonomy; prestige of the teaching profession; renovations, teachers collaboration and workload*. Teachers who perceive their schools as having a supportive leadership encourage the innovation/updates and collaboration between partners, leading to more positive attitudes towards inclusion. In a socio-cultural perspective this is very important as it is from this perspective that human beings (re)construct meaning in interaction with other persons from different social practices (Vygotsky, 1999). From a psychological, sociological and inclusive perspective it is necessary to take into account the complete ecosystem in which the development takes place, placing the emphasis not only on the child or on the context but on the interactions that occur between different systems which contribute to the development of the child/adolescent. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Can schools make a difference? When research has been conducted on schools' different levels of success regarding pupils' socio-economic backgrounds, the results shows that school can play a decisive role in not preserving those

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differences and that climate plays a decisive role (Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, & Ouston, 1982; Grosin, 2004). Grosin states that what distinguishes a successful school is mutual respect, a positive climate and a focus on knowledge goals and on pupils' learning:

Successful schools are distinguished by giving priority to subject knowledge and to pupils learning what they should know. However if the pupils are to attain the knowledge goals the adults also have to respond to the pupils in a positive way on a human level. One more link between the adults and the children in the successful schools is common social rules with a requirement of mutual respect (Grosin, p. 37, 2004, my translation).

The climate in the classroom is one of the determining factors in the development of these practices (at the level of teaching strategies, attitudes and organisational factors). It is important for the process of learning and pupils' development. In a survey of studies from various countries, several factors are shown to influence the development of an inclusive climate in the classroom, including *interpersonal relationships, personal development of each individual, beliefs, expectations and attitudes of teachers and other adults in school, and physical and organisational dimensions*.

2 Factors of Influence and Consequences on Classroom Climate

When we think of climate in school or classroom there are many factors to consider. Most important are affective-relational factors with impact on learning processes in social interactions. Studies on the interaction between psychosocial aspects, strategies and teaching attitudes, point at the importance of climate in the classroom on pupils learning, showing that pupils achieved much better in classrooms with an academic environment where they feel happy (Westling Allodi, 2002). Research shows that pupils need to feel that school is for them, to be involved, to feel that schoolwork is meaningful – that it is real – most pupils are dependent on teachers who can offer them this opportunity (Hugo, 2009; Ljusberg, 2009).

There are studies showing that it is easier to change the classroom climate if more people than teachers are involved (Schmidt & Çagran, 2006). Villa, Thousand, Myers, & Nevin (1996) claim that head-teachers' support and staff collaboration are

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apparent as important factors in the formation of positive attitudes although teachers perceive head-teachers as being detached and ambivalent towards inclusion. Van Reusen, Shoho & Barker (2001) expand the involvement to concern all staff around the pupils. Another researcher goes further to say, that the whole education system, as a single body, contributes to the learning process and if a sector does not work or is weakened, the whole process may be affected (Sakarneh, 2004). Van Reusen et. al (2001) hypothesise that “the attitudes and beliefs that teachers, administrators and other school personnel hold towards inclusion and the learning ability of pupils with disabilities may influence school learning environments and the availability of equitable educational opportunities for all pupils” (ibid, p. 8).

Interpersonal relationship is modulated by the interactions between pupils and between teacher and pupils in a context, the school, and in a national and local discourse. These interactions are crucial, not only its number, but essentially its quality, that is also closely related to multiple dimensions of the development of each player. The individual development (pupil or teacher), which impacts on these interactions are in turn influenced by many factors, including their *self-satisfaction*, *self-image*, *process of learning and social competence*, among others. The discourse; beliefs, expectations and attitudes of teachers and other adults in school, particularly in view of the difference, have profound effects on various socio-emotional dimensions, including level of self-concept, the process of acceptance and rejection among peers and the social adjustment among the pupils (Chang, 2003; Wentzel, 2002). Teachers’ attitudes are an important factor in determining the success of pupils (Grosin, 2004; Groth, 2007; Hugo, 2007; Lundgren, 2007), and we can see the same when it comes to inclusion (Ainscow, 1993; Baker & Gottlieb, 1980; Monsen & Frederickson, 2004; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Ward, Center & Bochner, 1994). To change from a mainstream school to an inclusive school requires a change of values, norms and attitudes (Carrington & Robinson, 2004; Fullan, 1999; Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Riehl’s, 2000; West-Burnham, 1997). There is evidence to suggest (e.g. Sebba & Ainscow, 1996) that an inclusive school is a school that has been subject to change and improvement. There are strong facts showing that the school culture has to change.

When teachers educate they use a special theoretical framework often hidden, not reflected upon, but still there, called an *interpretive background* (Hundeide, 2006).

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When educating, words are used, words which are created in the encounter between their interpretive backgrounds and a special discourse in the classroom. Words are action; the language is a powerful steering tool and works in at least two ways: it is created and it creates. Hjörne (2004) drew attention to this phenomenon in relation to the diagnosis AD/HD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) stating that in a study she conducted on a pupil welfare team, once the AD/HD diagnosis had been introduced and adopted as relevant, it seemed to be included in the staff pre-understanding and became active in the creation of meaning. How teachers give meaning to a situation in school is dependent on their interpretive background and on the discursive practice. When it comes to difficulties in the classroom, in the encounter between the pupil and the school, different perspectives give different meaning to the situation which results in different solutions, for example, a compensatory perspective or a critical, or a socio-cultural one. From a compensatory perspective the difficulties are attached to the pupil, in a critical perspective in the organisation and from a socio-cultural perspective the difficulties are seen as social constructs in a classroom situation. Nilholm (2006) states that the compensatory perspective regards special needs:

... as an individual quality; such needs are demarcated and categorized. ... Special, rather than inclusive support is advocated; what is seen as special education expertise is supplied immediately, related to the diagnosed problems in the pupil. The reason for the special education support is seen to depend on impairments that are either congenital or in some other way attached to the individual (Nilholm, 2006, p. 17, our translation).

3 Climate, and language

How we allocate meaning to a situation creates the situation, but there are more ingredients to this. How we look upon the world, situations and actions/interactions are then coloured or shaped. Learning can be seen as participation in different discourses through communication/interaction and the interaction is seen as a part of teaching and developing (Vygotsky 1999; Bakhtin 1986; Säljö 1999, 2000; Hundeide 2006). A key point is that discourses are built into artefacts and even the language is seen as an artefact. 'We are learning ... to notice, describe and act in reality in the way the surroundings permit and encourage' (Säljö 2000, 66, our translation). In the literature there are various indications of the influence exerted

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by teachers' interpretive backgrounds and expectations. In a classroom study Davis, Watson and Cunningham-Burley (2000) studied the interaction between pupils with intellectual disabilities and between pupils and teachers. The staff associated with the studied group of pupils gave various conditions of development to the pupils, depending on what meaning they saw in the pupils' behaviour. The staff's perspective could also be linked to the staff's own cultural background.

The power of the language is evidently in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2008) as an important catchphrase is "nothing about us without us", the word special is not meant and we can see a shift in focus;

<u>FROM</u>	<u>TO</u>
Rehabilitation	A rehabilitative society
Exclusion	Inclusion, participation, citizenship in society
Charity of medical treatment	Rights to qualified care
Adjust a child to the norm	Consultation of experts
Acceptance of diversities	Self- determination

From this perspective the teachers' and pupils' actions/interactions are seen as (re)constructing of the classroom/school. Discourses 'are material in their character and their consequences – they are ingredients in the practices which create and change the world around us' (Säljö 1999, 85, our translation). How teachers look upon the pupil are active ingredients in pupils' availability to be a particular kind of pupil. In the case of teachers' interpretive backgrounds, they are crucial to their approach, which makes up the framework within which the pupils have freedom to act. Hellström (2004), for example, uses the term 'self-fulfilling prophecy', while Jenner (2004) talks about the 'Pygmalion effect'. An important question is then;

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what expectations do I as a teacher have of my pupils with regard to interaction with them and the organisation of the teaching in my classroom?

The relationship between peers (in that it promotes self-knowledge and understanding of each other in a horizontal relationship with significant others) is also a reflection of the skills brought into play by each individual, and thus an important factor in the upholding or modification to the level of those skills. Specific dimensions correlated with self-esteem, as a preference, or social rejection by peers are also well known not only as a consequence but as determinants of relationships, social adjustment and the academic success (Santos, 2007). Several studies show that although peer groups have an important influence, the teacher has a vital role in changing attitudes. Even if language and attitudes are important research shows that infra-verbal signals underlying the dynamic in the emotional climate is ever important. In the classes where the teachers have a positive attitude and the inclusion of the pupils with special needs was emphasised, the pupils also expressed a higher degree of satisfaction, and a distinctively lower level of disagreement or quarrelling (Monsen & Frederickson, 2004).

The work on the expectations, attitudes and beliefs is particularly important for the impact it has, not only for academic learning, but across the socio-emotional dynamics in the classroom.

Many pupils in need of special support have significant social problems, such as establishing friendships and have feelings of isolation or loneliness. It is an important issue as research shows that problems with establishing friendships can also be found in the context (Ljusberg, 2009). The interactions and relationships between peers in childhood have a key role in structuring their subsequent social adjustment throughout life, so it is important for inclusive school teachers, to make collaborative efforts towards the creation of environments that support and lead to the promotion of acceptance and social competence. Some authors are even considering this research as one of the most fundamental in establishing an inclusive setting (Meadan, 2008; Patton, & Gall, 2006).

The real possibility of access to participation in the classroom is one of the most important indicators of classroom climate. The voluntary participation in the classroom is much related to the climate of it (Okolo, 2007).

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But Inclusion is not always seen in a positive light in the classroom. Some studies (Katz & Miranda, 2002; Trump & Hang, 1996) indicate that inclusion has positive effects but also negative and insignificant effects for the classroom. To contribute to the positive effects the teacher must prepare well for inclusion, having clear expectations, accepting additional staff such as the special education teacher as an equal partner, acknowledging the heterogeneity of classes, being tolerant and using more diverse strategies. The negative effects arise in cases of overloaded classes or when pupils in need of special support are not accepted.

This social dimension is also most evident in the context of the classroom where pupils/situations/teachers in need of extra support are particularly vulnerable and in need of an environment which is respectful of the differences.

Inclusion requires a deep acceptance of all individuals with variations in their ethnicity, religion, language, gender, class, in their diversity of needs, opportunities and difficulties. In this perspective it is indispensable to add the pupil's own experience of participation, as well during classroom time and during breaks – being able to take part in and have access to the information that flows in and outside of the classroom (Ljusberg, 2009).

The creation and maintenance of this environmental and socio-emotional climate in which all pupils can feel that they and their classmates are psychologically safe, valued and accepted, ensure active involvement and sense of belonging is therefore a *sine qua non* condition for the successful development of any inclusive practice.

4 Classroom climate - impact on different levels

An issue that should be considered regarding culture and inclusive culture is the fact that mainstream and special education teachers often fail to collaborate (Henderson, 1994). This problem is regarded by Bush (1995) as co-existence of divergent cultures in organisations. Riel's (2000) view of the change in the mind-set is that 'the development of inclusive structures and practices must be accompanied by new understandings and values or they will not result in lasting change'. Fullan (1999) has identified organisational culture as a key factor in leading change because of the need to develop new values, norms and attitudes when change is implemented. In an overview of 19 research investigations of inclusive programs, practices and outcomes, Hunt & Goetz (1997) describe characteristics of these

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programs such as a “morally driven commitment to children” and “a consensus on a set of values” that can be understood as components of school culture. The importance of school culture as a determinant in the effectiveness of organisational change has received further validity in the context of inclusion through the work of Carrington & Robinson (2004) who examine the need to ‘reculture’ schools. West-Burnham (1997) describes a school whose culture advocates changes :“A quality school is restless, constantly questioning, never satisfied, challenging norms and believing that things can always be better” (ibid. p. 98). Rosenholtz’s (1989) has applied one way to categorise cultures in terms of their tendency towards changes by distinction between ‘moving’ and ‘stuck’ cultures. ‘Moving’ cultures enable changes because they advocate learning, collaboration, supportive leadership, and interactivity among staff, whereas ‘stuck’ cultures inhibit change because they are featured by learning impoverishment, gate keeping leadership, and a feeling of isolation. Carnall (1995) suggests a distinction between ‘old’ and ‘new’ cultures. ‘Old’ cultures define a discourse which is *hierarchical, bureaucratic, tend towards clear boundaries and avoid taking risks*, while a school with ‘new’ cultures demonstrates *teamwork, empowerment, innovativeness and risk-taking*. According to Ballard (1996) the main shift in the mind-set towards inclusive culture is the ‘recognition of the value of diversity in schools and communities’ (ibid. p. 42). Zollers, Ramanathan, & Moonset (1999) conducted research that explored the relationship between culture and inclusion. The research was a single-case study and it identified three elements of culture that contribute to inclusive culture:

- 1) a democratic and empowering culture with collaborative decision-making,
- 2) a broad vision of school community with parental involvement,
- 3) and shared language and values (Zollers et al. 1999).

The main conclusion was that school culture should not be overlooked while implementing inclusion and that ‘inclusion may require an inclusive school culture in order to succeed’ (Zollers *et al.* (1999). In the study the emphasis was on the issue of staff attitudes in the formation of an inclusive culture: The features of this culture that emerged from a ethnographic inquiry of inclusive leadership, a broad view of school community, and shared language and values, combined to create an environment in which inclusion was not merely a program model, but a way of thinking.

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Jacobsson (2002) comments that it is reasonable to assume, that comprehensive factors as *time*, *support* and *availability* can be said to have meaning and influence opportunities for participation and equality of conditions for pupils in need of special support at a group level, and during certain hours. Real participation is not through attending a physical location, that is to say that all pupils are in the same classroom or group. Rather, there are other factors becoming necessary creating a good social and educational learning environment, factors as approach, working, communication and cooperation (Jakobsson, 2002).

A survey from various studies, found that classroom climate may have an impact, positive or negative, at several levels, including;

- The regulation of movement and construction of knowledge (an inclusive environment facilitates the explanations from various perspectives that enrich the discussion)
- The impact of meta-curriculum (one class allows inclusive and productive learning between different groups of pupils, facilitating their development of expertise, while non inclusive learning contexts facilitate the perpetuation of stereotypes)
- The impact on learning at an emotional level (a class where the learning experience is characterised by positive emotions - excitement of discovery, joy, etc. - has increased productivity by motivating pupils for future learning; contrary emotions such as fear, boredom and other negative emotions are highly unmotivating consequences for pupil and his academic success)
- The dynamics of power in the classroom (in productive classes teachers use their authority to encourage all pupils in their own ways of learning. Sometimes the refusal to learn can be an ultimate form of resistance from those who feel helpless in a hostile environment)
- And finally the persistence of the pupil (a pupil remains for less time when he feels less capable than others or feels he does not belong to the group).

More or less directly related to these dimensions of impact, is self-esteem in both pupil and teacher. From a teacher, self-esteem is one of the most important variables in their perception of self-efficacy. This is particularly important with regard to the collaborative work between teachers and special education teachers and as a factor influencing the climate of the inclusive

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classroom. Studies of Lovey (2002) reported that special education teachers often feel superfluous and even some sense of suspicion for their presence in the classroom when pupil/teachers/situations are in need of extra support. The way this presence is received by the teacher, as well as the collaborative work that is developed or not developed, has been reported in several cross-cultural studies as a determinant factor in climate (Bartolo, Janik, Janikova, & Hofsass, 2007).

5 Creating and Maintaining an Inclusive Climate in the Classroom

Research shows that Inclusive Education is achieved in a classroom with particular strategies and practices differing from those traditionally used (Westwood, 2004). According to a report by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2003) the practice of inclusive education should be based, essentially, on a quality education that promotes a truly inclusive educational differentiation, achieved through the use of cooperative work, action in partnership, promotion of working groups formed in the classroom and the promotion of work with peers.

In research on inclusion, no support has been found for the superiority of remedial classes (Brodin & Lindstrand 2007; Gustafsson & Myrberg, 2002; Haug, 1998; Skidmore, 2004). Several studies show an educational potential of interactions between peers, both on the development of social-cognitive skills at the level of the affective-emotional development for both partners (Bond & Castagna, 2006; Terpstra & Tamura, 2008).

When developing strategies, interventions are more focused on a relational context than on the individual which enables a sense of belonging to emerge, and facilitates collaboration and friendship. The purpose is primarily to develop an inclusive community (Soodak, 2003).

The evocation of these general strategies for developing inclusive practices underpins the promotion of a collaborative and relational dimension, which is closely associated with the climate of the classroom.

The development in the classroom of a sense of security which generates self-confidence and acceptance is crucial to the growth of children and adolescents and the success of any educational practice is targeted. So it seems essential to

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construct some guidance to contribute to the development of strategies for creating and maintaining an inclusive climate.

The recognition of this important relational dimension in many studies has stressed the need for a conscious development of strategies that ensure respect for difference, as well as the development of appropriate physical environments, in order to create a genuine and successful development of skills in all pupils. This goal, which involves long and consistent work, is based on a reflective process for improvement on the part of teachers regarding their attitudes towards the profound individual differences.

These positive attitudes and beliefs of teachers and pupils to inclusion are some of the most determinant factors in the creation of the classroom climate (Monsen & Frederickson, 2004).

Among the pedagogical strategies when it comes to teacher -pupil interaction which may contribute to the development of an inclusive classroom are: the use of an inclusive language with frequent use of male, female and first names; the avoidance of generalisations; the avoidance of value judgments and prejudices with the teacher using self-reflection about their intervention; giving feedback to pupils focusing on controllable causes such as effort; the avoidance of embarrassing exposure of a pupil to others; being alert to the body language of pupils; being as objective as possible in conversations; serving as a model interacting with everyone and respecting all opinions.

6 A new proposal: IRIS Aide Memoir

The IRIS project has created new tools for inclusive teaching; The Aide memoir and the "Fit to learn bookmark" which are intended to help teachers to:

- evaluate the level of their inclusive practice regarding suitable conditions for learning, learning community, learning environment and instruction
- increase the level of their inclusive practice in those areas
- raise awareness that good practice can meet the needs of ALL pupils, despite their individual needs
- identify their individual needs for in - service training.
- use as a checklist for assessing the quality of inclusion or assessment.

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Essentially it is a tool to be used as a reminder while teaching or working with the whole class or with an individual pupil. Overall the IRIS Aide Memoir helps to work towards better inclusive practice. Teaching inclusively is about creating an ethos and environment where pupils can understand why and what they shall learn and believe that the school is a place where they are welcomed and belong to, a place where they can enjoy learning, reflect, improve and grow in confidence. This is fundamental to all learning. In order to achieve those goals it is necessary for schools and teachers to create:

1. Suitable conditions for learning for every pupil

By considering:

- the demands of different types of learning
- child development
- the links between personal/social and academic learning
- the obstacles to learning
- a variety of practice

2. A learning community

By

- establishing inclusive learning
- defining roles and establishing partnerships within this framework
- establishing a supportive environment
- engaging pupils
- engaging parents/families
- linking to community services

3. A Learning Environment

By considering

- the use of space
- the technology
- the climate/atmosphere

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4. Positive Instruction/Assessment

By

- establishing a coherent, mindful curriculum
- making informed choices regarding instructional materials
- linking assessment to instruction and vice versa

7 Some ideas about teacher training

The practice of these guidelines requires a deep involvement by teacher, reflecting not only on their professional skills but - as a professional who deals with the person - also reflecting on their own personal and social skills. This means that training teachers for an Inclusive School probably cannot restrict us to a traditional academic education but must propose a training model that involves new processes.

The teacher training (initial and continuing) is a key resource for the construction and affirmation of the inclusive school, promoting the development of attitudes, knowledge and personal skills and teaching to serve interests and aims of Inclusive education.

Based on these considerations, we believe that the most important dimensions (assuming a cross dimensions character) in the development of any program of teacher education for Inclusive Schools are the knowledge, analysis and reflection about the importance of creating and maintaining an inclusive climate in the classroom and their conditioning factors and strategies considered most effective for its implementation. It seems essential for the strategies to be put into practice as part of an experiential process, reflected upon, and then for the teacher to respond to how he/she experiences difference, what impact it has on him/her and change practice accordingly.

Reviewing the research on classroom climate and classroom climate in inclusive settings offers the following suggestions about how to create and maintain a positive climate. Classroom climate is seen as a strong mediator of values, norms beliefs and standards showed in different action levels as how the classroom and teaching is physically and psychologically organised and how the pupils are approached. Basically it is about widening the thinking about normality not just

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focusing on similarities but respecting and appreciating differences as a variation of pupils' ethnicity, religion, language, gender, class, needs, opportunities and difficulties. These positive attitudes and beliefs of teachers and pupils, to inclusion are some of the most crucial factors in the creation of an inclusive class-room.

Organisation

Even if the teachers' attitudes are of significant importance the attitude of all staff around the pupils also plays an important role as do;

- a relational context
- the organisational objectives,
- appropriate physical environments

Teacher needs

- supportive leadership;
- autonomy;
- prestige of the teaching profession,
- collaborative work between teachers and special education teachers
- a collaborative and relational dimension
- a right to personal development,
- voluntary participation,
- high self-esteem,
- reflective process for the improvement on the part of teachers regarding their attitudes towards the profound individual differences.

Pupils need

- the real possibility of access to participation
- a quality education that promotes a truly inclusive educational differentiation,
- an academic environment where they feel happy.
- an environment which includes high expectations, attitudes and beliefs
- promotion of work with peers.
- A teacher who can support the pupils' successful development of skills

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We can develop a school that can meet the diversity of pupils as a reality. Pupils have different backgrounds in terms of class, ethnicity, gender, and disability, and thus different ways of interacting and giving meaning. It is important to develop a school that is based on diversity and that focuses on differentiated learning.

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