

‘Working toward inclusion without ifs and without buts.’

An interview with Profs Salvatore Soresi and Laura Nota, University of Padova conducted by Dr Elena Tanti Burlo', University of Malta

ETB: Thank you for accepting to give us your time for this interview.

Prof Soresi we met many years ago when you presented a paper on the effects of a peer preparation programme on the inclusion of a young child with autism. Your paper emphasised the statement I have always heard you make, that : the success for inclusive education depends on many stakeholders: the teachers, the support staff, the school management team, parents, other professionals, the Union, policy makers and above all, ALL the students . I would like you and Prof Laura Nota to share with us your thoughts on the space allocated to “students’ voices” in inclusive education.

Prof Soresi: Inclusion, as against mainstreaming and integration, is no longer concerned about this or that category of people....it makes no sense to talk about the inclusion of certain categories of people, for example, those with disabilities, with mental health problems, of immigrants and so on....this would have been valid when we used to speak of mainstreaming and of integration. This could have made some sense in the previous century when the movements in favour of mainstreaming and integration were in their infancy. Today, to ensure that these important achievements would not be challenged, it is preferable to reassert that inclusion inherently implies a series of important conditions which characterise the lived contexts of everyone. This will safeguard everyone’s rights and carefully consider everyone’s expectations, necessities and demands.

In other words, if a particular context is welcoming, tolerant or shows solidarity towards only certain individuals, it could, in effect show little respect towards differences, and because of this, the context cannot be defined as being inclusive. A context, in our opinion, either is or is not inclusive and it cannot demand any conditions for membership. (We like to say....inclusion with no ifs and no buts). As Asante (2002), one of the leaders of New African Voices, affirmed, inclusion needs and expects acknowledgement of interdependency and the understanding of the universality of the human condition. In fact, inclusion consists in

'acknowledging that we are "one thing" even if we are not all the same thing' (p1).

Prof Nota: Inclusive scenarios are possible as long as systematic and early intervention work is focused on the facilitation of:

- a) *The engagement of all who work at school* (directors, teachers, administrative personnel, and those who organise and run the school) as they, independently from their roles, their qualifications and specialities, are the most responsible for the 'inclusive culture' which one would breath in a particular scholastic reality.
- b) *The engagement of parents, of all the parents*, so that they collaborate to eliminate bias and stereotypes and promote the adoption of 'school rules' and programmes that foster the principles of inclusion and solidarity.
- c) *The engagement of class-mates*, so that as they may learn how to manifest pro-social behaviour of acceptance support, help and solidarity in their relationships, (Soresi and Nota, 2001; Soresi 2007; Soresi, 2016; Soresi, Nota and Ferrari, 2006; Nota, Soresi and Ferrari, 2014).

All this requires 'capacity building'. In other words, that internal process in an organization that facilitates continuous improvements, aiming at valourising the existing capabilities and stimulating new ones, that instil processes for cultural growth and continuous improvement (Banks, 2009). The processes of co-construction of new knowledge, capabilities, innovative ways of understanding inclusive processes, stress on the resources of individuals and contexts, the involvement of the administrative and organizational structure are therefore necessary.

ETB: How have the peer preparation programmes evolved in the past 20 years especially in the light of research on self-determination and quality of life? (Are you still talking about peers of disabled students or are all students involved in the programme?)

Prof Soresi: The current school reality is characterized by a high level of heterogeneity and plurality of situations so much so that in one class there are children and adolescents who have different experiences, living conditions, diverse languages and culture, abilities and functionalities. The opportunity to belong to such classrooms seems to benefit all students, be they able or disabled persons, children of Italian parents or those who have immigrated, and those with low or high socio-economic status.

If one wants to aim towards inclusion, to an inclusion 'without ifs and without buts', one must seriously consider the fact that there are a series of barriers and obstacles that still present risks of exclusion and discrimination,

especially for persons who are particularly vulnerable notwithstanding the existence of policy declarations and current legislation. These negative and penalizing phenomena are by now well known. Counter-measures have to be put in place that have to take on the characteristics of permanent and affirmative educational actions. Such actions will deal with the teaching and the education of all involved, on how to act respecting diversity, inclusivity and solidarity as to combat injustices in a way that 'the groups one finds oneself' in will grow and mature in respect of the individualities which characterises them.

Moving towards inclusive classrooms is the cornerstone which facilitates the creation of a micro-reality and a laboratory of solidarity, pluralism, and compassion.

Prof Nota: From this point of view, inclusive schools act, teach, educate, prevent and do not let 'natural tendencies' of the human race take over. The children and youngsters in class must, from the very first day of school, breath the air of inclusion, high demands, gratifications and special attention in respect of inclusive behaviour and attitudes. It is necessary to educate and teach, divulge knowledge and skills, act as role models and all this with high frequency in the awareness that inclusion requires intentionality, investment in human resources and continuous care.

To promote inclusion it becomes important to:

- a) augment awareness on the existence of diversity; work on the reduction of negative stereotyped attitudes and the acquisition of skills promoting and maintaining positive and diverse relations with different peers in their school environment;
- b) promote pro-social and social skills towards others, in spite of their having any difficulties, disabilities, hardships, vulnerabilities, etc.;
- c) favour positive and hopeful attitudes when faced with problems and difficulties.

ETB: *Italy has a system of school democracy where students form part of the school council as well as class councils. I was always interested in the amount of energy you have dedicated to programmes that motivate, engage and empower peers. What are your latest programmes?*

Prof Nota: In the wake of what has been proposed in the literature on how to motivate the engagement and participation of peers; considering the present composition of Italian classrooms and the necessity of helping the younger generations to cope with living, in a satisfactory way, in super-diverse contexts, we present two of our most recent proposals:

a) ‘ *Positive Actions*’ (*Le Belle Azioni*). A training programme, based on ten encounters of 35-45 minutes each held in *kindergarten classes* to promote positive attitudes, like the propensity of working and helping various classmates, to highlight the strong points of others, to create positive relationships and to be attentive towards differences. (Nota, Santilli, Soresi & Ginevra, 2014; Nota, Soresi & Ferrari, 2014; Soresi, Nota, Ferrari, Sgaramella, Ginevra & Santilli, 2013).

b) ‘ *Hurray to Differences, Hurray to Participation*’. This programme is based on ten meetings each of two-hour duration. It aims at creating awareness, amongst compulsory school aged children, to highlight the *differences* that are present in the classroom; to describe *their peers’ strengths* and their repertoire of abilities in the engagement of numerous activities in everyday life; and to create support and help so that the participation of everyone in school activities is increased.

ETB: You have been involved in some pioneering work on positive psychology for the past few years. How do you link this work with the development of students’ positive outlook toward their future, resilience and the ability to adapt to stressful environments and situations? How do you see this work help students face the world with optimism, hope and courage - courage to air their views and hope that their voices are heard?

Prof Nota: The recent models of development view positive aspects, such as hope and optimism, as having increasing importance. As already mentioned in our writings, when faced with diversity and caring behaviour towards others positive attitudes are involved.

We would also like to share with you the workshop *Jujube of Optimism and Hope at school*” “*Giuggiole di Ottimismo e Speranze a scuola*” (Nota, Di Maggio, Santilli, & Ginevra, 2014) which was designed by La R.I.O.S Laboratory and the International Hope Research Team (**IHRT**) of the University of Padova. This workshop proposes to analyse, together with the children, the idea of optimism and hope, stressing the importance of certain strategies and ways of thinking and developing children who are optimistic and hopeful.

In the course of the workshop, the children were trained to identify positive thoughts and to distinguish them from pessimistic ones, to identify the positive characteristics associated with optimism and hope, and to formulate positive objectives for their own future, showing also the strategies they need to achieve them. To check on the efficacy of the workshop a pre and post programme assessment was carried out. The children were asked to finish the following statements “the optimistic person is.....”, “the person who is hopeful is....”. This has allowed us to verify that at the end of the workshop the participants were fully aware of the essential points of the arguments

discussed and they also added more elements and characteristics to the definitions initially presented to them.

ETB: “Jujube of Optimism and Hope at school” (Giuggiole di Ottimismo e Speranze a scuola). What an interesting title. “Giuggiole” - “Jujube” can you explain the meaning behind this word? It reminds me of the Maltese word “Ġuġu” which are coloured gummy sweets covered in sugar.

Prof Nota: Yes, in fact, “Giuggiole” are the same as your “Ġuġu”: they are coloured, fruity, gummy sweets which children generally love. It’s a fun word, full of hope, joy and optimism. That’s why we called this programme Giuggiole di Ottimismo e Speranze a scuola.

ETB: It is a fun word. I can almost see the shopkeeper picking up the multicoloured sweets from a big transparent glass jar and us, as children, joyfully choosing our favourite coloured “Ġuġu” first from our 6 pence worth of paper bag and licking our fingers from the lingering sugar.

ETB: Your work has really developed from your initial peer preparation programme

Prof Soresi: Yes it has, and we have continued to stress on the skills needed to identify diversity, to respect and celebrate it. Diversity is part and parcel of life and the skills needed to identify, respect and celebrate it may be learnt and developed. Inclusion just does not happen on its own. It is up to us to create the right contexts, which facilitate inclusion. We know that you like to say that all those working within the educational system have to stop cutting corners and quickly lose hope when faced with challenges which leads them to create segregating environments. There is no easy and quick path to inclusion.

ETB: Yes indeed, there are no easy and quick paths to inclusion. These would only lead to segregating practices and environments, as we have been, unfortunately increasingly, witnessing over the years.

Thank you Professor Salvatore Soresi and Professor Laura Nota for your time and for sharing your innovative insights on how children may be prepared to become empowered and self-determined to make their voices heard. We need a lot of elbow grease.

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