

DESIGNING INCLUSION IN THE MULTICULTURAL SCHOOL: MIGRANTS AND SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS FROM A UDL 3.0 PERSPECTIVE

PROGETTARE L'INCLUSIONE NELLA SCUOLA MULTICULTURALE: STUDENTI STRANIERI E BISOGNI EDUCATIVI SPECIALI IN PROSPETTIVA UDL 3.0



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Alessandro Romano
Università degli Studi di Enna "Kore"
alessandro.romano@unikore.it



Francesca Oggiano
Università degli Studi di Macerata - Università degli Studi di Enna "Kore"
francesca.oggiano@unikore.it



Sofia Ribilotta
Università degli Studi di Enna "Kore"
sofia.ribilotta@unikorestudent.it



ABSTRACT

In Italian schools there are 914,860 students with non-Italian citizenship (CNI) often in vulnerable conditions. Personalized curricula and Italian language courses may be insufficient to guarantee their psycho-emotional well-being and a truly inclusive learning path. The contribution analyses the compensatory tools according to the principles of UDL 3.0 and a holistic approach that places the real needs of migrant students at the centre of the educational action.

Nelle scuole italiane sono presenti 914.860 studenti con cittadinanza non italiana (CNI) in condizioni di vulnerabilità. L'adozione del PDP e i corsi di italiano L2 possono risultare insufficienti a garantire il loro benessere e un percorso di apprendimento realmente inclusivo. Il contributo analizza alcuni strumenti compensativi alla luce dei principi dell'UDL 3.0 e di un approccio olistico che ponga al centro dell'azione educativa i reali bisogni degli studenti migranti.

KEYWORDS

Inclusion, special educational needs, migrant students
Inclusione, Bes, studenti migranti

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Introduction

In the 2022/2023 academic year, according to the most recent data provided by the Ministry of Education and Merit, 914,860 students with non-Italian citizenship (CNI) were enrolled in Italian schools, representing an increase of 42,500 units (MIM, 2024, p. 10). This data once again confirms that the presence of pupils with a migratory background within Italian schools has become a firmly established and deeply rooted phenomenon within our society (Romano, 2025; Burgio et al., 2023, p. 212). Indeed, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that, by 2050, approximately 218 million people will be forced to migrate due to droughts, floods, wildfires, and famines. In this regard, the IOM specifies: «it is estimated that populations that reside in areas affected by drought displacements are typically young (18.1 years on average), with a high proportion of children (43%)» (IOM, 2024, p.9). The school – as an educational agency within an adaptive network capable of responding to societal change – is thus called upon not only to address the challenge of welcoming migrant minors (NAI and CNI) but also to guarantee them a genuine process of inclusion, within a perspective of co-evolution and co-education, «through a process of mutual learning in which all participants grow through the sharing of experiences, fostering a sentiment of equality as the foundation for recognising differences» (Goussot, 2011, p.24).

Migrant students, including those with non-Italian citizenship (CNI) and newly arrived immigrants (NAI), exhibit highly complex and diverse legal (residence permits), cultural, psychological, linguistic, and socio-economic profiles. To better understand the high degree of heterogeneity currently present in Italian schools, a definition is provided of students classified as CNI, NAI, and UMM (UMM), as outlined in the Guidelines for the Reception and Integration of Migrants (Ministry of Education, 2014 and subsequent updates). It is important to note that, in Italy, citizenship is based on the principle of *jus sanguinis* (Law no. 91/1992), and is granted to all children born to at least one Italian parent or by descent up to the second generation. Students identified as CNI (non-Italian citizenship) are defined as all pupils who, although born in Italy, have both parents of non-Italian nationality (Ministry of Education, Guidelines 2014, p. 5). Students identified as NAI (Newly Arrived in Italy) are those with a migratory background who enter the Italian school system after having completed part of their education in their country of origin. NAI students are typically entirely non-Italian-speaking and unable to use Italian (L2) as a language of communication, or they have been enrolled in the Italian school

system for less than two years. This group includes unaccompanied migrant minors (UMM), minors who arrived in Italy through international adoption, and minors joining family members through family reunification. UMM (Unaccompanied Migrant Minors) refers to students under the age of 18 who are present in the national territory without Italian or EU citizenship and who have arrived in Italy without parents or legally responsible adults. These students often face stereotypes and prejudices, identity fractures, migratory trauma (Achotegui, 2012), and linguistic gaps that can severely hinder communication with caregivers, teachers, and educators, thereby jeopardising their overall process of social integration (Goussot, 2011). The concurrence of such factors significantly impedes learning processes and frequently generates special educational needs.

It is the school's responsibility to remove every obstacle to learning by implementing personalised educational pathways and strategies that enhance diversity, linguistic differences, and the life histories of vulnerable pupils. In this sense, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) represents both a challenge and an opportunity for education, as it enables the personalisation of educational interventions through the rethinking and redesign of dispensatory measures, compensatory tools, and, more generally, physical and virtual learning environments (CAST, 2024). Although Italy has developed effective regulatory frameworks supporting the integration of migrant students – such as the "Guidelines for the Reception and Integration of Foreign Pupils" (MIUR, 2014 and subsequent updates), the drafting of Personalised Didactic Plans (PDP) or Individualised Educational Plans (PEI) in cases of certified disability is not sufficient to guarantee the full right to education for all migrant students. Regarding NAI students, the limitations of the current integration system are particularly evident. These pupils frequently enter the educational system once the school year has already commenced and after a series of administrative delays, resulting in further setbacks. The Italian school system provides for the enrolment of NAI students (Newly Arrived in Italy) in compulsory education even after the academic year has begun, in accordance with Articles 3 and 34 of the Italian Constitution. The administrative procedures for school enrolment are established by the *Guidelines for the Reception and Inclusion of Migrant Students*. These measures, while not requiring a residence permit—since “an irregular legal status does not affect the exercise of the right to education” (*Guidelines for the Reception and Integration of Migrants*, 2014, p. 10)—allow the enrollment of minors with a migratory background in the class corresponding to their chronological age. However,

enrollment in a lower grade is permitted if the teaching staff identifies significant gaps in skills, competencies, or knowledge of the Italian language. The relevant regulations also stipulate that the presence of students with non-Italian citizenship (CNI) in each class must not exceed 30% of the total number of enrolled students. In practice, these procedures often pose barriers to accessing education, particularly in urban areas with a high density of residents with a migratory background. Delays and disruptions in educational trajectories are frequently observed among students placed in classes not aligned with their age group, as highlighted by recent data from the Ministry of Education and Merit.: «In the 2022/2023 academic year, 7.9% of Italian students were behind in their schooling, compared to 26.4% of students with non-Italian citizenship. The largest gap is recorded in upper secondary education, where the rates of delay are 16% and 48.0%, respectively» (MIM, 2024, p.52). Similarly, the situation of unaccompanied migrant minors (UMM) is significant (Romano, 2025; Burgio et al., 2023). Research conducted by the ISMU-ETS Foundation on a sample of 3,400 UMM reveals that the majority do not attend Italian schools, with «only one in five minors having accessed the Italian education system» (Santagati et al., 2024, p.85). Furthermore, as of 30 June 2024, among the 20,206 UMM present in Italy, 10% were aged between 7 and 14 years, and 14% were 15 years old. Many of these minors, especially those aged 15, find themselves trapped in a sort of educational limbo: too old for lower secondary school, yet too young for the Provincial Centres for Adult Education (CPIA). The Provincial Centers for Adult Education (*Centri Provinciali per l'Istruzione degli Adulti* – CPIA) were established in 1970 (Law no. 300) to enable members of the working class to attend free evening courses of 150 hours and obtain a lower secondary school certificate (*licenza media*), an upper secondary school diploma (*diploma di maturità*), or a professional qualification.

Over the years, and following the reforms of 1997 (Ministerial Order no. 445) and subsequently of 2012 (Presidential Decree no. 263), CPIAs have become key institutions for the adult population with a migratory background and for minors who are no longer subject to compulsory education (i.e., aged 16 and over). In addition to vocational qualification courses, CPIAs offer literacy and Italian language courses for foreigners. Literacy courses are primarily intended for unaccompanied foreign minors (UMM), who are not covered by compulsory education requirements. Finally, concerning early school leaving, the alarming dropout rates observed among Italian students in secondary education become

even more concerning when referring to students with CNI. Although the proportion of foreign pupils is significant at the preschool (12%) and primary school (15%) levels, these numbers decrease sharply in lower secondary and even more so in upper secondary education (MIM, 2024). According to the estimates of the Authority for Children and Adolescents, although Italy has narrowed the gap in early school leaving compared to other EU countries, it remains fourth from last in Europe. Specifically, the National Institute for the Evaluation of the Education and Training System (INVALSI) estimates that implicit and explicit school dropout exceeds 20% nationally, and that 14.4% of students leave lower secondary school with inadequate levels of competence in Italian, mathematics, and English. The phenomenon of early school leaving appears to affect migrants three times more frequently (4.1%) than their Italian peers (1.8%) (Authority for Children and Adolescents, 2022, pp.21-23).

1. The Italian Path to Inclusion

For approximately fifty years, the Italian education system has been at the centre of profound challenges, all aimed at safeguarding the right to education for all individuals, as enshrined in Article 26 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Articles 33 and 34 of the Italian Constitution. On one hand, Law No. 517 of 1977, which abolished special classes for students with disabilities, and on the other, Ministerial Circular No. 301 of 8 September 1989, which regulated the processes of integrating foreign pupils into compulsory schooling, have irreversibly reshaped the Italian educational and training system. This reconfiguration acknowledges a multiplicity of identities within the system, each characterised by the individuality of the person, whether pupil or student. With particular regard to the presence of migrant students within Italian schools, the late 1980s marked the beginning of methodological experimentation aimed at improving and enhancing educational practices and promoting the integration of this specific category of students into the pathways offered by the Italian school system. Notable examples include the reform of school curricula "to take into account intercultural demands" (Fiorucci & Catarci, 2015), the National Council for Public Education (CNPI)'s statement on "racism and antisemitism today: the role of the School" issued on 23 April 1992, and, in the same year, the enactment of the Framework Law for the assistance, social integration, and rights of persons with disabilities (Law No. 104/1992). Thus was born the Italian approach to the integration of migrants,

culminating in the issuance of Ministerial Circular No. 24 of 2006, "Guidelines for the Reception and Integration of Foreign Pupils", which declares: "Italy has chosen the full integration of everyone into the school system and intercultural education as its cultural horizon" (C.M. 24/2006, p.3). This commitment has been consistently reaffirmed in subsequent ministerial documents, including the updated "Guidelines for the Reception and Integration of Foreign Pupils" (MIUR, 2014), the document *Diversi da chi?* (MIUR, 2015), and more recently, the *Orientamenti interculturali* (MI, 2022). A cornerstone of the Italian school system's intercultural approach is the ministerial document *The Italian Approach to Intercultural Education and the Integration of Foreign Pupils* (MPI, 2007). This document outlines operational actions across three main areas of intervention—Actions for Integration, Actions for Intercultural Interaction, and Actors and Resources—and ten lines of action: (1) Practices for reception and integration into the school environment; (2) Italian as a second language; (3) Promotion of multilingualism; (4) Relationships with foreign families and guidance; (5) Relationships within the school and the broader community; (6) Interventions against discrimination and prejudice; (7) Intercultural perspectives on knowledge; (8) Autonomy and networking among educational institutions, civil society, and local communities; (9) The role of school leaders; and (10) The role of teachers and non-teaching staff (MPI, 2007, pp. 11–21). It was not until 2014, however, with the update of the *Guidelines for the Reception and Integration of Foreign Pupils* (C.M. No. 4233, 19 February 2014), that a more detailed distinction was drawn within the migratory universe present in Italian schools: "pupils without Italian citizenship (CNI), pupils from non-Italian-speaking family backgrounds, unaccompanied migrant minors (UMM), children of mixed couples, pupils who arrived through international adoption" or family reunification (NAI), "Roma, Sinti and Caminanti pupils, and university students of foreign nationality" (Fiorucci & Catarci, 2025, p. 63). Driven by the ongoing and increasing demands from teachers—whose daily experiences increasingly involved working with heterogeneous classrooms—the body of legislation developed over the years has profoundly transformed the face of the Italian school system. It has sought to provide appropriate responses to the many and varied needs that manifest within it, including certified disabilities (Law No. 104/1992) recognised by the National Health Service (SSN), specific learning disorders and specific developmental disorders (Law No. 170/2010), and socio-economic and cultural disadvantage (Ministerial Directive, 27 December 2012).

2. Migrant Students with Special Educational Needs

It is widely acknowledged that merely complying with legislative requirements and superficially "integrating" students with a migratory background into Italian classrooms is insufficient to achieve the principles underpinning a genuinely inclusive and intercultural educational environment. In this respect, it becomes evident that all actors involved, both directly and indirectly, in the educational journey of migrants are called upon to acknowledge vulnerabilities, interpret fragilities, and respond correctly to the educational (social, emotional, etc.) needs that significantly influence participation in school life and the learning process itself (Romano, 2025; Burgio et al., 2023). As Goussot observes: "The immigrant, before being an immigrant, is an emigrant, that is, a person who once lived in another country, with his or her own family, emotional, social and cultural history, and who, at a certain point, decides to leave" (Goussot, 2011, p. 112).

2.1 The double vulnerability of migrant students

In the school context, the complexity of managing inclusion increases considerably when socio-cultural vulnerabilities intersect with conditions of disability or specific developmental disorders. Although specific statistical data correlating migrants with disability status are currently unavailable, it is useful to recall that ISTAT reports nearly 400,000 students with disabilities enrolled in Italian schools across all levels for the academic year 2022/2023: "an increase of 7% compared to the previous school year and representing 4.1% of total enrolments" (ISTAT, 2024, p. 2), with a further increase of 6% expected in the academic year 2024/2025. Students with disabilities are predominantly male. With reference to the type of disability, ISTAT notes that "intellectual disability is the most prevalent, affecting 37% of students in the first cycle of education, rising to 42% in lower secondary schools and 48% in upper secondary schools. Developmental disorders affect 32% of students, reaching 57% in early childhood education. Learning disorders (SLD) and attention deficits (ADHD) affect 26% and 21% respectively of students in lower secondary schools" (ISTAT, 2024, p. 2). It should be noted, however, that the ISTAT data are based on the submission of disability certificates issued by the National Health Service (SSN) to school administrative offices: "Almost all students (97%) present a disability or invalidity certificate. Nevertheless, a marginal share of students, although lacking formal certification, receive educational support; these

are often students awaiting certification or exhibiting borderline difficulties" (ISTAT, 2024, p. 2).

2.2 Special Educational Needs and health certifications

The issue of certification remains a central element in the process of school inclusion and in ensuring full enjoyment of the right to education, particularly for migrant students. Students with Non-Italian Citizenship (CNI) often encounter significant barriers in accessing the SSN to obtain the necessary diagnoses for certification, frequently due to prolonged waiting lists. In contrast, private accredited healthcare services, although faster, remain considerably less accessible to families from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, which typically characterise those with a migratory history. In this regard, it is pertinent to highlight that absolute poverty rates reveal: "The incidence of absolute poverty among families with at least one foreign member is 30.6%, compared to 6.3% among families composed solely of Italians" (ISTAT, 2024, p. 5). Moreover, there is a heightened risk of generating false positives and/or false negatives due to cultural biases or the frequent unavailability of diagnostic tools for SLD and ADHD in languages other than Italian (Istituto Superiore di Sanità, LG, 2022). Exemplary cases of such challenges are represented by newly arrived adolescent immigrants (NAI), who often lack proficiency in Italian and possess limited education in their first language (L1), and by unaccompanied foreign minors (UMM), whose experiences of trauma—pre-, peri-, and post-migration—can manifest in dysfunctional learning behaviours with symptoms similar to attention deficit disorders characteristic of ADHD (Berg, 2017). Nevertheless, the necessity of addressing the educational needs of migrants exhibiting vulnerable profiles, even in the absence of formal certification, compels schools to implement individualised and personalised educational plans. Furthermore, they are encouraged to adopt dispensatory measures and compensatory tools (MIM, Ministerial Circular No. 8, 6 March 2013), pursuant to the status of "students with socio-economic, linguistic, and cultural disadvantage" as regulated by the Ministerial Directive of 27 December 2012. In this context, it is important to note that the frequent genericity of educational interventions aimed at migrants may hinder academic success, leading to a loss of intrinsic motivation, a reduction in self-efficacy and self-esteem, and an increased risk of school disengagement.

3. School Networking for the (Holistic) Wellbeing of Students

While Italy has consistently demonstrated a clear sensitivity towards inclusive policies, particularly regarding students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), notably those with Specific Learning Disorders (SLD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), it has not always been equally effective in managing the presence of migrant students—particularly those with a migratory background—without resorting to emergency rhetoric. Statistical data provided by the Italian Ministry of Education over the past two decades unequivocally confirms that the presence of migrant students within Italian classrooms constitutes a long-standing phenomenon, necessitating the implementation of appropriately designed inclusive educational and didactic interventions (Romano, 2025). Over the years, experiences within Italian schools have demonstrated that an integrated approach has successfully fostered the creation of support networks for teachers, promoting the development of linguistic and cultural mediation practices as well as Italian as a Second Language (L2) workshops, both within and beyond curricular hours, with the aim of enhancing the linguistic and communicative skills of migrant students. Nevertheless, limiting educational interventions to the sole objective of promoting proficiency in the Italian language does not fully align with the contemporary educational mission. A holistic perspective, attentive to the overall wellbeing of pupils—including their social and emotional dimensions—is required. This need is particularly acute given that students from migratory backgrounds often find themselves in vulnerable situations, shaped by cultural barriers, specific psychological conditions such as acculturation and relocation stress, migration-related trauma, and experiences of discrimination (e.g., bullying, racism) and exclusion within the new social context (Eacea/Eurydice, 2019, p. 21). In this regard, initial diagnostic evaluation procedures play a crucial role—not merely in assessing students' existing knowledge, skills, and competences upon entering the classroom, but also, particularly for newly arrived migrant students (NAI) or students with a non-Italian citizenship background (CNI), in reconstructing their Quality of Life (QOL) and level of resilience to migratory trauma (Verdugo, Schalock, 2024; Achotegui, 2024, p. 286). Such instruments are not only beneficial for NAI and CNI students but can also serve all students experiencing socio-economic and cultural disadvantage, often correlated with their family's marginalisation within society. Specifically concerning QOL, it is inspired by Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979; 1994) and proposes a multidimensional model

comprising eight domains of wellbeing: "emotional; interpersonal relationships; material wellbeing; personal development; physical wellbeing; self-determination; social inclusion; and rights" (Verdugo, 2024, p. 23). QOL operates on the premise that social, cultural, and physical factors play a decisive role, thus necessitating the establishment of community support networks alongside personalised support measures, aimed at assisting both schools and families.

In the same vein, as indicated by Eurydice (2019, p. 23), the establishment of multidisciplinary support teams—comprising educators, anthropologists, social workers, psychologists, and intercultural mediators—is advocated. These teams provide students with the necessary linguistic, academic, and socio-emotional support required to ensure the inclusion of migrant students (NAI, CNI) and offer teachers assistance in better understanding their pupils' needs, vulnerabilities, and actual learning difficulties, as well as in the drafting of Individualised Education Plans (IEPs). Indeed, adopting a holistic perspective to achieve a genuine project of inclusion for students from migratory backgrounds entails—as emphasised by educational psychologist Stefan Von Prondzinski during the conference "Special Education and Inclusive Design: A Focus on the Support of Individuals with Sensory Disabilities"¹—creating optimal contextual facilitations that enable full societal participation on the basis of equality. This approach proposes a new definition of SEN or BES, understood as "Best Environmental Support." This renewed conception of SEN is grounded in the definition of disability articulated by the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), where disability is no longer viewed merely as a condition of illness, dysfunction, or impairment, but as the dynamic interaction between an individual's personal characteristics, a given health condition, and the context in which they are situated (Caon, Melero, Brichese, 2023, p. 22). In this model, the environment—specifically, the school—may present barriers, obstacles, or facilitators. In other words, the environment (school, classroom, learning space) may act as either an ally or an adversary, directly

¹ The concept of Bes, as Best Environmental Support, was presented by Stefan Von Prondzinski, psychopedagogue and lecturer at the University of Bozen/Bolzano, as part of the speech 'People with sensory disabilities and the bio-psycho-social approach' presented during the Inclusion Week organised by the University of Macerata from 31 March - 6 April 2025.

influencing students' abilities and performance. Environmental factors, like personal factors, affect the quality of participation in educational activities.

4. The Principles of UDL 3.0 in Multicultural and Vulnerable Contexts

Italian school classrooms today host pupils with different characteristics, backgrounds, needs, and developmental potentials, each requiring specific actions aimed at enhancing individual uniqueness. In this context, Personalised Educational Plans (PDPs) constitute essential tools available to teachers for supporting students' academic pathways, employing strategies, resources, and measures tailored to the needs of each pupil, irrespective of their socio-cultural or ethnic background. School is thus the setting where "difference" — understood as an ontological category inherent to each individual — is regarded as an opportunity to experiment with innovative teaching solutions, with the aim of designing personalised pathways within the standard curriculum that respect the distinctiveness of every student (Savia, 2016, p. 28). From this perspective, the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) approach, by operating transversally across various domains impacting not only learning trajectories but also students' personal development and psycho-physical well-being, invites educational action grounded in the principles of "representation," "action and expression," and "engagement" (CAST, 2024). The three core principles of UDL (Universal Design for Learning), which underpin pedagogical and didactic inclusion for students with special educational needs (SEN) and motor, intellectual, or sensory disabilities, take on even greater relevance in heterogeneous, multilingual, and multicultural classrooms—particularly with students with non-Italian citizenship (CNI), and those classified as NAI and UMM. These latter groups, in particular, are often completely non-Italian-speaking and unable to use Italian (L2) either for communication or for accessing academic content. The principle of representation encourages educators to present information through multiple means—visual, tactile, and auditory stimuli—to support understanding among all students, without exception. Relying on a single medium, such as written texts, may not only be limiting but can become deeply marginalizing in contexts characterized by diversity and vulnerability. The second principle, action and expression, is based on the understanding that students differ not only in how they process information, but also in how they demonstrate and express their learning (Guatelli, 2025). In complex and multicultural settings, such

as Italian schools—where Italian-speaking students and those with CNI from over 200 countries (MIM, 2024) coexist—this principle must go beyond simply differentiating modes of expression. It should also include the recognition and valorisation of diverse linguistic and cultural identities present in the classroom, utilizing tools and approaches already offered by intercultural pedagogy. The third principle, engagement, recommends offering students a variety of learning activities tailored to different contexts. For students with CNI, NAI, and UMM, for whom the second language (L2) represents a major barrier not only to academic subjects but also to full participation in school and social life in the host country, this paper focuses on the design of diversified educational and play-based activities within didactic workshops for L2 acquisition. Although UDL has gained prominence in the international pedagogical landscape since 2000—as a framework for creating more inclusive education, transferring the principles of Universal Design (UD) developed by architect Ronald Mace in the 1980s into the educational field—“in Italy, there are still few experiences in the study, training, and implementation of UDL content, and these are mostly limited to the presentation of theoretical concepts” (Guatelli, 2025, p. 18). One such initiative is “Future Education Modena”, which engages in research, design, and startup acceleration activities, along with occasional experimental projects often stemming from the initiative of individual educators.

4.1 Teaching Italian L2 in Best Environmental Support, using UDL 3.0

The reception phase plays a pivotal role, as it shapes students’ first impressions and orientations, fostering their integration and reciprocal involvement, and establishing a communicative climate based on tolerance and mutual understanding, thereby preventing exclusionary mechanisms (Goussot, 2011, p. 164). Reception, conceived as a practice of pedagogical mediation, should not be interpreted merely as a liminal or preliminary phase ending with the student's formal enrolment. Rather, it should be regarded as an extended process aimed at building meaningful relationships among students and between students and teachers. The creation of a supportive environment (“Best Environmental Support”) during the reception phase necessarily involves the cultural mediator, who acts as a human facilitator by promoting connections among the school, the student, and their family. It should be noted that the role of the cultural mediator differs significantly from that of an interpreter or translator, as the mediator is a

professional figure responsible for fostering communication across diverse symbolic horizons (Goussot, 2011, p. 176). Similarly, teachers play a central role in nurturing the emotional and social well-being of students, especially those experiencing vulnerability or with special educational needs. Consequently, both initial and in-service teacher training are critical within a UDL framework, as the learning process inherently implicates psycho-personal variables that are directly influenced by the quality of relationships maintained with peers and educators (Cottini, 2021; Muscarà, 2018). Communication skills, empathy, mediation abilities, and leadership are merely a few examples of the complex competencies required of teachers to foster the development of a welcoming and conducive learning environment for all students. This is particularly significant during second language (L2) acquisition phases, where a positive emotional atmosphere — characterised by a high degree of interdependence — enhances group solidarity and encourages linguistic experimentation (Martínez Agudo, 2018, p. 28). In terms of the inclusion process for migrants, the management of Italian L2 language laboratories emerges as a crucial aspect. On the one hand, it facilitates the creation of an inclusive and supportive learning environment, thus preventing the activation of defensive mechanisms; on the other hand, it enables the use of language as an effective medium of connection rather than a barrier to communication and inclusion. The National INVALSI Report 2024, which presents the results of assessments in Italian, mathematics, and English across primary and secondary schools, reveals that: “migrants, particularly those of the first generation, tend to achieve lower average scores in Italian and mathematics compared to native students, whereas results in English show notable improvements. In lower secondary schools, first-generation migrants score approximately 23.7 points lower than their Italian peers, a gap that decreases to around 13.3 points for second-generation students (born in Italy to foreign parents). In upper secondary education, the gap reduces to about 19.8 points for first-generation and 10.2 points for second-generation students” (Portale interistituzionale, 2025). It is important to recognise that newly arrived students (NAI) and unaccompanied migrant minors (UMM) present special linguistic needs that are substantially different from those of students with a migratory background (CNI) who were born and raised, at least in part, in Italy. Therefore, in line with the aforementioned principle of personalised educational intervention, L2 language laboratories must be designed with differentiated linguistic mediation strategies. In particular, NAI and UMM often require acquisition of the Italian language to communicate and interact within the new social context, establish friendships,

express ideas, and engage effectively in everyday life. Conversely, migrants already established in Italian schools primarily need to strengthen their communicative and expressive competencies in Italian in order to master curricular knowledge and enhance their academic performance (e.g., improving skills in reading comprehension, oral production, text reformulation, and written production). With specific regard to NAI and UMM students, for whom language acquisition is a critical component of integration — directly linked to the UDL principle of "action and expression" — the L2 laboratory may represent a significant opportunity for supporting inclusion if conceptualised not as an episodic educational intervention, but rather as a year-long linguistic support programme fostering the development of expressive and communicative skills. Consistent with checkpoint 7.3 of UDL 3.0, "fostering joy and play," a playful approach within the learning environment promotes an emotionally engaging and stimulating context, facilitating social interaction and the building of new relationships. The use of playful didactics, both in traditional and multimedia forms, upholds the principles of inclusivity and accessibility endorsed by UDL, ensuring the active participation of all migrants by removing barriers typically found in traditional educational settings. Through educational games — in pairs or groups — it becomes possible to render the learning of vocabulary and morpho-syntactic structures more interactive and engaging. Board games, video games, educational applications and platforms, storytelling activities, and simulation-based strategies such as role play represent just a few of the tools available to multidisciplinary teams for creating dynamic and inclusive learning environments that effectively support the development of oral and written comprehension and production (Caon & Rutcka, 2006; Daloiso, 2022). In accordance with the second UDL principle, "Language and Symbols," the learning experience within Italian L2 laboratories extends beyond the mere acquisition of linguistic competencies; it fosters, from a transcultural perspective, "comprehension and dialogue across different languages" (checkpoint 2.3) and promotes the understanding and deconstruction of "prejudices in the use of language and symbols" (checkpoint 2.4). In this regard, translanguaging activities, which recognise and value the linguistic competencies of all students and encourage the use of all languages for communication and learning, are particularly significant.

Conclusions

The inclusion process for migrants—NAI, CNI, UMM, and second-generation learners—cannot and must not be limited to the provision of didactic workshops for learning Italian as a second language (L2) and the implementation of individualized learning plans. The inclusion of students with a migratory background, who often present special educational needs, today requires an authentically inclusive educational design. It is necessary to move beyond demographic data and the reconstruction of academic histories and begin to map holistic needs, vulnerabilities, and individual fragilities (*Quality of Life*, QOL), around which a truly inclusive environment (*Best Environmental Support*) and more effective learning support and motivational tools can be constructed. An inclusive school environment may be conceptualized within the ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1994) as an ecosystem capable of generating relational networks among families, caregivers, educators, third-sector associations, and local services. The aim is to facilitate both academic success and full, active participation in social life for students with CNI, including those who are NAI and UMM. Within this framework, linguistic and cultural mediation, as well as multidisciplinary teams focused on the emotional and relational development of students with a migratory background, play a central role—though such human facilitators are rarely or inadequately utilized in Italian schools. In this context, UDL emerges as a theoretical and methodological framework capable of embracing and supporting the complex experiences of students with migratory backgrounds and their special educational needs—needs often linked to multiple vulnerabilities stemming from the intersection of linguistic disadvantage, educational discontinuity, socioeconomic precarity, and, in some cases, disability. From this perspective, the concept of *Special Educational Needs* (SEN), as reformulated by Von Prondzinski into *Best Environmental Support*, emphasizes the need to reframe educational intervention not as a response to a diagnosis, but as the universal design of accessible, flexible, and culturally responsive learning environments. Workshops for Italian as L2, multidisciplinary teams, translanguaging practices, play-based pedagogy, and adequate initial and in-service teacher training that is more attuned to the needs of migrants represent just a few of the foundational elements of a Best Environmental Support framework. Adopting a systemic perspective in educational planning—one that is grounded in intercultural mediation, meaningful educational relationships, and full accessibility of knowledge—can ensure that migrants not

only exercise their right to education, but also their right to belonging and full social participation.

Author contributions

Francesca Oggiano, paragrafi: introduzione, 1, 2.

Sofia Ribilotta: paragrafi: 3 ,4.

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