The Autistic Pupil and the Classroom Management

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Riassunto: L’autismo è una condizione molto complessa le cui caratteristiche si ripercuotono in ogni ambito di vita della persona. L’obiettivo del presente articolo non è indagare il disturbo in tutta la sua complessità, ma i principi e le risorse che l’insegnante deve prendere in considerazione quando in classe è presente uno studente autistico. La gestione del gruppo è un compito arduo e necessita specifiche riflessioni per permettere all’équipe scolastica di lavorare all’interno di un’ottica di unitarietà d’intenti che supporti la realizzazione di un clima educativo positivo e favorevole all’integrazione scolastica e sociale dell’alunno con autismo.

Abstract: Autism is a very complex condition whose characteristics are reflected in every aspect of a pupil’s life. This article’s goal is not to investigate the complexity of the condition but to look at principles and resources to be taken into account by the teacher when there is an autistic pupil in the classroom. The task of managing the group is difficult and needs specific planning to let the school team act within a framework of common intents supporting the accomplishment of a positive schooling climate, favouring the school and social integration of the pupil affected by autism.

Keywords: autism, classroom management, education, teamwork, planning, organisation.

1. Introduction

For contemporary teachers, classroom management has become a hard task. Teaching skills and the individual characteristics of each student are strictly intertwined with the ability to produce a suitable climate for learning and integration.

For this reason, everyone’s needs must be given equal attention and im-

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portance enabling the growth of the group within the multiple experiences met in the classroom: every student has specific issues and the teacher must endeavour to create (from this standpoint), a valid educational path.

Diversity in the classroom is increasingly becoming evident. A homogenous group, on the potential and individual plane, is becoming increasingly hard to find (as each student naturally has differences.) However, the presence of a disabled student can widen this complexity and make the job of the teacher more difficult. The number of disabled pupils in Italian schools has increased over recent years according to recent data from ISTAT (AA.VV., 2013); they are approximately 145 thousand.

It is because of inclusive policies and the effort of professionals and parents, that educative and schooling institutions reached noteworthy results in integration, implementing effective strategies to support individual growth through school, university and work (Canevaro, D’Alonzo, Ianes, 2009; Canevaro, D’Alonzo, Ianes, Caldin, 2011).

Nevertheless, disabled students may still cause anxiety and worries in teachers especially when having to teach an autistic pupil. Pupils affected by Pervasive Developmental Disorders\(^1\), including Disorders on the Autistic Spectrum, represent 17.3% of the total number of disabled pupils in primary schools, and 11.8% of those in the intermediary school level (AA.VV., 2013, 4) (11 to 14 of age): this is a significant statistics to bear in mind when planning classroom management of an autistic pupil. Despite the legitimacy of the worries that derive from the presence of a pupil with such distinct characteristics, it is fundamental to overcome them by deepening the knowledge of the condition; to believe in the value of integration, with the school team, acting toward a common goal. Teachers should accept this challenge once there are the actual premises needed to act and solve the questions tied to the assumption of a new pedagogical model; not only aimed to challenge the autistic student’s integration, but that of the whole classroom. To set a new group dynamic oriented to accommodate the specific needs of each and everyone in the classroom (D’Alonzo, 2008, 28).

2. The Management of the Classroom

Research affirms that the handling of the classroom is the top-conditioning factor in the quality of learning and personal growth of the pupils (V. F. Jones, L.S. Jones, 2001, 4). The concept of class management includes all
the actions that the teacher must implement to raise the pupil's interest and participation in activities and establish a productive workplace. However, the discussion on the definition of management cannot end having as its only reference legislative interventions to be implemented to maintain the right environment for learning (V. F. Jones, L.S. Jones, 2007). Disciplinary control over inadequate pupils' behaviour in relation to difficulties and problems arising is important, but it is not the only aspect that the teacher has to supervise in the classroom: managing the classroom means creating a positive and welcoming environment where everyone has the opportunity to test himself and harmonically show his personality, and through it find motivations for individual and collective efforts (d’Alonzo, 2012, 13).

There are multiple factors that contribute importantly in the construction of a productive workplace environment. On one hand a concept, or just disciplinary content may result in great interest and immediate comprehension for a student, or, on the other, it may seem totally irrelevant and stressful. It depends on the way in which the teacher assumes his leading role and tunes his intervention according to the complex structural dynamics within the group. Therefore, the role of the teacher becomes central in managing the students during school activities: each educational action that was started helping to create the conditions for effective leadership.

Organisational and didactic options implemented by the teacher are tied to the organisation of the teaching context; this includes the relationships and rules that govern the group (Ibidem, 15). Brophy sustains that, «research has established that working classrooms are the result of relentless efforts of the teacher to create, maintain and (only in particular circumstances) re-set the conditions to favour learning: the most successful teacher takes classroom management as a process aimed to establishing and maintaining environments favourable to learning; the less successful teachers take classroom administration uniquely as a process aimed to implement discipline» (Brophy, 1999, 27).

One basic requirement that the teacher, together with the school team, has to consider is to build a positive environment that is welcoming and is based on mutual respect. Without it the pupils would hardly have a chance to achieve their potentials.

This climate reflects the school and socio-emotive life of the group. It can modify the learning process as it is directly linked to all the factors that involve teachers, families and the entire community (Fischer, 2003, 264). Obtaining the right environment is important because it is tightly linked
to the quality of the pupils' school performance. Furthermore, it allows the teacher to value (specificities) and favour the learning process as well as socio-emotive development.

A second requirement of great importance is to consider the classroom as a group: the teacher must be aware that he works with a definite number of students who did not independently choose to stay together, and will have to interact with each other for a long time. The classroom is a group where each member interacts actively and is marked by the wholeness of its specificity: the single diversities participate to build a social environment where each day the teacher paves the educational and learning path of the group (Ibidem, 264).

Finally, the classroom is to be considered as a physical environment. Every act of the teacher facilitates the conditions for an effective handling of the audience. This principle is activated also in the organisation of the physical space, for example with the desks’ layout, the choice of the room colours and the positioning of didactic and educational material (d’Alonzo, 2012).

The environment should be orderly and shaped upon the characteristics of the group as it is one element that can promote teaching quality and influence the handling of the students.

Considering the above mentioned requirements and recent research on the subject, it is possible to highlight the pillars of classroom management, they define the strategies considered fundamental for an effective intervention in the classroom (Ibidem, 70, 124):

• The effective presence: to lead the group is necessary to be aware of all proceedings. As Kounin (1970) sustains, «we can carry out the functions of teacher only if in possession of the skill of “withitness” in the kids’ problems». To be effectively present, the teacher should be able to identify precisely the pupil responsible of an inadequate behaviour and act immediately in such cases.

• Proximity control: as described by Jones (1987), proximity in the classroom can be the winning strategy to solve many risky situations. Proximity control takes place when the teacher physically gets near the pupil who is blocking the flow of the class and manages, through proximity, to contain the inadequate behaviour without any verbal communication.

• Wave effect: this strategy has been clearly outlined by Kounin (1970, 74) and consists in reproaching one bad behaved pupil with
the aim that the whole group should learn from the reproach. Wave effect is effective only if used sparingly, otherwise it looses effectiveness.

- Domination: the classroom can be effectively managed when the teacher leads the students with an vigilant educational behaviour, and also is proactive and respectful of the personalities and needs of the individual pupils, this means that not everything depends from the pupils. The teacher should prove to have adequate levels of domination, i.e. self-assurance and determination.

- Didactic communication: a good classroom management is based on the skill of clear and precise communication. The teacher’s style of communication is very important to be able to involve every pupil and make the messages understood.

- Non-verbal communication: a good teacher is a master of his body using it to communicate and promote positive behaviour and discourage the negative ones. Non-verbal communication is indispensable in handling the classroom and it is based on posture, standing and walking, of facial expressions, eye contact and breathing.

- Verbal communication: pupils need a teacher who projects self-assurance in what he says and does, this is transmitted through the voice, vocal timbre, calmness, choice of words. Verbal communication, and the non-verbal one, shows the mood of the teacher, who should look self-assured but calm and at ease.

- Pupil’s potential: to handle the classroom properly, it is mandatory to praise every student, to do so the teacher should not focus on negative behaviour only, and should praise especially the good ones. It is necessary to pay much attention to all pupils, praising them and supporting them when well behaved to motivate and support them.

When the teacher is called to manage a group where an autistic student is present, some of the requirements and principles to be considered for an ideal handling of the classroom may however need different implementation strategies. Let us see them in details.

3. Know to handle: how to prepare yourself to the autistic pupil

Autism is a very complex condition whose peculiarities are reflected in each aspect of the student life. According to diagnostic manuals, the
Disorders of the Autism Spectrum are characterised by a communication and social interaction deficit and by the presence of restricted and repetitive models of behaviour, interests and activities (Venuti, 2012, 25).

For a successful educational planning, the characteristics of this disturb must be precisely taken into account.

The manifestations of autism may differ greatly from case to case, the knowledge of the student’s case by the working team is a necessary requirement, collecting all useful information to define the right school context and find the right practices needed to handle the presence in the classroom.

To fully understand the specificities and peculiarities of the pupil, it is important that the teachers endeavour to collect information from before the start of the school year.

Firstly, it is essential to be documented on the typical characteristics of the disturb and the areas of learning where the student may find greater difficulties. Functional Diagnosis is the instrument through which is possible to get early information about the student: this document, that complements the diagnostic evaluation, sums up the most important characteristics and orients the family and social and health services.

Secondly, the teacher may deepen the knowledge of the pupil, and his educational needs, getting sufficiently ready through some good practices (Boroson, 2011, 9).

• Meet the family: parents are the first experts on their autistic child and are able to provide precious information to communicate, relate and handle the student in the classroom.
• Talk to colleagues who have already had experience with pupils affected by Pervasive Developmental Disorders: sharing doubts and fears with one more experienced colleague can surely help the teacher not to feel alone, to learn best practices that may be used in handling the classroom.
• Organize a meeting to get to know the student: it is not always easy to organise a meeting before the start of the school year. However, it may be useful to meet the student after having met the family. It would be ideal if the pupil, accompanied by the teacher, could visit the school and the classroom where he will be received, to get acquainted with the environment and organise the space.
• Make use of all the information gathered to define the educational profile: the school team must meet in time to share the information
collected and establish specific targets for the new school year. This implies understanding how to manage the group to facilitate all students integration and learning, including the ones with autism.

- Remove doubts and fears derived from the presence of one autistic pupil, to believe in everyone’s integration and potentials: the path towards school inclusion is long and tiring but possible. The teacher is not alone in obtaining such a goal and the whole working team should strive to remove doubts and fears, exploiting the available resources.

The actions described above can be measured differently according to specificities and needs, to become eventually good practices to be used throughout the school year. The suggested activities are useful tips for all students: to get to know every single member of the group is essential to allow the teacher build an encouraging climate for learning and growing up. It should be done, whenever possible, before the start of the school year.

4. The classroom as a physical space: organising space and time

The physical and temporal dimensions of the classroom are important aspects for learning and for the handling of students. However, when there is the presence of an autistic pupil, such a reflection becomes fundamental. The reason for the need of a specific attention to structuring time and space is essential and dictated by the particular deficits of autism, especially, for those affecting executive and sensorial functions. The executive function is a complex neurological system that controls the planning processes, as well as control and coordination of the cognitive system. Amongst them, are the organisation of actions, flexible shifting of attention, implementation of adequate strategies and inhibition towards inadequate answers? (Meltzer, 2007, 1-3).

For the people who possess the right executive function, it is possible to organise and manage actions and reactions towards a stimulus or situation on the basis of their experience together with a reasoned analysis of the context (Ibidem, 133-160). Because of this, a series of information becomes accessible, increasing the planning skills (objective thinking, prediction, reflection, impulse control, empathy...). The executive function is also directly tied to external changes handling skills, such as to be able to wait, bear frustration, stay calm and balance attention and concentration...
When this system does not work properly, as often happens in people with autism, cognitive schemes are not activated and so are the ones limiting impulsive, distract and dysfunctional behaviours. The students affected by this disturb may face difficulties to: modify their behaviour in a given context, manage anxiety and frustration, re-organise thinking in a flexible and adaptable manner, manage time and space in an organised manner, planning ahead, learn from errors and follow directions (Hannah, 2008, 85; Boroson, 2011, 71). The consequences of this deficit on handling a classroom with an autistic pupil are remarkable, especially when the executive function is compromised: the student will have difficulties to understand the assignments, organise, be able to control his behaviour and, moreover, control anxiety and impulsion. The sensorial aspect too is one to be considered to organise the school space (Volkmar, Paul, Klin, Cohen, 2005; Bogdashina, 2003; 2010).

All information is analysed by central nervous system through a neurobiological process called sensorial integration. It concerns the interpretation of the information gathered through the body’s senses, allowing the contemporary perception of several stimuli without going in overloading (Ayres, Robbins, 2005). The senses involved are seven, sight, touch, hearing, smell, taste, proprioceptive (body perception) and the vestibular (balance) systems.

People with autism can have one of them functioning inadequately and sometimes one or more senses are hypo- or hyper-reactive to the stimuli. This kind of problems may explain some behaviours typical of autism, like turning on oneself, do the “butterfly” with the hands, swinging, closing eyes and hears or shouting. When a sensorial dysfunction is present, as in autism, the input is not properly organised and can produce several degrees of developmental problems, in elaborating information, behaviour (Ibidem, 129) and capability to learn, socialise, cope with reality and pay attention in the classroom. For example, if the pupil is excessively sensitive to noise may be annoyed or attracted by a siren sounding in the distance, as a result he will not be able to listen the teacher or do the assignment.

To cope with these difficulties and facilitate the presence of the autistic pupil, some tips are useful. Firstly, it is necessary to establish the school space for the didactic activities, making it predictable and sensorially adequate to favour concentration, lower anxiety and support the comprehension of the surrounding reality. It may be necessary to design a specific area in the classroom for the teacher to work in small groups or with individu-
als: for many pupils to develop activities in a space where sensorial stimuli are small, for example, against a white wall, may lower the sensorial input and reduce problematic behaviour (Cottini, 2012, 137).

Secondly, it is essential to define time through the use of some instruments, they have to be tailored and used according to the skills of the student (Mesibov, Shea, Schopler, 2004, 41; Arwood, Kaulitz, Brown, 2009), among them:

- Visual agendas: tables or panels where it is explained what would happen during the school day. As everyone uses one agenda, this table too helps the youngster in organising the school time, to know before time what will happen at the end of every lesson. Visual agendas, can be made of real objects, photographs, images or words, this depends on the pupil’s levels of comprehension according to the Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) (Cafiero, 2009; Visconti, Peroni Ciceri, 2007). The agendas are adequate if in line with transparency, specificity and consistency criteria.
- Timer: many pupils may become anxious because they do not understand the verbal terms dictated by the teacher to define the time. Because of this, they should have the chance of actually seeing the effective duration of the activity verbally explained before. Not knowing when something will end in the perception of the pupil may mean that the assignment may last forever; this causes anxiety.

It is necessary to remind that the “change” is a factor that may happen at any time of the school day: the teacher is ill, a sudden fire alarm drill, the absence of a schoolmate are only some of the variables that may be sources of anxiety in a youngster affected by autism. The teacher is not expected to control every possible variable and avoid the unexpected. However, he should train the student, through self-control and ways to communicate the uneasiness, to control anxiety and the related frustration.

Finally, the definition of time and space is fundamental in structured teaching (Cottini, 2012, 142-144; Hannah, 2008, 53; Boroson, 2011) and assignment organisation. Just like everybody, the youngster with autism needs to know exactly what he has to do in the classroom for this reason the teaching should have a clear, coherent and explicit structure. The most important aspect of structured teaching is to allow to the pupil to see exactly the assignment expected from him, and what will happen afterward.

One instrument that may be used is a table that shows the sequence of
the actions required to start, develop and end the assignment (Magnusen, 2005, 49). Even the action that looks as the simplest, may result very complex to process and must be explained through the organisation and structuring of the activity. The table can be made through photographs, images or words, according to the skills of the pupil.

It is very important to use structured teaching to reduce anxiety and increase attention and motivation, in doing so, the unforeseen and the confusion decrease; remarkably, this discourages also adult’s tutoring, making the student more autonomous in fulfilling the assignments (Ibidem, 50). Considering the above, some organisational stratagems may result useful to integrate the autistic pupil, from the start of the school year (Boroson, 2011, 9):

- Knowing the student’s sensorial peculiarities and set his school desk in accordance. If, for example, the youngster is annoyed to be in direct sunlight, his desk should not be placed too near the classroom windows.
- Prepare a visual agenda for the early school days, the pupil may need it to understand what is going on in the classroom and, through this instrument, avoid situations of discomfort and uneasiness.
- Reduce images and ornaments hanging on the wall. Especially in the early school cycles, classroom walls have plenty of colourful drawings and didactic panels. These objects are important and the presence of an autistic pupil should not eliminate aesthetic creativity of teachers and classmates. However, this requires more organisation and applied logic to avoid that the classroom becomes one excessively sensorial stimulus causing distraction, originating problematic behaviours and reducing the level of attention.
- Organize the classroom neatly, orderly and simply, in a manner that finding tools and material for the didactic activities for the autistic student and his mates is easy. Shared objects can be filed in containers and shelves using words and images too.
- Define, when possible, a corner within the classroom for individual and small group works, to allow the pupil to develop activities specific to his needs without leaving the classroom.

The stratagems needed for a proper organisation of space and time in the classroom may result useful to the whole group, since a greater organisation benefits the attention and learning of every student and enables the didactic and educational activity of the teacher (Meltzer, 2001, 161-164).
5. Assignment motivation

The teacher’s skill to involve and motivate the students is essential to create a serene climate that encourages learning and opens the way to all pupils to experiment a positive relationship with the classroom. The motivation may be of two types, intrinsic or extrinsic: the first one derives from an individual’s inner energy, based on specific needs; it encourages positive personal and social behaviours. By consequence, it makes a person experience emotional situations that correspond to the typical needs of the human being, such like: curiosity, serenity and interest (d’Alonzo, 1999, 47). The second one, instead, does not originate from a real personal interest, it is introduced from outside and can be used in many phases of the didactic and educational experience (d’Alonzo, 2012, 13).

All students need a motivation, may it be intrinsic or extrinsic, to reach the targets set in the classroom. To support the pupils, the teacher can make use of the positive supports described below (Ibidem, 119):

• Social supports: they become especially important when expressed in the classroom, they consist of verbally expressed praise.
• Privileged supports: they are implemented by letting the pupil do or use something out of the “routinely”.
• Tangible supports: this kind of supports consist of notes of praise, written grades, comments on the notebook and on the diary of the pupil.

If motivation remains a potent tool to support learning, many students with autism do not feel encouraged by some of the strategies used with the rest of the classroom. Because of the difficulties in understanding the contents of social communication and relations, privileged and tangible supports result as the most suitable to motivate autistic pupils. To find effective supports, is necessary to know very well the student and to know which ones are the objects and activities that he prefers.

A very useful tool to supervise the proceeding of an assignment through the privileged support is the motivational table (Sansosti, Powell-Smith, Cowan, 2010, 112-114; Spears, Turne, 2011, 82); in other words a table where the teacher remarks what the pupil has to do first (assignment) and what he can do after the end of the assignment (support). With this instrument, the student is visually and materially motivated to complete the exercise and to reduce refusals and avoidance. In relation to the levels of capacities and comprehension, it is possible to define and agree the table with...
the student, giving him the choice on what to do after having completed the assignment. The capability of deciding the final prize works positively on the student, who feels directly involved in building the activities and organisation of his school time. The table may have different degrees of complexity and, to extend work and attention length, it may contain more assignments to be done before getting what was established.

To handle the entirety of the classroom, the teacher should choose a support shared by all pupils and encourage the approximation of the youngster to the classmates: the support of the activity and motivation of the student may be shared by the group or by a part of it, allowing time and modality sharing.

However, due to the disturb complexity, the reason why an autistic pupil can not start or complete a task may be due to limitations that have not connection to what the teacher can recognise and deal with.

6. How to communicate to manage the classroom

Verbal communication is what is said explicitly to the pupils, however, it is only a small part of what the teacher effectively communicates to the group. The underlying part of communication, made of body movements, signs and signals, gestures, hints and facial expressions, cause the real interaction. It suggests the way to receive and understand what is explicated verbally, announcing what has not yet been expressed. All this makes the style of communication of the teacher, it may change according to the group or the message to be send (Norton, 1983).

The style of communication has a central role in handling the classroom. In fact, many researches confirm that there is a direct relation between it and teaching effectiveness (Catani, Morgagni, Morin, 2001, 17-18): the teachers that are perceived as capable and skilled by their pupils are those who adopt one attentive, relaxed and clearly understandable style (d’Alonzo, 2012, 20).

Non-verbal communication (Boffo, 2006, 87-90; Boffo, 2005), essential in building a suitable educational climate, is that series of gestures and body movements that accompany and at times substitute verbal communication. The autistic youngster can have some difficulties in understanding this type of communication, especially because of his deficit in the theory of mind (Bogdashina, 2006; Rizzolatti, Vozz, 2007). That is the capacity to
move in the interpersonal world by the automatic attribution to someone else of mental states, intentions and viewpoints and through the analysis of corporeal, gestural and physiognomic signs. One of the consequences of this deficit is the incapability to understand non-verbal communication and other people’s mental states. Therefore, if the teacher uses a communication style too rich in non-verbal contents, the message may result of difficult comprehension and a source of confusion for the autistic pupil.

Through the correct use of his body, the teacher communicates non-verbal messages to the pupils. Iverson (2003) offers the following advises, that may be useful also in presence of an autistic pupil:

- Relax the body muscles, both when sitting or standing, permitting the movement without anxiety within the classroom and approach someone when needed with no show of fear or worry.
- Relax facial muscles: a relaxed face surely is a positive and encouraging message that transmits calmness to the youngster.
- To keep away from someone else individual space: many autistic people worldwide fame, like Temple Grandin (2009), underlined that, for some, close body proximity, can be annoying or even painful. This characteristic is typical in pupils with tactile hypersensitivity and the teacher must respect this difficultly towards physical contact and envisage suitable ways of approximation.
- Smiling to communicate approval: the teacher’s smile gives serenity to the student and can create a wave effect throughout the classroom, confirming the belief in the pupil’s potentialities and supporting the positive aspects of the pupil and his mates.

Verbal communication too may be compromised. Some autistic students, especially those who have high performances, can present important difficulties in verbal communication too, especially interacting with the speaker and in understanding the speech. This means that not all students with autism have difficulties in pronouncing or in speech; however, their explicit communication faculties can equally be insufficient.

These students may have developed one high expressive means and be in possession of a wide vocabulary and a speech in line with their age, as they are competent in it. However, they are not able to use and/or decipher the social elements present in a conversation (Moyes, 2004, 22). On the contrary, other students with autism, may have a strong speech deficit, to the point of a total lack of speech, but remain active communicators, using alternative forms of speech; through the use of gestures, objects, photos,
illustrations and writings. In this case the teacher can encourage the handling of the classroom preferring different methodologies, accompanying what he is verbally explaining with images and following the principles of the Augmentative and Alternative Communication (Cafero, 2009; Visconti, Peroni Ciceri, 2007).

Communicative difficulties can have important consequences in classroom life and in the relationship between teacher and schoolmates. It is the responsibility of the school team to understand the educational need of the pupil in relation to the group and context and try to pave a way that will encourage comprehension and learning and enables the handling of the classroom.

7. The importance of teamwork: the common goal

When facing the complexity of handling a classroom with an autistic pupil, the school team, made not just of curricular and support teachers, but also by trainers, auxiliary personnel, colleagues and the headmaster, has a central role.

Teamwork becomes one essential function, especially in being able to lead the group and keep the continuity of the educational and didactic intervention, to support the whole group and specifically, the autistic student (Venza, 2007, 230). Autism is a very complex condition and its specificities affect entirely of the youngster’s life, the school environment should keep a coherent operative and organisational mode, which would avoid confusion and anxiety to the student and his schoolmates.

The right teamwork, fulfilled with proactive and positive communicating modes, such as learning paths shared and built together with the understanding of needs and difficulties of all, encourages the pupil’s inclusion and supports his learning path as well as his growth in all directions during the time spent at school (Prizant et al., 2006).

The teaching team efforts needed to handle a classroom with an autistic pupil are remarkable, this should be kept in account to split equally the work that each teacher has to carry out: operational responsibility cannot be down to the single but should belong to the whole group. The common goal is, more than ever, essential. As for other individuals with educational problems, one autistic pupil has the necessity of having a physical and social environment based on a coherent and comprehensible model, to do
so, the adults around him should be able to pursue shared goals through shared operational strategies. To work and keep the common goal in view, is not always easy, sometimes it results difficult to create a cooperative climate at school. The responsibility of the classroom does not belong to a single teacher but to the whole team. However, they rarely work together. The headmaster is responsible, with the teachers, to encourage operations at school: he is the reference for the whole institution and makes the choices in favour – or against – integration. Based on this perspective, the school council needs to be a proactive team (Lee, Finger, 2010, 36-37) that is, able to observe and analyse the signals coming from the classroom to understand the pupils' problems and forecast the requests that follow, to avoid the raise troublesome behaviour. The appearance of behaviours that influence the management of the group is not rare with autistic pupils: if not quickly dealt with, they may damage deeply the group structure and obstacle significantly the teacher's leadership. The reasons why an inadequate behaviour may appear are many and not always easy to understand (Whitaker, Joy, Harley, Edwards, 2001) yet, it is essential that the teacher looks for solution strategies sharing a common path with his colleagues. The initial requisite for a proactive team is the belief in integration, to believe in the learning power of the student, even if he shows important limitations in development and growth (D’Alonzo, 2002, 137). Classmates are not just resources to implement integration, but, especially, to help teachers deal with their autistic classmate (Cottini, 2002). It is essential to actively involve the classmates too in managing school integration: in fact, they represent an essential condition for the realisation of a real integration capable of going beyond the classroom confinement. However, it cannot happen without specific measures that teachers should know and implement (Cottini, 2004). Classmates cannot be directly responsible in handling an autistic student, the teacher should lead the whole group to learn how to communicate and cohabit at school for each and everyone’s good.

8. Conclusions

Managing a classroom that receives an autistic pupil, inclusive and effective is not an easy task and the teacher, to succeed in his didactic and educational task, must operate with all his colleagues and consider the group a useful and founding resource.
The above reflections are not valid only for the autistic pupil; many strategies may result worthy even when applied to a classroom with children with other educational problems. With this in mind, the teacher will be able to use the principles that encourage the autistic student inclusion even in future occasions where he will have to teach a group with different specificities. Despite all the objective difficulties to be found in handling a classroom, it is necessary to reinforce a fundamental concept: the school for all must pursue integration.

This statement should not remain just a theoretical principle that enriches special pedagogy scarcely applicable in everyday’s reality at school: this principle must become the fundamental concept behind the educational and didactic action of the teachers and of all the adults directly or indirectly involved in educating and raising the pupil with autism. To translate in practice this important concept, an organisational and systematic adaptation of the institution is needed, with a significant investment in economical and human resources, to increase both social and school activities.

Classroom management and the teacher skills in building an active team encouraging learning, is just one of the requisites for a successful venture and to support the student with autism in his school life and to prepare him to live his life.

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Notes

1 General or Pervasive Development Disorders are characterised by serious and widespread deterioration of several areas of development, such like: reciprocal interaction and communication faculty, or, the recurrence of stereotyped behaviours, interests and activities. Clearly anomalous qualitative impairments define these conditions in relation to the level of development or mental age of the subject. This section included the Autistic Disorder, Rett Syndrome, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, and the not otherwise specified Pervasive Development Disorder Cfr. World Health Organisation (2000), International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems - tenth edition (ICD-10), Ginevra, WHO, Cap. I, sezione F84; American Psychiatric Association (2000), Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - forth edition revised (DSM-IV TR), Arlington, APA, Asse I, codice 299.

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