

Reshaping Educational Transitions: External Support Devices for Students with Special Educational Needs and Migrant Backgrounds Pathways into Higher Education Readiness

Vincenzo Salerno

Salesian University Institute of Venice , Italy

How to cite: Salerno, V. (2026). Reshaping Educational Transitions: External Support Devices for Students with Special Educational Needs and Migrant Backgrounds Pathways into Higher Education Readiness. In: 12th International Conference on Higher Education Advances (HEAd'26). Valencia, 15-18 June 2026. <https://doi.org/10.4995/HEAd26.2026.21611>

Abstract

This study examines how school-affiliated external educational programs serve as key support mechanisms for students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and neurodiversity from migrant backgrounds, with a particular focus on their role in fostering higher education preparation. Through a qualitative case study conducted in Northern Italy, the research explores alternative teaching settings that promote autonomy and transversal skills through laboratory activities. The program formally maintains the curricular objectives established by the school, which are pursued through practical activities that integrate disciplinary learning and the development of participation skills. This study focuses on the latter, as it is a prerequisite for the former. Data collected through narrative interviews and document analysis reveals that individualized scaffolding, token economy, and socio-emotional education are essential elements for supporting engagement and self-regulation. The findings indicate that these flexible learning programs, designed as re-engagement pathways, are crucial for preventing early school dropout and ensuring equitable access to tertiary education. The study concludes that integrating outdoor learning environments with mainstream curricula offers a sustainable model for rethinking inclusive transitions to higher education, providing transferable pedagogical principles for academic success and active civic participation.

Keywords: Preparation for higher education; School inclusion; Flexible learning programs; Special educational needs (SEN); Neurodiversity; Re-engagement pathway.

1. Introduction

For students with Special Educational Needs (SEN), neurodiversity, or vulnerabilities related to migration backgrounds, education systems have developed consolidated support

mechanisms—IEPs, dispensation measures, compensatory tools, and, in tertiary settings, tutoring and inclusion offices—which have expanded access and reduced specific barriers (Moriña & Perera, 2020). Nonetheless, the transition to more independent learning paths, particularly in university education, remains a tenuous option for many: not formally excluded, but often absent from educational expectations. This gap is not solely due to the severity of individual conditions or the limitations of compensatory mechanisms. Rather, it reflects a misalignment between what educational pathways develop and what high-autonomy contexts presuppose: self-regulation, autonomous task management, use of feedback, and sustained participation in less structured environments. These skills are not addressed by compensatory mechanisms and are rarely taught explicitly in mainstream curricula, with particularly significant effects for students with more complex profiles (Aguirre & Escobedo, 2026). Faced with this challenge, the traditional response of educational systems—special classes and separate settings—tends to isolate without preparing for the subsequent return. The inclusive perspective proposes a different logic: redesigning educational settings to make them accessible to diverse profiles, addressing the prerequisites for participation in advance. The external school-affiliated educational programs analysed in this study fit this framework: these settings are managed by third-sector organisations, formally affiliated with mainstream schools, which temporarily accommodate students who struggle in mainstream classrooms. Schools retain institutional ownership—they define curricular objectives and administer assessments—while the external program designs the daily educational journey through practical environments, structured routines, and stable relationships. Subject-specific learning is not absent, but rather mediated by practical experience: measuring, counting, and following written instructions are activities that simultaneously integrate curricular objectives and the development of participation skills—making the former accessible precisely through work on the latter. The goal is twofold: for those with potential, to build the prerequisites that facilitate a return to mainstream learning and, progressively, access to more advanced educational settings; for those with more serious vulnerabilities, to ensure a non-segregated educational environment, geared toward maximum development. Therefore, there are no special classes, but temporary "bridge programs," integrated with the system and geared towards participation (Salerno & Casasola, 2022).

The question guiding the research is: how and under what conditions do external school-affiliated educational programs contribute to developing, in students with SEN and a migrant background, the prerequisites of self-regulation and autonomy necessary to support participation in increasingly complex educational paths, including higher education?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Character Development and Socio-Behavioral Skills for Academic Preparation

The Character Education draws attention to a set of skills—responsibility, self-regulation, cooperation, and implicit rule management—that constitute essential prerequisites for school participation (McGinnis et al., 2011). However, these are skills that schools often assume rather than explicitly teach. For students with neurodevelopmental disorders such as ADHD and ASD, this implicitness represents a specific obstacle: frustration tolerance, feedback acceptance, and self-control are not accessory skills, but necessary conditions for sustainable participation, regardless of cognitive level (Lindner & Schwab, 2025). In multicultural contexts, models based on implicit codes and standardised curricula risk being even less accessible to students from migrant backgrounds. When these prerequisites are not intentionally built in earlier stages, the difficulty persists throughout the school career (Kocaoğlu et al., 2023). However, the role that the failure to build these prerequisites plays in narrowing the educational trajectories of students with complex profiles, even in the initial stages of the school career, remains little explored, transforming formally open possibilities for the transition to university education into outcomes considered unrealistic.

2.2. Socio-Ecological Approaches and Experiential Learning

The socio-ecological approach interprets learning as the result of dynamic interactions between the individual and the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). From this perspective, when the context requires skills that are not yet available and does not offer adequate mediation, participation tends to be interrupted. From this perspective, the inclusive response does not consist of adapting the student to the system, but of redesigning the context so that the necessary skills can be built through experience. Environments rich in practical and relational affordances—such as gardens, laboratories, and real workspaces—are particularly beneficial to students with self-regulation difficulties, as they make requests explicit, tasks concrete, and the relationship between action and consequence immediate (Kuo, Barnes & Jordan, 2019). In such contexts, learning by doing is not simply a methodological alternative, but a way of accessing the rules of participation, integrating cognitive, operational, and relational dimensions. When formally connected to the school curriculum, these environments can contribute to the progressive construction of the prerequisites necessary to support transitions to less supported learning contexts (Chien et al., 2025). The literature on socio-ecological approaches and experiential learning has focused primarily on their value in terms of engagement, well-being, and socio-emotional development. Their role as contexts intentionally geared toward rebuilding the conditions for participation for students struggling to sustain mainstream education has been less explored.

2.3. Productive Contexts and Responsibility-Building Devices

Identifying pedagogical tools for redesigning the educational environment is a central issue in inclusion research. International literature shows growing interest in experiential contexts—including social farming and production workshops—that integrate operational dimensions and educational objectives, fostering socio-emotional development, cooperation, and self-efficacy (Dewey, 1986; Passarelli & Kolb, 2023). In such contexts, scaffolding is the central pedagogical tool: understood as a system of structured and adaptive supports—task simplification, progressive guidance, modeling, and continuous feedback—it allows students to tackle otherwise inaccessible activities, with a gradual reduction in support as autonomy increases (Kim et al., 2022). Token economies and point systems complete this framework as non-punitive feedback tools: they make progress visible, support self-regulation, and strengthen self-efficacy, proving particularly effective for students with a history of academic failure (Tan et al., 2022). Although scaffolding and non-punitive feedback systems are widely documented in the literature, their use is primarily analyzed in relation to improving performance or behavioral management within established educational contexts. Their role in processes where participation itself is compromised is less explored, where these devices operate not as incremental supports, but as conditions for reinstating educational engagement.

2.4. The Theoretical Framework: Vygotsky and Bruner 's socio-cultural approach

Taken together, these three strands converge toward a shared logic, grounded in the sociocultural approach of: Vygotsky and Bruner learning is a socially mediated process that occurs in the zone of proximal development through the structured support of competent figures (Vygotsky & Cole, 2018; Bruner, 1974). From this perspective, the difficulties in school participation of vulnerable students do not depend on individual characteristics, but on the misalignment between their profiles and the implicit demands of the education system. Redesigning the environment through practical and relational contexts, individualised scaffolding, and non-punitive feedback is therefore not an arbitrary methodological choice, but a coherent application of this framework: tools through which the environment adapts to the student's profile, making accessible what they could not yet address alone (Xiuli & Hock, 2023). From this perspective, the reference to university education should not be understood as a direct or immediately observable outcome, but as a horizon of progressive accessibility: a possibility that depends, for some of these students, on the early construction of the conditions for participation that tertiary contexts tend to presuppose (Ghasemian Dastjerdy, 2025). This theoretical framework therefore guides the analysis of this study, which considers external school-affiliated educational programs as pedagogical mediation devices aimed at building, in an anticipatory manner, those prerequisites without which trajectories towards more advanced educational paths—including higher education—risk being prematurely narrowed.

3. Methodological Design and Research Context

3.1. Research Design and Context

The research focuses on a third-sector organisation in Northern Italy that manages a school-affiliated external educational program, divided into residential and day modules. Students are formally enrolled in mainstream schools, but their academic journey is conducted—based on agreements between families, schools, and social services—in an external environment more suited to their functioning profiles. Schools retain full institutional authority: they define learning objectives and administer transition exams, while the external organisation designs the daily educational program through individualised scaffolding, workshop activities, and structured routines, in collaboration with a partner cooperative that provides real productive spaces—including vegetable gardens, kitchens, and environmental maintenance workshops. The program operates in collaboration with municipalities, social services, and childhood neuropsychiatry. The goal is not to create a parallel or special curriculum, but to build the transversal skills and self-regulation abilities necessary for successful reintegration into mainstream schools. The program is not a special class or a substitute curriculum: it is a preparatory environment that aims to create the conditions for successful reintegration into mainstream schools. Table 1 summarises the student profiles and support strategies adopted. Table 1. Student functioning profiles and support strategies

3.2. Participants and Sampling

The study, conducted from September 2024 to June 2025, adopts a qualitative case study design to analyse a real educational context as a situated and complex unit (Hoda, 2025). The case study was selected through purposive sampling based on the following criteria: formal partnership with mainstream schools, presence of structured laboratory activities, a population with a prevalent presence of SEN and a migrant background, and documented use of scaffolding and token economies (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). The study involved 110 students (aged 11-21) with heterogeneous profiles—cognitive disabilities, ASD, ADHD, emotional vulnerability—most of them with a migrant background, including unaccompanied foreign minors, who, in addition to SEN, experience language barriers, academic discontinuity, and post-migration trauma.

Table 1. Student profiles, manifestations of vulnerability, and educational support devices. Source: Adapted from monitoring registers (2025).

Profile	N	Vulnerability	Barriers to inclusion	Supports
Cognitive disabilities	18	Slow processing, difficulty abstracting	Strict timeframes, standardised assessment	Real-world, graded tasks, visual scaffolding, hands-on tutoring
ASD	10	Social communication, rigidity, sensory hypersensitivity	Implicit rules, high stimulation	Predictable environments, modeling, explicit routines
ADHD	10	Inattention, impulsiveness	Frontal teaching, intolerance to error	Alternating manual labor, token economy, immediate visual feedback
Emotional/psychiatric vulnerability	15	Instability, withdrawal, trauma	Competitive contexts, difficult relationships	Stable relationship, low-threshold tasks, micro-teams
BES/DSA	20	Instrumental difficulties, slow processing	Uncompensated curriculum	Multisensory teaching, compensatory tools in a practical context
Unaccompanied minors with linguistic-migratory vulnerability	37	Language barriers, trauma, discontinuity	Implicit codes, absence of stable figures	Situational learning, cultural mediation, linguistic scaffolding
Total	110			

3.3. Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection used a triangulation of qualitative sources to ensure the credibility of the analysis (Handwerker, 2001; Figueroa, 2008). Twenty-three narrative interviews were conducted with the multidisciplinary team, consisting of support teachers, inclusion specialists, and transition coordinators. The interview questions focused on the participants' professional experiences within the program and their observations of student progress. Examples of questions include: "How would you describe the changes you've observed in students' ability to manage homework independently over time?" "What strategies have proven most effective in supporting self-regulation in students with SEN?" "How do you evaluate the role of practical activities in preparing students for traditional educational paths?". The interviews were supplemented with participant observation and extensive document analysis, including Individualised Education Plans (IEPs), meeting minutes, and monitoring logs. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles for research involving minors and vulnerable populations. Informed

consent was obtained from families and, where applicable, from the social services acting as legal guardians. All participants have been anonymised and no identifying information is reported. The collected data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), supported by MAXQDA software for systematic coding and mapping of instructional strategies. The analysis focused specifically on the development of transversal skills—such as task persistence and self-regulation—that facilitate sustainable school participation.

Table 2. Sources of qualitative data: typology, composition, and consistency of the corpus.

Acronym	Source type	Consistency of the corpus
I	Narrative interviews with educators, support teachers, technical supervisors, coordinators, inclusion specialists, social workers, and neuropsychiatrists	23 interviews
P	Individualized Education Plans (one for each of the 110 students)	110 IEPs
R	Monitoring logs produced by the internal multidisciplinary team (educators, support teachers, coordinators) 3 systematic observations: baseline (Sep 2024), mid-year (Jan 2025), end-of-year (Jun 2025)	3 logs
V	Team meeting minutes	12 minutes
O	Participant observation notes	40 sessions

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Learning by doing: the laboratory as a learning environment

The data describes the external laboratory not as a substitute context, but as an intermediate space in which the demands of the school system are made accessible through operational mediations: "At school you tell him 'be careful.' Here, if you're not careful, you'll cut yourself or make mistakes in your work. It's no longer an abstract request" (I11). The disciplinary content is not absent, but mediated by experience: "We don't make him do exercises in the book. We make him weigh the bags for sale, calculate the price" (I9). The mechanism described does not concern a different formulation of the request, but a different structure of the context that makes it functionally necessary: "In class, we ask him to sit, listen, wait his turn. Here, we ask him to

pick the courgettes. But while he's picking the courgettes, he's doing exactly those things" (I4). The observation notes document how this logic translates into precise and situated pedagogical interventions: "During the collection, a student repeatedly interrupts the group's work. The educator doesn't verbally reprimand him, but assigns an individual micro-task. The student completes the task, rejoins the group, and resumes the rhythm" (O10). A recurring element in the interviews concerns the systematic clarification of what is taken for granted in other contexts. "We make everything explicit: times, roles, mistakes. Schools often assume that these things are already known" (I16). Monitoring logs from the initial phase report that 70% of students have difficulty independently managing their homework (R1). In the intermediate phase, this percentage drops to 45% (R2). "What he builds here—the ability to stay on task, to tolerate waiting, to ask for help—is exactly what he needs to function in class" (I16).

4.2. Scaffolding and token economy systems: making support visible and progressive

The second emerging element concerns the structure of educational support. The operators describe an approach in which assistance is not generic but sequential, graduated, and progressively withdrawn. "We don't give long instructions. We break everything down. 'Take the knife. Cut like this. Stop. Look.' It's a sequence, not an explanation" (I7). The underlying logic is that of the zone of proximal development: the support spans exactly the gap between what the student can do alone and what he or she can do with guidance: "At first, we do it together with them. Then we remove pieces. If you remove too soon, everything falls apart" (I15). The observation notes document how this principle translates into observable progress even for complex profiles: "A student with ASD was initially guided step-by-step in preparing a recipe. After three weeks, he or she independently completes 70% of the sequences, requesting support only at critical points" (O32). The second approach concerns feedback. The operators emphasize how its function is not evaluative but orienting and continuous. "Schools often provide feedback at the end. Here, feedback is continuous, made visible through concrete tools—including the token economy, a point system that tracks progress in real time and makes it tangible for the student." (I1). For students with histories of academic failure, this feature takes on particular significance. "The point system is not a competition and does not include penalties. It is calibrated to each student's starting point: progress is measured against themselves, not against an external standard. This makes it accessible even to those who are starting from a very low point" (I5). "There is no such thing as 'doing badly.' There is 'you're not there yet, but look how far you've come'" (I14). Monitoring logs of the intermediate phase document measurable effects: increased permanence on task (+30%) and reduction in episodes of behavioral interruption (-25%) (R2).

4.3. Observed outcomes: development of self-regulation and transversal skills

The operators describe the observed changes "not as the acquisition of disciplinary content, but as a transformation of the conditions of participation" (I3). Student profiles documented at intake consistently indicated significant difficulties with task persistence and frustration tolerance (P), confirmed by educators during the program: 'At the beginning they give up after two minutes' (I6). "We started with five-minute sequences. Then ten. Then twenty" (I14). A second change concerns the ability to receive corrections: "The hardest thing is not learning the task. It's accepting someone telling you you've made a mistake without shutting down or exploding" (I12). Observation notes document these changes in concrete situations: "A student gets the proportions wrong. The educator points it out. The student stops and repeats the sequence from the beginning without aggressive reactions" (O18). On the level of self-efficacy: "In January he told me 'I can't do it anyway'. In June he asked me if he could try to do the most difficult part himself" (I13). For students with a migrant background, changes also concern the understanding of implicit codes: "For him, school was a place where he didn't understand anything—the language, the rules, the expectations. Here he learned how a structured context works. He then brought that understanding into the classroom as well" (I21). The transfer is documented by the support teachers: "When he returned to class, he was unrecognisable. Not in terms of content—in the way he sat there, in how he asked for help, in how he waited his turn" (I17). The systematic progression is summarised in Table 3 (R1, R2, R3). The data reflect systematic professional assessments by the educational team, not standardised measurements.

Table 3. Development of transversal competences across monitoring phases. Source: The monitoring logs (R1, R2, R3) were produced by the educational team at three fixed intervals over the academic year (September 2024, January 2025, June 2025), independently of the researcher's data collection timeline.

Skill / Indicator	R1 — Sep 2024	R2 — Jan 2025	R3 — Jun 2025
Autonomous Task Management	0%	35%	70%
Acceptance of Feedback	10%	45%	70%
Self-Control in Critical Situations	25%	65%	85%
Perceived Self-Efficacy	0%	40%	75%

4.4. Educational transitions and reintegration outcomes

During the school year analysed, 16 students were reintegrated into formal education, of whom eight began or resumed university studies (R3). Several of these students presented, at the time of admission, particularly complex profiles (P). "She was referred from neuropsychiatry: she didn't speak in groups, she had daily dissociative episodes, the mental health centre told us that the goal was stabilisation, not academic progress. Today she is enrolled in university" (I8).

"When he arrived, he had dropped out of school two years earlier due to exhaustion. He couldn't sit still for more than five minutes, he exploded at every correction. Social services sent him to us without expecting much. He returned to high school and enrolled in university" (I17). "He came from a severely dysfunctional family background, with a significant SEN and a history of trauma. At school he was managed, not educated—no one had ever thought about an educational future for him. Now he attends" (I13). Transitions are decided collegially based on indicators shared between educators, support teachers, and social services (V6). "We don't send anyone until we're convinced they can handle it. And when we do send them, we still follow them" (I23). At the same time, 25 participants have begun supported job placement programs at partner cooperatives (R3). The remaining students are busy consolidating the prerequisites for participation before making the transition. "Not everyone is ready at the same time. First you build the conditions, then you take the step" (I16). "In September, they couldn't stay in a group for ten minutes. In June, they work in teams and manage conflicts" (I5).

5. Conclusions

The study analysed how an external educational context affiliated with the school can act as a "bridge" for students with SEN, neurodiversity, and complex vulnerabilities, supporting their participation and reintegration into mainstream education. While disciplinary learning also occurs, the analysis focused specifically on the conditions that enable school participation. From this perspective, the aim is not to establish a hierarchy between disciplinary and transversal skills, but to recognise that the latter are the foundation upon which any learning can be based. In response to the research question, the results suggest that the effectiveness of the program does not depend on offering a separate alternative to school, but rather on the possibility of temporarily redesigning the conditions for participation through environments, routines, and mediations that are more accessible to students' functioning profiles. From this perspective, the case study appears consistent with the socio-ecological literature and Vygotsky and Bruner's sociocultural framework: the observed participation difficulties do not appear to be solely attributable to individual characteristics, but rather to a misalignment between the implicit demands of the school system and the resources students have to address them (Clouder et al., 2020). The findings confirm that real-world productive contexts, individualised scaffolding, continuous feedback, and non-punitive regulatory mechanisms, such as token economies, can significantly support the development of transversal skills—task persistence, feedback acceptance, routine management, emotional self-regulation—which are important prerequisites for more stable school participation (Tobin, 2021). A particularly significant element is that inclusion, in this model, is not achieved through a simplification of requirements, but through their different mediation. Formal affiliation maintains centrality to curricular and assessment objectives, while the educational intervention focuses on the conditions that make them accessible. The observed outcomes in terms of autonomy, self-efficacy, and self-regulation,

along with cases of educational reintegration and access to supported internships, indicate that such mediations can translate into concrete educational trajectories. At the same time, the data also show that these outcomes are neither uniform nor immediate. Only a portion of the sample achieved, during the period observed, reintegration into training or access to internships; for others, the process remains focused on strengthening basic prerequisites. This suggests caution in interpretation: the program offers favorable support conditions, but does not guarantee linear outcomes, especially in the presence of multiple vulnerabilities and highly discontinuous trajectories. Although this is a situated case and cannot be statistically generalised, the study offers an analytical contribution to the literature on inclusive educational transitions, demonstrating how external school-affiliated mechanisms can support educational continuity without assuming a segregating function. The findings suggest several transferable principles—the centrality of educational mediation, situated learning, gradual support, and the development of self-regulation—that are useful for designing inclusive contexts capable of impacting not only student performance but the very conditions of their participation.

Future research should consider comparative studies across different school-affiliated educational programs to explore how different institutional settings influence student readiness for higher education. Longitudinal studies could also analyse the long-term transfer of self-regulation skills developed through token economy systems and productive laboratories in university settings. Finally, including the voices of students and their families would allow for a more complete understanding of perceived agency and academic success

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