

# **Towards A Zombie Theory Of Inclusive Education: A Discourse Analysis Of Special Educational Needs Policies In Five European Countries**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose** This study aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on reimagining special education to authentically support inclusivity. It explores the application of zombie theory as a critical lens to examine Special Educational Needs (SEN) policies across Denmark, France, Italy, Spain, and the UK. By dissecting the current state of SEN policies, the paper seeks to uncover mechanisms that perpetuate exclusion under the guise of inclusion.

**Methods** Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research combines quantitative data analysis with qualitative discourse analysis. This comprehensive methodology facilitates an in-depth examination of SEN policy implementation and its impact across the selected European countries. The study analyzes policy documents, legislation, and statistical reports to investigate the conceptualization and operationalization of SEN within various educational systems.

**Findings** The findings reveal a growing trend in the identification of students with SEN, coupled with significant regional disparities in addressing these needs. The analysis highlights the fluid and often ambiguous definitions of SEN, contributing to what is described as a 'nurtured epidemic.' The study identifies processes of 'immunization' and 'burnout' as crucial for understanding the exclusionary pressures within inclusive education. These processes marginalize students with SEN and commodify their needs within a broader educational market, reflecting the paradoxes and contradictions that undermine the objectives of inclusive education.

**Conclusion** The study concludes that zombie theory provides a powerful metaphor for critiquing and rethinking SEN policies within the context of inclusive education. It advocates for a shift away from current practices that marginalize and exploit students with SEN, proposing instead a more dynamic and fluid understanding of inclusion. This 'nomadic' approach to inclusive education would acknowledge and value the diverse needs of students, viewing these differences as opportunities to enrich the educational landscape. The paper calls for an educational paradigm that truly accommodates all learners, moving beyond the undead state of current SEN policies to revive the spirit of genuine inclusion.

**Keywords:** Inclusive Education, Special Educational Needs, Zombie Theory, Categorization, Policy Analysis.

## **Points of Interests**

The text introduces insights from zombie theory to discuss educational support for students needing extra help, highlighting four main points:

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- Unique perspective on education: By comparing struggling students to zombies, creatures trapped between two states, the study illuminates the complexities and inconsistencies within educational policies aimed at supporting every student equally.
- Examination of education policies: Investigating policies from five European countries, it reveals that attempts to support all students often lead to exclusion, highlighting a discrepancy between the policies' intentions and their actual impact on students.
- Discussion on economic and social effects: The study points out the potential for educational policies to create a 'zombie economy' within the education system, where the approach to categorizing and supporting students may result in unintended and possibly negative consequences.
- Emphasis on change: Using zombie theory, the study underscores the need for significant changes in the education system's approach to inclusivity.

## Introduction

What is the essence of being human? How do we recognize each other as subjects and affirm our humanity? This question has been central to philosophical inquiry from Socrates through to existentialism, and extending into contemporary exploration in diverse fields such as neuroscience and posthumanism. Like many readers, I presume, I have spent time in delving into this classic question and its implications for education. Then, unexpectedly, I found the answer —not from philosophers or social scientists, but from engineers. To verify our humanity, an increasing number of websites require us to select the correct images (traffic lights, hydrants, buses, or boats) from a collection of pictures. By completing this CAPTCHA, we prove to the computer that we are human, not automated bots, gaining access to the desired webpage. In return, I will have exploited myself by contributing a minute of unpaid work to train the computer in improving image recognition. The realization that a machine can exploit me even before determining whether I am a sentient being or merely an automated process posing as one prompted me to reflect on the current life condition of inclusive education.

In recent years, the health status of inclusive education as an intervention strategy aimed at improving equality and equity in schools has sparked extensive debate. Some specialists argue that inclusive education is simply dead, as its approach does not work, especially for students with severe learning difficulties and profound and multiple learning difficulties (Imray & Colley, 2017; Kauffman et al, 2018). They contend: “However laudable the ideals, it doesn’t work and it never has worked.” (Imray & Colley, 2017: 99). Consequently, these critics reject the very concept of inclusion as confused and impractical, advocating for the reinstatement of special education as the sole legitimate research framework in this field.

Conversely, another prominent scholar, Roger Slee, maintains that inclusive education is not dead, but it's also far from thriving. Ironically quoting Frank Zappa, he remarks that inclusive education ‘smells funny’, suggesting that its original critical force aimed at challenging and preventing the exclusion of learners has been increasingly tamed and rendered ineffectual (Slee, 2018):

The near perfect attempt to silence inclusive education through the colonisation of its language and new franchising deals with units and classrooms in the neighbourhood school diminishes inclusive education’s original manifesto of justice for children and young people with disabilities (2018:11).

More optimistically, Allan and Slee recently observed that what has been prematurely declared as the death of inclusive education might more accurately be described as an ongoing mutation (Allan & Slee, 2019). However, the direction of this mutation cannot be taken for granted. The challenge for inclusive education to ensure the

participation and learning of all children is too often articulated through a negative narrative that attributes failures to the inadequacies of teachers and parents, rather than addressing the various ways in which exclusion persists within the educational system. In contrast, Allan and Slee suggest that a positive transformation can be induced by integrating the current concept of inclusion with the emerging framework of intersectionality. This approach moves beyond outdated distinctions traditionally used in research on marginalized groups by highlighting the interconnectedness of social categorizations such as race, class, gender, and disability (Annamma et al., 2022; Connor et al., 2016). Consequently, it provides insights into, for example, the disproportionate representation of racial and ethnic groups among students labelled as having special educational needs (SEN), henceforth referred to as ‘students with SEN’).

Overall, the debate concerning the vitality of educational inclusion demonstrates that a blurred construct as ‘inclusive education’—which encompasses multiple and often conflicting perspectives on how diversity in schools should be managed—can not only survive, but even thrive over time (Boyle et al., 2020; Florian, 2014; Nilholm & Göransson, 2017). While many academic disputes persist in defining inclusion within a binary ‘true or false’ framework, I propose that inclusive education is better understood through a multiple-valued logic system. This approach allows us to avoid the pitfalls of binary thinking (male/female, black/white, able/disable...) that is deeply ingrained in Western culture. Recognizing that education often operates under conditions of complexity and uncertainty, multiple-valued logic systems extend beyond traditional Boolean logic by accommodating more than two values. Unlike conventional crisp logic, they facilitate the conception and management of fuzzy sets, where elements are not strictly categorized as belonging or not belonging but possess degrees of membership to a given group (Peckol, 2021; Zadeh & Aliev, 2018) dichotomy—opens up space to view it not as a static condition or attribute, but as a principled, dynamic, and ongoing process, one whose evolution is seldom straightforward (Booth, 2009).

While fuzzy logic helps broaden the definition of inclusive education, organizational studies offer insights into its management within schools. In this context, policies and practices for inclusion can be seen as a boundary object, which is “both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites” (Bowker & Star, 2000: 16). This dual nature of being both plastic and robust allows the boundary work of inclusion to facilitate cooperation across different social worlds. It does so by adopting classification systems that both suppress relevant information about individuals and provide seemingly precise descriptions based on accredited guidelines and classification repertoires. Once diagnostic manuals, screening tests, and evaluation forms are accepted as standard procedures for identifying ‘special’ students, they begin to fade into the background, becoming ‘black boxes’ (Latour, 1999). These tools are gradually integrated and taken for granted, thus forming an invisible infrastructure within the school. Procedures slowly embed themselves into decision-making structures, social arrangements, and technologies, becoming implicit assumptions about appropriate practices for inclusion. They are not constantly questioned or reinvented for each task but are ‘naturally’ transmitted through school culture. What is excluded and remains invisible lays the groundwork for what is made visible and formally exhibited, as the two processes are interdependent (Star & Bowker, 2007). While the latter materializes and crystallizes, the former becomes transparent and fluid.

Through this process, inclusive education assumes a powerful and pervasive role, seamlessly integrating into the fabric of school organization and adopting various forms. It has acquired a liminal status, generating a systematic tension between what is visible and what remains invisible. This dynamic fosters power relations in which the discourse on diversity fails to progress towards appreciating differences. Instead, it diminishes to a mere depreciation of variability. This occurs through screening processes that amplify negative divergence by categorizing anomalies in relation to an assumed statistical norm. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the context of SEN (Done et al., 2013; Williams et al., 2016). Embedded procedures, justified under the guise of ‘early prevention’, potentially label every child as a candidate for SEN diagnoses. Consequently, the intentional ambiguity of SEN categories not only perpetuates binary thinking, which classifies students as either ‘fit’ or ‘unfit’ for the system. It also enormously expands the grey area of students considered potentially ‘at risk’, as they *could* have a problem.

In this paper, I propose using the category of zombie—an entity inherently suspended between life and death—as an analytical tool for investigating how new forms of subjectification are produced within the conceptual framework of inclusive education. To achieve this, I will review SEN policies implemented in five European countries through the analysis of statistic reports, legislation, and regulations developed over the years. The findings will show how educational policies generate exclusionary pressures, characterized by both under-inclusion (stigmatization of diversity) and super-inclusion (oversaturation and devaluation of diversity).

## **Theoretical framework**

Inclusive education aims to ensure that everyone can obtain a high-quality education by removing barriers to learning and participation in schools (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Spratt & Florian, 2015). Consequently, recognizing and embracing differences become central issues for schools committed to creating better conditions for advancing inclusive educational practices (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015; Kozleski et al., 2013; Thomas & Macnab, 2022). However, the diversity of learners is increasingly subjected to pathologization practices (Kinsella, 2020; Liasidou, 2015), which contribute to student marginalization and exclusion through two intertwined processes: immunization and burnout.

### **Immunization as a Mechanism of Exclusion**

Immunization, akin to the medical practice of vaccination, involves introducing a minor disease into the organism to protect it against a more severe, potentially lethal disorder. According to the Western worldview, an individual is considered a unitary and indivisible self or person. This notion refers to something like the essential core or spirit of a singular human being, which defines that self as a constant in its particularity (Fowler, 2004; Sökefeld, 1999). In this context, difference is often perceived as a potential threat because it can lead to changes, removing or transforming any part of that whole and, consequently, fundamentally altering the ‘self’. From the perspective of immunization, the inherent danger represented by difference can be managed through identification, fragmentation, and partial incorporation:

life combats what negates it through immunitary protection, not a strategy of frontal opposition but of outflanking and neutralizing. Evil must be thwarted, but not by keeping it at a distance from one's borders; rather, it is included inside them" (Esposito, 2011: 8).

Accordingly, school welcomes children categorised as having SEN, as a means to mitigate the perceived threat that unconditional acceptance of students' diversity poses to the assumed individual self of learners. Educational institutions achieve this by classifying and assimilating diverse students as ‘dividuals’—subjects that are divisible, consisting of a complex of separable dimensions or aspects that are interrelated yet essentially independent (Deleuze, 1992; Webb et al., 2020). For this purpose, a taxonomy of diversity is established using “soft categories, spongy quasi-legal procedures, quasi-medical diagnoses and quasi-scientific assessments” (Thomas & Loxley, 2007: 58). This taxonomy aids schools in immunizing themselves by identifying and categorizing ‘ill-students’ into manageable groups that, on one hand, can be accepted and contained, and on the other, serve to affirm the health of the remaining children.

### **Burnout as a Mechanism of Over-Inclusion**

The second component of pathologization, burnout, involves the assumption and multiplication of diversity through endless repetition, leading to a state of overproduction and inflation. In this context, harm arises not solely from negativity, as seen in the immunization paradigm, but also from an excess of positivity: it emanates “not just from the Other or the foreign, but also from the Same” (Han, 2015: 4). Similar to an autoimmune disease, a

devalued form of diversity—measured, ranked, and closely linked to the notion of achievement—is incessantly promoted and replicated, resulting in an oversaturation that diminishes the creative significance of differences and internally poisons the system. Examining education from the burnout perspective, we observe how the pervasive emphasis on a one-dimensional view of diversity as competition has propagated the current epidemic of keywords such as ‘ranking’ and ‘excellence’ in schools. This trend is exacerbated by a sense of increasing precarity and fragmentation, fostered by neoliberal policies, which triggers a state of constant anxiety, fibrillation, and exhaustion. Such conditions divert attention and resources away from promoting inclusive education (Bacon, 2019; De Lissovoy, 2018; Ferri & Ashby, 2017).

This stress condition is perpetuated by special education, a sub-section of the education system that leverages the ideology of SEN to rationalize the economic and social inequalities faced by large social groups. In recent years, the significant expansion of special education has given rise to a veritable SEN industry, characterized by increased funding, institutional arrangements, and the allocation of human and material resources. This industry addresses the needs of a large number of young people labeled as lower achievers or as having special needs, learning difficulties, disabilities, disaffection, or disengagement (Tomlinson, 2012). In an education system primarily designed to produce academic and technical elites, a plethora of special educators, behavioral specialists, psychologists, doctors, therapists, and other practitioners are employed. Their role is to ensure that students deemed ‘unfit’ are provided with a second-rate education, which, in turn, prepares them for the second-class jobs required by post-industrial, technologically advanced societies (Emmerich & Hormel, 2021; Tomlinson, 2015).

### **Conceptual Underpinnings**

The interplay between the two processes—immunization and burnout—in exacerbating students’ marginalization and exclusion can be more clearly understood by applying, respectively, Foucault's concept of ‘apparatus’ and Deleuze and Guattari's notion of ‘assemblage’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004; Foucault, 1980). An apparatus (*dispositif*) is defined as “a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions” (Foucault, 1980: 194). The exclusionary form of inclusion produced by the immunization activity in educational institutions results from a combination of elements that delineate and regulate undesirable behaviors through both tangible and intangible means, such as legal documents, administrative mechanisms, moral judgments, discourses, body management practices, material objects, and architecture. This discursive and non-discursive formation enables schools to formally uphold the right to education while subtly maintaining policies that perpetuate segregation at various levels.

In turn, the notion of assemblage (*agencement*) elucidates the role of burnout in propagating exclusionary practices in schools. As assemblages, individuals are defined not by a presumed ‘essence’ that confers permanence despite other non-essential aspects but by only contingent and singular features (Nail, 2017: 24). Contrary to the traditional view of individuals as unified entities, Deleuze and Guattari argue they are better described through their external relations of aggregation, composition, and mixture. Subjects are multiplicities that can be added, subtracted, and recombined within a systematic process of enunciation, stratification, territorialization, and deterritorialization (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004). Viewing individuals as assemblages sheds light on the paradox of individualization at the core of special education. Students with SEN can be assisted only under the condition that their individuality is scrutinized and segmented to identify dysfunctional elements, theoretically for rectification. However, rather than fostering multiplicity and togetherness, this approach leads to fragmentation and disconnection, diminishing the individual’s power to ‘arrange’ (*agencer*) their own life into merely a simulacrum.

### **Ghosts and subjectification**

Through the intertwined concepts of apparatus and assemblage, immunization and burnout can be identified and examined as sociocultural mechanisms that impede inclusion by manipulating educational subjects. Immunization



and burnout foster the creation of knowledge structures, power relations, and self-practices in schools that generate new forms of subjectification. These processes both colonize and prompt self-colonization of the subject (Deleuze, 1990; Foucault, 2008). These forms of subjectification are nebulous concerning their content, as the identification of students relies on ambiguous labels such as SEN or ‘excellence’. In fact, their impact is profoundly significant precisely because of their elusiveness, which has the potential to apply to everyone. Despite their vagueness, these mechanisms are relentless in their procedures and precise in their effects; classifying students according to these labels results in tangible and immediate consequences for their lives.

This special blend of being elusive and simultaneously persistent is often likened to the condition of ghosts. According to Derrida (1994), spectres occupy the boundary between reality and absence, or non-presence. They serve as a constant reminder that certain aspects and moments of the past cannot be relegated to oblivion, for they are neither concluded nor lost. By intertwining past and present through these spectral moments, ghosts challenge our conventional perceptions of time as a straightforward chronological and linear dimension, thereby allowing us to perceive lived time and memory as malleable components of otherness. In this context, Derrida suggests, “one must perhaps ask oneself whether the spectrality effect does not consist in undoing this opposition, or even this dialectic, between actual, effective presence and its other” (Derrida, 1994: 48).

Adopting Derrida’s approach to spectrality, Allan and Youdell explore the dynamics of subjectification in relation to inclusive education through the lens of ‘ghosting’—defined as the act of “actively erasing a person or thing, while creating an impression of its continued presence” (Allan & Youdell, 2015: 5). They utilize the concept as an analytical tool to scrutinize the English SEND Code of Practice (GOV.UK, 2015). From the perspective of ghosting, Allan and Youdell conduct a critical review not only of what the Code explicitly suggests, implies, or insinuates about children’s diagnoses and educational practices but also, and more crucially, of what it meticulously omits, avoids, or eludes. Consequently, they reveal the spectral nature of the Code as an ostensibly empty, and thereby more imposing, structure. This structure is erected on a regulatory framework that mandates educational institutions to undertake a comprehensive array of activities for students with SEN (e.g., planning, assessing, consulting, documenting, and reviewing), without clearly defining what constitutes SEN.

### **Zombie and acting-out**

However, while the concept of ghosting reveals several important and concealed aspects of how SEN are managed in schools, it also encounters limitations inherent to the notion of the ghost itself. As entities that traverse both past and present, ghosts serve as temporal bridges, aspiring to reconnect two dimensions of time in order to reconcile what remains unresolved. Ghosts are not merely earthly manifestations of the spirit but also embody the ambivalent and nostalgic longing for redemption, that is, for the spirit to become whole once again (Buse & Stott, 1999). Thus, ghosts (along with vampires) are emblematic of the modern era: they are frightening, yet in a romantically appealing manner.

Conversely, zombies are not romantic; they are brutal. While ghosts exist in a state of suspension and indecision, zombies transcend decision-making altogether, epitomizing mere acting out. In essence, they represent the posthuman as described by Braidotti: “the posthuman is a navigational tool that enables us to survey the material and the discursive manifestations of the mutations that are engendered by advanced technological developments (am I a robot?), climate change (will I survive?), and capitalism (can I afford this?)” (Braidotti, 2019: 15). Positioned within a mutant and liminal condition—straddling the human and non-human—zombies and their imagery are quintessentially part of these contemporary mutations. Accordingly, I propose that SEN policies could be fruitfully analyzed through the lens of the zombie. As a conceptual framework, this perspective illuminates how barriers to learning and participation are constructed around the notion of difference as liminality.

## **Zombie Theory as an Analytical Lens**

As a long-lasting and successful genre in popular culture, the zombie has recently garnered interest in the social sciences (Browning et al., 2016; Drezner, 2014; Giroux, 2011; Lauro & Embry, 2008). Similar to ghosts, zombies exist in a liminal state between life and death. However, while ghosts are ethereal—souls without bodies longing for liberation—zombies are corporeal entities: bodies devoid of souls, driven solely by the impulse to assault humans and create more zombies. Consequently, zombies epitomize a habit or a pattern of repetition that proliferates by establishing a norm that systematically frames difference as liminality (Deleuze, 1994). They create a condition of asubjectivity through incorporation and exhaustion, immunization, and burnout. On one hand, when personality is reduced to the primal urge of aggressively assimilating others, no one is safe from the risk of zombification. On the other, zombies cannot be liberated or persuaded to negotiate; they can only be eliminated (although, paradoxically, their undead status renders this very challenging).

As a consequence, we reaffirm our humanity by creating and executing zombies as a form of ‘bare life’ (Agamben, 1998). They are the exception that enables us to confirm the social order through the principle of ‘inclusive exclusion’: inclusion becomes an integral part of the exclusion mechanism by activating a mass production process that transforms stigma into value extractable from individuals. In the subsequent sections of the paper, I will employ the critical lens provided by zombie studies to analyze the guidelines on SEN policies issued in five European countries.

## **Methods**

This investigation was conducted using a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data on students with SEN were collected from national statistical databases managed by the Danish, French, Italian, Spanish and British Departments for Education. I utilized repeated cross-sectional data gathered through surveys conducted over ten years (more precisely in 2013, 2017 and 2022) to compare increases in prevalence rates of pupils with SEN across the five countries. The same surveys were used to examine geographic variations in rates of pupils with SEN, with comparison made at both the national level and within selected regions/departments of each country. Data were analyzed using SPSS 15.0. One-way ANOVA with correction and independent samples F-test at the 5% significance level were employed to confirm that there is a significant difference both between and within countries.

Qualitative data were analyzed through critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA aims to explore the relationships between the content of texts and discursive practices, linking them to the broader context of social and cultural structures, relations, and processes. In doing so, it assists in describing, interpreting, and explaining the power relationships between language and social configurations (Fairclough, 2013; Rogers, 2011). Unlike other methods of discourse analysis, CDA not only provides a description and interpretation of discourse structures in education but also explains how and why hidden power relations and ideologies are embedded in the construction and representation of the educational field through discourse.

I applied the CDA approach to a corpus of official regulations and guidelines concerning SEN developed in Denmark, France, Italy, Spain, and UK between 2001 and 2023. which issue directives and guidance on SEN at the compulsory school level, were retrieved from the websites of the national Ministries of Education. The collected texts were subsequently analyzed with a focus on the following aspects (Fairclough, 2001):

- Words (e.g. vocabulary, collocations, use of metaphors).
- Clause combination.
- Grammatical and semantic features (e.g. transitivity, action, voice, mood, modality). And
- Whole text organization (e.g. narrative and argumentative structure).

Evidence emerging from the critical analysis were then coded through NVivo 14 in order to compare data and highlight commonalities and differences. This process facilitated the identification of categories that were used to develop a cross-country analysis of the national approaches to SEN policies across the five countries. Research findings were validated by verifying inter-rater reliability ( $k=0.85$ ), as well as through the triangulation of information sources.

The emerging themes identified by the study were examined to discover common trends, which were then discussed in relation to the conceptual framework of zombies previously described.

## Results

In this section, the results of the research are presented, focusing on the analysis of both the quantitative data from the annual surveys conducted in the five countries under study and the qualitative data derived from the regulations and guidelines issued during the period 2001-2023.

### Quantitative data

The comparison of data regarding the prevalence of students with SEN in Denmark, France, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom presents a particular challenge due to the different perspectives through which the notion of SEN is framed within each country's educational system (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet Uddannelsesstatistik, 2023a, 2023b; Office for National Statistics, 2022, 2023; Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, 2023; Ministère de l'Éducation nationale et de la Jeunesse, 2023; Ministerio de Educación, Formación Profesional y Deportes, 2023). This diversity is mirrored in the statistical surveys conducted annually by the Ministries of Education, which is also reflected in the variability of information accessible through the databases available for consultation (Table 1, Figure 1).

**Table 1.**

*Students receiving special education in the five countries.*

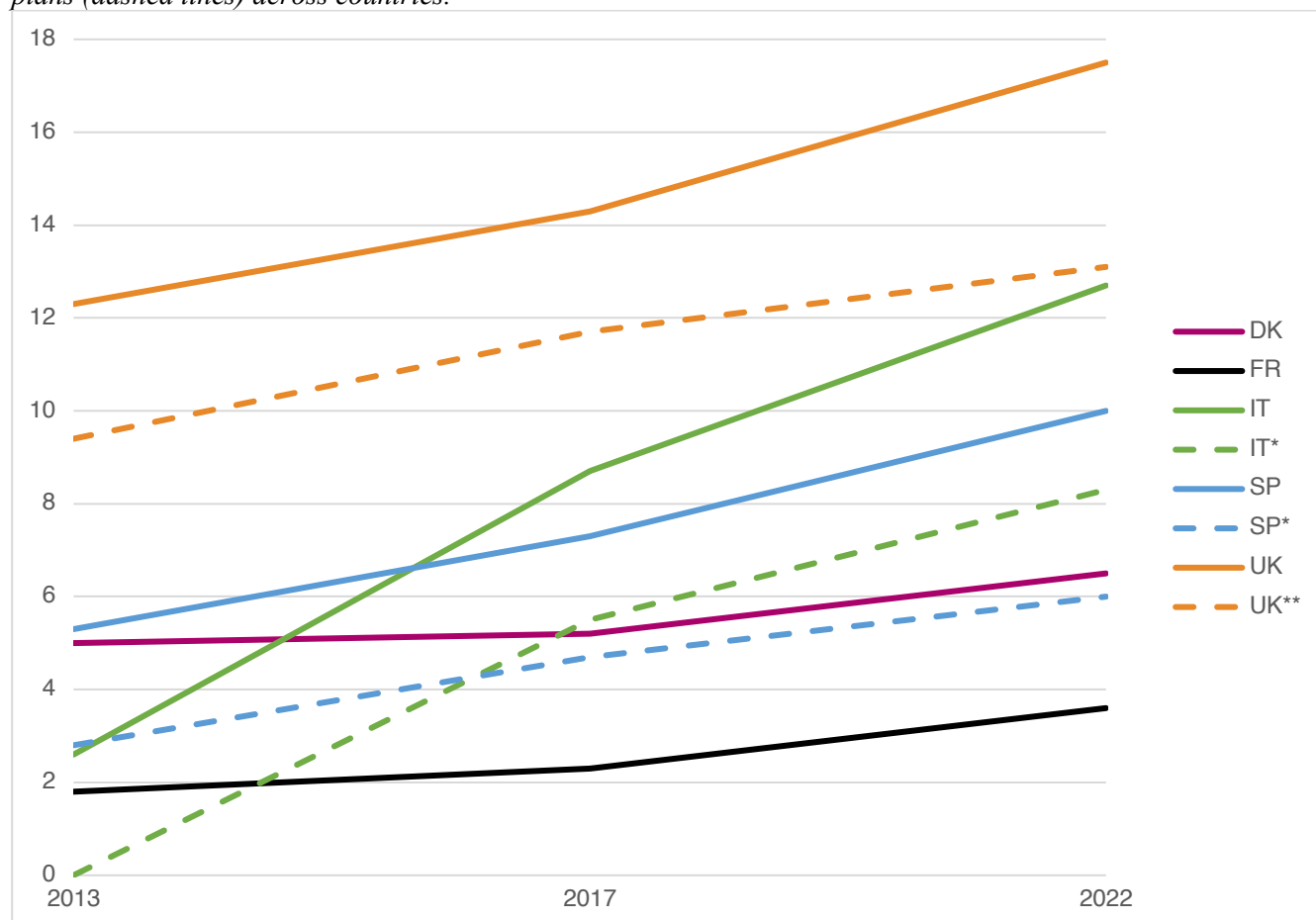
Year Country	Students' population			Students receiving special education			Prevalence (%)					95% Confidence Interval*	
	2013	2017	2022	2013	2017	2022	2013	2017	2022	Mean	Std. Deviation	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
DK	573.523	558.184	526.857	28.563	29.049	34.404	5.0	5.2	6.5	55.7	8.14	35.43	75.90
FR	15.196.500	15.627.900	12.076.600	310.853	390.771	436.100	2.0	2.5	3.6	27.0	8.18	6.67	47.33
IT	8.943.701	8.664.367	7.194.400	222.917	752.348	913.303	2.6	8.7	12.7	80.0	50.86	-46.35	206.35
				-	484.102*	597.102*	-	5.5	8.3	46.0	42.22	-58.89	150.89
SP	7.923.293	8.182.396	9.162.349	420.686	605.354	800.409	5.3	7.3	10.0	75.3	23.58	16.74	133.93
				223.031**	346.103*	554.426*	2.8	4.7	6.0	45.0	16.09	5.02	84.98
UK	8.249.810	8.669.085	9.000.031	1.013.065	1.244.254	1.572.555	12.3	14.3	17.5	147.0	26.23	81.84	212.16
				779.635***	1.002.069**	1.183.384**	9.4	11.7	13.0	114.0	18.68	67.59	160.41

$p<0.05$ .  $F=7.01$ . \* Students with SEN without disabilities \*\* Students with SEN without an EHC plan



**Figure 1**

*Prevalence of students in special education (continuous lines) and students with SEN without disabilities/EHC plans (dashed lines) across countries.*



\* Students with SEN \*\* Students with SEN without an EHC plan

The data from Denmark and France offer an overview of the educational provision targeting students who, for various reasons, do not attain the expected learning outcomes. These provisions encompass special classes and schools, as well as diagnostic and support services. However, the data do not differentiate between categories of students with disabilities and those with SEN, instead grouping them under the broad umbrella of special education.

The Danish statistics provide general information regarding the number and prevalence of students receiving specialized support, broken down by school years and grade levels. They also provide a detailed description the distribution of these students across municipalities, which bear direct responsibility for managing both regular and special educational facilities. Additionally, the statistics include a measure of the ‘degree of inclusion’ (*inklusionsgrad*). However, this measure only refers to the proportion of pupils in mainstream education compared to those in special classes and schools. It is noted that only a negligible number of pupils receiving special education (less than 1%) are enrolled in mainstream classes.

In France, as we will delve into more deeply in the section dedicated to qualitative analysis, the concept of SEN has only recently begun to gain recognition within the educational system. This shift is evident in the

encouragement of developing differentiated programs, plans, and projects tailored to the diverse needs of students within the sphere of special education. However, this nuanced approach to differentiation is not yet reflected in the statistical surveys conducted by the Ministry of Education, which continue to rely on a one-dimensional conception of disability (*handicap*, in French) as a homogeneous and all-encompassing category.

Conversely, the statistics from Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom offer a more differentiated view of the student population by not only identifying students within the realm of special education but also distinguishing those specifically categorized under SEN.

In Italy, national regulations abolished special schools in 1977, ensuring that all children with disabilities (except for the most severe cases) gained access to mainstream classes. This right was further extended to pre-schools and secondary schools in the 1980s. Notably, the category of SEN was introduced in 2012, making data related to it available only from 2017 onwards. Although the regulations make a distinction between students with specific learning disorders and those with SEN, the statistics group both under the single category of 'students with SEN', treating them as a distinct entity from students with disabilities.

In Spain, the regulation defining the role of SEN within the education system has been in place since 2002. The annual data collection conducted by the ministry differentiates between "students with educational needs associated with disabilities or severe disorders" and "students with other specific educational support needs." Initially, the statistics also recognized two additional groups: students with high intellectual abilities and those with delayed integration into the Spanish education system (i.e., students with a migratory background). However, since 2019, these groups have been included in the 'other specific educational support needs' category. Consequently, this broadened category aligns with the concept of SEN discussed in this paper, referring to students who are part of the special education framework without being classified explicitly as disabled or with severe disorders.

Finally, in the United Kingdom, statistical reports capture the significant evolution of the SEN concept within the English educational system over time. The initial distinction between disability and SEN was introduced to recognize a broad group of students who, despite not having a physical or mental impairment, required additional educational support. In recent years, this distinction has been softened (though not removed) by introducing a 'SEND' macro-category, which merges SEN and disabilities within the special education domain. Consequently, current regulations differentiate between students with particularly complex needs, managed through an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP), and those receiving standard SEN support from school and local authority resources. This paper focuses on the latter group when discussing the category of special educational needs.

Given the diversity of criteria described above for including or excluding students from the SEN category, a direct comparison of the five countries under examination is not feasible. However, it is still possible to identify some particularly relevant elements regarding the school attendance of students with SEN in these countries over the decade in question.

Firstly, one immediately noticeable trend is the overall increase in the percentage of students placed in special education relative to the total student population. This increase, observed across all examined countries, shows a pronounced acceleration during the five-year period from 2017 to 2022, moving from 7.6% to 9.9% on average. In countries where it is possible to distinguish between students with disabilities and those with SEN (Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom), students with disabilities experienced a moderate increase from 2013 to 2017. However, from 2017 to 2022, their numbers significantly rose in the United Kingdom and stabilized in Spain. As for students with SEN, their numbers gradually increased in the United Kingdom over the decade and even doubled in Spain. Italy also witnessed considerable growth in this group (+2.8%), although the recent introduction of the SEN category means data collection was limited to the years 2017 to 2022. Nonetheless, the most significant observation is the growing proportion of SEN students within the special education student population over time. By 2022, they accounted for 65% in Italy, 70% in Spain, and 75% in the United Kingdom.

In Denmark and France, although statistics do not distinguish between students with disabilities and those with SEN, there has been an increase in the number of students identified as part of the special education sector over

the decade, particularly during the five-year period from 2017 to 2022. This trend supports the hypothesis that the evolution is linked to the increasing significance of SEN within the special education sector, similar to trends observed in other countries. This hypothesis is further supported by recent research indicating that, in Western Europe, the population of children and adolescents with disabilities is among the lowest globally, at 2.1% (Olusanya et al., 2020). Specifically, the trend concerning intellectual disabilities has been on a progressive decline over the last ten years (Nair et al., 2022). Therefore, the current expansion in the number of students categorized within the special education sector can reasonably be attributed to an increase in those identified under the SEN category, as the number of students with disabilities remains generally stable or is in decline.

**Table 2**

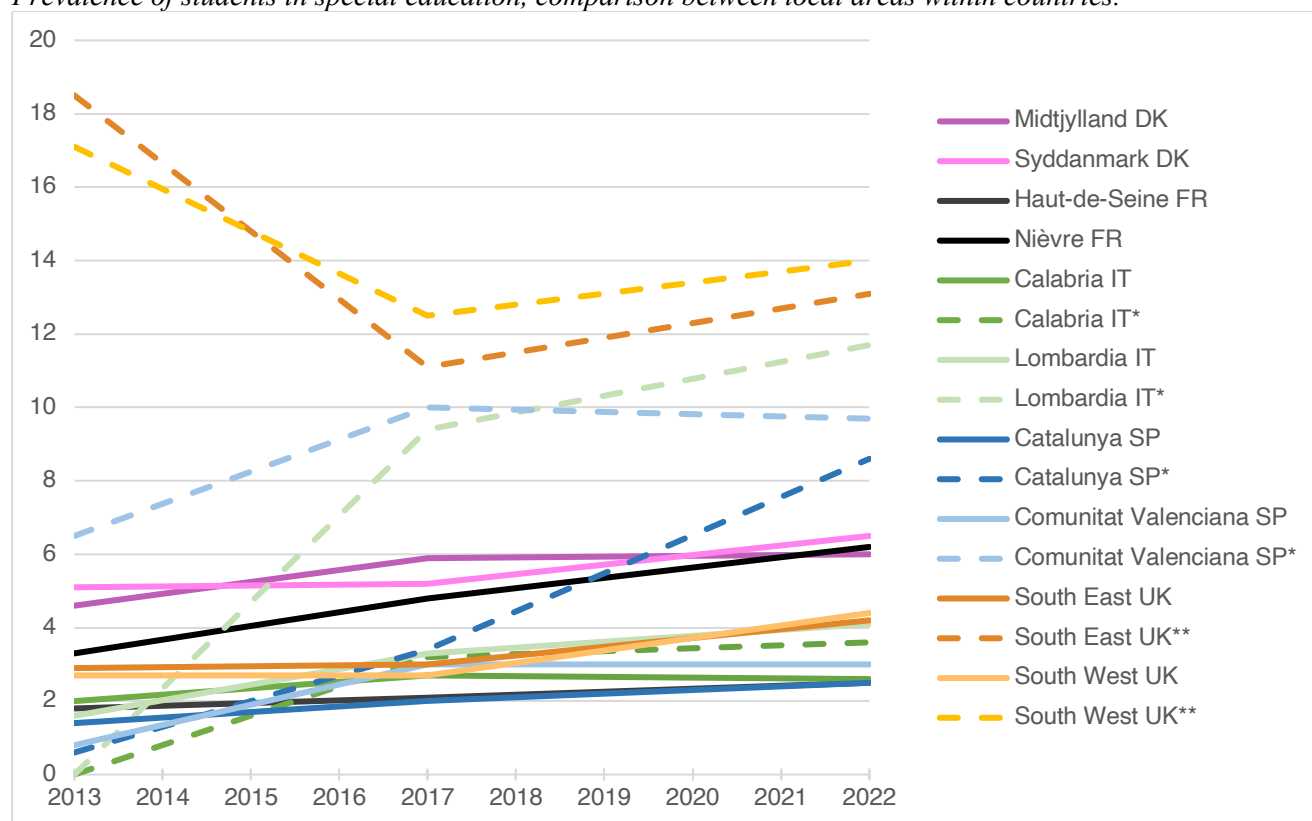
*Students receiving special education, comparison between local areas within countries.*

Year Country		Prevalence (%)					95% Confidence Interval*	
		2013	2017	2022	Mean	Std. Deviation	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
DK	Midtjylland	4.6	5.9	6.0	55.0	7.81	35.60	74.40
	Syddanmark	5.1	5.2	6.5	56.0	7.81	35.60	75.40
FR	Haut-de-Seine	1.8	2.1	2.5	21.3	3.5	12.61	30.06
	Nièvre	3.3	4.8	6.2	47.67	14.5	11.64	83.69
IT	Calabria	2.0	2.7	2.6	24.33	3.78	14.93	33.74
		-	3.2*	3.4*	33.0	1.41	20.29	45.71
	Lombardia	2.6	3.3	4.1	33.33	7.50	14.69	51.98
		-	9.4*	11.7*	105.5	16.26	-40.62	251.62
SP	Catalunya	1.4	2.0	2.5	19.67	5.50	5.99	33.35
		0.6*	3.4*	8.6*	42.0	40.59	-58.64	142.84
	Comunitat Valenciana	0.8	3.0	3.0	22.67	12.70	-8.89	54.22
		6.5*	10*	9.7*	57.3	44.00	-51.98	166.64
UK	South East	2.9	3.0	4.2	33.67	7.23	15.70	51.64
		18.5**	11.1**	13.1**	142.3	38.28	47.24	237.43
	South West	2.7	2.7	4.4	32.67	9.81	8.28	57.05
		17.1**	12.5**	14.0**	145.3	23.44	87.06	203.61

p<0.05. F=8.37 \* Students with SEN \*\* Students with SEN without an EHC plan

**Figure 2**

*Prevalence of students in special education, comparison between local areas within countries.*



\* Students with SEN \*\* Students with SEN without an EHC plan

Regarding the analysis of data within each country, significant differences are observed in the national contexts when comparing different areas/regions (see Table 2, Figure 2). For instance, in France, the disparity in disability prevalence between students in the Haut-de-Seine department and those in Nièvre exceeded 4% in 2022. These differences are even more pronounced for SEN. For example, in Italy, in 2022, there was an 8% gap in the prevalence of students with SEN between Lombardy and Calabria.

Studies suggest that the significant variability observed at the local level in cases of disabilities can be partly attributed to the diversity of diagnostic methods used. Specifically, the identification of learning disorders often employs different criteria-driven approaches (usually ICD-11, DSM-V, or AAMR), leading to divergent diagnoses (Grünke & Cavendish, 2016). Moreover, the data collected frequently do not directly report specific diagnoses but rather reflect the administrative prevalence, which is defined as the proportion of the population identified by service providers as requiring services within a specified area (Ouellette-Kuntz et al., 2009). Additionally, research indicates that variations in policy, awareness, and/or access to professional services, along with social, cultural, and economic factors, are critical elements that contribute to the increased variability of data regarding the identification of students with disabilities at the local level (Shenouda et al., 2022; Søndena et al., 2010). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that in identifying students with SEN, who do not necessitate a functional diagnosis, the influence of such differences and factors is even more pronounced, leading to varying figures across regions in each country.

## Qualitative data

The table below displays, in chronological order, the regulations and guidelines concerning SEN collected from each country between 2001 and 2023.

**Table 3**  
*Regulations and guidelines on SEN (2001-2023).*

	<i>Denmark</i>	<i>France</i>	<i>Italy</i>	<i>Spain</i>	<i>UK</i>
2001					SEN Code of Practice
2002				Ley Orgánica 10/2002	
2003	VEJ nr 9845; VEJ nr 20346				
2004	Lovbekendtgørelse nr. 870				SEN and disability: Towards inclusive schools
2005					
2006		Code de l'éducation, Articles D311-11 à D351-9 (2006-2021)		Ley Orgánica 2/2006	Special Educational Needs: Third Report of Session 2005–06
2007	Bekendtgørelse nr. 564; Bekendtgørelse nr. 974				
2008					
2009		Arrêté du 2 avril 2009			
2010					
2011					
2012	2011/1 LSF 103; LOV nr 379		Direttiva BES		Residential special schools: national minimum standards (2012/2022)



2013	BEK nr. 1377; Bekendtgørelse nr. 1425; Lovbekendtgørelse nr. 1031	Loi 2013-595	Circ. Min. n. 08/2013; Nota MIUR n.1551; Nota MIUR n. 2563	Ley Orgánica 8/2013	
2014	BEK nr. 693; Bekendtgørelse nr. 1480	Décret n° 2014-1377	Nota MIUR n. 7433		Children and Families Act; SEN and Disability Regulations; Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0–25 years.
2015	Bekendtgørelse nr. 783; VEJ nr 11056				SEN and disability code of practice
2016		Circulaire n° 2016-117			
2017	Bekendtgørelse nr. 284		Decreto legislativo n. 66		SEND: 19- to 25-year-olds' entitlement to EHC plans
2018	Bekendtgørelse nr. 30; Bekendtgørelse nr. 94		Nota MIUR n. 1143		
2019	Lovbekendtgørelse nr. 610	Circulaire n° 2019-088	Decreto legislativo, n. 96		
2020	LBK nr 2; LBK nr 1396; Lovbekendtgørelse nr. 69		Decreto interministeriale n. 182; Decreto Ministeriale n. 89	Ley Orgánica 3/2020	
2021	Lovbekendtgørelse nr 1887	Décret n° 2021-1246	Decreto ministeriale n. 188; Nota 71		
2022			Linee guida	Ley Orgánica 3/2022	SEND Review
2023	Bekendtgørelse nr 731; LBK nr 1086		Decreto interministeriale n. 153; Disposizioni correttive		SEN and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) Improvement Plan

Critical discourse analysis of regulations and guidelines on SEN issued by the five countries between 2001 and 2023 highlights nine main categories linked to the zombies' conceptual framework described above: nurtured epidemics, fuzzy logic, apparatus/assemblage, presentification by denial, bare repetition/propaganda, subjectivation/subjectation, conflict, breakdown/aggression, and zombie economy.

### **Nurtured epidemics**

Zombies are essentially an epidemic phenomenon. Their primary purpose is to multiply at all costs by infecting as many humans as possible. Similarly, as a conceptual category that has an immediate impact on the lives of many students, SEN display characteristics of an epidemic, spreading according to its own cycles, rates of diffusion, and patterns of contagion.

The analysis of documents highlights reveals a widespread and growing concern over the increasing number of students identified with SEN, as observed in national surveys over the years. For instance, a 2010 report in Denmark showed that 5.6% of the student population was receiving separate education in special classes or schools (Deloitte, 2010). In response, the Danish government enacted the 'Inclusion Act' in 2012, aiming to limit placement in special classes or schools exclusively to students with severe physical or mental disabilities, with the intention that all others be integrated into mainstream schools with support from educational-psychological services (Retsinformation, 2012). Following the law's implementation, the number of students placed in segregated settings initially decreased. However, beginning in 2017, this number started to rise again, now exceeding 6% (Børne- og Undervisningsministeriet Uddannelsesstatistik, 2023a; Egelund & Dyssegaard, 2019).

In France, legislative measures reflect the significant increase in students within the field of special education, which have nearly doubled since 2016 (Comité interministériel sur le handicap, 2023). Although the French education system tends to group diverse conditions such as disabilities and SEN under the umbrella term 'handicap', it is evident that the latter category has substantially contributed to the expansion of this sector. In response to this increase, there have been concerted efforts to restrict education in health or medical-social institutions exclusively to students with severe disabilities, while simultaneously enhancing support strategies in mainstream schools (Légifrance, 2016). Support is provided through specific programs and initiatives, differentiating interventions based on individual circumstances: Individual Educational Success Plan (PPRE), Individual Accommodation Plan (PAI), Personalized Support Plan (PAP), and Personalized Schooling Plan (PPS). In the UK, legislation reflects concerns not only about containing the growing number of students classified within the special education category but also highlights a recurring interest in the significant variability in case distribution across different regions of the country, as revealed by earlier analyzed surveys. An Ofsted document from 2004 emphasized the wide variance in the proportion of children in special schools across Local Education Authorities (LEAs), noting disparities greater than tenfold (Ofsted, 2004: 8). This observation was echoed in 2006 by the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee's report, which pointed out that "the proportion of pupils with statements varies greatly between different authorities, ranging from 1.08% in Nottinghamshire to 4.83% in Halton, Cheshire, representing nearly a fivefold difference" (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006). Recent reviews, such as the SEND review, analyzing outcomes of the 2014 reforms (GOV.UK, 2014; Legislation.gov.UK, 2014b), underscored that while significant emphasis was placed on local cooperation for planning special education interventions, broad discretion was also granted, leading to considerable inconsistencies in SEND provision across the country (GOV.UK, 2022). Variations in the identification and assessment of needs among regions mean that the school a child or young person attends becomes a primary determinant of whether they are identified as having SEN and whether they receive support (Hutchinson, 2021). This results in a significant national disparity in how children and young people with comparable needs are treated, with some receiving effective support in mainstream schools, while others are placed in specialized settings.

In summary, the analysis not only highlights a unique evolutionary trajectory in the spread of SEN on a transnational level but also frames it as a nurtured epidemic. Unlike biological epidemics, which require physical contact and initially involve other species before becoming inter-human, the spread of SEN is a wholly human-

initiated process, far from natural and requiring active, and to some extent, voluntary participation by individuals. It represents a man-made disaster, not caused by an alien species but by the perception that an increasing diversity of human conditions represent undesirable variations, latent zombies awaiting identification.

### **Fuzzy logic**

SEN share with zombies the belonging to a fuzzy, non-binary logic. As previously noted, zombies are simultaneously both alive and dead, thus representing a form of ultra-humanity that challenges conventional distinctions. Similarly, SEN are characterized by being a category with essentially blurred and shifting boundaries, a polymorphic notion.

The documents analyzed highlight at multiple points this condition of indefiniteness and constant mutation. Initially, the French Code of Education defines students with SEN as those facing significant difficulties in acquiring the common base of knowledge and skills, but also those who are intellectually precocious and exhibit particular aptitudes and pupils of non-French languages who have recently arrived in the country (Légifrance, 2006-2021). By 2015, this latter group was no longer explicitly mentioned, while by 2021 the category has been broadened to include students with disabilities, those suffering from chronic illnesses, and “high potential” students. Notably, the theme of schooling for students with SEN is inserted into a group of totally heterogeneous activities, which include, among others, the prevention of radicalism, gender equality, environmental protection, and non-violent conflict resolution (Légifrance, 2006-2021). The relationship between students with disabilities and those with SEN remains particularly elusive. While a 2019 law refers to the special educational needs of students with disabilities, a circular from the same year mentions students with disabilities as a specific case of those with SEN (Légifrance, 2006-2021; Légifrance, 2019). Thus, each group is simultaneously a subset of the other.

In Italy the category of SEN has also assumed and maintained essentially blurred outlines over time. When introduced in 2012, the category encompassed socio-economic and cultural disadvantages, linguistic difficulties of newly immigrated pupils, learning and developmental disorders, and disabilities. There was also mention of ‘classes’ with SEN and a requirement for families to present ‘clinical’ documentation (MIUR, 2012). The ambiguity persisted in the subsequent Note of 2013 (MIUR, 2013b), which referred to “unspecified difficulties to be addressed with specific tools” (the Personalized Educational Plan), emphasized the need for planning flexible educational paths while maintaining unchanged learning levels, and called for the school community to become aware of the “significant and varied spectrum of criticalities within the school” (evidently overlooking the potentials and resources also available). More recent documents have recognized the detrimental effects that the introduction of the SEN category has had on the Italian educational system (MIUR, 2018), and subsequently, SEN has been redefined into a multi-purpose set that also includes disabilities and learning disorders (MIUR, 2020a).

In Spain, the regulations on SEN have followed an equally wandering trajectory. Initially, in 2002, the category of ‘specific’ educational needs was created, encompassing immigrant students, the gifted, and those with special educational needs, which in turn included disabilities and “other factors of analogous effect,” namely “deficiencies and disadvantages of personal, family, economic social and cultural type” (BOE, 2002). However, the same document subsequently defines SEN as physical, psychological, sensory disabilities, personality, and behavior disorders. However, the same document later defines SEN more narrowly as physical, psychological, sensory disabilities, and personality and behavior disorders. In an effort to address “to the diversity of needs of all students,” the 2006 legislation reorganized SEN into three categories: special difficulties in learning or integrating into ordinary school activities, high intellectual abilities, and disabilities (BOE, 2006). Yet, this category of students requiring ‘special’ attention was subsequently expanded to include as many as nine types: special educational needs, developmental delays, language and communication development disorders, attention or learning disorders, poor knowledge of the language of learning, situations of socio-educational vulnerability, high intellectual abilities, late entry into the educational system due to personal conditions or one's own school history. Lately, students with severe behavioral disorders were added to these. By 2013, the categories were streamlined

to six, eliminating developmental delays, language and communication development disorders, poor knowledge of the language of learning, and socio-educational vulnerability, but incorporating ADHD (BOE, 2013). The 2020 legislation took a different approach, reaffirming the last set of categories but also introducing the concept of barriers. According to this law, students with SEN are those “who face barriers that limit their access, presence, participation, or learning resulting from disability or severe disorders of behavior, communication, and language” (BOE, 2020). It emphasizes developing “actions aimed at individuals, groups, social environments and territorial areas that are in a situation of socio-educational and cultural vulnerability with the goal of eliminating the barriers that limit their access, presence, participation, or learning” (BOE, 2020).

Fuzzy definitions have also characterized the long evolution of the notion of SEN in the UK. In 2001, special education provision was defined as “educational provision which is additional to, or otherwise different from, the educational provision made generally for children of their age for those aged two or over” (GOV.UK, 2001). However, a 2004 review by Ofsted noted that “the boundaries between the special and mainstream sectors have blurred,” highlighting the development of a spectrum of provision that includes specially resourced provision in mainstream schools and dual-registration arrangements (Ofsted, 2004). The report expressed particular concern about the inconsistency in the definition of SEN, warning of the risk of ‘distracting’ schools’ attention from doing what is necessary. This concern was echoed in a 2006 report, which highlighted the unintended consequences of using SEN as the name for a single, all-encompassing category (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006). Despite noting the growing confusion between SEN and disability, the document ambiguously stated that the two sets overlap but do not coincide, and there is a strong, yet not automatic, correlation between social deprivation and SEN. The report usefully pointed out two critical issues: the latent contradiction between the promotion of SEN policy and the existence of league tables, attainment targets, and a system offering increased choice and diversity for parents; and the problematic overlap between SEN and disability, leading to policy, regulatory, and funding frameworks often addressing the two areas interchangeably.

The elusive and changing nature of SEN was further confirmed by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice (GOV.UK, 2015), which identified four main areas of SEN (communication and interaction; cognition and learning; social, emotional, and mental health; and sensory and/or physical needs) and emphasized that “individual children often have needs that cut across all these areas and their needs may change over time.” Finally, in 2022, SEN and disability were formally merged into a new overarching category, SEND. Similarly, the notion of ‘alternative provision’ was indefinitely extended to now include children and young people both with and without SEND (GOV.UK, 2022).

The documents examined collectively underscore the notion of SEN as a highly variable construct at the conceptual level, simultaneously subject to continuous mutations over time. On one hand, there's a prevalent tendency to conflate and amalgamate various forms of discomfort, disadvantage, difficulties, disorders, and disability—essentially, all that pertains to what might be termed ‘negative diversity’. On the other hand, the category often encompasses a broad array of heterogeneous elements, including gifted students and those newly immigrated. The confusion resulting from these blurred boundaries is interpreted, particularly in British documentation, as indicative of a lack of precision, suggesting a need for more rigorous and clearer definitions. However, it is the very absence of a singular, fixed definition that allows SEN to remain in a state of constant metamorphosis that facilitates its spread to increasingly wider segments of the student population. The ambiguity surrounding special needs implies that any variance can be interpreted as a deviation, thus permitting a potentially unlimited expansion of the SEN category. If the risk of being framed as scraps in relation to what is considered ‘really’ human is increasingly widespread, it is inevitable that SEN, like zombies, will reproduce at a rapid pace.

## **Apparatus/assemblage**

The ambiguity surrounding the development of the SEN definition has not hindered its widespread use for identifying and classifying students. This process involves distinguishing students through normative and administrative mechanisms that, on the one hand, simplify and reduce the diversity of individuals to their deficits

(*apparatus*), and on the other, reproduce and multiply these deficits by aggregating them in various forms (*assemblage*).

This approach is implemented differently across countries. For instance, in France, until recently, the medical model of disability was the primary method for categorizing students who did not align with the expected educational standards. The concept of special needs, encompassing a diverse group of students including those from foreign countries and gifted students, has been recognized since at least 2006 (Légifrance, 2006-2021). However, SEN was predominantly associated with disability until 2014. That year marked the introduction of inclusion in policy documents as ‘pedagogical support’, alongside the launch of the ‘Personalized Educational Success Program’, aimed at students “at risk not mastering certain knowledge and skills expected at the end of a cycle” (Légifrance, 2014). Subsequently, as we noted, there was a swift increase in the categorization of students with special needs and the programs designed for them, including PAI (‘individualized welcome project’), PAP (‘personalized support plan’), and PPS (‘personalized schooling project’). To address the proliferation of acronyms and programs, in 2021, the ‘inclusive pathway booklet’ was introduced, consolidating information related to all SEN programs into a single online document accessible to families (Légifrance, 2021).

The identification of SEN students in Italy has experienced fluctuations as well. Initially, from 2012 to 2016, the SEN category was introduced and applied broadly and often inconsistently (MIUR, 2012; 2013a; 2013b; 2013c; 2014). On one hand, it expanded the definition to include every form of diversity, and on the other, it emphasized the need to “identify types of SEN” and “specify cases.” In 2017, the focus on inclusion shifted back towards disability, with the International Classification of Functioning (ICF), developed by the World Health Organization, proposed as the framework for identifying students requiring special education (GU, 2017). In 2018, a ministerial note recognized that categorizing students as SEN within the school system had a stigmatizing effect (MIUR, 2018). Schools were encouraged to move beyond mere classifications and the drafting of Personalized Educational Plans. By 2020, the ICF, was adopted as the comprehensive framework for classifying all students with special needs (MIUR, 2020a).

In Spain, the identification of SEN students initially relied on a broad definition, targeting those that “cannot be included in ordinary offerings and their needs cannot be met within the framework of measures to address diversity”. These students were provided with differentiated educational offerings (BOE, 2006). A consistent theme in Spanish policy is the categorization of ‘different’ students along opposing lines, including both those who “have special learning difficulties and those who have greater ability and motivation to learn.” Spanish legislation also underscores the importance of early identification of potential SEN students, preferably during the early years of education (BOE, 2006; 2013). This early identification aims to mitigate the educational impact of cultural, social, and economic disparities.

In the United Kingdom, the definition of SEN primarily hinges on numerical ratios. Students are identified as having SEN if they “have a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children of the same age” (GOV.UK, 2001; Children and Families Act 2014). Over time, the prevailing definition has been that “a child or young person has special educational needs if he or she has a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her” (SEN Code of Practice, 2001; Children and Families Act 2014; Special educational needs and disability code of practice, 2015). It’s crucial to recognize that identification is contingent on a reversal of cause and effect: without the need for special educational provision, a student is not considered to have special needs. This paradox becomes more pronounced for children under compulsory school age, defined as those who “it is likely” would face learning difficulties “if special educational provision was not made for them” (SEN Code of Practice, 2001; Legislation.gov.UK, 2014a). Aside from the Special Educational Needs: Third Report of Session (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006), which critiques the notion of a single category of SEN as flawed and leading to inaccurate classifications, regulations tend to favor expanding categorization rather than critically evaluating it. For instance, associating SEN with moral judgment is a frequent method for profiling students seen as eccentric. Students with social and behavioral difficulties are deemed “the hardest test of the inclusion framework” (Ofsted, 2004), implicitly linking social background with misbehavior and subtly contrasting this with ‘good’ SEN, which seemingly refers to all other categories. Moral



judgments persist in the SEND Review (GOV.UK, 2022), suggesting a direct connection between students with SEN and disengagement from education. Moreover, English legislation, like Spain's, emphasizes the importance of "anticipating the needs of children and young people with SEN" (GOV.UK, 2015). The rationale is that early identification sets clear expectations for the child and aims to reduce the growing number of EHCPs. While adopting a preventive (rather than reactive) approach to addressing student needs seems reasonable, this attitude contributes to further encouraging the classification of increasingly younger children, diverting attention from the primary goal of the primary objective of creating a more inclusive and adaptable school environment. Adaptations should not solely be preventive and centered on the student but also interactive, aiming to modify the educational setting to benefit all students.

In general, the crucial aspect of accommodating the context to facilitate the inclusion of students is often overlooked in the examined documentation. Instead of assuming that the environment should be adapted to support inclusion, the ability of students to adapt to existing facilities is frequently used as a criterion to determine whether they have SEN. This reversal of cause and effect, as previously mentioned, plays a decisive role in framing SEN as an attribute intrinsic to the individual. The analyzed texts underscore the interplay between the constructs of apparatus and assemblage in this process. On one hand, the apparatus operates through a technocratic model, using procedural rules to label individuals by assigning deficits. On the other hand, the assemblage encourages the proliferation and continuous recombination of rules, enabling the potential classification of any individual as having a deficit. The apparatus results in discrete discrimination through rule application, while the assemblage leads to unlimited discrimination through rule reinterpretation, creating a mechanism of simultaneous reduction and expansion: like zombies, students are simultaneously deteriorating and proliferating: like zombies, students simultaneously deteriorating and proliferating.

Moreover, the documents draw another compelling analogy between zombies and SEN: both are primarily defined by a radical reduction of identity to action. Zombies typically exist in a semi-vegetative state, becoming subjects only through their actions, such as when they hunt humans. Similarly, despite efforts to delineate SEN as a category distinct from disability, in practice, "policy, regulatory and funding frameworks frequently address the two areas interchangeably because the 'groups' overlap" (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006). Thus, the identity of SEN is linked not to an ontological status but to praxis. SEN are identified not by their inherent qualities but by their actions. SEN are such not for what they are, but for what they do. Although their identity and origins remain ambiguous and they lack an independent existence, this does not prevent them from acting and having a precise and lasting impact on people's lives.

### **Presentification by denial**

As observed earlier, rendering the definition of SEN incorporeal does not halt their ongoing and active proliferation. Yet, in some cases, this exercise of emptying reaches a peak when the definition relies on absence or negation. Danish legislation illustrates this with statements often bordering on tautology: "Special education is provided to children whose development requires special consideration or support in special classes and special schools." (Retsinformation, 2015b). Similarly, the Inclusion Act (Retsinformation, 2012a) does not clarify the nature of SEN, offering merely a procedural definition, which stipulates that "a decision will no longer have to be made in relation to the individual student about special education, when it concerns a student who needs support for less than 9 teaching hours per week." Nine weekly hours thus become the demarcation between normality and specialty.

In French legislation too, the discourse on SEN regularly builds from what is absent or (presumed absent), from an absence or the presumption of an absence. For example, the Individual Educational Success Plan "can be established for students whose essential school knowledge and skills at the end of a cycle are not mastered or who are at risk of not mastering them" (Légifrance, 2016). Regarding the Personalized Support Plan, the same circular states that "It is not a response to the needs of students who require a decision from the Commission on the Rights

and Autonomy of Disabled Persons” and that “it also does not address students with rights recognized under disability, including in non-academic areas, who benefit from a personalized education project upon request.”

Similarly, Italian documentation often uses negation to critique educational practices considered incorrect. A 2013 note articulates that “personalization is not merely a procedural matter, reducing the educational relationship to formulas, acronyms, bureaucratic compliances” (MIUR, 2013c). This further highlights the prevalence of such practices in schools, as further evidenced by a 2018 note: “It is necessary to restart a professional dialogue that overcomes the tendency to categorize everyone’s specificities, with the risk of implementing personalization predominantly through bureaucratic tools and mere compliance, to develop instead proposals that take into account the complexity, heterogeneity, and educational opportunities of classes” (MIUR, 2018).

Spanish legislation routinely adopts a strategy of negation in defining SEN. For example, the Ley Orgánica 2/2006 stipulates that the schooling of students with SEN in special education centers “will be carried out when their needs cannot be met within the framework of the measures for attention to diversity in ordinary centers” (BOE, 2006). Moreover, this aspect is again based on a tautology: “The most suitable measures will be established so that the conditions for carrying out the processes associated with evaluation adapt to the needs of students with specific educational support needs” (BOE, 2013). Thus, the referral to special schools is predicated on a dual negation: the inability to meet needs through “measures for attention to diversity,” which themselves are left undefined.

In the UK, the definition of SEN entails a complex interplay of references and negations. According to the 2001 Code of Practice, children are identified as having special educational needs if they exhibit a learning difficulty. For children under compulsory school age, a learning difficulty is defined by “the presence of a disability or a significantly greater difficulty in learning compared to the majority of their age peers”, or if they would be considered to have a learning difficulty “if special educational provision was not made for them” (GOV.UK, 2001). This formulation has remained unchanged in the 2015 Code of Practice. The strategy of negation is also crucial in interactions with families. The Third report of session (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006) suggests that in dealing with families “the standard approach should not be adversarial.” Similarly, the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan states “we want to ensure that parents experience a less adversarial system and restore their trust that their children will get prompt access to the support they need” (GOV.UK, 2023) Through the use of negation or subtraction, these statements inadvertently highlight the conflict-laden atmosphere that persists in the relationships between families, schools, and local authorities.

In summary, the elements of absence, subtraction, and negation contribute to creating and maintaining a persecutory dimension within the discourse on SEN. By being concealed or denied, the problematic and undesirable aspects that one wishes to avoid are ironically invoked and brought to the forefront. Thus, like zombies, they resurface with increased force and persistence, threatening the apparent peace of school life.

### **Bare repetition / Propaganda**

Strength and persistence are not just typical traits of zombies: they constitute their essence. As previously mentioned, the personality of zombies essentially coincides with action. Consequently, they do not devise complex or particularly clever plans to eliminate humans; their method relies on brute force, a process that “solves a problem through exhaustion: it goes through all possible choices until a solution is found” (Codeacademy, 2024). The principle is rooted in bare repetition, a mechanical reproduction of the same (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994: 22-26).

In the texts examined, this often manifests as a linguistic mantra producing a combined effect of habituation and propaganda through the continuous reiteration of terms and concepts rendering them meaningless. In the Danish context, for instance, this is evident in the repeated use of the phrase “children whose development requires special consideration or support,” introduced in 2003 and then revisited in 2012, 2015, and 2020 (Retsinformation, 2003b; 2012a; 2015b; 2020b). A similar pattern is observed with the terms “remedying and limiting” with respect to “the

effects of mental, physical, linguistic, or sensory functional difficulties” found in the Inclusion Act (Retsinformation, 2012a), and repeated in subsequent documents (Retsinformation, 2014a; 2015b).

In France, approach relies on the frequent repetition of terms such as ‘support’ and ‘specific’, intended to project an image of benevolence and professionalism in educational efforts. However, this often results in generic statements like, “Students with special educational needs benefit from specific educational support” and “This accompaniment covers all types of learning and includes, in particular, appropriate aids for the difficulties encountered” (Légifrance, 2013).

While in Italy, the term “functioning” becomes a catch-all phrase in legislation (a topic we will revisit), the Spanish context shows a gradual linguistic evolution from “non-discrimination, normalization, integration” (BOE, 2002) to “normalization and inclusion” (BOE, 2006), “non-discrimination, normalization, inclusion” (BOE, 2013), and finally “participation and inclusion” (BOE, 2020). In these instances, the sheer volume of repetitions replaces the depth of meaning, as seen in statements like “The educational authorities will establish the most suitable measures so that the conditions for carrying out individualized evaluations adapt to the needs of students with special educational needs” (BOE, 2013) and “to attend to the diversity of the needs of all students” (BOE, 2006, 2020).

In the UK, the mantra of the discourse on inclusion is characterized by the repetitive emphasis on keywords such as ‘participation’, ‘greater control’, ‘high quality provision’ (GOV.UK, 2015) which at times assumes a clear propagandistic dimension. This is evident when statements claim that “children, young people, and their families will be involved in the decision-making process around the support they receive and in the development of the policy which drives those decisions” (GOV.UK, 2023) yet fail to detail how this involvement will be facilitated. Similarly, frequent dyads like “early identification, clear expectations” (GOV.UK, 2023) form a chorus whose repetition seems less concerned with fostering reflection on their meaning and implications, and more with conveying a sense of authority. This approach aims to produce a comforting effect on the contentious topic of inclusion, despite the ongoing debates and controversies it has sparked. In truth, the very effort to be authoritative and reassuring inadvertently summons the zombie forcefully knocking at the school’s door. It is the obsession with failure, evoked in other recurrent phrases such as “successful preparation for adulthood” or “independent living and employment” (GOV.UK, 2015), which lay bare the prevailing anxiety within the SEN narrative about an ‘anxious future’. In this universe, the immediate experiences of children are overlooked in favor of viewing them solely as projections of an idealized future adult, defined narrowly by the ability to work and live independently. In short, the prospect being offered is to become a zombie.

## **Subjectivation/ Subjection**

Analyzed through a Foucauldian lens, regulations in the area of special education, much like diagnoses, emerge as ‘true discourses’ that delineate the gap between children's actual behavior and the behavior that is desired. Accordingly, the truth about the individual being examined is ultimately determined and articulated wholly by the disciplinary system from an external viewpoint. In this framework, power operates not only as a restrictive force but also as a creative one, molding students into controlled, subordinate entities through a process of subjugation. However, Foucault underscores that subjection is invariably linked to subjectivation, as power requires individuals, bound to a certain truth for their self-constitution as subjects, actively participate in the process. Hence, students with SEN are not merely passive recipients of categorization; they are also impelled to endorse and partake in it.

The discourse surrounding ‘needs’ often displays an active/passive ambivalence, as observed in the documentation analyzed. For instance, Danish legislation, while presenting explicit prescriptive directives that students, schools, and families must follow, frequently includes references to students who “needs special educational assistance” (Retsinformation, 2014a) or to “children whose development requires special consideration or support” (Retsinformation, 2020b).

The ‘request for attention’ by the student is frequently invoked to justify the establishment of norms and tools in the field of special education in both French and Spanish legislation. In France, the Code de l’éducation

consistently references “students [...] who demonstrate particular educational needs” or who “experience significant difficulties in acquiring the common base of knowledge, skills, and culture” (Légifrance, 2006-2021). In Spain, it is articulated that students not only have special educational needs but “require an educational attention different from the ordinary” (BOE, 2006).

Italian documents particularly emphasize the aspect of subjectivation, often conveying a tone of magnanimous paternalism towards students with SEN. It is portrayed that it is the students who “present a request for special attention” within a context where “every student can manifest BES” (MIUR, 2012). However, the same subject who presumably would ask for help is stripped of their role, as proposals are made to adapt educational methodologies “to the needs of the student, or rather to his *person*, leaving to the exclusive discretion of the teachers the decision regarding educational choices” (MIUR, 2013c).

The interplay of subjection and subjectivation is especially pronounced in English documentation. The element of subjection is evident in statements justifying choices in this domain based on “what works best for the child or young person,” relying on evidence but failing to account for the diversity of cases and contexts (GOV.UK, 2023). Complementing this is the prevalent use of managerial language: “All children and young people with SEND can achieve their potential, with most achieving in line with their peers” (GOV.UK, 2022). Here, as already noted, children are valued not for their inherent qualities but for their potential to ‘achieve’. On one hand, the paradox is established where the ‘peers’ are only part of the class. On the other hand, it is presupposed from the outset that this goal will remain unattainable for some. The subjection arises not only from the precision of this language of exclusion but also of the ambiguity surrounding the initial identification of SEN. A child or young person can be “brought to the authority’s attention by any person as someone who has or may have special educational needs”. Under compulsory school age, “an integrated care board or NHS trust form the opinion that the child has (or probably has) special educational needs or a disability” (Legislation.gov.UK, 2014a). This paradoxical blend of specificity and ambiguity plays a crucial role in exercising and multiplying SEN as a category that produces subordination. However, this approach would be incomplete without considering how it activates the subjects within this process. For example, it is declared that “children and young people with SEND have the same aspirations as their peers,” but “did not get the support they wanted” (GOV.UK, 2022). Having SEND is fundamentally interpreted as an act of volition: SEND students not only have aspirations similar to their classmates (and why shouldn’t they?), but they also require specific types of support. In other instances, the designation of students as actors in their own categorization is more indirect, tied to how elements are presented. For example, in supporting SEN students (and their families), LEAs are encouraged to consider their (a) opinions, wishes, and feelings, (b) decisions, (c) provision of information and support (for decision), and (d) the need to facilitate them in achieving the best possible educational outcomes (Legislation.gov.UK, 2014a). Here, the order of the elements matters, starting from a dimension of personal agency to which the institutional policies are subordinated.

In conclusion, we observe a process characterized by an assemblage of subjection and subjectivation. This process utilizes the notion of SEN to position the student within a disciplinary system that operates by including through exclusion and, simultaneously, ensures that the student actively adopts and perpetuates this imposed identity. The harshness of this mechanism—where recognition comes at the price of contributing to one’s own annihilation—often gives rise to contentious and aggressive (or rather, passive-aggressive) dynamics. After all, it’s unsurprising that, just like zombies, those who are asked to internalize and reproduce the violence of exclusion will eventually refuse to quietly endure in the shadows, suffering with gratitude.

## Conflict

The dual pressures of subjecting and being subjected extend beyond students to affect all participants in the SEN domain, including families, schools, and administrations. This dynamic creates an environment rife with tension and conflict, as documented both directly and indirectly. In Denmark, we observe a growing body of regulations concerning family grievances over educational or administrative decisions regarding special education placements. These regulations increasingly aim to precisely (and essentially limit) the scope of family appeals over time.



Conversely, legislation significantly underscores the perspectives and wishes of teachers and school leaders (“School leaders and teachers have a common understanding that a student is included when the student benefits from general education and actively participates in the social community in the general class”; “There is also a widespread desire among school leaders for educational-psychological counseling to be visible and present in schools to a greater extent than today”) (Retsinformation, 2012a). Yet, this stance has not culminated in a clear definition of inclusion or concrete measures to realize these aspirations. This constitutes a form of ‘false empowerment’ where, under the guise of flexibility and autonomy the burden of decision-making is often shifted to local authorities, guided by convoluted guidelines: “If it is assumed that a student needs special educational assistance, the student must be recommended for an educational-psychological assessment. The recommendation is made by the head of the school for educational-psychological counseling, possibly at the initiative of the municipal health service, if it is aware of mental, physical, linguistic, or sensory difficulties in the student, which give reason to believe that the student needs special education support.” (Retsinformation, 2014a).

This strategy, which encourages involvement and collaboration within pre-defined structures and resources only to subsequently shift the challenges of decision-making and implementation downstream, is prevalent in other contexts as well. In France, for instance, teachers are urged to ensure that “students with particular educational needs benefit from specific pedagogical support” by implementing “appropriate aids for the difficulties encountered” (Légifrance, 2013). Similarly, in Italy, as mentioned previously, there is a call for teacher discretion in interventions concerning the inclusion of students with SEN. This approach is further supported by urging teachers and families to collaborate in addressing SEN and “to avoid litigation” (MIUR, 2013a). Spanish legislation also highlights the need to resolve ‘discrepancies’ between families, schools, and administrations, acknowledging the concrete risk that SEN issues may exacerbate segregation within educational institutions (BOE, 2020).

A sense of false empowerment also pervades English legislation, leading to conflict due to a triangulation of elements that culminate in what can be termed as an ‘impossible policy’. On one hand, there is the objective of ensuring efficient education for all children, gauged against pre-established standards of excellence. On the other hand, the legislation aims to provide a variety of educational options to cater to the unique needs of each student. Further complicating the issue is the rhetoric that promises families ‘new freedoms’ of choice to secure ‘what parents want’ (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006). The Children and Families Act of 2014 embodies this paradox, presenting an illusion of parental freedom while effectively subjecting them to authoritative decisions. It initially underscores “the importance of the child and his or her parent, or the young person, participating as fully as possible in decisions relating to the exercise of the function concerned”. Yet, it quickly reduces their role to simply having “the right to express views to the authority (orally or in writing), and submit evidence to the authority”. The conflict is inevitable when “parents have a legal right to seek a special school place, but do not have a right to be provided with one necessarily”. Consequently, “parents had little choice in taking an adversarial approach during the appeals process” (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2006). This issue is highlighted by the recent SEND Review (GOV.UK, 2022), which notes a significant increase in cases where parents of SEND students successfully appeal, indicating a diminishing trust in the educational framework. The Review attributes this mistrust stems to inconsistent educational practices and calls for more standardized methods in identifying and supporting needs. However, the conflict arises not only from those inconsistencies but also from an escalating ‘competition for support’, fueled by a system that fails to allocate sufficient resources while simultaneously increasing the number of cases. As the special education sector expands, fierce competition for limited resources emerges among stakeholders, further intensified by a narrative that frames SEN as an individual deficiency.

### **Breakdown/aggression**

Immunization and burnout contribute in distinct ways to framing SEN as a zombie condition. Immunization identifies students with SEN through technocratic apparatuses that break down the individual based on



predetermined definitions and classifications. Conversely, burnout also categorize the ‘different’ student, but it leads to a performative self-identity that the individual is compelled to construct through a process of assemblage, where identity formation results from active bricolage by the subject themselves. While immunization externalizes aggression, imposing it on the individual from outside, burnout internalizes aggression, manifesting it from within the individual outward. Thus, the identity of SEN students is produced through a dual process of division (‘Fragment the self’) and expansion (‘Improve yourself’).

In the regulations examined, this mechanism activated interpreting the ‘diverse’ student from an exclusively individual perspective and predominantly through the lens of deficit. In the Danish context, special education encompasses “specially arranged teaching in the subjects and areas of the public school, organized with consideration for the student's learning prerequisites, and teaching and training methods aimed at remedying or limiting the effects of psychological, physical, linguistic, or sensory functional difficulties in the child.” (Retsinformation, 2012a). Deficits identified include challenges in “the reading process, memory or behavioral difficulties (Retsinformation, 2015b). In France, where the focus on disability is explicit, the attention is directed towards the student who “risks not mastering the essential knowledge and skills at the end of a cycle” (Légifrance, 2006-2021). To address these deficits, support is offered through “diverse and differentiated pedagogical practices” (Légifrance, 2013). Over time, these practices have evolved into ‘educational success’ programs and tools, such as the ‘inclusive course booklet’, necessitating active participation from families in the SEN identification procedures (Légifrance, 2021). Notably missing is the consideration for curriculum flexibility that adapts to both the individual needs and the collective strengths of diverse classrooms.

Italian legislation extends beyond merely establishing a direct link between the individual, their deficits, and the support provided. It broadens this relationship to encompass disadvantage: “School disadvantage is much broader than deficit” (2012). The primary focus of interventions is on identifying “the various types of special educational needs, the resources available for employment, and the range of difficulties and disorders encountered” (MIUR, 2013c). This identification procedure becomes particularly compelling with the adoption of the ICF as the framework for assessing cases in special education. This approach significantly shifts the discourse around SEN from an educational to a medical context, categorizing students based on whether they “function” or not, and using a violent language to describe their conditions (“functioning debt”, MIUR 2020a). Consequently, identifying a student with SEN becomes the basis for compiling a Personalized Educational Plan. In this process, constant family involvement is required (MIUR, 2018). However, this focus is predominantly on teaching methodologies tailored to the individual and rarely includes strategies for integrating SEN students into group activities. Moreover, it fails to consider adjustments to the curriculum and its goals to better represent the actual diversity of the classroom, with its wide range of resources and challenges.

Spain essentially aligns with a vision of SEN as a specific deficiency primarily attributed to the individual. The legislation recognizes the connection between SEN and socioeconomic and cultural vulnerabilities (BOE, 2006). Accordingly, it proposes specific educational policies aimed at compensating for these disadvantages, though these measures are evidently only partially effective, lacking a preventative approach. This limitation becomes especially apparent when, despite the ambitious goal of eliminating “barriers to access, presence, participation, and learning’ for individuals and groups across various social contexts and regions,” the strategy predominantly relies on implementing “reasonable adjustments” tailored to individual needs (BOE, 2020). Similarly, while the importance of addressing students’ needs for learning, participation, and coexistence is acknowledged, participation and coexistence often fade into the background, with the emphasis primarily on individual learning objectives (BOE, 2020). Assessment, a critical aspect of Spanish legislation, does not prompt a comprehensive reevaluation of its role in light of the growing prevalence of SEN and other special education categories. Instead, the focus remains on customizing assessments to meet the individual needs of students (BOE, 2002; 2013; 2020; 2022).

In the UK, the unintended consequences of categorizing students with diverse needs and conditions under the single umbrella of SEN became apparent shortly after its introduction into the school system. Despite this, legislation continues to regularly endorse SEN as a category, albeit with ongoing modifications and shifts in

approach, as a means to categorize students. This aligns them with the standards set by the neoliberal rhetoric of excellence that has dominated schools in recent decades. This categorization relies on a narrative that perpetuates the paradigm of individual deficit, suggesting that the issue of school failure should be primarily attribute to the students' inherent lack of physical, cognitive, or emotional capacities rather than to the external barriers presented by the structure and organization of schools. Interestingly, the definition of disability—which has significantly influenced the concept of SEN—has remained largely unchanged over the years: a student is considered to have a disability if it “prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream schools or mainstream post-16 institutions” (Legislation.gov.UK, 2014a). Thus, the facilities themselves determine whether the student has a deficit, rather than being considered as potentially adaptable structures based on the principle of reasonable accommodations. Legislation does not present the flexibility of educational offerings as a comprehensive approach but rather as an attempt to adjust residual parts of the structure to meet the individual needs of ‘unsuitable’ students. This approach is reinforced by statements that artfully reverse cause and effect, attributing the current crisis in school policies to SEN: “Children and young people with SEN are also more likely to be disengaged from education, pushing them further behind. They have poorer attendance and are more likely to be excluded” or “Young people with SEND are also overrepresented in the justice system: one in four children and young people in young offender institutions have SEND” (GOV.UK, 2022).

Thus, the process of aggression is thus: firstly, it reduces the student to a state of perceived inherent inadequacy; secondly, it compels the student to acknowledge this supposed inadequacy and to strive for redemption through continuous self-improvement. Those unable to conform to this perspective are left to be either pitied or secluded.

### **Zombie economy**

Students with SEN, like zombies, are caught in a cycle of self-exclusion from and aggression towards the system. This cycle results from systemic violence, revealing a crisis in the current educational model, which leverages the SEN category to fuel the growth of a related industry of special needs (Tomlinson, 2012). This industry is integrated into a financialized economic system that fundamentally depends on the generation of speculative bubbles to fuel its expansion. Consequently, an extraordinary demand for an asset is artificially created, leading its price to significantly exceed its real value. In a similar manner, the current educational system fosters a widespread expectation of gain (be it primary or secondary), purportedly guaranteed by the endless expansion of the student body with SEN. The ‘SEN bubble’ represents an unsustainable approach, failing not just on educational and ethical grounds but economically as well – as evidenced by documents from Denmark and England.

In Denmark, the continuous rise in public spending on special education prompted a significant reform in 2012 (Retsinformation, 2012a). This reform aimed to reorganize primary education so that “the goal of inclusion can contribute to a reduction in the proportion of resources used for special education”. The intention was to reallocate the resources saved to “among other things, strengthen general education in primary schools”. However, resistance from families, reluctant to forego subsidies for their children’s support, combined with teachers' protests about their lack of preparation for including students in mainstream classrooms, led to the reform’s failure. Consequently, with a renewed increase in the demand for special education, the system reverted to a state of resource scarcity, intensifying the competitive struggle for support.

A similar evolution, albeit occurring at different times, is evident in English policy documentation. In the UK, escalating public expenditure on special education is a major economic concern, driven by the increasing number of pupils receiving support through EHCPs. The Children and Families Act of 2014 sought to reduce the number of EHCPs by introducing a category for students with SEN who do not qualify for an EHCP and therefore are not placed in a special school (Legislation.gov.UK, 2014a). However, the same legislation also lists numerous exceptions that still allow for a student (for example, “following a change in his or her circumstances”) to be admitted to a special school. This has further complicated the process for families seeking support, without achieving the intended reduction in spending. This issue is recently revisited in the SEND Review (GOV.UK,

2022), which observes that “as a result of this low confidence, parents, carers, and providers feel they need to secure EHCPs and, in some cases, specialist provision as a means of guaranteeing appropriate support for their child. This increased need for EHCPs and specialist provision creates further challenges across the system”. The document notes that the planned investment of funds in the area of special needs are expected to increase by over 40% within three years. However, this increase occurs within a chronically underfunded system where limited resources are depleted by an unsustainable model of hyper-individualized support, purported to offer ‘freedom of choice’ for families. Moreover, the Review acknowledges that “despite this significant investment, the system is not delivering value for money and outcomes and experiences for children and young people with SEND are not improving. Instead, the system has become financially unsustainable”. In response to the growing contentious climate surrounding SEN, a more recent document merely reiterates generic clichés (“high-quality, well-led and inclusive schools,” “fair access to excellent teaching of evidence-based curricula,” “what works best,” “early identification of need”; “calm, safe and supportive settings”) (GOV.UK, 2023). Ultimately, the document’s underlying goal appears to be cost reduction: “With these expectations, and improved mainstream provision, more children and young people will receive the support they need through ordinarily available provision in their local setting. Fewer will therefore need to access support through an EHCP”. To address the proliferation of SEN and the ensuing ‘race for EHCPs’—a result of a system characterized by individual competition and insufficient resources—a proposed solution is to manage special needs within the ordinary school context. However, it is this very context, given its current structure, that contributes to the creation and exacerbation of those needs.

## Conclusions

In this paper, I argued that the concept of zombies serves as an effective analytical tool for understanding the dynamics underlying policies related to SEN within the field of special education. Accordingly, this analysis has involved a review of both statistical reports and the legislative and regulatory frameworks of five countries—Denmark, France, Italy, Spain, and the UK—over the past ten and twenty years, respectively.

Despite the numerous differences arising partly from the varied organization of educational systems, the statistical reports provide a broad overview of the evolution of SEN over time in the countries investigated. However, it is crucial to recognize that the statistics generated often rely on arbitrary simplifications in the categories used, for instance, in how they aggregate or differentiate SEN from disabilities. Given the prominence of statistics in both public and media discourse, these simplifications significantly influence the perception of SEN in discussions across scientific, educational, and political arena. Yet, two interesting common trends can be identified.

Quantitative analysis has revealed a significant increase in the proportion of students enrolled in special education programs compared to the total student population, particularly over the five-year period from 2017 to 2022. This rise has been most pronounced among students identified with SEN, who now represent an increasing share of the special education demographic. By 2022, students with SEN comprised 65% of the special education population in Italy, 70% in Spain, and 75% in the United Kingdom. This suggests that the growth of the special education sector is primarily driven by an increase in recognizing and categorizing students with SEN. Meanwhile, the number of students identified with disabilities has either remained constant or experienced a decline.

Furthermore, the analysis of statistical reports underscores significant local-level variability in the prevalence and conditions of students referred to special education. This variability stems not only from the diversity of diagnostic approaches used but also from differences in policy awareness, access to professional services, and broader social, cultural, and economic factors. These elements play a crucial role in amplifying the divergence of data related to the identification of ‘diverse’ students at the local level. Therefore, it can be reasonably inferred that for students with SEN, whose identification significantly depends on this range of disparities and factors, this aspect becomes even more pronounced. As a result, these students are likely to contribute substantially to the increased variability of figures and conditions in special education across different regions within each country.

Altogether, the examination of statistical reports from the five countries, which underscores the current rise of SEN and the uneven distribution of its variants across regions, helps to frame them as a transnational epidemic

that increasingly affects the education system today. SEN, like zombies, spread virally, like an outbreak without a virus.

These findings are further supported by the qualitative analysis of regulations and guidelines on SEN in the five countries. This analysis reveals that SEN are a nurtured epidemic, stemming from a wholly human-initiated process involving active, and to some extent, voluntary participation by individuals. It is a man-made disaster, fueled by the perception that increasing diversity in human conditions constitutes undesirable variations, like latent zombies awaiting identification.

This aspect is emphasized by the fuzzy nature of the SEN concept, which undergoes continuous mutations over time. SEN blend and merge various forms of ‘negative diversity’: discomfort, disadvantage, difficulties, disorders, and disability. Moreover, they cover a wide spectrum of heterogeneous elements, including gifted students and those who are newly immigrated. In short, the lack of a singular, fixed definition allows SEN to remain in a state of constant metamorphosis, facilitating its spread across increasingly larger segments of the student population. Due to this ambiguity, any variance can be interpreted as a deviation, thus allowing for a potentially unlimited expansion of SEN.

However, the ambiguity surrounding the SEN definition has not impeded its widespread application in identifying and classifying students, utilizing a combination of apparatus and assemblage techniques, as conceptualized by Foucault and Deleuze. This combination, through normative and administrative mechanisms, simplifies and reduces the diversity of individuals to their perceived deficits, while simultaneously reproducing and multiplying these deficits by aggregating them in various forms. This process creates a reversal of the cause-and-effect relationship, suggesting that SEN are attributes intrinsic to an individual, rather than a reflection of the failure to adapt the environment to support inclusion. As a result, students with SEN, like zombies, are simultaneously deteriorating and proliferating. In addition, as students become both the object and subject of these procedures, their identity is systematically extracted and confined within the dimension of performativity.

The process of reduction is especially exacerbated by the way documents support definitions of SEN based on absence, subtraction, and negation, concepts explored by Derrida. Far from minimizing the role of SEN, this aspect further contributes to their perception as a threatening condition. Additionally, the documents amplify the dimension of action by employing brute force in the form of bare repetition of the same verbal expressions over and over—like a mantra. Eventually, these expressions are devoid of any meaning and transform into catchphrases, mere propaganda. Though intended to sound reassuring, their actual effect is quite the contrary, highlighting the pervasive anxiety and obsession with failure that permeate today’s educational discourse.

The documents’ analysis further illuminates how subjection and subjectivation, as discussed by Foucault, are combined to not only impose categorization upon students but also ensure they will actively support it. This approach pursues inclusion by simultaneously generating exclusion and self-exclusion through strategies centered on immunization and burnout. Both strategies contribute to categorizing students by using, respectively, technocratic procedures (*apparatus*) to break down the individual identity and recombining methods (*assemblage*) to build a new one based on SEN, which students are encouraged to internalize. The dual process of fragmentation and self-improvement of identity push students with SEN to engage in both inward and outward dynamics of aggression and self-aggression. This growing atmosphere of aggression unavoidably involves families, schools, and administrations. As the system is unable to fulfill the promise of accommodating a growing population of students with SEN, competition for support escalates among parents, leading to conflicts with schools and, more broadly, disaffection with the educational system.

In conclusion, even though the evolution of national approaches to SEN is not linear nor homogeneous, the conceptual framework of zombie theory illuminates some common trends in SEN policies that Denmark, France, Italy, Spain, and UK share. However, this study has been limited to examining statistical reports and national regulations. To address this limitation, future investigation should expand to include other countries that have integrated SEN into their policy and practice in the field of special education. Furthermore, additional research is needed to enrich the analysis of reports and documents with insights from the perspectives of students, families and administrators on this topic.



Some questions would be particularly fruitful areas for future investigation:

- Immunization leads to the creation of educational zombies (children are accepted only insofar as they are identified with their deficits), whereas burnout results in educational ‘zombing’, i.e., a pervasive practice through which anyone can be dismissed as potentially defective. The two processes are interdependent.
- Zombie students are the ‘majority exception’ required by the educational system to sustain the current myth of excellence, which recognizes only a small number of students as valuable in order to exploit all others. Exclusion is thus created both through under-inclusion (stigmatization of diversity) and super-inclusion (oversaturation and devaluation of diversity).
- Needs, in themselves, are not inherently exploitable. They become exploitable when students are categorized as ‘zombies’, that is, when their needs are framed as conditions of inadequacy, due to either deficiency or excess, for the purpose of generating profit through a systematic value extraction process. This extractivism is twofold: it deprives individuals of their intrinsic value while it stereotypes and saturates their otherness, transforming it into a state of exploitation and self-exploitation.

Since their introduction into special educational policies, SEN have rapidly become what Paul Krugman defines as a “zombie idea—an idea that should have been killed by evidence, but refuses to die. Instead, it just kept shambling along, eating people’s brains” (2021: 7). The education zombies we have created by rejecting and over-producing diversity through SEN are now ubiquitous. They are ‘hopeful monsters’ on which we increasingly rely to affirm that we are alive. In this context, the question whether the conceptual body of inclusive education is alive or dead could be usefully reframed by conceiving it as nomadic. As a ‘nomadic body’ (Braidotti, 2011), the life of inclusive education does not reside in building classification systems to quantify supposed abnormalities, but in providing cartographies of the power relations embedded in the making of discourses and social practices around diversity. In doing so, it can act as a threshold of transformations through which zombies, instead of being rejected, can teach us how to ‘prove humanity’ anew.

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