PERSONAE
SCENARI E PROSPETTIVE PEDAGOGICHE

Educating for Care Through Diversity: The DIVERSITY-LIVED Project as a Humanistic Pedagogical Framework for Inclusive Professional Training

Educare alla cura attraverso la diversità: il progetto DIVERSITY-LIVED come framework pedagogico umanistico per la formazione professionale inclusiva.

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary societies are increasingly characterised by demographic ageing, functional diversity and complex care needs, challenging professional education to rethink how future healthcare and social care professionals are prepared. This article presents the pedagogical framework developed within the Erasmus+ project DIVERSITY-LIVED, which explores the educational value of lived experiences, experiential simulations, and reflective learning in fostering inclusive care. Drawing on care pedagogy, inclusive education and professional identity formation, the framework proposes diversity as a pedagogical resource rather than merely an object of intervention. Particular attention is devoted to the development of human skills, including empathy, communication, reflexivity and ethical sensitivity, as essential dimensions of professional practice. The article argues that encounters with ageing, disability and social diversity can support transformative learning processes and contribute to the formation of reflective and responsible professionals capable of responding to the complexities of contemporary care contexts.

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Keywords: Inclusive Care; Lived Experiences; Human Skills; Professional Identity Formation; Diversity.

Le società contemporanee sono sempre più caratterizzate dall'invecchiamento demografico, dalla diversità funzionale e dalla crescente complessità dei bisogni di cura, che pongono nuove sfide alla formazione dei professionisti dei servizi sanitari e sociali. L'articolo presenta il framework pedagogico sviluppato nell'ambito del progetto Erasmus+ DIVERSITY-LIVED, evidenziando il valore educativo delle esperienze vissute, delle simulazioni esperienziali e della riflessione critica, al fine di promuovere una cura inclusiva. Muovendo dalla pedagogia della cura, dall'educazione inclusiva e dagli studi sulla formazione dell'identità professionale, il contributo interpreta la diversità come una risorsa pedagogica e non come un semplice oggetto di intervento. Particolare attenzione è dedicata allo sviluppo delle human skills – empatia, comunicazione, riflessività e sensibilità etica – considerate dimensioni essenziali dell'agire professionale. L'incontro con esperienze di invecchiamento, disabilità e diversità sociale favorisce processi di apprendimento trasformativo e la formazione di professionisti riflessivi, responsabili e orientati alla cura della persona.

Parole Chiave: Cura inclusiva; Esperienze vissute; Human Skills; Identità professionale; Diversità.

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1. Introduction: Educating for Care in Contemporary Diverse Societies

Contemporary societies are increasingly characterised by demographic ageing, functional diversity and growing demands for integrated forms of care. These transformations challenge healthcare and social care systems to move beyond fragmented models of intervention and towards approaches capable of addressing the complexity of human needs (Hughes et al., 2020; Lee & Lee, 2025). Within this evolving landscape, care is no longer understood exclusively as a clinical or technical activity but as a multidimensional process involving relational, social and educational dimensions. Recent studies highlight the importance of integrated and person-centred approaches that recognise individuals as active participants in care processes rather than passive recipients of services (Busch et al., 2019; Porcel-Gálvez et al., 2025; Santana et al., 2018).

At the same time, educational institutions are increasingly called upon to prepare professionals capable of responding to diverse and rapidly changing social contexts. Future healthcare and social care practitioners must be able not only to apply specialised knowledge but also to engage with situations characterised by vulnerability, uncertainty and human complexity (Maeda & Socha-Dietrich, 2021). This challenge is particularly evident in contexts shaped by ageing populations, disability inclusion and cultural diversity, where effective professional action depends on the ability to combine technical expertise with relational competence and ethical responsibility (Lim et al., 2023).

Recent debates on inclusive education have further emphasised the need to remove structural barriers and promote learning environments that recognise diversity as a source of participation and human development rather than as a condition of deficit (Waisath et al., 2024; Migliarini & Elder, 2024). Similarly, critical perspectives on disability-inclusive policies highlight the importance of moving beyond purely procedural approaches towards educational models that recognise the plurality of lived experiences and the unequal power relations that often shape social and institutional contexts (Liasidou & Liasidou, 2025).

Within this framework, the relationship between diversity and care emerges as one of the most significant pedagogical challenges of contemporary professional education. Preparing professionals for inclusive care requires more than the acquisition of technical competences; it demands educational pathways capable of fostering empathy, reflexivity, perspective-taking and ethical sensitivity. It is precisely from this assumption that the Erasmus+ project *DIVERSITY-LIVED* (Functional Diversity Training for Social and Healthcare Professionals Through Lived Experiences to Enhance Empathy, Understanding and Care) was developed. The project explores how lived experiences, experiential learning and human-centred pedagogies can contribute to the formation of professionals able to engage responsibly with the complexity of contemporary care contexts.

This article presents the theoretical and pedagogical framework developed within DIVERSITY-LIVED, arguing that diversity should be understood not merely as an object of intervention but as a pedagogical resource capable of supporting professional formation, inclusive care and human development.

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2. Diversity and Care as Pedagogical Categories

The growing attention devoted to care within contemporary educational, social and healthcare debates risks generating an apparent consensus around a concept whose meaning often remains vague and unexamined. Care is frequently invoked as a desirable value, a professional competence or an ethical imperative, yet its pedagogical significance is not always sufficiently explored. Similarly, diversity is often framed through normative discourses centred on inclusion policies and equal opportunities, while its potential as a formative and transformative educational resource remains underdeveloped. In this sense, both care and diversity require critical reconsideration, not as separate domains of intervention but as interconnected pedagogical categories capable of

reorienting the aims and practices of professional education.

From a pedagogical perspective, care cannot be reduced to a set of technical actions aimed at responding to needs. Such a reduction would risk confining care to the sphere of assistance, overlooking its relational, ethical and educational dimensions.

Noddings (2013) argues that caring emerges through encounters in which individuals become genuinely attentive to one another, developing forms of responsiveness that transcend procedural obligations. In her view, care is not merely something that professionals do; it is a way of being in relation with others. This shift is particularly significant for educational contexts, where learning often takes place through relationships capable of generating recognition, trust and responsibility. As Noddings (2008) further suggests, moral education itself cannot be separated from experiences of caring relationships, since ethical understanding develops not only through abstract principles but through concrete encounters with others.

The pedagogical implications of this perspective become even more evident when read alongside Mortari's (2006) reflections on the practice of care. For Mortari, caring is not simply an intervention directed toward another person; it is an existential and educational posture grounded in attentiveness to the conditions that enable human flourishing.

Care, therefore, involves recognising vulnerability not as a deficit to be corrected but as a constitutive dimension of human existence. Such a position challenges dominant educational models centred on performance, efficiency and standardisation, inviting educators and professionals to cultivate forms of practical wisdom capable of responding to the uniqueness of each situation.

When we talk about being unique, it raises an important question about diversity. Often, when we think about diversity, we focus on how to help people fit in or overcome their differences. But this approach can actually make things worse by reinforcing the idea that there's a "normal" way of being and that anyone who is different needs to be fixed. In education, we should think about diversity as a normal part of life, not as something that needs special treatment. Every time we interact with someone, we're dealing with a complex mix of differences - where they come from, what they've experienced, how they think and learn, their bodies, and their relationships. As educators, we need to be able to work with this complexity, rather than trying to fit people into predetermined categories. By doing so, we can create a more inclusive and effective learning environment.

The relationship between care and diversity becomes particularly relevant when considering the complexity of contemporary educational action. As Broccoli (2016) observes, educational practice unfolds within contexts characterised by uncertainty, unpredictability and relational complexity. Educational decisions cannot be entirely predetermined, nor can they be reduced to technical procedures. Rather, they require continuous interpretation and ethical judgement. In this perspective, care becomes a way of inhabiting complexity, allowing professionals to remain attentive to the singularity of persons while navigating the tensions and ambiguities inherent in educational and caring relationships.

Moreover, care is never solely an individual disposition. It is also shaped by the social, cultural and institutional environments in which relationships take place. Tronto (2020) reminds us that care is deeply connected to questions of responsibility, power and participation. Her reflections invite us to move beyond individualistic understandings of care and consider how caring practices are embedded within broader social arrangements. Similarly, the notion of “caring architecture” proposed by Tronto (2019) highlights the importance of designing environments that support attentiveness, responsiveness and inclusion. This perspective is particularly relevant for professional education, where learning environments contribute significantly to shaping future practitioners' attitudes and ways of relating to others.

Within this framework, Broccoli's (2019) reflections on the educational community acquire renewed significance. The educational value of care cannot be separated from the construction of relational spaces in which recognition, reciprocity and participation become possible. Professional learning, therefore, extends beyond the acquisition of competencies and encompasses processes of belonging, dialogue and shared responsibility. Educating for care means creating conditions in which future professionals can experience the

relational dimensions of learning and develop the capacity to engage ethically with human diversity.

When we think about it, diversity and care are closely linked. To truly care for someone, we need to recognize what makes them unique. And it's through diversity that we can see and appreciate these unique qualities. So, the real challenge for education today is not just to produce skilled professionals, but to create reflective and thoughtful practitioners who can learn from and understand different perspectives. This is where hands-on, diversity-focused learning approaches come in - they help us turn encounters with difference into opportunities for personal and professional growth. By doing so, we can foster a deeper understanding of each other and ourselves, leading to more empathetic and effective care.

3. Learning Through Lived Experiences: Encountering Diversity as an Educational Experience

One of the most significant limitations of contemporary professional education lies in the tendency to approach diversity primarily as an object of knowledge. Future healthcare and social care professionals are frequently exposed to information about ageing, disability, dependency and vulnerability through lectures, guidelines and procedural frameworks. While such knowledge is undoubtedly necessary, it is often insufficient for preparing practitioners to engage with the complexity of human experience. Knowing about diversity does not necessarily imply understanding how diversity is lived, perceived and negotiated in everyday life. The educational challenge, therefore, is not merely to expand professional knowledge, but to create conditions through which learners can critically encounter experiences that question assumptions, unsettle certainties and open new perspectives on care.

From this standpoint, the DIVERSITY-LIVED project proposes a significant pedagogical shift. The project is grounded in the assumption that educational transformation occurs when diversity ceases to be a distant object of observation and becomes an experience that engages the learner cognitively, emotionally and relationally. In this perspective, lived experiences are not supplementary elements added to professional curricula; they represent a form of knowledge that enables access to dimensions of human existence that often remain invisible within conventional educational approaches.

The growing interest in simulation-based education reflects a broader recognition of the need to bridge the gap between theoretical understanding and lived reality. Recent reviews have shown that ageing simulation experiences can foster greater awareness of the challenges associated with sensory, physical and cognitive decline, contributing to more positive attitudes towards older adults and more person-centred approaches to care (Eost-Telling et al., 2021; Nelson et al., 2023). However, the educational value of simulation should not be interpreted in terms of the faithful reproduction of another person's condition. No simulation can fully capture the complexity of living with a disability, experiencing dependency or ageing over time. The pedagogical relevance of these experiences lies elsewhere.

What simulations make possible is a temporary disruption of habitual perceptions. By confronting learners with unfamiliar limitations, altered sensory conditions or reduced autonomy, they create situations in which previously unnoticed dimensions of everyday life become visible. In this sense, simulations function as pedagogical mediators rather than representations of reality. Their purpose is not to generate identification with another person's experience, but to encourage a more reflective awareness of one's own assumptions regarding normality, independence and competence. Educationally, their value resides less in imitation than in the questions they provoke.

This aspect is particularly important within professional education for care. Encounters with vulnerability often generate emotional reactions that cannot be reduced to cognitive learning outcomes. Feelings of uncertainty, frustration, dependency or disorientation may emerge during immersive experiences, creating opportunities for learners to reflect upon dimensions of care that are difficult to access through traditional instruction. Yet experience alone does not guarantee learning. Educational meaning emerges through processes of reflection, dialogue and interpretation that enable participants to make sense of what they have encountered. For this reason, the DIVERSITY-LIVED framework attributes particular importance to debriefing practices and guided reflection. The educational objective is not the experience itself, but the critical elaboration of the experience.

Within this process, lived experiences become powerful catalysts for the development of human skills. Recent studies indicate that simulation-based educational approaches can contribute to strengthening communication abilities, empathic understanding and relational awareness among healthcare professionals (Mohammed & Shaban, 2025). Similarly, immersive environments have been shown to enhance perspective-taking and emotional engagement, fostering deeper forms of learning than those achieved through transmissive methods alone (Makransky et al., 2020). Nevertheless, empathy is not conceived here as a spontaneous emotional reaction or as an individual trait. From a pedagogical perspective, the educational significance of lived experiences lies precisely in their ability to transform encounters with diversity into opportunities for human and professional growth. Through simulation, reflection and dialogue, learners are invited to move beyond stereotypical representations and engage with the complexity of human vulnerability. In this way, lived experiences become educational mediators through which future professionals can develop not only greater technical competence, but also the empathy, reflexivity and ethical sensitivity required for inclusive care.

The DIVERSITY-LIVED project locates its educational innovation within this transformative potential. By integrating experiential devices, reflective practices and direct engagement with diverse life experiences, the framework seeks to cultivate forms of professional learning capable of connecting knowledge with understanding, competence with responsibility and care with recognition. It is precisely from this educational encounter with diversity that the human skills necessary for inclusive professional practice begin to emerge.

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4. Human Skills and the Formation of Caring Professionals

The increasing complexity of contemporary care contexts has generated growing attention towards the development of so-called human skills.

Empathy, communication, emotional awareness, perspective-taking, reflexivity and relational competence are frequently identified as essential attributes for professionals working in healthcare and social care settings. Yet, despite their widespread recognition, these dimensions often remain peripheral within formal educational pathways, where technical expertise continues to occupy a dominant position. This imbalance reveals a deeper educational issue: the persistent tendency to conceive professional preparation primarily in terms of knowledge acquisition and procedural competence, while underestimating the relational and ethical dimensions through which professional practice acquires meaning.

As Maeda and Socha-Dietrich (2021) observe, future health and social care professionals will be required not only to master specialised knowledge but also to navigate uncertainty, engage with diverse life experiences and respond to situations that cannot be addressed through standardised protocols alone. Professional effectiveness, therefore, depends on the ability to integrate technical competence with forms of practical judgement, relational sensitivity and ethical responsibility. From this perspective, human skills should not be interpreted as supplementary attributes that complement professional expertise. Rather, they constitute an essential dimension of professional competence itself.

The DIVERSITY-LIVED framework challenges the widespread assumption that such capacities can be developed through direct instruction or isolated training activities. Empathy, for example, cannot be reduced to a behavioural technique nor acquired through the simple transmission of theoretical principles. Rather, it emerges through encounters that invite individuals to reconsider their own perspectives and engage with experiences different from their own. Recent research suggests that immersive and simulation-based educational experiences can contribute significantly to the development of empathic understanding and communication skills, particularly when accompanied by structured opportunities for reflection and dialogue (Mohammed & Shaban, 2025). What appears educationally relevant is not the emotional impact of the experience itself, but the learner's capacity to interpret, question, and integrate that experience into a broader understanding of professional responsibility.

This emphasis on reflexivity is particularly important. Contemporary professional cultures often privilege certainty, efficiency and problem-solving. However, caring professions frequently require the capacity to remain within situations

characterised by ambiguity, vulnerability and incompleteness. Educationally, reflexivity enables professionals to recognise the limits of their own assumptions, to question habitual ways of interpreting reality and to remain open to alternative perspectives. In this sense, reflexivity functions as a mediating competence through which empathy, communication and ethical awareness become professionally meaningful.

A similar argument can be advanced regarding perspective-taking. Encounters with lived experiences of ageing, disability and social exclusion expose learners to forms of knowledge that challenge dominant representations of autonomy, productivity and normality. Research on simulation-based learning has shown that immersive educational environments can support these processes by fostering deeper engagement with the experiences of others and encouraging more nuanced forms of interpretation (Makransky et al., 2020). Nevertheless, perspective-taking should not be confused with identification. The educational objective is not to claim access to another person's experience, but to cultivate a disposition of attentiveness towards perspectives that remain different from one's own.

Within the DIVERSITY-LIVED project, the development of human skills is therefore understood as a process of professional formation rather than skills acquisition. The distinction is significant. Formation refers to a broader educational movement through which individuals gradually construct ways of seeing, interpreting and inhabiting professional practice. Human skills emerge through participation in meaningful experiences, through dialogue with others and through critical engagement with situations that challenge established certainties. They are cultivated within relationships and communities of learning rather than transmitted as discrete competencies.

Ultimately, the educational value of human skills lies in their capacity to reconnect professional action with its human significance. In contexts increasingly influenced by technological innovation, managerial logics and performance indicators, there is a risk that care becomes detached from the relational foundations that give it meaning. The contribution of DIVERSITY-LIVED resides precisely in its attempt to restore this connection by creating educational environments in which empathy, reflexivity, communication and ethical responsibility are not treated as ancillary outcomes, but as central dimensions of professional identity. Through this perspective, the formation of caring professionals becomes inseparable from the formation of reflective and responsible human beings capable of recognising diversity as a source of learning, understanding and shared humanity.

5. The DIVERSITY-LIVED Pedagogical Framework: Towards Inclusive Professional Formation

The challenges posed by contemporary care contexts require educational frameworks capable of connecting knowledge, experience and professional formation within coherent learning environments. In response to this need, the DIVERSITY-LIVED project proposes a pedagogical framework that integrates lived experiences, reflective learning and human skills to support the development of inclusive care practices.

The framework originates from the recognition that professional competence cannot be reduced to technical expertise alone. Contemporary scholarship increasingly highlights the need for educational approaches that foster ethical responsibility, relational awareness and critical judgement alongside specialised knowledge (Lozano et al., 2017). Professional formation, therefore, involves not only learning how to act, but also developing the capacity to understand the meanings, values and relationships that underpin care practices.

The first pillar of the framework concerns the recognition of lived experiences as educational knowledge. Experiences of ageing, disability and social diversity are approached not as objects of study but as opportunities to encounter perspectives capable of challenging assumptions and expanding professional understanding. Learning emerges through engagement with experiences that reveal the complexity of human vulnerability and interdependence.

The second pillar is reflective learning. Within DIVERSITY-LIVED, simulations, narratives and experiential activities are conceived as educational mediators that support processes of interpretation and meaning-making. Their value lies not in reproducing reality but in creating opportunities for critical reflection through which learners can reconsider beliefs, attitudes and professional

responsibilities. This perspective is consistent with approaches that conceive professional learning as an ongoing process of inquiry and development rather than the acquisition of fixed competencies (Merry et al., 2023).

The third pillar concerns the development of human skills as foundational dimensions of professional identity. Empathy, communication, reflexivity and ethical sensitivity are not considered supplementary attributes but integral components of professional formation. Recent studies on professional identity formation emphasise that becoming a professional entails the gradual development of values, dispositions and ways of understanding responsibility within practice (Kim et al., 2024; Rath, 2025). In this regard, human skills represent essential conditions for establishing meaningful and respectful relationships within diverse care contexts. This perspective is further supported by evidence-informed pedagogical approaches that identify reflective practice, authentic experiences and relational learning as central to the development of professional identity (Fleer et al., 2025).

Finally, the framework promotes learning environments characterised by participation, reciprocity and recognition. Knowledge is understood as a process co-constructed through dialogue among learners, educators and people with lived experience. While contemporary professional education is increasingly influenced by technological innovation and personalised learning systems (Ait Ali et al., 2023; Almansour & Alfhaid, 2024), DIVERSITY-LIVED emphasises that inclusive care ultimately depends on the capacity to understand, recognise and respond to the uniqueness of each person. By integrating lived experiences, reflective learning and human skills, the framework offers a pedagogical model for preparing professionals capable of engaging ethically and responsibly with the complexities of contemporary society.

The reflections developed throughout this contribution suggest that contemporary professional education faces a challenge that cannot be addressed through the simple addition of new content or specialised competences. The increasing complexity of care contexts requires educational frameworks capable of connecting knowledge, experience and professional formation within coherent learning environments. In this perspective, the DIVERSITY-LIVED project proposes a pedagogical framework that seeks to

6. Conclusions

The reflections developed in this article suggest that the challenges posed by contemporary care contexts cannot be addressed solely through the acquisition of new technical competencies or the implementation of innovative educational tools. The growing complexity of ageing societies, the increasing visibility of functional diversity and the demand for more inclusive forms of care call for a deeper reconsideration of the educational foundations upon which professional preparation is built. At stake is not simply the effectiveness of professional interventions, but the very way in which future practitioners learn to understand the human condition and their responsibility towards others.

From this perspective, care emerges as a fundamentally pedagogical concern. Before becoming a professional practice, care represents a way of interpreting relationships, recognising vulnerability and responding to human uniqueness. Similarly, diversity cannot be reduced to a category of intervention or a challenge to be managed through specialised procedures. It constitutes a structural dimension of human existence that invites educational systems to move beyond standardised representations of the person and towards more relational, situated and inclusive forms of learning.

The DIVERSITY-LIVED framework has been presented as an attempt to respond to this challenge by placing lived experiences at the centre of professional education. The project assumes that meaningful learning about ageing, disability and social diversity cannot be achieved exclusively through the transmission of information. Rather, it requires educational encounters capable of engaging learners cognitively, emotionally and ethically, enabling them to question assumptions, recognise different perspectives and develop a more complex understanding of care. Within this process, simulations, narratives and reflective practices do not function as isolated methodologies, but as pedagogical mediators that support the construction of meaning and the development of professional awareness.

Particular significance has been attributed to the role of human skills. The literature increasingly

recognises that empathy, communication, reflexivity and ethical sensitivity are essential dimensions of professional competence (Kim et al., 2024; Rath, 2025). However, the contribution of DIVERSITY-LIVED lies in proposing a broader educational interpretation. Human skills are not conceived as additional competences that complement technical expertise; they are understood as formative dimensions through which professional identity takes shape. As recent studies on professional identity formation suggest, becoming a professional involves the gradual development of dispositions, values and ways of relating that influence how individuals understand their role and responsibility within practice (Fleer et al., 2025). In this sense, professional education is inseparable from processes of human development. The framework, therefore, contributes to ongoing debates concerning the future of health and social care education by proposing a pedagogical vision in which diversity becomes a source of learning, care becomes a relational and ethical horizon, and professional formation becomes a process of personal and collective transformation. Such a perspective is particularly relevant in a historical moment characterised by technological innovation, increasing complexity and the risk of reducing educational quality to measurable outcomes alone. While contemporary educational systems continue to invest in digitalisation, artificial intelligence and personalised learning environments (Almansour & Alfhaid, 2024), the human dimensions of care remain irreplaceable. The capacity to listen, recognise, understand and respond responsibly to others cannot be delegated to technological systems; it must be cultivated through educational experiences that place human relationships at the centre of learning.

Ultimately, the contribution of the DIVERSITY-LIVED project extends beyond the specific context of healthcare and social care training. It offers a broader pedagogical reflection on how educational institutions might contribute to the formation of professionals capable of inhabiting complexity without reducing it, engaging with diversity without fearing it and exercising care without transforming it into a purely technical function. In this regard, educating for care through diversity becomes not only a professional objective, but a humanistic educational project oriented towards the development of more inclusive, reflective and responsible societies.

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