DISABILITY AND TEACHING FROM THE NAIVE PERSPECTIVES OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHERS.
TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AS THE KEY CHALLENGE FOR A CULTURAL RENEWAL

DISABILITÀ E DIDATTICA NELLE CONCEZIONI INGENUE DEI DOCENTI DI SOSTEGNO
LA FORMAZIONE COME SFIDA PER UN RINNOVAMENTO CULTURALE

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Abstract

In line with the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of inclusive approaches, the present exploratory qualitative study examined the ideas and attitudes of future special education teachers for nursery and primary schools, at the beginning of their professional training, in the context of the postgraduate course in special education for students with disabilities at Milano-Bicocca University. Basic training should allow time and space for stimulating future teachers to reflect on and deconstruct the naive understanding and misguided attitudes that are sometimes held by inexperienced teachers. Indeed, initial teacher training is one of key factors in the improvement the educational system from an inclusive perspective.

La ricerca esplorativa-qualitativa qui presentata, basandosi sui quadri concettuali dell'approccio inclusivo, è volta a indagare le concezioni ingenue e gli atteggiamenti dei futuri insegnanti di sostegno della scuola dell'infanzia e primaria, all'inizio del loro percorso formativo nell'ambito del Corso di Specializzazione per le attività di sostegno agli alunni con disabilità presso l'Università Milano-Bicocca. La formazione iniziale dovrebbe rappresentare uno spazio-tempo per stimolare i futuri insegnanti a riflettere e a decostruire concezioni ingenue e atteggiamenti erronei che, talvolta, appartengono ad insegnanti novizi. Difatti, la formazione iniziale rappresenta uno dei fattori decisivi per il miglioramento del sistema di istruzione in una prospettiva inclusiva.

Keywords

basic training; special education teachers; naive understandings; disability; teaching

Formazione inziale; insegnante di sostegno; concezioni ingenue; disabilità; didattica

1. Introduction
Throughout Europe, and at the international level more generally, there is growing recognition of the need to move in an ever more inclusive direction (UN, 2015). Inclusion is also a goal of education systems, thanks in part to major international policy statements that have fostered *a*

new educational culture in schools. Suffice it to recall that the term inclusion was formalized - and recognized internationally in 1994 - via the Salamanca Declaration (UNESCO, 1994), which marked the beginning of *a cultural change* and a renewal in education and teaching that has sought to build up democratic schools committed to the values of integration and inclusion. The expression *education for all* entered the discourse, flagging the urgent need to receive all children, including those with disabilities, into a shared school system, which should offer the capacity to promote not only access, but also participation and learning for an increasingly diverse group of children. *Differences,* which concern *everybody*, were now a value and represented a structural and intrinsic element of human existence; teachers were to be guided to make the cultural shift away from a conceptualization of difference as an exceptional condition (only affecting a few) or as reduced to learning difficulties and/or special educational needs (Demo, 2019; Bocci, 2015).

This was a key development - which is still ongoing today - and which has had repercussions, not only at the level of teaching practices, but also at the level of teachers' initial education and in-service training. An inclusive perspective requires revolutionizing teachers' professional development in terms of their knowledge and skills but underpinned by a renewed commitment to inclusive values and cultures that should themselves be addressed as part of teacher training (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2012). In other words, basic teacher education should allow time and space for stimulating reflection on and deconstruction of the naive understandings and misguided attitudes that are sometimes held by inexperienced teachers. The professional development trajectory of future special education teachers must not run the risk of becoming a "replicator" of recurrent attitudes and/or dominant practices, via a predominantly transmissive and cumulative model that does not allow them to modify – where necessary – their mental representations, beliefs and/or ideas "at the point of entry" to the profession. As the European Agency notes (2014), during their initial and in-service training, teachers should be encouraged to acquire the positive attitudes, knowledge, and skills that will equip them to deal with pupils' diverse needs. Furthermore, if teachers end their basic training without developing positive attitudes to inclusion, they are unlikely to acquire such attitudes during their professional careers (De Angelis, 2017; Ramel, 2016). Initial teacher training, therefore, is "among the key factors in the improvement and innovation of the educational system from an inclusive perspective" (Chiappetta Cajola, 2018, p. 25).

In light of this background, the present exploratory qualitative study examined the ideas and attitudes of future special education teachers for nursery and primary schools, at the beginning of their professional training, in the context of the postgraduate course in special education for students with disabilities at the University of Milan-Bicocca.

2. The key importance of initial teacher education

At both the national and international levels, teachers require broader and more robust professional competences as a key prerequisite for delivering quality inclusive education and equal opportunities for learning to all (UN, 2015). This will demand major investment in teaching staff in terms of offering all teachers strong initial education and in-service professional development in relation to the educational and teaching/learning aspects of school inclusion (Pavone, 2015). In this sense, inclusion is the key goal to be achieved when going about the delicate task of training special education teachers (but also subject specialist teachers), who should "be first and foremost *inclusive teachers* enriched with additional *skills* for the fostering-facilitation-negotiation of cultures, policies, and good practices in school and extracurricular settings" (Gasperi, 2017). Regarding the skill sets of inclusive teachers, the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education published, in 2012, a document entitled *Profile of Inclusive Teachers* which outlined the values and areas of competence that

teachers require to be inclusive. The profile of the inclusive teacher spans knowledge, abilities, and *professional competences* of the methodological-didactic, relational-communicative, and reflective kind, which serve to enhance the learning environment via an inclusive teaching style that values differences among students, removes obstacles to learning, and encourages a cooperative and participatory approach. Hence an inclusive approach is closely bound up with inclusive values related to respect for differences, the protection of rights (*valuing student diversity and supporting all students*), building an inclusive educational community *(working with others: families and other practitioners*) and professional responsibility (*basic training and continuing professional development)*. The document, however, also emphasizes the fact that underpinning teachers' professional knowhow is the dimension *of their personal beliefs and opinions*, which constitutes the cultural framework for their educational and teaching actions and the behaviours they enact. Thus, working on the ability to critically examine and deconstruct one's own beliefs and attitudes on themes of inclusion is an essential component of basic teacher education (both special and subject-specialist), but also of continuous professional development, if we wish to improve the quality of education. Teacher education trajectories should not *overlook* the "entry" attitudes and beliefs of students who can act as *vectors of* or, on the contrary, as (cultural) barriers to inclusion, in the school setting. The basic training of future special education teachers should include exploration of their past experience (both personal and professional) with a view to identifying potential stereotypical views and prejudices, and acquiring an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms that can hinder the participation and learning of students with disabilities and, more generally, of all students. As Dovigo (2015) points out, in order to promote "inclusion and reduce exclusion we must explore our values and beliefs, our prejudices, our own experiences relating to obstacles to learning and participation, and with regard to exclusion […] Disabilities are often created within the setting. in the form of discriminatory attitudes and practices and inability to remove obstacles to access and participation" (p. 95 and p. 78).

Learning to cultivate awareness of one's own attitudes and beliefs, via a process of deconstruction and reflection, and developing the propensity to reflect on one's own concept of "teacher" should be *key components* of initial teacher training, whose purpose is to form the highly qualified professionals required to implement truly inclusive practices. In basic teacher education, indirect teaching practice and laboratories play a key role in this regard - and indeed, these are two of the major areas provided for in the 2011 ministerial decree on postgraduate courses for special education teachers, which offer theoretical-practical knowledge to meet the training needs of future teachers, blending theory, professional practice, and reflexivity (Zecca, 2014). On the postgraduate course in special education, these spaces of reflexivity bear even greater added value, becoming a privileged opportunity, if only due to the low student/tutor ratio, to tap into the student teachers' representations of disability, the role and functions of the special needs teacher, and their own teaching skills.

3.The study

In light of this theoretical framework, we based our own reflections on data collected using exploratory-qualitative research methods, on the attitudes and beliefs of special education teachers at the beginning of their training. Students enrolled on the 5th edition of the Postgraduate Course in Special Education at Nursery and Primary School (2019/2020) completed a semi-structured questionnaire divided into two sections: the first designed to collect socio-demographic data such as age, educational status, work experience, and type of job; and the second comprising three open-ended questions. The analysis now presented concerns participants' responses to the third open question, which was designed to tap into potential naive understandings held by the student teachers. Specifically, the question was

formulated as follows: "a teacher approaching the role of special education teacher for the first time may have naive ideas about the education of students with disabilities. Try to describe possible ideas that trainee special education teachers often hold (max. three ideas, max. two lines each)" (Calvani, et al., 2017). The aim of the research, therefore, was to investigate the naive understandings of trainee teachers, based on their own experience as individuals or teachers.

Of 151 students (137=female and 14=male) aged between 24 and 53, 66.9% held a master's degree or the previous equivalent (four-year degree programme); of these, 50.3% had completed a degree in Primary Education. With regard to work experience, 96% said they were in a teaching post at the time of completing the questionnaire: of these, 80.1% were on temporary contracts, while 15.9% held permanent posts. About 63.5% of the participants reported one-five years' teaching experience, while 9.3% had completed less than one year of service. In relation to type of teaching job, 34.4% had never worked as a special education teacher.

These figures suggest that, with the exception of a very small percentage, virtually all the sample had teaching experience, working as subject specialists and/or special needs teachers.

3.1 The methodology

The answers to the third open question were analysed using qualitative thematic coding (Braun, Clarke, 2006). Coding of the textual corpus led to the identification of meaningful patterns that recurred throughout the text. The core themes were not defined a priori, but rather by following an inductive, data-driven method: the list of codes was developed after the researchers had carefully read and familiarized themselves with the text, enabling them to extract the concepts that were salient to the phenomenon under study (Auerbach, Silvestrein, 2003; Pastori, 2017). The entire analysis process was conducted intersubjectively, that it to say, it was jointly conducted by the three authors, following the six steps recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) immersion in the data by reading and re-reading the texts and noting initial ideas; (2) codification, for the entire data set, the most salient contents; (3) grouping of the codes under recurring themes that are salient to the research topic; (4) verification of the themes that emerge on the basis of the assigned codes and generation of an analytical thematic map; (5) definitively defining the themes by assigning a clear and distinctive label to each (6) selection of significant examples to link the research question with the data analysis and draw up a final report. The intersubjective discussion among the authors facilitated the identification of clear and distinct codes and the clarification of their meaning where necessary. This methodology enabled us to remain faithful to the words of the students themselves, and to focus on *the meaning* of the data (Pastori, 2017, p. 398).

4.Results

The analytical process described led to the identification of three thematic areas, each comprising a set of recurring themes, identified by coding and grouping individual textual units. The outcomes of the analysis may thus be mapped around three axes: the concept of *disability*, the concept of *teaching methods*, and the concept of *inclusion*. In the following paragraphs, we describe the first two of these axes only.

4.1 Axis 1-Disability: Naive understandings

The first thematic area that emerged from the codification of the student teachers' responses is closely linked to the concept of disability and encompasses all the naive understandings drawn on by the students to define the nature of disability or paint a picture of it. In keeping with other recent findings (Fiorucci 2018, Fiorucci, 2019, Ramel, 2014), the responses to the present

questionnaire revealed naive understandings based on stereotypical images of disability and a predominantly bio-medical perspective. Among the most frequently described naive beliefs is the identification of pupils with their disability, as though this were an inherent characteristic of the person, with the immediate consequence that all pupils with a given disability are perceived to be the same.

> "The child is associated with his or her disability. The first thing you see is the disability" (St. 31)[1].
> "Identifying the child with his disability" (St. 79).
> "Disability is a difficulty that lies within the child" (St. 87).
> "Treating disability as a problem caused by a disease or pathological condition" (St. 109).

As the last of these responses makes clear, identifying pupils with disabilities with their diagnoses leads teachers to use specialized medical language, characterized, as exemplified below, by terms such as "being affected by", "pathology", and "symptoms". This language leads teachers to divide pupils into immutable, stereotypical categories: "autistic" "children with Down syndrome", "deaf". Each category is attributed similar behaviours, personality types, or attitudes. From an educational point of view, this concept, in the light of the data collected, translates into the idea of being able to adopt the same tools and strategies for all the pupils in a given "category".

> "Focusing on certain features of a pathology for all children affected by that pathology: Down Syndrome children are sociable and extroverted" (St. 52).
> "with regard to disability, there are, for example, generalizations about each type of handicap: Children with Down syndrome are affectionate; deaf children are aggressive; children with autism cannot be touched" (St.58).
> "All children with a given disorder have all the symptoms" (St.63).
> "Reading the diagnosis tells us what the person is like. All those with the same diagnosis are classifiable in the same way" (St. 12).

These conceptualizations appear to be based on the images that underpin broader social representations of disability, as pointed out by Mercier (1999) in an international research setting. More specifically, the students' words express *a semiological image*, guided by principles of classification that identify the part with the whole, leading to a "lumping together" of the different types of disability (Fiorucci, Pinnelli, 2019). The other naive understandings reported by the students appear to be based on the image of the "*figure in need of support*, which infantilizes the disabled person" (Fiorucci, Pinnelli, 2019, p.540).
These are naive outlooks reflecting social representations of disability which, as pointed out by Lepri (2011), once they have been produced and used throughout history will never completely disappear, and which and still today dominate cultures, practices, and policies (Booth, Ainscow 2002), interpreting disability as disease ("a sick person to be cared for") or need for care ("an eternal child"). In the school setting too, the image of a student with disabilities as a subject that needs to be supported, looked after, and protected, with a dependent relationship, appears to underpin the various naive understandings of disability.

> "There has to be protective attitude toward the disabled child" (St. 37).
> "Thinking that being special education teachers is a predisposition to help the most disadvantaged and that one must become the child' shadow, almost a substitute mother at school" (S.41).

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[1] "St." stands for "student".

> "Welfarism: so often those who come to work in schools do not seek to develop the student's potential, especially in cases of severe disability" (S.45).
> "Fulfilling an exaggeratedly protective function, often without realizing it; this means running the risk of having an overly invasive attitude in terms of reception, care, and protection" (S.56).
> "The child with disabilities basically needs to be nursed" (S. 97).
> "The tendency to go over the top in carrying out one's protective function, thus compromising self-responsibility" (S.120).
> "The disabled child is an unfortunate, to be saved and looked after" (S. 128)

In the educational field, care, caregiving, and protection translate into doing everything for pupils, leading them to reduce their level of activity and participation, in the terms of the ICF (WHO, 2001). Excessive care and protection, as if the teacher were the parent's alter ego at school, hinders, as we shall see in the next paragraph, both the design of situations with an appropriate level of challenge, and collective learning, in which the participation of the pupil with disabilities is not reduced to an exclusive relationship with the special needs teacher (d'Alonzo, 2016; Demo, 2016; Gaspari, 2015). Such naïve views, if not recognized, can have a dampening impact on pupils' functioning given that the educational action does reflect the etymological direction of the term "education=draw out" by focusing on the students' potential, but rather expresses an overly resigned attitude and lack of confidence in their potential for growth and improvement. Although recent research into special education teachers' beliefs about educational success for pupils with disabilities identified a theory of incremental intelligence (Montesano, Straniero, 2019), the naive understandings of student teachers at the beginning of their training that we present here reflect a notion of immutability and limited hope of improvement for pupils with disabilities. Attitudes of care, protection, and substitution stem from the naive notion that pupils "cannot manage" by themselves and that this status is, presumably, difficult to change.

> "There is a notion of dealing with pupils who remain in a fixed, stable condition, which cannot be improved" (St.8).
> "Children with disabilities are unable to improve" (St.27).
> "Having an unchangeable view of the person with a handicap" (St.23).
> "There are fixed cases, there are pre-defined strategies, in some cases there is no room for improvement" (St.32).
> "There is the notion that the child should be treated as if she was not able to do anything" (St. 133).

All of these naive understandings elicit old models and concepts of disability which mainly emphasize the person's deficient, inadequate characteristics, based on the labelling of the individual, without considering that the context may represent part of the problem (D'Alessio, 2011). This focus on the deficiency, which is believed to be immutable and consequently elicits a protective attitude toward the individual, shows that the setting and environmental factors are rarely taken into account when relating to persons with disability. In the absence of specific training on disability and inclusion (Amatori, 2019; Bocci, 2015), such a view translates, at the educational level, into holding the school, class, teachers, and peers less responsible for doing all that they can to reduce barriers and encourage the participation of the disabled student. Getting student teachers to observe how the physical, organizational, and relational setting (Cottini, 2017) can feature either barriers or facilitating features and, consequently, what interventions might be possible, can become a pathway towards changing the *school culture*. An *ecological* perspective that emphasizes the impact of the environment on the genesis and maintenance of disability (Ianes, Cramerotti, Scapin, 2019), as defined in the ICF, still demands

cultural change, a profoundly renewed "*mindset*, perception of the other, assumptions, thoughts, and emotions, which affect our way of behaving" (Prondzinski, 2019, p.147).

4.2 Axis 2-Teaching: naive understandings

The naive understandings related to the macro thematic area of teaching are related to all the practices involved in teaching-learning processes, along a continuum that extends from the design phase to the evaluation phase of educational action. More specifically, these perspectives are centred around three constructs: "simplification", "personalized design", and "taking the pupil with disabilities out of the classroom". Underpinning these concepts, which can be typical of teachers in training, there is the notion that complex skills can be acquired more easily if broken down into their individual component skills, which are viewed as simpler. Complex skills are thus divided into the minimal units composing them, to be learned by those who display the greatest difficulty in mastering them (Bloom, 1981). For pupils with disabilities, the learning objectives and contents tend to be reduced in number and scope, with respect to the activities designed for the class, which are designed with a homogeneous group of pupils in mind. The term "simplification" was used by several student teachers to describe the process of adapting educational design to the specific needs of pupils with disabilities and respecting differences.

> "The pupil certainly requires maximum simplification and cutting down of activities, and so cannot work with the others but must necessarily have a one-to-one relationship with the special needs teacher" (St. 7).
> "Simplifying everything, even things that your child could do as well as the others" (St. 30).
> "Simplifying activities and planning without taking the student's actual skills into account" (St. 58)
> "The special education teacher must follow the class programme, reducing it or simplifying it for the disabled child" (St.146)

This simplification is the process that Cottini (2019) identifies as a recurring attempt to combine customized design with following the set curriculum. When addressing the question of how to achieve an educational design that takes into account different educational needs, a range of possibilities are available, and the "most reassuring path, because tried and tested, is to design a programme for the class, to be modified to a greater or lesser extent for those who are unable to complete it" (p. 13). Thus, two programmes are designed, one for the student with disabilities and one for the class group, which proceed like two parallel roads that never meet, as expressed by the student teachers themselves:

> "You work with the child outside of the classroom to do activities designed for them, without alternating them with the activities of the class group." (St. 34).
> "In the case of more serious disabilities, it is believed that the design of the class programme cannot be linked in any way with that of the student" (St. 38).

It is more complex to set out to design a programme that is inclusive, open and flexible, and takes individual differences into account while limiting recourse to special programmes to be run in parallel with those of the class. Achieving this objective requires abandoning some of the naive understandings and attitudes that can be held by trainee teachers, as articulated by the student teachers:

> "Thinking about educational design for the child in your charge without involving the other teachers" (St. 34).

> "Always proceeding separately without seeking points of contact with the class programme" (St.141).
> "Some special needs teachers are the first to think that they need to carry out their work separately, dealing only with the student who has been assigned to them without remembering that they are teachers to the entire class to all intents and purposes" (St. 58).
> "You cannot intervene in class work designed by your colleagues" (S.146).

There is still a strong vision of a special education teacher who, on the one hand, is the only one with the competences required to design teaching-learning paths suitable for the student with disabilities and, on the other, is excluded from working with the other teachers to develop an inclusive curriculum (Cottini, 2019). Even at the design stage, the student teachers viewed the special education teacher's job as individual, solitary and confined to a one-to-one relationship: the focus is on the pupil, and their difficulties and needs, as the basis for designing personalized teaching-learning paths. However, in the absence of specific training on themes of inclusion, the need for specific interventions and teaching methods for pupils with disabilities may lead to forms of discrimination. Designing ad hoc programmes for these pupils, according to the student teachers, means that they follow differential educational trajectories in different times and spaces, thus receiving limited opportunities to participate in the life of the class. Although several studies (Aiello et al., 2017; Fiorucci, 2019, Fiorucci, Pinnelli, 2019; Montesano, Straniero, 2019) have found that teachers recognize the importance of the values of inclusion and the role of Italian legislation in ensuring the educational success of pupils with disabilities, naive views continue to persist that steer educational action in a different direction to that evoked in principle. There appears to be a discrepancy between the student teachers' expressed opinions about inclusion (for example, strong disagreement with the notion that a pupil with disabilities should follow a separate educational pathway to her classmates) and their naive understandings, which mirror and photograph what is actually done in class. Analysis of the student teachers' responses suggests that the most frequently used expression was "out of the classroom", which featured in over one third of the texts.

> "You always need to take the child out; to work exclusively with the child with disabilities" (St. 24).
> "The pupil with disabilities is always kept out of the classroom because he cannot do the things that his classmates do" (St. 50).
> "The child with disabilities must be outside of the classroom because she creates disturbance" (St. 71).

Working outside the classroom on a programme based, by virtue of the principle of simplification, on minimum objectives that reflect the principle of "training" rather than learning, entails a set of behaviours that are, naively, put into practice by teachers. The student teachers reported the tendency to lighten, as a matter of principle, the learning burden of pupils with disabilities, to avoid challenging them with complex and demanding tasks (Caldin, 2019a). Furthermore, in line with the protective attitude described in the last paragraph, efforts are also put in place to prevent pupils with disabilities from having to deal with potentially frustrating situations. Such behaviours, unconsciously, limit these pupils' opportunities to choose for themselves and to engage in exchanges and negotiations with their peers. Having to cope with potentially complex situations, which require pupils to express their point of view and choose between different scenarios, is a necessary prerequisite to acquiring, from a young age, useful skills for future social roles that are acknowledged by society and meaningful for individuals themselves, enabling them to become "causative agents in their own lives" (Cottini, 2021; Giaconi, 2015).

5. Conclusions

The research outcomes outlined above suggest that a stigmatizing and infantilizing image of disability, conveyed using clinical semantic lexicon, continues to underpin the naive views of future special education teachers. Furthermore, teaching practices are based on naive understandings in which simplification and taking pupils with disabilities out of the classroom to work with them, are the trajectories that most typically, and perhaps most conveniently, inform educational design. It is clear that we must "listen" to this "latent" perspective and, through teacher education, begin to clarify and bring to light the relationship between the naive beliefs of student teachers and the resulting educational action and teaching practices (e.g., protective attitudes, low expectations concerning educational success, avoidance of challenging tasks, etc.).

Hence, as observed by Caldin (2019b), there is a danger that the extensive knowledge acquired in over 40 years of integration and school inclusion will not lead to increasingly inclusive settings and more strongly inclusive teaching-learning processes if teachers, first and foremost, do not *invest* – in terms of their educational action and teaching methods – in the student, by proposing a challenging and emancipated programme to be shared with the class group, in the classroom. *Making this happen will require transforming the teacher's perspective* such that it is no longer merely "reparative", and closely bound up with a bio-medical vision of disability, but "promotional", that is to say, capable of promoting *a new culture* of disability, which transcends a welfarist and/or medicalizing approach and adopts one based on human and inclusive rights, with a focus on removing obstacles to learning and participation as an urgent priority and, therefore, on transforming settings based on the recognition that they do not play a neutral part in our understanding of situations of disability. Training can play *a key role* in developing skills that involve the sphere of personal attitudes and beliefs, as well as requiring the adoption of a reflexive attitude to one's own ideas and actions. In the process of *progressively developing* a professional identity as a special education teacher, indirect teaching practice and laboratories that prioritize experiential and situated learning can make a key contribution. An inclusive perspective certainly requires revisiting teaching methods, but this will not suffice to bring about a new approach to schooling unless inclusivity is also embraced at the cultural level, which, still today, represents the principal challenge to building *a framework* of inclusion.

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