

INITIAL ON LINE TRAINING OF THE SUPPORT TEACHER. AN EXPLORATORY STUDY IN THREE ITALIAN UNIVERSITIES

LA FORMAZIONE INIZIALE ON LINE DEL DOCENTE DI SOSTEGNO. UNO STUDIO ESPLORATIVO IN TRE ATENEI ITALIANI

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ABSTRACT: Introduction: The topic of training and initial academic specialization of support teachers represents, today, an open question that requires important reflections. In the rich Italian pedagogical and cultural debate on the issues of school inclusion of pupils with disabilities, the voice has rarely been given to the direct protagonists: the teachers, who every day promote inclusion in Italian schools (Canevaro, d'Alonzo, Ianes & Caldin, 2011). For this reason, in the two academic years that have just passed, an exploratory survey was carried out among aspiring support teachers with the aim of understanding their training needs, expectations and aspirations, skills in the process of being acquired, and any critical issues related to processing of professional identity, etc. **Methodology:** The survey was conducted on a total of 962 students attending the specialization course for supporting students with disabilities at the University of International Studies of Rome, Link Campus University and the University of Foggia. The survey tool was distributed online in synchronous anonymous form using the Google Form tool. **Results:** The data emerging from the exploratory survey seem to provide a interesting picture regarding initial support teacher training, such as to prompt some reflections for university educational management and for all stakeholders in the school world. **Conclusions and Discussions:** The academic paths to train as support teachers become an indispensable training ground for the acquisition of specialized skills and particular sensitivities education for working with diversity. Therefore, their optimal planning and management is essential to make the teaching proposal inclusive and promote the school of differences.

KEYWORDS: initial training; online teaching and learning; support teacher; inclusion.

RIASSUNTO: Introduzione: Il tema della formazione e della specializzazione accademica iniziale degli insegnanti di sostegno rappresenta, oggi, una questione aperta che richiede importanti riflessioni. Nel ricco dibattito pedagogico e culturale italiano sui temi dell'inclusione scolastica degli alunni con disabilità, raramente la voce è stata data ai diretti protagonisti: gli insegnanti, che ogni giorno si fanno promotori di inclusione nelle scuole italiane (Canevaro, d'Alonzo, Ianes & Caldin, 2011). Per questo motivo, nei due anni accademici appena trascorsi, si è realizzata una indagine esplorativa tra aspiranti docenti di sostegno allo scopo di comprendere i loro bisogni formativi, le attese e le aspirazioni, le competenze in corso di acquisizione, le eventuali criticità legate all'elaborazione dell'identità professionale, ecc. **Metodologia:** L'indagine è stata condotta su un totale di 962 corsisti frequentanti il Corso di specializzazione per il sostegno agli allievi con disabilità presso l'Università degli Studi Internazionali di Roma, Link Campus University e Università degli Studi di Foggia. Lo strumento di rilevazione è stato distribuito online in forma anonima utilizzando lo strumento Google Form. **Risultati:** I dati che emergono dall'indagine esplorativa sembrano restituire un quadro interessante in materia di formazione iniziale del docente di sostegno, tale da sollecitare alcune riflessioni per il management didattico universitario e per tutti gli stakeholders del mondo scuola. **Conclusioni e Discussioni:** I percorsi accademici per formarsi come insegnanti di sostegno diventano una palestra indispensabile per l'acquisizione di competenze specialistiche e di particolari sensibilità educative per lavorare con la diversità. Pertanto è essenziale una loro ottimale progettazione e conduzione per rendere inclusiva la proposta didattica e promuovere la scuola delle differenze.

Parole chiave: formazione iniziale; didattica on line; insegnante di sostegno; inclusione.

1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is the process aimed at guaranteeing the right to education for all regardless of the diversity of each one that derives from conditions of disability and / or psychophysical, socio-economic and cultural disadvantage. Underlying this concept of education is an approach to inclusion that goes beyond the confines of the school to project itself into a social dimension, in prospect of an integral development of the person and of the overall development of society membership.

Inclusive education produces the improvement of learning processes and environments by considering students in their educational context and the system to support the entire learning experience (Ainscow & Miles, 2008).

The centrality of inclusive education in guaranteeing the effective and full right to education for all, a pillar of development, has been formally recognized by the United Nations as a founding element of the objective on education within the new Goals of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Fourth goal of the 2030 Agenda launched in New York in September 2015, in fact, sets as a goal from achieve that of «Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all» (ONU, 2015).

Inclusive education, understood in this way, is to be considered the main theoretical reference for the training of teachers specializing in support activities.

Nevertheless, it must be stated that no country has yet succeeded in constructing a school system that lives up to the ideals and intentions of inclusion, as defined by different international organizations (Peder, 2017).

Inclusive education aims to remove obstacles to learning and participation, implement facilitation strategies, make spaces and places accessible (Unesco, 2017) and train, in a specialized way, teachers who work or will work with disabilities.

In the rich Italian pedagogical and cultural debate on the issues of scholastic inclusion of disabled pupils, the voice has rarely been given to the direct protagonists: the teachers, who carry it out every day in Italian schools (Canevaro, d'Alonzo, Ianes & Caldin, 2011).

The legislative process that introduced in Italy the Active Training Internship Courses (TFA) wanted to generate a specialized academic preparation and a clear professional qualification of these teachers to contrast stereotypes and favors the scholastic inclusion of disabled students.

The current transformation of the training curriculum of the specialized support teacher, introduced by Legislative Decree no. 66/2017 under Law no. 107/2015, is animating a series of theoretical, epistemological and methodological reflections on:

- The professional skills of this kind of teacher
- The principles of inclusion shared internationally (think of ICF classification)
- How to make this competitive and qualified figure.

From the attendance of the Active Training Internship Courses, the figure of a support teacher emerges with teaching, planning, theoretical, methodological and relational skills regarding disabilities, capable to influence contexts and promote learning and inclusion of all.

Academic programs of specialization for support teachers becomes an indispensable training ground for the acquisition of specialist and transversal skills and educational sensitivities about diversities. All of this are essential for making the setting inclusive, the learning proposal and promoting the school of differences.

As Bocci, Guerini and Travaglini (2020) points out, specialization on the themes of pedagogy and special education needs, requires a reflection on the models of inclusive action that are emerging at the international level. A greater degree of awareness is required, a more accentuated ability to read situations and critically analyze them, managing to grasp what escapes common attention. This implies that the training on special education theory and methods must characterize all teachers, not only who have to teach to disabled students.

Academic specialization courses for support teachers have always had a marked theoretical-practical feature. For this reason, this kind of course have regulations that provided for complete disbursement in presence, with mandatory attendance.

The online activation of this kind of courses was introduced by the Interministerial Decree no. 94/2020 for students of the fifth cycle (academic year 2019/20). The subsequent ministerial decree no. 858/2020, issued following the persistence of the pandemic, also allowed practical and laboratory activities to be carried out online.

This significant transformation has required universities to redesign the teaching and learning paths in order to be delivered entirely online.

2. METHODS

The research questions, at a general level, are the following: who are those who prepare to become support teachers? What are their needs and expectations? What are the difficulties during the training course to prepare for support teaching activities?

To try to answer to these questions, in June 22 we conduct an exploratory survey at the Specialization Courses for support teachers activated in three Italian universities:

- University of International Studies of Rome (n. 548 students)
- University of Foggia (n. 316 students)
- Link Campus University of Rome (n. 98 students)

An exploratory survey questionnaire (de Ketele & Roegiers, 2013) designed by Limone and Simone (2022) was administered, anonymously distributed and self-administered on-line via Google Forms with no. 30 multiple choice questions and 1 open to a total of 962 postgraduates students. The questions relating to the detection of attitudes provided for structured responses on a 7-point Likert scale.

The sample was interviewed in the final phase of the training course (June 22). The students completed an individual and anonymous compilation of the survey. After compiling, the students participated in brainstorming and focus groups coordinated by a teacher teaching the course to socialize the impressions collected in their group following the compilation of the questionnaire and listen when it emerged from the discussion of all the other groups.

As regards the questionnaire, it should be noted that it was not a protocol to detect a sort of «customer satisfaction» on the learning activities in progress, nor to evaluate the effectiveness/efficiency of the course itself, but to trace some dimensions underlying the development of professional role in the initial training phase.

The exploratory survey tool was divided into the following areas, not visible to respondents, which correspond to some blocks of questions:

0. Registry and personal data section
1. Teaching motivation and professional skills (questions n. 1 to n. 5)
2. Professional role idea and required skills (question from n. 6 to n. 9)
3. Relationship with disabilities and inclusion idea (questions n. 9 to n. 18)
4. Relationship with technologies (questions n. 19 to n. 24)
5. Covid 19 and distance learning (questions from n. 25 to n. 30)

The first block of questions (personal data section) contains questions aimed at detecting the socio-demographic information of the students (age, sex, last degree obtained, any other qualifications, current job position, etc.).

The second block of questions presents items whose purpose is to detect the reasons that led the students to attend the specialization course, their representation of the knowledge / skills / abilities useful for improving their professional role in an inclusive perspective, their idea of teaching, the critical issues that can be linked to being a support teacher. Those who already teaches, perhaps due to the fact of being a teacher with an annual contract, were asked

for information about: their relationship with colleagues, with the overall group of students, with the disabled student, with his/her family.

In the third section of the questionnaire we wanted to investigate the interviewees' idea of school inclusion and how they undertake to increase the participation of the disabled student in class activities.

The fourth block of questions concerned the relationship of trainees with education and learning technologies. It was not only asked which technological aids they use most frequently, for what purposes and whether or not there are critical issues in their use. Information was also requested regarding the actual role of technologies in favoring the process of inclusion of disabled pupils.

The fifth and final block of questions urges the interviewees to reflect on their teaching and training practices in times of pandemic. In particular, if the closure of schools and the distance learning influenced the relationship with the disabled student, such as critical issues that emerged and, possibly, which advantage areas.

3. RESULTS

For the moment, this first analysis intends to provide a general identikit of the student who attends the specialization courses for support teaching activities in this three Italian university, their needs and expectations. Further and more in-depth interpretation of the data is needed in the future.

Through the analysis of the distribution of frequencies in the main answers provided, a substantial homogeneity was observed between the three groups of students in the three universities.

3.1. GENERAL PROFILE OF THE SAMPLE

The group under investigation is mainly represented by women (85 %). The prevailing age group is 30-40 years old (76 %). The majority of students enter the specialization training course with a degree (45.3 %) or a high school diploma (25.3 %); 43 % of the sample currently has an annual teaching role.

3.2. TEACHING ROLE AND SKILLS REPRESENTATION

We are faced with a trainees group absolutely satisfied to have approached this profession (71 %). The reasons for choosing teaching role are a specific vocation for teaching (74 %) and on the interest in developmental age students (67 %).

Among the teacher skills, 87 % preferences focused on relational and empathic ones, followed by observation skills, pedagogical and psychological ones and methodological ones.

Those who already teach feel a lack of skills in special education (24 %) and about the characteristics of various disabilities (37 %).

3.3. INCLUSION AREA AND TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Those who already teach feel little appreciated by their colleagues (46 %) while they feel perceived as a resource by all students (54 %).

The relationship with the family of the student with disabilities is good (62 %).

To create inclusion, in the classroom teachers mainly use group work (70 %), peer tutoring (61 %), theatrical, artistic and musical activities (59 %).

3.4. TECHNOLOGY AREA

The presence of technology in the classroom is considered quite important (69 %). Technology is useful for creating ad hoc teaching material for students with disabilities (40 %) and for disciplinary insights (35 %).

Teachers mainly use the interactive multimedia whiteboard (33 %) and various disability-specific software (26 %).

According to the opinion of the subjects interviewed, technology motivates the learning of students with disabilities (45 %).

Respondents agree on the lack of ICT equipment and devices in the school where they worked or where they carried out their internship (35 %).

3.5. AREA RELATING TO PANDEMIC AND DISTANCE LEARNING

The greatest difficulties in teaching in the Covid era, according to the subjects interviewed, were linked to the presence of technical problems (26 %) and to the teaching method which was difficult to understand for some students with cognitive disabilities, communicative and relational difficulties (79 %).

Very few teachers (12 %) were enthusiastic about distance learning in the pandemic era. According to those interviewed, distance learning, during the pandemic, was lacking especially in terms of inclusion (54 %) and relationships (51 %).

If distance learning was an absolutely necessary support during the emergency period, it failed to guarantee the educational and inclusion needs of all students with disabilities.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

The data emerged from this exploratory survey, although still embryonic, make it possible to develop a summary of the professional profile of Italian support teachers who are entering the school system in a difficult historical moment, i.e. the post pandemic period.

The research continues in the academic year 2023/24 to observe new developments in the investigation.

From this research emerges the profile of a motivated aspiring support teacher, eager to acquire new skills, with a good level of confidence and trust in technology.

If diversity is to become not a threat but a growth factor of the school system (Santi & Ghedin, 2012), it is necessary to invest in teacher training for the acquisition of tools that guide the development of inclusive cultures and practices.

The research presented here can offer avenues of reflection and intervention for training planners and academic decision makers with the aim of optimizing specialization paths for aspiring support teachers.

The academic courses to become a support teachers are an indispensable training ground for the acquisition of specialist skills and particular sensitivities education for working with diversity.

In the near future we need to aim for structural changes in teaching training. From our point of view, one of the keystones lies in the inclusion, in teaching practice and professional knowledge, of a digital pedagogy (Simone, 2021) to be included on a permanent basis, and not occasionally, in teacher training programs at all stages of their careers.

The university, in this process, plays a fundamental role as driving force for continuous teachers training and to respond to the needs of the present time.

From the university institution training opportunities and experiences are hoped to make the teacher an effective protagonist of the complexity of scientific, methodological and technological innovation.

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