

# A proposal for a *feasible* evolution of the role of the support teacher in Italy

## Ipotesi di evoluzione funzionale dell'insegnante di sostegno in Italia

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Although inclusive education has now been endorsed as the model for current and future schools in many countries in Europe, there is still heated debate on the usefulness of a co-presence of support teachers and mainstream teachers to facilitate the teaching-learning process and to sustain inclusive practices. Indeed, in this complex scenario of reflections the pedagogical community in Italy is faced with a dilemma on the role of the support teacher within a full-inclusion model. Notwithstanding the differences between the educational systems, the reflections presented in this article start from the English experience on this issue, it being the birthplace of the concept of special educational needs and is currently reviewing the training and roles of support teachers. The proposed scenario of a double mission for support teachers presented in this paper stems from the consideration that currently the only training model rich in methodological and didactic content in Italy is the one offered to support teachers, equipping them with the competencies necessary to facilitate an inclusive teaching-learning process by supporting both the mainstream teachers and the students.

**Key-words:** inclusion, integration, teacher training, teaching assistant, support teacher

abstract

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## 1. Introduction

As in many other countries, the path towards inclusion in Italy has been characterised by systematic and constant attempts to make choices between alternatives that, very often, neither were favourable to effectively decipher the complexity for the provision of special needs education. These *dilemmas*, as Norwich (2008, p. 288) refers to them, continue to emerge as new reforms in educational policies are proposed, implemented and evaluated. Dyson's conceptual meaning of the term *dilemma* (2001), taken as an alternative stance to analyse the development of special needs provision in the UK throughout the twenty-first century, can be adopted to analyse the major choices made between a series of dichotomies that have led to the current legislative and practical implementation of inclusive education in Italian schools.

Reflecting briefly upon the key milestones since the 70s in the evolution of special education provision in Italy, the first dichotomy between a *dual track system* and *mainstreaming*, with the latter option prevailing, marked the first dilemma. As a consequence, the issue on how to enhance *diversity* within a *normalisation* context emerged. What soon followed was the dilemma as to whether the educational model should be based on *integration* or *inclusion*, with full inclusion being considered the way forward; a choice which was influenced by the adoption of the conceptual meaning proposed by the Conference of the United Nations in 2006 and approved in Italy in 2009.

The dilemma arising from this new perspective stimulated the debate on the meaning of *diversity* and *difference*, which has led to question how a balance could be found between the *subjective needs of the students* and the *objectivity of the legislation*.

In this complex scenario of reflections it is now required to re-think the roles and responsibilities of *support* and *mainstream* teachers, within which lies yet another contradiction. This is related to the models of initial and in-service teacher training required for mainstream teachers to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values needed to be competent in responding to the diverse needs of all children, including those with disability or special educational needs, or whether the presence of a support teacher is still required to meet the said needs.

Indeed, a full-inclusion model requires that mainstream teachers manage the complexity emerging from the heterogeneity in Italian classrooms, where the number of students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) is increasing rapidly especially since the issue of the Ministerial Directive (2012) "Intervention tools for students with Special Educational Needs and the territorial organization for inclusion in schools". Under this new definition, students with SEN fall into three main sub-categories: students with disability, with specific learning difficulties (SLDs) or developmental disorders and/or having socio-economic, linguistic and cultural disadvantage. A support teacher is not envisaged for students with SLDs nor where the special need is not stated since, as highlighted in the Directive, each student during his/her school career can temporarily present a special educational need for different reasons. Hence, mainstream teachers have to be able to provide full access to learning, by planning differentiated and personalised pathways for all children (M.D. December 27th 2012).



In this period of transition it is evident that the mainstream teacher has been left alone with the difficult task of making pedagogical and didactic choices to meet the pressing demands of providing differentiated and personalised learning opportunities without sufficient training, in most cases, to manage the heterogeneity of the students' educational needs. It is therefore all the more a questionable choice that which proposes the gradual abolition of support teachers in schools, if not to give value and recapitalise their methodological and didactic competencies and place them at the service of the wider teaching community in order to achieve truly inclusive contexts.

Notwithstanding the objective differences between the educational policies and the systems in embracing individual differences, reference is made to the current debate in England with the aim of re-evaluating the reasons supporting the significant role support teachers play in mainstream schools. Founding the argument on the history of teacher training in Italy, the methodological and didactic competencies of support and mainstream teachers is analysed in the third part of the paper. Based on this analysis, a feasible evolution of the role of the support teacher through a systemic approach is proposed, postulating that support teachers should undertake a dual mission that integrates aspects of both *special* and *inclusive* pedagogy and didactics by operating a functional role through a qualifying action that supports the work of mainstream teachers and facilitates students' learning.

## 2. The situation in England

Although inclusive education has now been endorsed as the model for current and future schools by many countries in Europe (EADSNE, 2010), there is still heated debate on the usefulness of a co-presence of support teachers and mainstream teachers to facilitate the teaching-learning process and to uphold inclusive practices. The dilemma, in this case, is whether the former are crucial to the success of inclusion because of the support they offer to learning for students with SEN.

In particular, in Britain, the birthplace of the concept of special educational needs, the question of the nature and level of support needed for teachers to cope with the challenge posed by inclusion is seen as "an urgent and perennial issue" (Armstrong, Barton 2007, p. 5), which requires the active participation of all organisations and actors involved in the educational process.

This orientation is the result of a gradual process that at first linked the concept of integration to the process of repositioning a child or group of children in ordinary schools, especially following the publication of the Warnock Report (1978) and the subsequent Education Act of 1981 which allowed children with special educational needs to attend mainstream schools while delegating the task of ensuring special educational provisions to the Local Educational Authorities (LEAs).

On an international level the concept of Special Educational Needs has been, and continues to be, a theoretical construct with different interpretations and variations, due to the different educational policies and socio-cultural approaches of the different countries. As for England, the SEN Code of Practice clarifies that students with special educational needs

have a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children of the same age; or have a disability which prevents or hinders them from making use of educational facilities of a kind generally provided for children of the same age in schools within the area of the local authority (*Special educational needs: code of practice, DfES, 2001, p. 6*).

From a pedagogical point of view, the concept of SEN was first theorised in British scientific literature which, in the sixties, laid the foundations for a reconceptualisation of the needs in educational terms, stressing the necessity to restructure school contexts and training courses because of the complexity of the factors that determine the mental and physical development of each student (Gulliford, 1960; Gulliford, Upton, 1992).

In the same years the competences required by special teachers were defined, requesting that they promote the maximum development of the potential and personality of students with special educational needs. Thus, it entrusted teachers with the responsibility of acquiring deeper knowledge and understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the child, the level of emotional maturity, the social and physical effects of their condition and the influence their environment played on their learning (Gulliford, 1971).

Hence, the view of special education being proposed was no longer conditioned by the medical model of disability, which still guides specialist practice and is mostly used in special schools, but one that focuses on the educational needs as a result of the interaction of personal and social factors that require more complex answers.

At the same time, as a result of the large number of children with SEN in ordinary contexts and the complexity of their educational requirements, the need for action that offered support to the teaching-learning process emerged. This role has been delegated to teaching assistants who currently account for a quarter of the whole school workforce and serve a dual function: on the one hand, raise the levels of learning for all students, on the other hand, limit the excessive workload of mainstream teachers (Department for Education and Skills [DfES] 2003).

Therefore, in England the role of the Teaching Assistant (TA) is that of supporting the learning of a student or group of students with SEN so that they can reach the goals set in their Individual Education Plan (IEP) successfully. This supporting figure, however, takes on different roles within the different educational institutions that regulate the function autonomously, according to the specific needs of each individual institution. The TA, in fact, works mainly in supporting the work of the mainstream teacher through individualised teaching and works with small groups. However, this figure often supports students even outside the classroom, intervening where students do not seem to reach the expected levels of progress and preparing for their specific structured programmes (Webster *et al.*, 2010).

Research in the United Kingdom on the effects of this approach has shown encouraging benefits of the presence of TAs, such as increased levels of learning and the degree of participation of students with SEN (Alborz *et al.*, 2009; Slavin *et al.*, 2009), thus advocating for greater recognition and a greater appreciation of their role (Groom, Rose, 2005) in contrast with the attempt to abolish this supportive figure.



What seems particularly interesting with regard to the definition of a profile of the teacher to support the teaching-learning process that may prove effective, are research results that provide evidence of the effectiveness of activities that bring about real benefits. These are usually indirect actions, such as the organisation of the classroom setting, the intervention in cases of attitudes and behaviour that are negative or off-task, and especially in the development of what are called “soft skills”, such as self-esteem and motivation, predisposition to learning and collaboration with others; skills necessary to achieve the educational objectives and the academic success of each student.

On the other hand, other research (in particular the Draft Report on Deployment and Impact of Support Staff in Schools - DISS) has shown that the effect of the TAs’ interventions on subjects with SEN when set at a one to one ratio, is that of detachment from the other peers and from the mainstream teacher, generating unproductive passive attitudes (Webster *et al.*, 2010).

This prompted the reflection on the importance of the organisation of the roles and responsibilities of the work of TAs taking into account the dynamics of classroom management that requires adequate training that includes the upgrading of methodological skills through intervention programmes in the field. An example, in this sense, is the Higher Level Teaching Assistant (HLTA) training that offers TAs the opportunity to develop skills and expertise that will enhance and increase the level of professionalism. In fact the reason for not fully recognising the role of TAs in English school contexts can be attributed to inadequate training and not having granted them the same responsibilities of the mainstream teachers, as is required by Italian law for support teachers.

Despite the fact that the English educational policy is based on a dual track system and still provides separate training courses for mainstream teachers and specialised teachers, the need for professionals with adequate methodological skills and didactic competencies is acknowledged to face the complexity of the students’ needs and to support the work of mainstream teachers in schools. This approach endorses a model of integration that promotes the development of learners, through a co-presence of various professionals who cooperate with the aim of achieving a common goal.

### 3. The Italian perspective

As what concerns Italy, the adoption, in the 70s, of an educational system that embraced the principles of integration gradually reified the idea of schooling into one in which the provision of equal educational opportunities to all citizens was possible. This was endorsed from a legal perspective where the participation to the educational project within ordinary school contexts is a right of *each and every one*.

Therefore, in contrast to the English context, in Italy schools are required to create the dynamics for integration and, unlike TAs who are assigned to individual children (Devecchi *et al.*, 2012), the support teacher is required to build differentiated and personalised plans and to provide support to the class; a role that in England is assigned to the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO).

Hence, a reflection on the role of the support teacher in Italian schools requires a preliminary analysis of the specificity of the legislative development and

the evolution of initial and in-service teacher training that has led to the current situation in which it is possible to identify the relationships and interactions that are not always in line with the school goals and with the emerging needs of both learners and teachers. Therefore, it could be useful to analyse some aspects that, by their nature and functions, are relevant in describing the current scenario of the Italian educational system in which the support teacher works.

– *The roles and responsibilities traceable in the Italian Constitution and Law 517 of 1977 on the right to education and integration*

The right to education of each and every one, recognised as a constitutional principle, found its full identity within educational policy in 1977 with Law 517, which foresaw the integration of students with disability. The law which provided students with disability the access to common classes, also helped to establish the need to build a school tailored on personal students' needs, recognising diversity as a value on which to effectively organise the educational provision and model didactic action. In particular, the law called for the emergence of new needs in the Italian educational system, whose resolution is still necessary for carrying out the integrative functions that ensure other forms of educational support, indispensable to the attainment of educational success, to students with disability and to all those who need them.

By establishing the need for a presence in the school of a specialised teacher for providing *support to the class*, Law 517/77 did not fulfil the rights to study and learning of disabled students only with the presence of the support teacher, but extended the responsibilities of the integration process to the entire group of teachers. Indeed, this Law set the basis for a harmonious integration of the specific competences of the support teacher and the didactic competences of the other teachers through the principle of the didactic co-responsibility of all teachers, who were to ensure that every student had the possibility to express his/her potential. In this sense, every teacher was required to face the complexity of the teaching-learning process by acquiring adequate didactic competences. The subsequent Law n. 270/82, defined the role of the support teacher in terms of support to the class and not to the disabled student and started a gradual change of the training procedures always more oriented to the acquisition of didactic, methodological and relational skills, supported by the awareness of diversity of the educational needs and the knowledge of the disabled student.

As a consequence, such laws were supposed to trigger a redefinition of teacher training, by soliciting new laws that could guarantee a form of teacher training able to promote processes of personalisation of educational interventions to promote integration. Yet, the two decades following the application of the law did not correspond to an evolution of the system, neither of initial nor of in-service teacher training. Law 104 of 1992, while establishing a systemic form of integration, did not provide any form of adaptation of teachers' didactic competences which were necessary to understand the function of the reticular educational activities for supporting disability. The issue of the acquisition of didactic competences was implicitly solicited only recently in the law on school autonomy, introduced in 1997 and has been experimented in school contexts since 1999.

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– *The heterogeneity of teacher training and of the mechanisms for accessing the teaching profession*

Over the past three decades the Italian school system has been characterised by a variety of models of teacher training and recruitment. The differences were related both to the qualifications for accessing teacher training and those necessary for the teaching profession.

Since 1982, Law 270 stipulated that to teach, prospective teachers had to pass a national entry exam that was based on the accreditation of qualifications and of tests which were essentially of a disciplinary nature. This method of recruitment did not provide any training experience aimed at acquiring the skills that needed to be assessed and evaluated in the exam. Hence, it was a mere recruitment procedure which prospective candidates could access on the basis of these criteria:

- for kindergarten and primary school: candidates having a secondary school diploma from the Teacher Training Institute, lasting four years, which in its curriculum included some subjects on education sciences such as pedagogy and psychology;
- for lower and upper secondary school: candidates who had a university degree in the subject;
- to be taught and without any specific professional teacher training.

At this stage the basic and specific didactic and pedagogic competences, necessary for the personalisation of didactic interventions, didn't seem to appear relevant in teacher training and recruitment. Also, support teacher training reflected a similar heterogeneity, providing:

- monovalent courses, which offered specific knowledge about one of the three categories of disabilities (mental and physical, auditory or visual);
- polyvalent courses (valid for all three types of handicap) held by accredited organisations and recognised by the Ministry of Education and/or offices of the Ministry;
- courses divided in areas, held at Universities in collaboration with accredited entities.

This type of training has gradually reduced the clinical content in courses, giving more importance to the didactic training and shaping the profile of the support teacher to make the teaching-learning process of disabled students more effective, within the perspective of integration.

In the 90s, various legislative measures were implemented, including Law n. 341 of 1990 “Reform of university teaching” that led to the establishment of a graduate programme for primary school teachers and Post-Graduate Courses for Secondary School Teaching (SSIS) and the Ministerial Decree 153 of 1998, entitled “Criteria for the activation of the degree courses in primary education and Post-graduate Courses for teaching in secondary schools” which established:

- the structure of SSIS that linked disciplinary competencies to the knowledge of education sciences, introducing innovative workshops and internships de-

- signed to integrate theoretical knowledge and operational skills, making the future teacher an active agent of his career;
- the activities of the degree course in Primary Education – the first academic year 1998-1999, was a significant turning point to the training of teachers of kindergarten and elementary school. It is important to remember that until then, the training of teachers of kindergarten and elementary school were, respectively, a three-year and a four-year course, both at upper secondary school level.

The new degree course was a four year-course. The first two years were common for both the training of elementary school teachers as well as kindergarten teachers, whereas the last two years students had to choose their field of specialisation at the end of the second year of the course. Central in the degree programme was the integration of knowledge of education sciences with the teaching activities aimed at the acquisition of skills and competencies in relation to the disciplinary foundations and operational capabilities in various disciplines.

At this stage, the training of support teachers envisaged courses of a duration of 400 hours and 800 which were based on the idea to move away from the specialist approach and move towards an idea of a teacher who is a methodologist who will have acquired the competencies necessary to provide support in class.

The Ministerial Decree of 1998, which stipulated the establishment of this Degree Course, did not recognise the degree as enough for obtaining a teacher's warrant, a recognition which came only in 2003. Recently, the graduate programme has increased the number of years from four to five, getting in line with the total duration of the other university first and second Degree and Master's courses while maintaining a single-cycle program. The SSIS were replaced by a one-year post-graduate teacher training course (TFA) from the academic year 2011-2012 (but in fact from 2012 to 2013).

In 2011, even in the case of specialisation courses for support teachers, the scenario changed and the universities were asked to take over the full responsibility of this training without having other entities involved. To activate such courses it is now necessary to have the presence of a Full Professor in Special Didactics and Pedagogy. The 1-year (60ECTS) course is composed of 150 hours of Didactics and Special Pedagogy, 180 hours of laboratory work and 150 hours of indirect stage/apprenticeship which includes Information and Communication Technology.

Apart from these courses, it must be highlighted that during these years, new training paths to obtain teachers' warrants were also organised to offer supply teachers with years of experience the opportunity to obtain a teachers' warrant in order to counteract the different forms of precariousness which have always characterised the school system. These paths, whose prerequisite for access was the teachers' years of experience, were organised by the Peripheral Offices of the Italian Ministry and by universities and included 18 credits for didactic and pedagogic activities, with at least 6 credits for the area of Didactics and Special Pedagogy.



- *The complexity deriving from the co-existence in the school of different teacher profiles deriving from different training models*

As a result of these reforms in teacher training, the presence of a heterogeneity of teachers' competences in Italian schools is one of the most complex elements, as it puts together teachers with different and dystonic training paths.

In kindergarten, teachers' educational backgrounds vary from those having a high-school diploma to others having a degree, others who accessed in-service training on the basis of their school experience while others were recruited after passing national entry examinations. In high schools, the situation is fairly similar having teachers with four-year degrees in the subject taught, others having followed a teachers' specialisation course or have been recruited after following the SISS, the TFA or other training paths offered to obtain teachers' warrants.

As for the support teachers, teachers with different qualifications take on the same roles, whether they have followed non-university or university biennial training; training programmes which are different in their content, methods and duration, but still provide a more solid methodological and didactic framework than the training of mainstream teachers.

In conclusion, in Italian school contexts there are different types of professional figures trained and recruited by means of different modalities, without envisaging the uniformity of the competences that are necessary to face the challenges of the ministerial programmes and guidelines over time, often disregarding the principles of the law on school autonomy which tend to a widespread teachers' didactic competence to implement the principles of integration and inclusion.

- *The identification of “funzioni strumentali”<sup>1</sup> to support didactics*

Following the approval of Law n. 59 of 15th March 1997, which proposed a re-organisation of the entire Italian educational system, in the National Collective Agreement of 26th May and in the CCNI of 31st August 1999 functional figures were identified to support curriculum development, to contribute to school autonomy and to enhance the participation and add value to the professionalism of teachers, through the conferral of four instrumental roles. These roles have become a sort of technical tool aimed at enhancing internal school resources in order to accompany the testing phase of school autonomy, whose real application is still underway. The Ministerial Circular of August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2000 highlighted the need to confirm these four areas of intervention considered mandatory:

- organisation of the school curriculum;
- support to teachers' work;
- interventions and services for students;

1 The Italian locution “funzioni strumentali” indicates teachers who collaborate with the Head teacher of a school to organise, monitor and assess curriculum development. Each teacher with this role has to coordinate, manage and develop all the activities and the projects related to his/her area of intervention. The teachers' council and the Head teacher choose these teachers on the basis of their competences, professional experiences and interpersonal skills.

- planning and implementation of educational projects with external entities and institutions.

It seems clear from this approach that the support to teachers' work is one of the emergencies highlighted by Italian law, although in the proposed strategy a generic macro action can be traced. Despite the recognition of the need to set up a supporting system to didactics in schools, the resolution of the complexity emerging from the teaching-learning process is still the responsibility of the single teacher, who has to make use of effective teaching strategies that ensure school achievement of all learners.

#### **4. Re-thinking the role of support teachers: a system of functions with a double mission**

The current emerging scenario is one which suggests a new setup for initial teacher training that is more focused on didactic-pedagogical disciplines and proposes in-service teacher training in line with the perspective of full inclusion and the Profile of Inclusive Teachers suggested by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2012). In Italy, the shift was fostered by some laws which, between 2010 and 2012, led to a deeper reflection on the teacher's role, redefining his/her own professional profile. These laws put in evidence the need for a shared responsibility of all teachers on inclusion and, therefore, on the implementation of educational activities for all students, including those with disabilities or special educational needs. In this sense, the acquisition of educational and didactic competences aiming at eliminating barriers to learning for all pupils is required, involving all teachers in different educational actions that are geared to foster collegiality and co-responsibility to sustain full inclusion.

In particular, Law 08/10/2010, n. 170 – New norms on Specific Learning Difficulties in schools and the related Appendices of the Ministerial Decree of 12/07/2011 “Guidelines for the right to education of pupils and students with Specific learning Difficulties” highlight the need for teachers to reacquire the educational-didactic competencies also for SLD, where the displacement of the focus in clinical settings had instead increasingly led to delegate its functions to specialists outside of the teaching profession or remodel its activities on the model of specialised interventions, based on the awareness of the complexity of the problem and its neurobiological implications” (Guidelines, 2011, p. 9). With this aim, starting from the academic year 2011/2012, the Ministry of Education, through a Memorandum of Understanding with all the Faculties of Education, has promoted advanced training through the implementation of professional development courses and post-graduate courses in “Didactics and educational psychology for Specific Learning Difficulties”, aimed at heads of school and teachers teaching in any level. The Ministerial Directive of 27th December 2012, “Intervention tools for pupils with special educational needs and the territorial organisation for school inclusion”, makes reference to a training offer activated in 2012/2013 on specific emerging themes in the field of disability: courses/post-graduate courses dedicated to didactics and educational psy-



chology for children with autism, ADHD, intellectual disabilities, for inclusive psychomotor education and for sensory disabilities.

The achievement of these training goals shouldn't be considered as paving the way to provide an alternative to the presence of support teachers but as an effective way to share meanings, goals and objectives with mainstream teachers and, rather, lead the way to a cooperative approach in planning educational activities for students. This approach, in a school system as the Italian one, represents a promising way to make the coexistence between support and mainstream teachers possible, where the former are asked to implement more specific educational interventions and the latter cover a more general function. This process, although initiated, takes a very long time to meet the expectations of an inclusive approach and does not imply a possible abolition of such a crucial figure as the support teacher to the class.

At a time of transition, as the one being experienced in Italy, it may be worthwhile that the support teacher takes on a second mission: to support the inclusive didactic approaches of his/her colleagues, becoming a mediator and promoter of learning, co-planning, sharing educational paths, and supporting the work of mainstream teachers.

Therefore, to envisage change, support teachers, who are now considered to have a marginal role with regards to the support offered to students with Special Educational Needs, may provide suggestions regarding methodological approaches and guide the choice of methods and tools to be used in co-teaching experiences that encourage collaboration among professionals with a heterogeneity of training and academic backgrounds to meet the diverse educational needs in each classroom setting.

As a result, this new mission for support teachers calls for the acquisition of new competencies that over the years have been considered by the Ministry of Education and the educational scientific community:

- *collegiality*, resulting in the ability of teachers to share the same *language*, methods, strategies and actions which are essential for an effective cooperation, in terms of teaching, necessary to translate into practice the Ministerial Guidelines;
- *co-responsibility*, which is the awareness that each teacher takes on the same responsibilities of others in teaching to students with disabilities and with special educational needs;
- *the right and the duty to in-service teacher training and refresher courses*, which reflects the need to ensure adequate initial competences for teachers as well as supporting their work. Training is configured both as a right for teachers and as an ethical and professional duty of teachers that corresponds to the need to build appropriate skills to face the complexity of the educational system and the special needs of learners;
- *the systemic dimension of the role of teachers and didactics*. In fact, school autonomy and the consequent and continuous demands of education, arising from the social context and from the Ministry Guidelines, highlight the systemic dimension of the role of teachers and didactics, with particular reference to inclusive actions. For inclusive education to be effective, taken from a complex and systemic perception, requires coaching and supporting activ-

ities to the work of teachers, preceded and accompanied by moments of information, training and refresher courses that require constant maintenance of each teacher's didactic skills.

## Conclusion

The proposal in this paper stems from the consideration that currently the only training model that is rich in methodological and didactic content in Italy is the one offered to support teachers, who have been required to constantly navigate in the rough seas of complexity characterising the teaching-learning process in a continuously-evolving educational reform. By contrast, the initial teacher-training model proposed for mainstream teachers disregarded the training needs concerning the didactic skills required for effective teaching, since it did not provide adequate training with a system of teaching methods based on knowledge of general pedagogy and didactics and special education.

The support teacher, in supporting the classroom, is now called upon to prepare and share with other teachers, subjective and collective educational actions able to meet the learning needs of students. The English experience of teaching assistants and its outcomes, contextualised within the diversity and specificity of the Italian school system seems to offer interesting suggestions and specific opportunities to reposition the figure and function of the support teacher. In this sense, following the approach already mapped out by the identification of the "*funzioni strumentali*" to support didactics, the support teacher could represent the node of a school network to support mainstream teachers in the field of general, special and inclusive didactics, coordinated by the teacher in charge of the "*funzione strumentale*" on a school level.

Hence, a double mission for the support teacher: providing support to mainstream teachers as well as the students, taking on a pivotal role that, on a classroom level, covers the "*funzioni strumentali*" identified. Naturally, the didactic needs arising from this second mission require a specific training programme to be implemented at university level and should be able to systematically organise the fundamental didactic competencies and the specialised ones of support teachers, harmonised with the experience gained in the field. In this perspective, the role of the support teacher is emancipated from a mere role of care to a qualified form of support that can guarantee the quality of teaching and the real possibility of inclusion in the presence of special educational needs.

In this sense, awaiting the full implementation of the latest reform on teacher training in 2011 as a way of implementing teaching and methodological skills needed to ensure inclusive processes in Italian schools, support teachers would take a leading role able to restore the too often denied dignity of the profession.



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- Legge 4 agosto 1977, n. 517 - Norme sulla valutazione degli alunni e sull'abolizione degli esami di riparazione nonché altre norme di modifica dell'ordinamento scolastico [Norms on the evaluation of pupils and the abolition of remedial exams as well as other amendments regarding the school system].
- Legge 29 maggio 1982, n. 297 - Disciplina del trattamento di fine rapporto e norme in materia pensionistica [Norms on indemnity payment system and pensions].
- Legge 19 novembre 1990, n. 341 - Riforma degli ordinamenti didattici universitari [Reform on the university didactic organisation].
- Legge 5 febbraio 1992, n. 104 - Legge-quadro per l'assistenza, l'integrazione sociale e i diritti delle

persone handicappate [Law on the assistance, social integration and the rights of handicapped people].

Legge 15 marzo 1997, n. 5 - Delega al Governo per il conferimento di funzioni e compiti alle regioni ed enti locali, per la riforma della Pubblica Amministrazione e per la semplificazione amministrativa [Delegation to the Government for the assignment of functions and tasks to the regions and local authorities, for the reform of public administration and administrative simplification].

Legge 8 ottobre 2010, n. 170 - Nuove norme in materia di disturbi specifici di apprendimento in ambito scolastico [New norms on Specific Learning Difficulties in schools].