

Challenges and Opportunities for Inclusive Education: The co-teaching practice

Sfide e opportunità per l'educazione inclusiva: il co-insegnamento

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This paper explores teachers views about co-teaching practice. The main issues investigated are: finding teachers beliefs referring to the co-teaching; analysing the obstacles which keep teachers from implementing successfully this didactical approach and finding strategies which can empower teachers' efficacy and let the co-teaching becoming a favourable chance for the development of every student's learning potential. The research questions are: "Is the co-teaching an approach which finds a place in our nowadays school reality?", "How does it work?", "Which opportunities it offers to teachers?", "Which are the obstacles to its realization and how can they be got over in order to implement this approach?". Results are in line with the literature research and demonstrate teachers' particular interest to realize this practice.

Keywords: co-teaching, inclusive education, general education teacher, special education teacher, semi-structured interview, shared teaching

abstract

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ISSN 2282-5061 (in press)
ISSN 2282-6041 (on line)

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1. Introduction

The inclusive education is a process including the transformation of schools and others learning centers in order to face the several needs of children, students belonging to ethnic and linguistic minorities, rural populations, children affected from Hiv and AIDS, and disabled pupils or children with learning deficit, and in order to give a chance to learn for the young and adults.

Its target is to eliminate the exclusion, which is a consequence of negative behaviors and lack of answers to ethnic differences, economical and social status, linguistic, religious, gender, sexual orientation and skills. Education is verified in different contexts, both formal than informal, in families and in a larger community. Consequently the inclusive education is rather a central than a marginal issue for pursuing a high quality education for all the learners and for promoting the development of more inclusive societies (Ghedin, 2009). The current line promoted by many European educational systems is a collaborative approach between special teacher and other teachers of the class. In addition, the special teacher not only has the function of individualized support for students with disabilities, but has a proactive role in improving the capability of schools to overcome barriers to learning and participation (Forlin, 2001). The focus of this article is on the practice of co-teaching conceived as a practice shared between two teachers working together with a diverse group of students. The research questions are: "Is the co-teaching an approach which finds a place in our nowadays school reality?", "How does it work?", "Which opportunities it offers to teachers?", "Which are the obstacles to its realization and how can they be got over in order to implement this approach?". The data were collected by interviewing 20 teachers (primary and pre-school teachers, general and special teachers). The results of the empirical research are discussed through comparison with scientific literature about this theme.

2. Inclusive Education and Co-teaching

The inclusive education is essential to pursue the social equity and it's the fundamental basis of learning for all life. So that it's really important that all children can access to inclusion (Ghedin, 2009, p. 142). At the same time it's important that they can play a role in their school life and pursue the wished outcomes in their educational experiences. While the school performance based on subjects is often used as a successful index to measure learning, it must be conceived extensively actually, including also the acquisition of values, behaviors, knowledge and skills required to face the challenges of the modern societies. It's necessary to give learning opportunities since the focus of inclusive education is related to the real participation of a human being into society and to the pursuing of his/her learning potential. Promoting inclusion means stimulating discussion, encouraging positive behaviors and improving educational and social models in order to face new requests in education. It concerns the improving of processes and contexts to promote learning both at the student level in his educational environment, than at the general system level to support the entire experience of learning (Ainscow, Miles, 2008).

The core of inclusive education is made of classes where heterogeneous groups of students learn together and achieve important learning results. Teaching to such an heterogeneous groups of students, it could be important to have a specialist and specific knowledge to support children identified “with special educational needs”, even if is agreed that principles and strategies of teaching should be equal and similar for all students (Davis, Florian, 2004; Kershner, 2007). Michael Oliver states that “teaching is teaching, independently from students gamut and needs, and an essential prerequisite for inclusion, in the very new meaning of the word, is the taking of responsibility by all teachers in order to work with all the children, with or without special educational needs. Only when teacher takes such a responsibility, inclusion than will be really achieved” (2011, p. 33). It’s known by everyone, actually, that inclusive education differs remarkably from traditional education (Thomas, Vaughan, 2004). An example is the “inclusive way of thinking”¹, where it is affirmed that hypothetical problems are caused by the learning context and not by the child. So that, thinking inclusively means reflecting on the fact that learning context can facilitate or obstruct child’s growth and learning. This idea is supported since 2001 with the introduction of the International Classification of Functioning to value the functioning of an individual which is determined by the dynamic relationship between body components, activity and participation of a human being in his relationship with the context. From this point of view “it is about to consider the relationship such as a whole interaction among individuals, between individual and context and between these ones and wider contexts: it means that educational activities, and not only, can be interpreted not as single acts, isolated, but as actions connected to others. From now it is important to assume the concept of ecology as a place of changes and relationships, wondering if the institutions and the contexts offer real possibilities for their construction” (Medeghini, Fornasa, 2011, p. 18). This means that the relationship conceived as a link, permits to consider in thoughts, in behaviors and in educational acts, in addition to intentions, awareness and meanings of the person who wants to create the action, also those ones of the person to which the action is dedicated, creating a mutual influence among individuals. So that the whole dynamic (context as classrooms, schools, groups...) starts up from the differences of single components and of the whole together. The circularity of interactions makes the totality changeable in its structure of relationships and shows the way to the possibility of change (Medeghini, Fornasa, 2011).


Another aspect which is underlined in the literature concerns the tools to promote inclusion. In an important meeting about the definition of inclusive education (Dyson et al., 2002) it was stated that: «*First of all, inclusive education tries to answer simultaneously to students which are different one from another in important ways, some of them create particular challenges to school. Second, it doesn’t only concern having the presence of the students in schools, but most of all maximize their participation. In conclusion, the inclusion is a process which*

1 A. Rytivaara (2012). Collaborative classroom management in a co-taught primary school classroom. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 53, 182.

can be promoted through an action at a school level»². In this way inclusive education is not a goal itself than a medium to reach a goal. It contributes to the realization of an inclusive society through a human rights approach. Inclusive education actually is seen as an outcome of certain kinds of actions which people do to start the process (Booth, Ainscow, 2002, 2006).

In the context where those paper's data were collected, co-teaching between a curricular teacher and a special teacher to ensure a better education for all students, can be considered an example of actions dedicated to create an inclusive process (Rytivaara, 2012). This is not only a question of understanding pupils' individual needs and capabilities to integrate them with other ones more "typical" of the same age. Ainscow, Conteh, Dyson and Gallanaugh (2010) discussed about the way the educational difference itself has been created in different contexts and in different moments. As Slee (2011) stated "the inclusive cultures of the school need radical changes among the education way of thinking about children, curriculum, pedagogy and scholastic organization" (p. 110). The principles of inclusive education doubt the traditional point of view, also as far as the class direction is concerned. For example, the concept of "difficult child" becomes complicated (Graff, 2009). In particular the large discussion about the fact that it is right to talk about individuality and diversity rather than deviance, raises the issue about the origins of the problem. Vehemas (2010) affirms, in his philosophical analysis, that the word "special need" at the moment gives a negative characterization of individual differences. In the same way, Danforth e Smith (2005) emphasize, thou, that teachers should considerate a child with an "untypical behavior", an individual in his complexity with several different experiences, and that the relationship between teacher and pupil, the "pedagogical alliance"³ (p. 5), can be an important source for children well-being (Rytivaara, 2012). In the same way Canevaro (2008) writes: "An inclusive education allows common schools to fill up with qualities: a school where all pupils are welcomed, where they can learn with their own times, and most of all they can participate, a school where pupils can understand differences such as enrichment for everyone" (Canevaro, 2008a, p. 12). Then, in this way, diversities and differences become so normal that they are considered factors of the system growth, rather than threat factors for a system (Santi, Ghedin, 2012, p. 102). Inclusion regards more than a simple welcoming to diversity. It involves the challenges of co-teaching, of the teaching team, and the capability of creating a good cooperation among teachers. Shared goals, teaching methods, planning and evaluation, are one of the fundamental points of an education model which involves curricular and special teacher in a teaching model defined as co-teaching (Ghedin, 2009, p. 142). All of this is expressed into the didactical and educative procedure in classes. For several teachers, in fact, the prompt responsibilities in order to make the inclusion working, come off in the classroom context (d'Alonzo, 2011). The co-teaching

- 2 A. Dyson, A. Howes, B. Roberts (2002). A systematic review of the effectiveness of school-level actions for promoting participation by all students. *Inclusive Education Review Group for the EPPI Centre*, p. 7.
- 3 A. Rytivaara (2012). Collaborative classroom management in a co-taught primary school classroom. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 53, 183.



raises questions about teachers' different point of views about aspects concerning the direction of the classrooms (Rytivaara, 2012). When teachers decide to work together, as it happens in the co-teaching, they create a new environment which helps children's learning, as the example of particular way of organizing groups and of team teaching (Rytivaara, 2012). Moreover it exists also a new significant micro-system composed by teachers working together, and this means evaluating their conversations, the relationship and the pedagogical approach inside and outside the classroom. Then it becomes necessary to pay attention to the dialogic process of professional learning that incorporates the full partnership of teaching as well as the activities of team-teaching that is observable in the classroom (Rytivaara, Kershner, 2012). The co-teaching is, potentially, a genuine relationship of learning among peers, where communication goes through different contexts inside and outside the classroom (Rytivaara, Kershner, 2012). Trent et al. (2003) affirm in fact that is fundamental from the beginning an open communication to promote successful experiences of co-teaching. This allows to ensure that responsibilities are equally shared and that both teachers, when necessary, can face better any type of unexpected situations in the classroom (Rytivaara, 2012). A successful co-teaching practice needs an active involvement of both teachers in teaching, and cooperation in working is essential. Sharing practical responsibility of classroom and students, often leads teachers together, silently, to the practical knowledge. The silent knowledge is difficult to communicate one to another, but Cook and Friend (1995) recommend co-teaching teachers to discuss their beliefs about the way of teaching, the routine and the behaviour of the class. Ideally this makes teachers possible to face and prevent difficult situations inside and outside the classroom. To share knowledge can move teachers energy from teaching every single detail to focus on wider topics, so that it offers special opportunities of learning based on the mutual comprehension of the context (Rytivaara, Kershner, 2012).

In our school reality, children with special educational needs and with disabilities are included in regular schools. This has represented an important goal for the identification of the importance of the inclusion process. In the last 40 years in Italy, it was attempted to offer an adequate answer to every single student and to reduce the environmental factors which are real obstacles to activities and participation of people with disability, defining their condition. The inclusion of pupils with disabilities in the common school system influenced the re-determination of the roles of the curricular and special teachers, both of them are seen as teachers of the classroom and, so, teachers for all the students (L. 104/92). In Italy, co-teaching is applied as a principal tool to advance inclusive education. Special education teachers, called 'support teachers' (*insegnante di sostegno*) have been working since the 1970s almost exclusively in normal classes giving support to one to four students with special needs (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD] 1999). The powerful feature of co-teaching is the physical presence of the special education teacher in the mainstreaming classroom. She/he can thus participate actively in the instruction, and provide help without stigmatizing or segregating students (Weiss, Lloyd 2002; Canevaro, 1999; Pavone, 2010; Gelati, 2004; d'Alonzo, 2010). The presence of two teachers in the classroom offers more teacher time for the students, and the extra resource can be used for individualized instruction, small group activ-

ities and in many other ways (Saloviita and Takala, 2010, p. 389). One of the fundamental aspect for the development of inclusive approaches is represented by the collaboration and the sharing of the educative-didactical praxis by all the teachers of the classroom. Such an awareness legitimise the co-teaching approach as a teaching strategy allowing teachers to put together their teaching skills, their strategies and skills in order to give a better answer to the needs/aspirations of the several different students, ensuring to all pupils equal opportunity of learning.

According to this preamble, the research questions are: “Is the co-teaching an approach which finds a place in our nowadays school reality?”, “How does it work?”, “Which opportunities it offers to teachers?”, “Which are the obstacles to its realization and how can they be got over in order to implement this approach?”. These will be the focus investigated in this paper: finding teachers beliefs referring to the co-teaching; analysing the obstacles which keep teachers from implementing successfully this didactical approach and finding strategies which can empower teachers’ efficacy and let the co-teaching becoming a favourable chance for the development of every student’s learning potential.

3. Method

Participants involved in the research

120

The co-teaching approach has been deepen through curricular and special teachers’ point of view, both in the pre- than in the primary school.

The research has involved teachers in two different phases:

- 1) we met 4 teachers who had covered the role of privileged witness for the evaluation of adequacy, clearness and intelligibility of the tool built: two curricular teachers (one in the pre-school and one in the primary) and two special teachers (one in the pre-school and one in the primary school)
- 2) 20 teachers have been interviewed, all coming from 6 different schools of the province of Padua (as you can see on the attached chart).

	General teachers	Special teachers	Tot.
Pre-school	5	5	10
Primary school	5	5	10
Tot.	10	10	20

Tab. 1: distribution of interviewed teachers

Tool and data analysis⁴

Semi-structured interview has been the chosen instrument to deeply investigate knowledge and beliefs and systems of values which teachers have regarding co-teaching practice. In the first moment of the research, privileged witness have been interviewed to receive a feedback about the interview such as it was built and they have offered some suggestions useful to have a clearer comprehension. The interviews administered to 20 teachers involved in the study were analysed with the software Atlas.ti that has identified 10 families which became container of united codes (Ghedin, Caserotti, 2012).

FAMILIES	CODES
Definition of co-teaching	Mutual aid; Cooperation among colleagues in the management of children; Sharing of materials; Sharing of goals, objectives, responsibilities; Individualization of teaching and learning; Pursue the same goals with different methodologies; Presence of two teachers in the same class with the same group of children; Shared planning; Information exchange; Sharing roles and work; Common objectives for all strict programming.
Advantages of co-teaching for students	To have more time to learn, To share their work with children other than their own; Educational continuity; To enjoy different languages; To receive examples of co-operation; To receive examples of organization; Esteem, help and mutual enrichment; Doing more, to pay more attention to all students; To have a teacher more and achieve good results with children.
Advantages of co-teaching for teachers	Support in maintaining outlining the objectives; Mutual learning; Sharing points of view, Sharing experiences; Sharing responsibility, Organizational flexibility and teaching; Division of roles and labour; Support in times of difficulty, More attention to all students to have a teacher in most get good results with children, Offering new things, Greater confidence
Disadvantages of co-teaching for teachers	No disadvantage, Difficulties in relationship; Special teacher not considered; Greater programming, To remain behind schedule.
Disadvantages of co-teaching for students	No disadvantage, Simplification and slowdown in teaching and find it difficult to trust a teacher who does not feel similar; Disagreement between teachers; Perception of different treatment; Contemporary explanation may cause confusion and distraction.

4 Interviews have been collected by Claudia Caserotti, graduated in Sciences of primary education and data and outcome analysis have been analyzed together and for a part converged into the thesis of the student whom I have been the supervisor.

Facilitators to co-teaching	Opening to the other, Collaboration with colleagues, Sharing with colleagues, Mutual understanding between teachers; Continuity Teachers flexibility in finding time to plan, Specific training for the disease, Planning and common language, Educational projects for all students, Recognizing the role of the worker; Mutual respect; Synergy in the actions; To foster families of disabled children bring into the classroom.
Obstacles to co-teaching	Closing of teachers; Delegation of the educational-teaching to special teacher, Difficulty to change the style of teaching; Disagreement about distinction of roles; severity Disorder of the child; Aide careful only to the child with a disability, Difficulties in relationship, Special education teacher in this class with reduced hours, Lack of synergy in the actions, Lack of shared planning, Not sharing teaching practices; Prejudices against the way of working of the other teacher, Lack of knowledge of the child's disability; Poor common planning time; Turnover of special teacher; Complexity of creating new relationship with special teacher, Families hinder presence in class child with a disability.
Approaches to co-teaching	Alternative teaching; One-teach one-assist; One-teach one-observe; Parallel teaching; Station teaching; Team teaching.
Personal skills of teachers	Openness to others; Harmony in the relationship; Management relationship with the child; Positive beliefs about the potential of the child; Determination and patience, Availability, Commitment to the profession, Questioning, intelligence, own and operate knowledge, Professionalism, Respect for fellow; Frankness in the relationship with colleague; Esteem colleague, Humility.
Professional skills of teachers	Active learning and innovation, Collaboration among colleagues, Flexibility to change, Comparison between colleagues To know the history of the child's life; Support teacher mediator between teacher curricular and child with a disability, Special education teacher as a resource for the whole class, Quality of co-teaching depends on teacher education curriculum, Quality of teaching depends on co-education teacher preparation, Observation of the child; Observation mutual relationship of the child and connects with class; Synergy of actions.

Tab. 2: List of identified Families and Codes

4. Outcomes

Definition of Co-teaching

Co-teaching is characterized by three correlated aspects: the planning of the activity, the collaboration and the sharing. In fact it comes out the idea of co-teaching as a practice anticipating a straight and shared planning (9/20) and this feature represents also an obstacle to its realisation since it is seen as a difficult practice to activate. The co-teaching is based, then, on the creation of a common planning made by the curricular and special teachers for disabled children and for the entire class “As a curricular teacher, I work together with the special teacher to realise a project with pupils suitable to their capacity, or they reduce goals, the teaching plan is adjusted, the language is simplified or we use more efficient intermediaries”. Common planning needs skills such as sharing and collaboration; there is *collaboration in the management of the child* (14/20) because “in the actual situation the certification doesn’t recover all the hours so that also the curricular teacher must be at the same time teacher of the child with special needs” and there is *sharing of aims, goals and responsibilities* (11/20). Some of the teachers (6/20) think that co-teaching takes place when there are *two teachers in the same classroom with the same group* and when teachers *separate respectively their roles and work*: “in the classroom should not be a division but a collaboration in order to share topics to analyse and in which way roles can be changed to let the special teacher explain part of the programme while the classroom teacher stays closer to the disabled child”. It becomes important for teachers sharing a common goals project for the realisation of activities involving also the disabled child (*collaboration among teachers in the direction of the disabled child*). The latter is considered an important feature of co-teaching in particular for special teachers (both from pre-schools than from primaries) and for curricular teachers of the primary school while this dimension doesn’t stand out for the curricular teachers from primary school. We could wonder if this is due to the fact that the curricular teacher of the primary school thinks that should be the special teacher to take care exclusively of disabled children. Another aspect distinguishing the way of considering the co-teaching model, concerns the perception of the planning strictness mainly felt by curricular teachers of both schools. This data could be explained concerning the fact that curricular teachers through the co-teaching method, should enclose in their planning also activities dedicated to the disabled child that cannot be relegated to the special teacher.

Advantages/Disadvantages of Co-teaching for teachers and students

An important aspect we tried to investigate through the interviews was about the advantages and disadvantages found by the teachers in the realization of the co-teaching approach. First of all there is “*the presence of one more teacher in the classroom*” (13/20) which is a “new resource for the classroom” because “he/she can be a “point of reference for children”, “He/she can speak at your place to work out a problem”, “he/she can see dynamics in the classroom that the other teacher cannot see”, “being two teachers instead of one: four eyes, four hands, two heads, they are surely better than one”. Another important as-

pect is that teachers can learn one from other (8/20), “If everyone shares his own experience, his own knowledge and his own learning, will become teacher of the other teacher. It’s a mutual process. You teach me and I teach you”. The other advantage is the possibility to *pay more attention to all the students* (7/20). In particular, referring to the daily situation teachers have to deal with “a classroom where children are at different levels of learning. If you have 20 pupils you have 20 different levels: there are children which, even if they are not identified as children with disabilities through a certification, have difficulties and need particular attention, so that an agreement between special teacher and curricular teacher on a different program for the entire class group, can help you to diversify other programs also for other pupils and not only for that child who have the certification”. Other advantages found by teachers are the *possibility of sharing roles and work* (3/20), the *sharing different points of views* (2/20), and *experiences* (2/20), and *support in difficult moments* (2/20). “Working together, having two different points of view, sharing experiences, enriching what you are not able to do by yourself, having a practical support and make the other teachers’ job easier so that you can share your work within pupils”.

As far as the advantages found by teachers are concerned, all teachers from every rank or level agree on stating that *having one more teacher in the classroom* is a positive aspect both for teachers and pupils (13/20). Students have the chance to receive more attention (7/20), as well as different points of reference (5/20), and to learn different kind of languages (3/20). Other advantages for students, particularly interesting, concern the fact that, for example, teachers think pupils have the possibility to live *examples of collaboration* (5/20). In fact “the child who see two teachers working together learns how being cooperative and wonders about if he works with a peer in a collaborative way”. Students have also the possibility to share their own work with other pupils with differences (3/20) in order to create an educative-didactical inclusion for all and for everyone. “Be placed in cooperative groups (made possible by the presence of the second teacher) has facilitated the entry of the child with disabilities in the section and allowed the class to know and engage with him in a relationship of respect, help and mutual enrichment”. Furthermore teachers believe that all of these aspects can positively affect the climate of the whole class and then all children, without distinction, may qualify for it.

The disadvantages identified by the teachers are all about its realization and in particular about the fact that co-teaching needs *more planning* (1/20), and *longer time* (3/20) for its planning and realization, “because you can’t decide on your own but confrontation with the colleague is necessary”, the *difficult relationships* (7/20) a teacher can face with other colleagues, and *not to be in time with the scholastic program* (1/20) because activities with the disabled child must be organized. Within curricular teachers there is thou a common opinion about the fact that the inclusion of disabled children in their class, is an approach destined to fail. Students with disabilities steal part of the teaching time to students without any disability, furthermore teaching to disabled pupils, needs specialized teaching skills and teachers are not trained to give specialized education that is necessary for disabled students (Jordan et al. 2009). One of the teachers summarized with these words the disadvantages identified: “Everything becomes a little bit more difficult. It’s more difficult to plan and manage work time: time is

very short, the needs of fast children would be working fast while slower children have necessities and need more time. The adaptation and the co-teaching practice are fatigue because we must adjust time and work. It would be easier working together at the same program". Some of the teachers think that possible disadvantages for students could be *two teachers teaching together at the same time can create lack of attention and confusion in the children (3/20)* and *troubles for students in relying to a teacher which they don't feel as their own one (2/20)*. In the last case, they underline how the special teacher is seen as the teacher who looks after few pupils and not to the entire classroom. Furthermore when teachers do not agree (2/20) they can't collaborate together in an efficient way making the students feel that the special teacher is not the teacher of the entire class and force them to follow a lesson which is not shared and collaborative where teachers can explain different topics at the same time and give different explanation creating confusion and disorientation. About this topic, one of the curricular teachers from pre-school has said: "If there isn't any collaboration and agreement among teachers, it's a disadvantage for children which risk to be involved in a atmosphere of tension and, especially for the disabled child which is not integrated into the class and into the activities played by his mates". Furthermore teachers think that a possible trouble can be ascribed to an excessive simplification and to a slowdown of the teaching method which must involve also children with more difficulties to the detriment of the talented ones (2/20). In this way, thou, they raise a vision of the co-teaching method in which only some of the children can take advantage, in particular those in difficulty, while the others more talented can't take any advantage at all. This disadvantage is especially identified by the curricular teachers from the Primary schools, who are more loyal to the scholastic program they have to teach in order to achieve the learning goals decided by the Ministerial Programmatic Instructions.

During the analysis of the interviews it comes out a school reality where the co-teaching method isn't set up (11/20). In these cases, teachers prefer the approach defined as "special teacher- certified child", both inside the classroom than outside. In fact one of the teachers said: "I'm not able to carry out the co-teaching with another teacher, because teaching is standard and traditional: the teacher prefers to teach in a frontal way and I go out with a little group of children I follow on my own doing a different program from the one followed by their mates inside the classroom".

Obstacles and facilitators for the co-teaching

We have just seen in the last part that not all the teachers use the co-teaching method. If we analyze the barriers to its achievement several teachers (7/20) said that the *turn-over of the special teachers* is an obstacle to its achievement. "The major barrier is that every year a new teacher comes. There isn't any continuity and so it's very difficult to build relationships, we always have to restart from the base to create the relationship with our colleague and with students". In fact some teachers (5/20), because of the turn-over, agree that *it's difficult to build a relationship with a new special teacher*. As far as the relationships within colleagues are concerned, the major *troubles* are *relational (7/20)*, or *narrow-mindedness attitude towards the colleagues (5/20)* and *a lack of energy in their actions (5/20)*.

It may happen to be in situations where “the teacher doesn’t consider you, you are an obstacle to her, she is not able and she doesn’t want to share the lesson”, “the curricular teacher doesn’t let any space to play”, “teachers don’t understand each others”, “if teachers argue, they don’t collaborate, they don’t understand each other, they don’t do any kind of activity together, it’s a disadvantage for the entire division”. Another barrier to its achievement is the fact that teachers have limited and reduced hours to work in their classroom (5/20): “I’m looking after 4 certificated students so that I have few hours with every child and this doesn’t allow me to do a good job”. There is also an important obstacle caused by the *separation of the roles* (4/20) inside the classroom, or rather not consider job division as it came out before in the co-teaching definition given by teachers, since an important difference within teachers: the shared opinion is that curricular teacher consider herself as the “classroom teacher” and that the special teacher consider herself as the “only teacher of that particular student” and so she thinks to have a different role: “this is very common because I, as a special teacher, am the only one to know deeply the child and so I closed myself in my approach, in my beliefs and I could be not open to the collaboration. The curricular teacher, on the other hand, may think-I’ve got the rest of the class to work with and I don’t want another problem if there is a special teacher for him”. In addition to this, special teachers think that a division of roles has been stressed since when “especially teachers with older teaching experience tend to considerate the class as their own class and so they difficultly share a part of the lesson and of the responsibility with another teacher”. Consequently *the looking after the certificated child* is only delegated (5/20) to the educative-didactical action of the special teacher. A teacher of the primary school has said “I’ve seen situations where there has been a delegation to the special teacher, as if the certificated student was totally her own student and so, when she wasn’t in the classroom the curricular teachers didn’t do anything at all for him or they asked the special teacher to give him some work to do. A child who can do the same work of their mates in the classroom, maybe a little bit modified, is not allowed to do it because he has to follow the scholastic program of the special teacher”. Viceversa, it happens that the special teacher only pays attention to the disabled child (2/20) and not also to other students. This division of the roles wanted by special teachers comes out especially in this teacher’s words: “if I am a special teacher I have to know which is the curriculum planning and try to understand if the child I’m taking care of can follow it, or if I have to change it or if I need a planning completely different from that of the class”.

From the analysis of the interviews, it comes out that one important aspect for the achievement of the co-teaching is the strict planning among teachers, and actually it comes out that a barrier to its achievement is the *few time available for the common planning* (3/20) because for example special teachers “have a lot of classes and they can be in the team meetings just only once a month and this makes the common planning very difficult to do”. There is also the *not sharing the educative method* (4/20) affirmed by some of the teachers, usually the curricular ones, which are not available to change their teaching style (5/20) traditional and the old statements. Another obstacle identified to the achievement of this approach is due to the *level of gravity of the child’s disease* (4/20): “if the child has a serious impairment it is very difficult to integrate him into a group. In

this case the special teacher is forced to work in a more individualistic way and less inside the classroom". As far as the cure, the education and the management of the disabled child are concerned, a fundamental difference between special teachers and curricular ones comes out. On one hand special teachers feel the delegation of the child at all, while on the other hand the curricular teachers feel that the attention of the special teacher is only paid to the "certificated" children. There is thou a contrast between the ideal of a teacher who should be a resource for the entire class and the disabled child is looked after by both teachers, and the reality where the special teacher feels committed as a teacher only for the certificated child. Another interesting difference among teachers from different kinds of schools comes out: primary school teachers see few hours spent in the classes as a barrier. Instead the special teachers blame the lack of sharing planning activities for the disabled child with their curricular colleagues as an important obstacle. On the other side, concerning what came out until this moment, the major factors considered as facilitators to co-teaching practice are *collaboration* (9/20), *sharing opinions within colleagues* (13/20), and the *planning through a common language* (5/20). Also important is the *non stopping specific training about the child pathology* (4/20) both for special teachers than curricular ones, in order to plan a right activity to strengthen their abilities: "being update on what is a child with disability, but also on which kind of education and intervention is right for that specific pathology". This analysis underlines how fundamental dimensions to make the co-teaching method easier to be achieved are the building of positive relationships within colleagues based on mutual respect, open-mindedness, sharing opinions, collaboration, mutual knowledge and respect and on a synergy of actions toward the child's family.

Personal and professional features of the teachers

Certain personal and professional features, if owned by the teachers, can facilitate the co-teaching method. Considering professional features, the essential one is the idea of the *special teacher as a resource for the entire class* (19/20) and not as a resource only for the disabled child: "the special teacher, since she has been assigned to the class, should have a relationship with all the class". Other important features are the *collaboration within colleagues* (7/20), *confrontation* (5/20), and *synergy in actions* (4/20). Concerning the activities taught in the classroom, these features show in an *active and innovative teaching* (5/20) characterized for *flexibility to changes* (5/20), "it's important to own a certain skill to adapt oneself, to adapt the program and the path, to change it, to modify it" and in particular this is ought to "several variables that can be played in a class, because also the disabled child can be a positive variable if you are able to see it, while he can be a negative if you are not able to see it". Referring then to the relationship with the child, the interviewed teachers underline some important features that should be played as the *child observation* (2/20), the *knowledge of his life history* (3/20), the *special teacher's training about the disability of the child* (6/20), these are all dimensions which allow the teacher to get in touch deeply with the child and to share these information with the curricular teacher, exactly because the special teacher is *an intermediary between the disabled child and the curricular teacher* (2/20).

Concerning the personal features a teacher should have to achieve a successful co-teaching, the interviewed teachers identify them as: *openness towards the others* (17/20), *harmony* (7/20), *sincerity* (7/20), *respect for the colleague* (2/20), *capacity to question himself* (13/20), *resolution and patience* (4/20), *willingness* (4/20), *humbleness* (2/20), *commitment in job* (2/20), and the *positive beliefs on the potential of the child* (2/20), letting the teacher work for a teaching plan that can push the child to develop all his capacities because she owns “ a positive vision that led you thinking that with the child you are working everything is possible and so commitment is the point”.

5. Discussion

The co-teaching is an educative method where two or more teachers, the curricular one and the special one, teach to an heterogeneous group of students in the same class, in the school reality, with different approaches. (Friend, Cook, 2007). Definitions identified by the interviewed teachers agree with this vision and they add that the co-teaching also involves the collaboration among colleagues, the division of the roles and of work and the shared planning. Collaboration is a medium for the co-building of another knowledge as well as it is useful as a catalogue shared of actual memories and shared knowledge. So, in a collaborative context, teachers should put in practice more knowledge than they work on their own; about this topic Villa et al. says (2004) “what a teacher can do with the help of another teacher is even more indicative of their capacity than what she can do on her own”⁵. Collaboration within teachers includes: evaluation, planning, sensitive support, problem solving and didactical support in the relationship with children (Huffman et al., 2002; Puchner, Taylor, 2006)⁶. This focus on everyone’s strength is also one of the principles of the inclusive education both for teachers than for children: not everyone needs to understand everything if the learning is diffused (Rytivaara, Kershner, 2012). Despite the definition of co-teaching coming out in the interviews assumes its knowledge by the teachers actually, in the major of the cases, we observe situations where the co-teaching isn’t set up or it is considered as the lesson given only by the curricular teacher. In particular it is possible to see these situations: in the first case the curricular teacher and the special one plan together the lesson for the disabled child, who is integrated in the class but looked after only by the special teacher or he is taken outside the classroom with a group of mates; in the second case, the special teacher plans all alone the lesson for the disabled child and she teaches it inside or outside the classroom, faraway from the other students. A possible explanation could be ascribed to the difficulty in realizing this approach. In fact, in spite of the advantages found (as the mutual teaching and knowledge within

5 R.A. Villa, J.S. Thousand, A.I. Nevin (2004). *A guide to co-teaching: Practical tips for facilitating student learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, p. 61.

6 Cit. in M.T. Gray (2001). *Co-teaching in Inclusive Classrooms: The Impact of Collaboration*. Bibliobazaar, p. 10.

teachers, the support in teaching, the possibility to share the responsibility in the classroom, the opportunity for the teachers professional development, the chance to learn the respect and the tolerance towards diversity and the increase of expectations for students with disability⁷) and the few disadvantages pointed out, there are the same several barriers which complicate its achievement and in particular there is a problem to work together among the colleagues, the division of roles engaged by teachers in the co-teaching and especially both the special than the curricular teacher are afraid of losing their proper exclusive role, and the special attention paid in the planning moment which must be very strict in the co-teaching model and very sensitive to considerate all the several variables influencing the realization of didactical activities (Walther-Thomas, 1997; Cole, McLeskley, 2010). Walther-Thomas, Bryant (1996) found in the cooperative planning one of the essential base for the co-teaching because it allows teachers to decide the roles and responsibilities during the lesson, to create a favorable atmosphere for co-teaching and to make the thorough consideration of the individual and group's needs easier in order to guarantee benefits for each child inside the inclusive context. It is seen as a fundamental aspect for the achievement of this method (Walther-Thomas, 1997) since it allows teachers to decide goals, tools, methods and approaches to work and mutual roles of every subject involved in this practice. Not only is necessary a common planning at the classroom level, but also it refers to a process which must be shared and carried out from the entire scholastic institution. In this last case, the same institution can give support and services useful to the achievement of co-teaching, such as to create a calendar of the lessons manageable and efficient and to foresee a support system in order to face all the problems coming out. The forecast of a strict system of planning at different levels, from teachers to management, permits a major sharing of values towards the creation of an inclusive environment by all the entire scholastic staff, families and community members as well. Considering these results, we could propose the following suggestions so that co-teaching can find a place in our nowadays school reality: 1) at the level of teacher training courses to raise awareness to promote inclusive education even for general teachers training, 2) to promote training courses for teachers to support teaching methods that sensitize the skills to work with colleagues, shared planning and shared assessment; 3) at the organization's school to raise the entire structure, starting from the headmaster to the teaching staff, the importance of encouraging educational activities (as co-teaching) that promote participation for all students.

Referring to the advantages found, the most important is the possibility to have in the classroom one more teacher which presence will bring the division of the roles, of the work, the mutual learning and the possibility to answer better to students' learning needs. As a consequence this is an advantage also for those students who can receive more attention when they have troubles and to develop their learning potential at all. Here we are: the shared planning permits the acknowledgment of the importance of the roles and work division inside the

7 G.W. Lodato, J. Blednick (2011), *Teaching in Tandem: Effective Co-Teaching in the inclusive classroom*, Ascd, Alexandria, VA, p. 11.

teachers staff, which is an essential aspect in order to fulfill an efficacious action of teaching. Concerning this part Keefe and Moore (2004) ended that if such a division of roles and of mutual responsibilities don't happen, the co-teaching is reduced to the figure of the curricular teacher as the teacher giving roles and works and managing activities while the special teacher only plays a monitoring and helping action. These obstacles can be overcome through some factors found in the personal and professional features of the teachers, as well as into the scholastic system as far as the turn-over of special teachers is concerned. Some of the more important aspects are the training of the teachers, collaboration, open-mindedness towards the others, to be under discussion, the sincerity in giving a feedback to the other teacher, harmony in relationships, considering the figure of the special teacher as a resource for the entire class. Simona D'Alessio (2011) in fact warns the reader about a possible risk in our context where the special teacher can be seen firstly a strong reference point to promote an integration process but then an obstacle if her figure becomes the focus with measuring the scholastic integration success or failure, and in the worst cases, when she becomes an appendage or a prosthesis of the disabled child.

According to Austin's studies (2001) who affirms that teachers consider critical for the success of the co-teaching several factors such as communication, giving a feedback to the colleague and sharing the management of the class. Common features used to describe the co-teaching include: 1) common goals, publicly decided, 2) a shared system of beliefs 3) equality within teachers 4) clear roles defined 5) collaboration, cooperation and mutual proposals (Villa, Thousand, Nevin, 2004). Having a common goal for students and working for the fulfillment of that goal beginning from a system of beliefs based on mutual proposals and on the philosophy of teaching, these are the critical features of the co-teaching. Equally important is the status of the partnership itself, which must be created on the mutual respect and on the freedom to change one's mind. Anyway, practically, a lot of examples of co-teaching don't have such a collaborative or productive features, maybe since some models have had a top-down characteristic which is imposed. Some problems could come out, for example, about the occasional inequality of experiences of both teachers, curricular and special ones, involved into co-teaching, about the struggles between different styles of teaching or structural and practical problems in defining an useful planning and reflection moments (Friend et al., 2010; Gurg, Uzuner, 2011).

Concerning disadvantages, they are identified in the difficulty and confusion which can come out among those students receiving a double kind of teaching at the same time, in the problematic relationships among some teachers and in the increase of time spent for planning the lesson. Even if the co-teaching method is considered an useful approach to promote the inclusive values and most of all to give attention to the different needs/aspirations of the students, it seems difficult to be achieved because of some barriers hampering its realization. In particular a barrier very difficult to cross is the special teachers' turn-over which creates a lot of troubles for the building of all those dimensions considered important for the realization of this practice, such as relying on the other, the collaboration, open-mindedness towards the others, all aspects of a relationship that may need more time to put in practice. Such this barrier then compromises other factors such as the difficulty in collaborating, a stronger plan-

ning necessary to its realization and the non-identification of the role of the co-teacher. Murray (2004) in fact underlines how teachers' narrow-mindedness and their few time for collaboration are some of the obstacles identified for the implementation of this approach.

The possible future development of the research wants to investigate first of all the meanings of this approach not only as far as the teachers are concerned but also for the other actors involved into the practice of co-teaching, or rather children and school managers which play an important role in transferring the inclusive values in the school structure where they work. Another aspect that should be taken into consideration concerns the comparison between the learning results in students which take advantages of the co-teaching and those which take benefit from the traditional teaching method also to investigate how such a didactical activity is different from the more traditional ones. It could be also interesting to analyze, furthermore, the co-teaching in relation to two factors: the different subjects and the students' specific characteristics of learning. Without any significant base of research that defines the efficacy or not of the different approaches of co-teaching in relation to subjects, problems, difficulties, students' problems or potentials and other variables influenced by this approach, it's not possible to have any realistic expectations for the fulfillment of co-teaching.

Finally, another topic of the research is about the association with co-assessment (Conderman, Hedin, 2012). The practice of co-teaching requests to change the learning environment and the teaching style, through a different way of giving works and roles and managing activities. In this case, then, we should wonder if we have to modify also the correlate system of evaluation and for example if the authentic assessment, in opposition to the traditional one, could be considerate efficient to assess students learning and the environment where the co-teaching is fulfilled.

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