

Inclusive education practices. The teacher training Pratiche didattiche inclusive. La formazione degli insegnanti

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Today the discussion on the state of inclusive school for all students, where learning and participation obstacles are eliminated, especially for students with impairments, is today well developed both within the national and international scientific community. The lack of appropriate training for teachers and the opportunity of benefiting from a lifelong learning according to an inclusive - collaborative approach are relevant indicators to evaluate the quality of the system. Creating Community of Practice for teachers could be the answer to this situation.

The need for a training package in line with the establishment of Community of Practice is also highlighted by a series of indicators that emerged from a theoretical-explorative research, addressed to 120 in-service teachers in schools of different grades in Lazio region (Italy), who were attending the Master on "Teaching and Educational Psychology for student with Learning Disability" during 2011/2012 at the University of Roma Tre.

Key-words: Inclusion, Community of Practice, Learning Disability, Lifelong Learning Training, Index for Inclusion

abstract

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1. Inclusion in school

The current state of inclusion in Italy is characterized by an increasing number of students with impairments, with Learning Disability (LD) or other Special Educational Needs (SEN)¹, which represents a situation of enduring difficulties in the realization of a real inclusive and social process of school (Canevaro, 2007; d'Alonzo, 2008; Canevaro, d'Alonzo, lanes, 2009; Pavone, 2010; Chiappetta Cajola, 2006, 2008, 2012; lanes, Cramerotti, 2011, 2013; lanes 2007, 2013).

Today the target of an inclusive education for all students, with no barriers to learning and global participation, especially for students with impairments, is well discussed within the international scientific community: Booth and Ainscow (2002, 2008, 2011) in their Index for Inclusion propose a structured collection of indicators of inclusion together with a methodology for self-assessment and self-improvement that makes proper use of those indicators in order to identify the strengths and situations that require specific project actions (Demo, 2013).

In school, where the presence of students with LD and SEN is only one aspect of diversity, a focus on the quality of the education system is increasingly important. Some of the indicators identified for building inclusive schools concern: the lack of teacher training, the collective effort in the construction of shared responses adapted to students' individual needs, early school leaving, low quality of the programs, rigidity of curriculum and assessment procedures, as well as continuous lack of collaboration and communication among teachers (Canevaro, Mandato, 2004; Cottini, 2004; Dovigo, 2007; Chiappetta Cajola, Margottini, 2006; Canevaro, d'Alonzo, lanes, 2009; EFA, Report 2009; Pavone 2002, 2007, 2010; Chiappetta Cajola, 2009, 2012; lanes, 2013).

In Europe as well teachers' training is considered a key factor to guarantee the quality of education and to improve education standard (European Commission, 2007). This in turn highlights the need of lifelong learning in order to answer to the lack of sharing and collaboration as observed in different educational contexts. In addition, initial training cannot provide permanently teachers with the skills and knowledge required for practicing the profession. Therefore, teachers' professional development and knowledge must be perceived as a lifelong learning: in fact, teachers are being asked to adopt more collaborative and constructive learning practices, thus playing a role of coadjutors and classroom managers, rather than trainers ex-cathedra (MIUR & European Union, 2007; European Commission, 2007, 2013).

These new roles require a specific training on a whole spectrum of techniques and didactic methods, given also the heterogeneity of classrooms, where typically students come from different environments and cultures, thus drawing attention on those affected by LD. In such situations teachers should be able to

1 In the school year 2013/2014, 209,000 students with certified disabilities are enrolled (Ministry for Education, University and Research, 2013b), while students with Learning Disability enrolled in the school year 2010/2011 were 65,219 and for the school year 2011/2012 90,030 were registered (Ministry for Education, University and Research, 2013a). For more data: Associazione Treelle, Caritas italiana et Fondazione Agnelli, 2011; ISTAT 2013.



take advantage from the opportunities offered by new technologies, while satisfying at the same time the learning needs of some individuals. In 2002, the Italian Ministry for Education, University and Research established a training program on technologies for schools staff in order to mind the existing gap in managing Information Communication Technology (ICT) and the digital divide². In 2012 the need of training on new technologies has been reaffirmed, with a special emphasis on the need of acquiring ICT competences for support teachers (D.D. n.7/2012); in 2013 the Italian Parliament approved a set of norms for Schools, University and Research, which includes among others an enhancement of digital competencies for teachers³.

The challenging issue of teacher education can also be approached considering the possibility to organize and facilitate the creation of Community of Practice necessary to support daily activities of teachers in order to facilitate the inclusion of all forms of school diversity (Chiappetta Cajola, 2009; Lipari, 2007, 2010; Calvani, 2011).

Hattie's works (2009) provided further relevance to this training method, in the context of Evidence Based Education (EBE), based on a study of fifteen years of research and over 800 meta-analyses, which consist of more than 50,000 minor studies involving nearly 250 million students. The author, in his results analysis, calls teachers to a community work where mutual criticism and passion for teaching would be fully shared and appreciated.

2. Teachers as Community of Practice

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As already mentioned, for teachers it is very important to get a training package which is designed according to an inclusive – collaborative approach. In that respect a response can be found by establishing the Community of Practice (CoP). In his work Wenger, one of the leading exponents of learning theories applied to the field, does not only give a simple definition, but also provides an analytical tool capable of interpreting organizational forms of various types and to represent the starting point for an effective re-design of knowledge-oriented organizations (Wenger, 2006).

Starting from the classical formulation of Argyris and Schön (1978), the perspective of organizational learning is for the CoP a particularly relevant reference point for the development of both theoretical and empirical application. In fact the conceptual notion of Communities of Practice was drawn up at the end of the last century as part of a specific research program conducted by Lave and Wenger on the subject of learning.

These studies were characterized by at least three factors:

- 2 White Book on Innovation in Schools and Universities: 4 main priority areas for intervention have been identified: innovation in the school system, through new methods and new teaching materials; institute hardwiring and networking; the creation of virtual communities within the School- University system; the use of *e-learning* to provide students, teaching and non-teaching staff with courses.
- 3 Law, 8th november 2013, n. 128.

- a) overturn the assumption, consolidated in common beliefs, according to which training is based on a special relationship between teacher and student;
- b) highlight the fact that gradual learning of a skilled competence is based on a process of social participation at a given practice;
- c) analyze these practices as complex sets of relationships between the student and other community members, between the student and the practice itself, between the student and the group culture (Wenger, Lave, 1991).

Wenger thus defines the CoP firstly as a result of active participation in the practices of one or more social communities to which the individual belongs (more or less consciously at different levels of involvement) and secondly as the process of identification/membership to their communities.

Such an approach, arising from cultural psychology and ethnography applied to organizational schemes, embraces different theories, such as meaning theory, social structure, contextualized experience, community, subjectivity, power, practice and identity (Pontecorvo, Ajello, Zucchermaglio, 1995; Zucchermaglio, 1996; Wenger, 2006; Lipari, 2007, 2010).

In this respect, learning is an essentially experiential and social process, consisting of a real “social participation” that creates emergent structures and contributes to the construction of our identity through membership in a community, where the following elements come simultaneously into play:

- 1) acquisition of situated skills (technical and interpersonal);
- 2) construction of individual and social identity;
- 3) recognition of being part of a group that shares, in practice, knowledge, values, language and identity.

In this perspective practice plays a key role for understanding the phenomena of learning, as it is defined as the “action (...) within a particular historical and social context”, where participation “influences not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do” (Wenger, 2006, p. 47).

According to this approach, the CoP is a useful model to address the problem of knowledge management as it represents an “organizational infrastructure for the concrete realization of the dream of a learning organization” (Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, 2002, p. 6). In reality, the CoP can take many forms. They could be communities that carry out their activity either in presence, or on-line or in a blended format, i.e. using meetings both in presence and web (Maraigliano, 2004; Calvani, 2001, 2011).

At school the situation is rather complex and creating a CoP of teachers is a way to make them aware of their own role within the school system. In this way teachers could be accompanied in their daily practices and can interact with colleagues, thus abandoning their isolation through experience sharing, best practices identification and relying on mutual help to face daily problems in their profession.

Such a learning could be defined as collaborative, or mutual, in opposition to the so-called direct learning, where someone provides teaching according to a specific educational program.

The concept of CoP promotes an authentic collaborative learning capable of responding to mainly two requirements: the first is related to the possibility, downstream of a training action, to give itself continuity through forms of mutual assistance between newly-trained and more experienced teachers,



and the second refers to the creation of professional communities inspired by the models of the so-called knowledge sharing (Trentin, 2001, 2004; Calvani, 2011).

3. Research: some indicators on the need of teachers' collaboration and sharing

3.1 Methodology: Objectives and Research Sample

The aims of the research concerned the knowledge of the following topics: any instruments of monitoring and evaluation adopted by teachers for students with LD; their level of sharing between subject teachers and support teachers; the knowledge and use of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health for Children and Youth (WHO, 2001, 2007); the respondents' profile and their participation in training programs.

These objectives as well as the need of a training program in line with the establishment of CoP have been investigated by a theoretical-exploratory research (Lumbelli 1984, 2006; Clarke, 2005), addressed to 120 in-service teachers in schools of different grades in Lazio region (Italy), who have attended the Master on "Teaching and Educational Psychology for student with LD" in A.Y. 2011/2012 at the University of Roma Tre, Department of Educational Science, in agreement with the Italian Ministry for Education, University and Research.

This choice concerns a non-probability sample (also known as a purposive sample) whereas the chances of members of the wider population being selected for the sample are unknown. In a non-probability sample some members are deliberately – purposely – selected and are identified among those who consider themselves more connected to the phenomenon under study (i.e. every member of the wider population does not have an equal chance of being included in the sample) (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2007, p. 110).

3.2 Questionnaire

The research, carried out by using a semi-structured questionnaire⁴ consisting of both closed and open questions, was designed to obtain specific indicators through elementary information collected on the field, properly specified in the research plan aimed at obtaining the descriptive knowledge of the unit of analysis, which is the starting point of any data analysis, or the observed knowledge, that allows to deepen the study of respondents individual behavior (Lazarsfeld, 1966; Trentini, 2000; Corbetta, 2003; Domenici, 2006; Ciucci, 2012; Chiaro, 1998, 2005, 2012).

The questionnaire was administered to the sample composed of 120 teachers as defined above and included the following questions:

4 The questionnaire was administered in the context of the basic course teaching "Didactics and Evaluation".

- nominal characteristics of the sampling (sex; years of working in the school; school grade; qualified as a support teacher; participation in training programs);
- observation tools used for the identification of pupils with LD;
- monitoring and evaluation tools adopted by teachers for students with LD;
- the level of sharing and collaboration among teachers during the monitoring and evaluation definition for students with L.D.;
- the use of them in the design phase of the educational courses;
- the knowledge and use of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health for Children and Youth.

The answers obtained from the questionnaire mentioned above have provided the basis for the indicators considered in this paper for the evaluation of training aimed at establishing a CoP.

In particular, the following indicators were analyzed: the level of sharing and collaboration among teachers during the definition of monitoring and evaluation for students with L.D.; the use of such evidence in the design phase of the educational courses as well as the knowledge of previous training experiences attended by students consisting of a specific group of teachers that took part to LD university training.

3.3 Some research results

The analysis of the sample shows that 43,7% of teachers works in school for over 15 years; 26,1% between 11 and 15 years (Fig. 1). As shown in Fig. 2 the teachers in the primary school are the highest value (51,3%), followed by those who work in the upper secondary school (22,7%); 76,7% are also support teachers (Fig. 3).

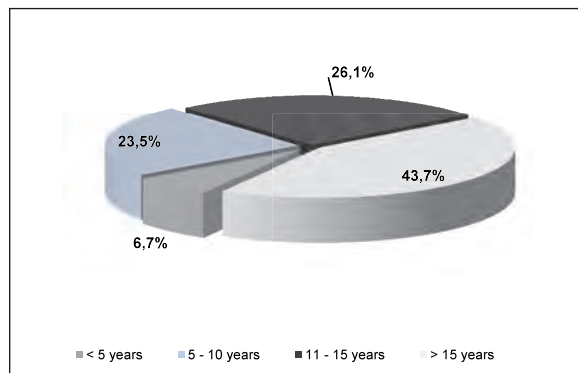


Fig. 1: Years of working in the school

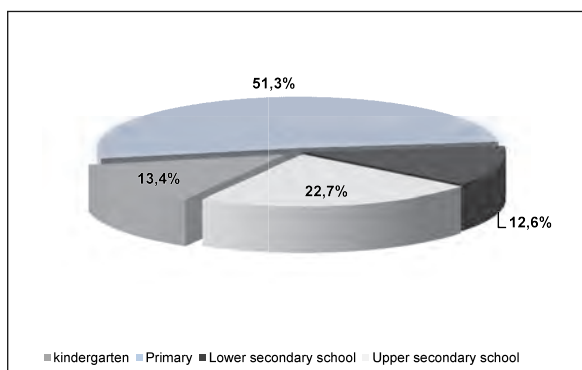


Fig. 2: School grades

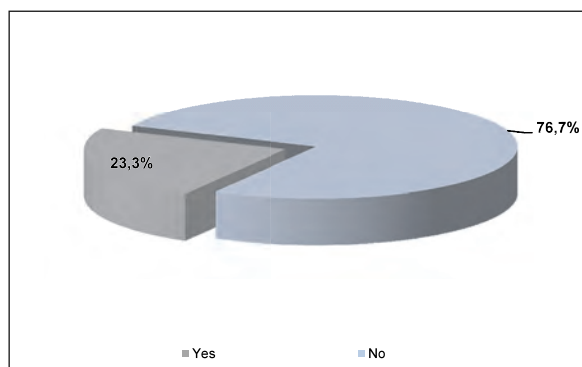


Fig. 3: Specialized as support teacher

The analysis of the results shows that teachers express the need of training in an inclusive perspective: as a matter of facts, only 11.8% had previously attended courses related to instructional design for inclusion, 6.3% had attended courses for the identification and treatment of special educational needs and 22.1 % for the teaching of students with LD (Fig. 4).

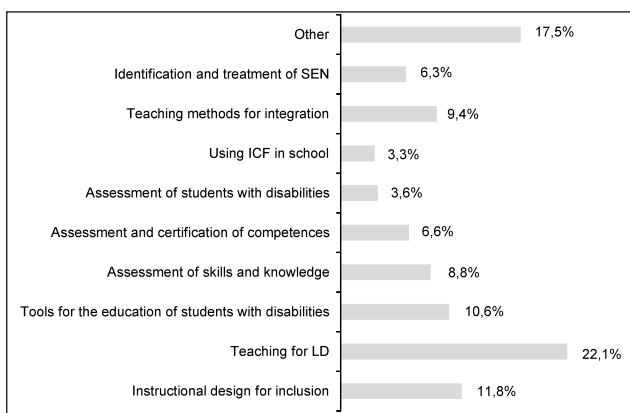


Fig. 4: Participation in educational training

In addition, other identified indicators show a low level of collaboration among teachers: only 59.8% systematically shares the results of evaluation for the students with LD and then use them to redesign the training courses (Fig. 5), while only 55.6% shares the criteria of assessment students (Fig. 6) and 59% the teaching methods and evaluation (Fig. 7).

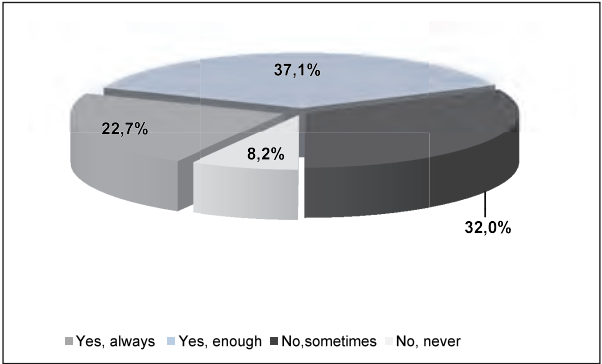


Fig. 5: Discussion in the Class Council of tests results for students with LD and their use to redesign training courses

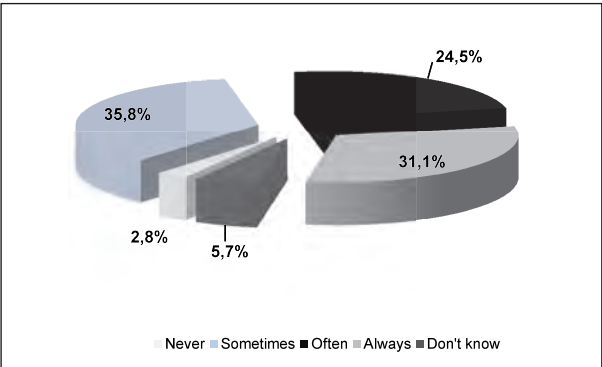


Fig. 6: Class teachers share the assessment criteria for students with LD

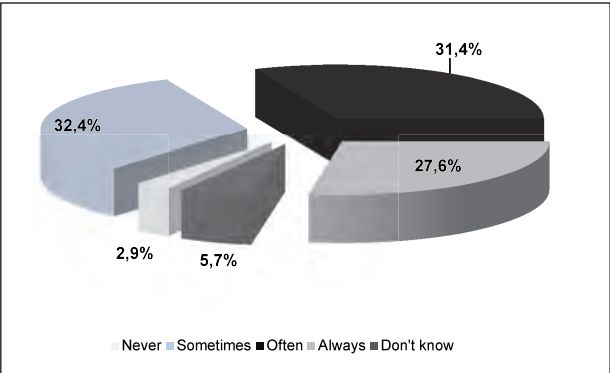


Fig. 7: Class teachers share the teaching methods and assessment for students with LD



What has been described so far shows that teachers often live in isolation, as the assessment criteria for students with LD are shared “sometimes” by 35.8% of teachers (Fig. 6); the teaching methods and assessment are shared “sometimes” by 32,4% (Fig. 7) and about 40% does not discuss in the Class Council the results of the tests obtained by students with LD (Fig. 5).

Furthermore, as evidenced by the results shown in Fig. 3, their request for an innovative offer of training activity is sporadically accepted by the school, thus making relevant the question of how to respond to such a need in a context that seems to be, at least partially, traditional and conservative.

Spreading the Communities of Practice as a training and operational method for all teachers is useful to break that isolation in which teachers are often forced to work, thereby creating the right conditions to let them work in an appropriate way, leading them to open the school to change. Such an approach requires a complex set of attitudes and competences, which is quite difficult to develop and which should be supported by daily practice by offering interaction opportunities with colleagues and the possibility of getting to know teachers (Midoro, 2004).

Although the Community of Practice can be formed spontaneously or through the aggregation and growth of small groups, its development can be encouraged and supported in various ways: through careful organization, or through recognition systems, through appropriate training, or common activities. By focusing on the elements identified by Wenger (2006), teachers can reflect on their practice, share approaches, experiment new content and practices, while providing psychological, educational and pedagogical support to other colleagues.

Professional development does not only come from traditional activities, as teachers themselves can take part and can get important benefits from the possibility of interacting in a CoP, where they are continuously in touch among themselves, thus developing a learning pattern capable of stimulating problem solving at the same time when problems arise (Bodi, 2007).

4. Conclusions: considerations on the assessment of teaching effectiveness

In this perspective it is relevant the possibility of measuring the change in the learning processes as a result of an inclusive education approach that takes into account teachers continuous education in a lifelong learning view. In particular, the constitution of CoP can be realized by identifying suitable recognition instruments and specific indicators that take into account all aspects related to teaching and the level of interaction between different participants involved in the learning process: students, teachers, support staff.

Such an evaluation has an impact on organization and performance, as it goes beyond participants’ reactions of their training path and their own feedback on learning. The “diachronic” dimension of impact, i.e. the study and evaluation of training according to its evolution in time in a dynamic and evolutionary perspective, is a particularly important aspect to be considered and measured in relation to the type of training activity and teaching strategy adopted.

In each school, the systematic measurement of the level of inclusion is the-

refore essential for having reliable data that can allow the change of educational environment for addressing the educational needs of pupils with LD or other SEN.

In this perspective, the Index for Inclusion offers a series of questionnaires that schools can use within a process of inclusive development subdivided into 5 stages (Booth, Ainscow 2008).

The possibility of using tools provided by statistics to implement a process of detection, analysis and knowledge of all the elements that make up the educational processes in an inclusive perspective is offered by the Index for Inclusion proposed in 2002 by Booth and Ainscow then radically revised by the same authors in 2011 (EASPD 2012). This is a suitable tool to support educational institutions in the transformation of their culture and practices on their way to become schools for all, given that the term inclusion is not only limited to students with Learning Disability or with Special Educational Needs, as it also includes a whole set of differences, expressions and capabilities of all students (Medeghini, 2006).

This tool is designed to accompany the process of self-analysis of an educational institution with the aim of reducing barriers to learning and promoting participation of students, while monitoring its suitability with respect to the inclusive model through an analysis conducted by the indicators that highlight values and the conditions of teaching and learning.

Each indicator is translated into applications that help to define its meaning, so as to encourage the school to explore it in detail.

Questions allow developing the analysis on the actual state of schools and are useful criteria to evaluate the progress achieved. It is also foreseen that each school will add and /or integrate personalized questions adapted to its reality in order to analyze precisely and accurately each situation.

In particular, the concepts of inclusion and exclusion are explored along three interconnected dimensions related to the improvement of school: creating inclusive cultures, producing inclusive policies, develop inclusive practices. The three dimensions are all necessary for the enhancement of inclusion in school, but particularly in the first section a specific area on community building, through the flexibility offered by the Index, allows to customize indicators in order to focus analysis on the basis of pre-defined cognitive objectives.

In addition, since school development is a complex and challenging process, the Index cannot be explained by a linear activity for achieving the priorities needed for change, but it can produce positive impacts changing teaching methods towards achieving greater sharing of educational and planning activities.

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