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Ethical competence in Italian and German teacher training for inclusive primary schools
La competenza etica nella formazione degli insegnanti italiani e tedeschi per le scuole primarie inclusive

Call

Inclusive education in primary schools involves a wide range of ethical issues. Although teacher training across Europe aims to enable ethically reflective professional practice, previous research shows that student teachers are insufficiently qualified in terms of ethical competence. As Italy has a far longer tradition of school inclusion than Germany, the question arises as to whether student teachers in primary education (N=276) express different training needs in an online survey. Student teachers in Italy rated the ethical competence they had acquired during their training significantly higher and rated ethics in the curriculum as more important than student teachers in Germany. In both countries, student teachers wished for a higher priority to be given to the teaching of ethics, with a focus on applied competence objectives. Beyond country differences, the results show that student teachers recognise the ethical challenges of their profession and want to be empowered to face them.

Keywords: ethical competence, student teachers, teacher training, inclusion, primary schools.

L'educazione inclusiva nelle scuole primarie solleva numerose questioni etiche. Sebbene la formazione degli insegnanti in Europa miri a promuovere una pratica professionale eticamente riflessiva, studi precedenti rivelano che i futuri insegnanti spesso mancano di un'adeguata competenza etica. Considerando che l'Italia ha una tradizione di inclusione scolastica significativamente più lunga rispetto alla Germania, ci si chiede se i bisogni formativi espressi dai futuri insegnanti della scuola primaria (N=276) differiscano nei due Paesi, secondo i dati raccolti tramite un questionario online. In Italia, i futuri insegnanti hanno attribuito un valore significativamente più alto alle competenze etiche acquisite durante la loro formazione e considerato l'etica nel curriculum come più importante rispetto ai loro colleghi in Germania. Tuttavia, in entrambi i Paesi emerge il desiderio che l'insegnamento dell'etica riceva una maggiore priorità, con particolare attenzione agli obiettivi di competenza applicata. Al di là delle differenze nazionali, i risultati indicano che i futuri insegnanti riconoscono le sfide etiche della loro professione e chiedono di essere adeguatamente preparati per affrontarle.

Parole chiave: competenza etica, futuri insegnanti, formazione degli insegnanti, inclusione, scuole primarie.

1. Introduction

Inclusive education requires a consistent orientation of teaching practices towards the needs of all children as an ethical goal (Mainardi, 2023). The implementation of school inclusion raises a number of ethical questions, areas of conflict, challenges or dilemmas that teachers face in their daily practice (Quante et al., 2018; Ta et al., 2023). They are evident in essential day-to-day tasks in inclusive schools, such as providing individualised and targeted learning opportunities, advising on educational choices, managing diversity, enabling social participation and preventing exclusion (Quante & Wiedebusch, 2021). To meet these challenges, teachers, including primary school teachers, need skills to balance competing values and needs (Ta et al., 2023), ethical judgement to provide equal opportunities for individual learning and education (Davies & Heyward, 2019), ethical principles of justice that orient their conduct in diverse classrooms (Tirri & Laine, 2017), and overall ethical competence (Gajewski, 2017). A model of ethical competence for teachers, which includes the components of knowledge, skills and values, was presented by Ghiatau (2015). Quante and Wiedebusch (2021) proposed a refined model to strengthen ethical competence, emphasizing awareness of ethical tensions, case-specific analysis, and critical reflection. This includes awareness and sensitivity to ethical issues and tensions in inclusive schools, the justification of ethical judgements, as well as critical reflection on those judgments and the ability to implement them through appropriate educational action and communication with students, parents and the multi-professional school team. In order to achieve this training objective, the applied teaching of this competence aims to sensitise student teachers to the ethical dimensions of their profession and to sharpen their ethical analysis and judgement on the basis of specific school scenarios. Moreover, a general ethical attitude based on ethical knowledge and identification with ethical values seems to strengthen personal resources, build professional resilience and protect teachers' mental health. Granjo et al. (2021) found relationships between teachers' ethical orientation on the one hand and their global self-esteem and perceived competence on the other. In turn, teachers who frequently experience ethical dilemmas report comparatively higher levels of burnout (Heikkilä et al., 2023). Overall, teaching is ethically charged, and teachers who share responsibility for students' educational biographies are emotionally unburdened by ethical training (Davies & Heyward, 2019).

Across Europe, teacher training aims to foster ethically reflective school practices (Teacher Professional Learning for Inclusion; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2020). Concerning the intrinsic ethical value of the teaching profession Damiano (2007) describes teachers as moral professionals, accountable for educational choices, committed to protecting students' dignity, and aware of the ethical significance of the teaching-learning relationship. According to Damiano, they operate within a framework of values, assuming responsibility for the consequences of their actions and reflecting on the ultimate aims of education. Although Damiano does not explicitly address inclusion, his portrayal underscores that a teacher is fundamentally a moral subject, endowed with autonomy and responsibility. Moreover, the attention he gives to the dignity of each learner and the moral implications of educational practice aligns well with the spirit of an inclusive school that values differences and encourages everyone's involvement.

This is especially true when looking at schools through the perspective offered by the Index for Inclusion (Booth & Ainscow, 2014), which reminds us that if the inclusive development of schools is to be understood as a transformation process, then only those transformations grounded in inclusive values – such as respect for diversity, equity, and active participation – can be considered genuinely inclusive. Instead of relying on isolated technical measures, these values encourage the removal of barriers, the promotion of collaboration, and the co-creation of an educational environment every student belongs to. In this perspective, the morally grounded figure envisioned by Damiano can offer a strong ethical foundation that resonates with the Index's emphasis on values. For these reasons, an education in ethical competencies and reflective practices in ethical decision-making fits perfectly and demonstrates complete alignment.

Ethical competence is among the key teaching competencies for inclusive education and prospective

teachers should already acquire it in their initial university education. However, Maxwell et al. (2020) report low levels of ethical sensitivity among teachers. According to Ta et al. (2023), teachers in Western Europe have few opportunities to discuss and reflect on the ethical dimensions of the work they undertake. There is criticism that student teachers are not sufficiently qualified in terms of ethical competence at this stage, and there is advocacy for basic ethics education to ensure this competence in inclusive schools (Malone, 2020; Forster & Maxwell, 2022). Little is known about how ethics education is implemented in teacher training programmes across different European countries, especially in those with distinct histories of school inclusion. Italy has a long tradition of inclusive education: since 1977, students with disabilities are fully included in mainstream classrooms (Saloviita & Consegnati, 2019; Ianes et al., 2020; Marsili et al., 2021), and they are entitled to specific measures such as the presence of a support teacher or individually tailored learning programs. In contrast, Germany has achieved partial inclusion so far, with the majority of pupils attending mainstream schools, but still a significant proportion of pupils with diverse support needs attend special schools (Shevchenko et al., 2020).

Regarding teacher training, it should be noted that courses for support teachers in Italy have evolved over the years. The aim is no longer to produce specialists in individual disabilities, but rather experts in inclusive didactic mediation who serve as an agent of inclusive transformation within school settings (Manno, 2021). There has been no lack of debate on the possible transformation of the roles and functions of these professionals (Ianes, 2015a; 2015b). Most recently, in January 2024, a legislative proposal was presented on the so-called «inclusive teaching post», which, if adopted, would require that teachers initially appointed to either mainstream or support positions also carry out part of their service in a position different from their original appointment. More generally, the introduction of a mandatory 25-hour training course on inclusion (Ministerial Decree No. 188/21) for all teachers is worth mentioning as evidence that Italy has focused on managing inclusion and diversity in recent years and has «placed a heavy responsibility on teacher education institutions to ensure that current and future teachers are ready, willing and able to face the complexities that characterise 21st century classrooms» (Aiello & Pace, 2020, p. 1). In Germany, there is still great heterogeneity in the content and structure of teacher training curricula for inclusion in primary and secondary schools (Liebner & Schmaltz, 2021), although it is a stated aim to qualify future teachers for their tasks in inclusive schools and diverse learning groups (Emmerich & Moser, 2020). In 2020, the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) and the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs (KMK) presented an interim report on the implementation of the curricular adjustments made so far to achieve the goal of a school of diversity (HRK/KMK, 2020), which has not yet been achieved.

Cultural and historical differences also influence how student teachers develop and interpret ethical competence. In Italy, those in teacher education may have directly experienced inclusive schooling, whereas in Germany the concept of inclusion in schools is often first encountered at university (Büker et al., 2022). By now, no studies on how primary education student teachers in Germany and Italy evaluate their acquisition of ethical competence in view of their future roles in inclusive schools exist. Investigating their perceptions could reveal how well these future educators feel prepared to handle moral dilemmas, respond sensitively to diverse needs, and nurture learning environments characterized by openness and collective participation. The study presented below aims to provide insight into the relevance of ethical qualification in teacher education from the perspective of student teachers who have different backgrounds of inclusion in their societies: a sample of German students from the University of Muenster and a sample of Italian students from the Suor Orsola Benincasa University of Naples.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

At the University of Muenster, Germany, and the Suor Orsola Benincasa University of Naples, Italy, student teachers in primary education participated in an online survey. In Germany, student teachers for primary education complete a three-year Bachelor's degree followed by a two-year Master's degree. In Italy, student teachers complete a five-year polyvalent degree course in Primary Education Science, which qualifies them to teach in primary schools or kindergartens. The German and Italian student teachers surveyed were in their fourth and fifth academic year and thus in advanced teacher training programmes. The research questions, the survey instrument and the data collection are presented below.

2.2 Research Questions

The main purpose of this study was to compare the acquisition and needs of ethical competence in initial teacher training programmes of two exemplary samples of German and Italian student teachers in primary education in a cross-sectional study. Ethical competence was specified as awareness for ethical questions and areas of tension in the school context as well as the reflected and argumentatively based judgment in individual cases. As the focus was on the need for ethical competence in inclusive primary schools, the survey started with attitudes towards inclusive education. Specifically, student teachers in primary education assessed

- their attitudes towards school inclusion and their expectations of future tasks and roles in an inclusive primary school,
- the teacher tasks in an inclusive primary school for which ethical competence is required,
- the acquisition of ethical competence that has taken place in their teacher training programme so far and the acquisition of ethical competence that is desired in the further course of their training,
- the current and future importance of teaching ethics in primary teacher education and the learning and competency objectives in this area.

2.3 Measures

A customised online questionnaire for student teachers was developed in German (Wiedebusch et al., 2022), translated into Italian by native speakers and back-translated to ensure consistent item comprehension. Experts from different disciplines (educational science, philosophy, psychology, special education) involved in teacher training gave their feedback on the items and the wording of the items. This ensured the face validity of the questionnaire from a multi-professional perspective. The questionnaire was pretested with German student teachers (N = 7) to test the comprehensibility of the items. Subjective assessments on the following topics were collected from the student teachers by means of rating scales:

– *Primary student teachers' attitudes and expectations towards inclusive schools.* Student teachers were asked about their general attitudes towards inclusive schools and their expectations regarding their future tasks and working methods as a primary teacher (7 items; 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 6 = 'strongly agree').

– *Need for ethical competence for the tasks of teachers in inclusive primary schools.* Student teachers were asked to rate the importance of selected teacher tasks (12 items; 1 = 'not at all important' to 6 = 'very important'). They then indicated for which of these tasks, in addition to other competences, they thought ethical competence was required (12 items; 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 6 = 'strongly agree').

– *Acquiring ethical competence in primary teacher education.* Student teachers indicated whether they

had already acquired ethical competence during their teacher training in primary education and whether they would like to acquire or deepen ethical competence as part of their further training (each item 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 6 = 'strongly agree'). Next, student teachers indicated which specific learning and competence objectives they would like to achieve when teaching ethical competence (9 items; 1 = 'strongly disagree' to 6 = 'strongly agree'). Finally, on a 10-point numerical rating scale with verbal end-points, student teachers rated the current importance of teaching ethics in their teacher training programme and the importance it should have in future teacher education (each item 1 = 'very low' to 10 = 'very high').

In addition, socio-demographic data (age, gender) were collected anonymously.

2.4 Procedure

Primary student teachers on the Master's programme at the University of Muenster, Germany, and fourth and fifth year students on the Primary Education Science programme at the Suor Orsola Benincasa University of Naples, Italy, were invited by email to participate in the online survey. Students were at the same stage of teacher education in both samples. The participants were assured of a data protection-compliant evaluation and gave written informed consent to participate in the study. Two weeks after the initial invitation, a reminder email followed with a renewed request to participate. The questionnaire was advertised as taking approximately ten minutes to complete.

3. Results

The descriptive results of the survey are presented below, starting with a description of the sample. Group differences between student teachers in primary education in Germany and Italy were tested with two-sample t-tests. If there was no homogeneity of variance according to Levene's test, the Welch test was used. In the case of significant differences, the significance level p and Cohen's d are given. In the case of missing data for single items, respondents were excluded from the analysis of the relevant items.

3.1 Sample Description

A total of N = 276 primary student teachers (n=100 in Muenster, Germany, n=176 in Naples, Italy) took part in the survey. This corresponds to a response rate of 16.2% for the German and 18.5% for the Italian students in the fourth and fifth year of training to become primary school teachers. The samples of the German (G) and Italian (I) student teachers for primary education at both universities differed significantly in terms of age distribution (G: M = 24.39; SD = 1.86; I: M = 25.84; SD = 5.32; $t_{(239.89)}$ = -3.48, p ≤ .001, d = -0.35), with the Italian students being on average one year older. In both samples most of the respondents were female (G: 90.0%; I: 95.5%). The overall high proportion of female respondents corresponded to the gender ratio of all student teachers in primary education at the participating universities.

3.2 Primary student teachers' attitudes and expectations towards inclusive schools

Most student teachers in both countries thought that it was right for schools to aim for an inclusive approach and to include pupils with different abilities and special educational needs (G: 66.0%; I: 95.5%; response levels 'agree' and 'strongly agree'). Italian student teachers had a significantly more positive attitude towards school inclusion than German student teachers in primary education (see table 1). The majority of prospective primary teachers expected to work in an inclusive setting and to teach both pupils

without special educational needs and pupils with special educational needs (G: 78.0%; I: 91.5%; response levels 'agree' and 'strongly agree'). This expectation was significantly higher for Italian than for German student teachers (see table 1). Helping students to learn on an individual basis was seen as central to future teaching (G: 89.0%; I: 86.9%; response levels 'agree' and 'strongly agree'). In addition, the majority of student teachers in both countries expected to work as part of a multi-professional school team (G: 59.0%; I: 88.7%; response levels 'agree' and 'strongly agree') and to collaborate with other professionals, such as support or special education teachers, in the classroom (G: 80.0%; I: 92.1%; response levels 'agree' and 'strongly agree'). Both of these expectations were significantly more pronounced among the Italian student teachers (see table 1). German and Italian student teachers differed in their expectation to prepare and deliver lessons in coordination with other teachers (G: 22.3%; I: 81.8%; response levels 'agree' and 'strongly agree') and in their expectation to do this alone (G: 48.5%; I: 22.8%; response levels 'agree' and 'strongly agree'). Italian student teachers were significantly less likely than German student teachers to expect to teach alone and significantly more likely to expect to coordinate with other teachers (see table 1).

Attitudes and expectations	$M_{(G)}$	$SD_{(G)}$	$M_{(I)}$	$SD_{(I)}$	t	p	d
I think it is right for schools to develop into inclusive educational institutions that accept pupils with different special needs and special educational needs.	4.99	0.98	5.80	0.63	-7.39	.001	-1.04
After my teacher training, I expect to teach pupils with and without special educational needs in an inclusive school.	5.14	1.00	5.65	0.76	-4.38	.001	-0.59
I expect that the individual support of pupils will be a central task in my teaching activities.	5.36	0.79	5.36	0.91	-0.03	.097	0.00
I expect to work in a multi-professional school team.	4.69	1.13	5.49	0.80	-6.25	.001	-0.86
I expect to work together with other professional groups (e.g. teachers for special needs education, support teachers) in the classroom.	5.14	0.99	5.65	0.76	-4.42	.001	-0.60
As a rule, I expect to prepare and conduct school lessons on my own.	4.32	1.27	3.10	1.61	6.91	.001	0.81
As a rule, I expect to prepare and conduct school lessons in coordination with special education teachers.	3.68	1.14	5.32	0.93	-12.94	.001	-1.63

Table 1. *Primary student teachers' assessments of attitudes and expectations towards inclusive schools*
(1 = 'strongly disagree' to 6 = 'strongly agree'; G = German student teachers, n = 100; I = Italian student teachers, n = 176)

3.3 Need for ethical competence for the tasks of teachers in inclusive primary schools

The student teachers assessed which of the twelve selected future tasks in an inclusive primary school they would need ethical competence for and rated the importance of these tasks beforehand. Student teachers from both countries did not differ in their ratings of the importance of these teacher tasks, with one exception: German student teachers considered it significantly more important to identify exclusion in pupils than Italian students (G: M = 5.42; SD = 1.28; I: M = 4.37; SD = 1.96; $t_{(261.01)}$ = 5.29, p ≤ .001, d = 0.60). For each of the teacher tasks, the majority of the German and Italian respondents considered it necessary to have ethical competence in addition to other competences. German student teachers were more likely to agree with items requiring ethical competence to avoid exclusion of pupils, namely to prevent labelling and stigmatising pupils (G: 96.5%; I: 85.8%) or to be aware of exclusion of pupils (G: 89.3%; I: 67.6%; response levels 'agree' and 'strongly agree'). For both teacher tasks, German student teachers rated the need for ethical competence significantly higher than Italian student teachers in primary edu-

cation (see table 2). In contrast, Italian student teachers were more likely to agree with statements emphasising the importance of ethical competence for individual learning support, e.g. to support pupils individually as they learn (I: 86.3%; G: 56.5%;), to recognise pupils' individual abilities and support needs (I: 86.4%; G: 52.9%) or to advise pupils on learning and educational decisions (I: 85.8%; G: 69.1%; response levels 'agree' and 'strongly agree'). For these teacher tasks, Italian student teachers rated the need for ethical competence significantly higher than German student teachers in primary education (see table 2).

Ethical competence is necessary to …	$M_{(G)}$	$SD_{(G)}$	$M_{(I)}$	$SD_{(I)}$	t	p	d
prevent student labeling and stigmatization	5.59	0.66	5.38	1.03	2.02	.045	0.23
enable social inclusion in the classroom	5.31	1.01	5.52	0.88	-1.77	.077	-0.23
recognize student exclusion	5.33	0.99	4.67	1.71	3.92	.001	0.44
advise students on learning and educational decisions	4.81	1.05	5.37	0.94	-4.31	.001	-0.57
advise parents on their children's learning and educational decisions	4.82	1.14	5.23	0.99	-2.97	.003	-0.39
make decisions with respect to individual support of students	4.65	1.19	5.34	0.97	-4.63	.001	-0.66
support students individually with regard to special needs	4.45	1.18	5.36	0.95	-6.25	.001	-0.89
design inclusive learning contexts in a multi-professional school team	4.46	1.20	5.38	0.99	-6.13	.001	-0.86
communicate in the multi-professional school team about the support of students	4.45	1.27	5.33	0.98	-5.56	.001	-0.81
support students individually as they learn	4.48	1.17	5.38	0.89	-6.24	.001	-0.90
recognize individual abilities and support needs of students	4.33	1.22	5.41	0.89	-7.28	.001	-1.07
set individual learning objectives for students	4.23	1.20	5.22	1.02	-6.55	.001	-0.91

Table 2. Primary student teachers' assessments of the need for ethical competence in view of teacher tasks in inclusive schools (1 = 'strongly disagree' to 6 = 'strongly agree'; G = German student teachers, n = 86; I = Italian student teachers, n = 176)

3.4 Acquiring ethical competence in primary teacher education

In the German sample, 8.4% and in the Italian sample, 77.8% of the student teachers reported that they had acquired ethical competence so far in their advanced teacher training programme (response levels 'agree' and 'strongly agree'). In the further course of their training, 63.4% of the German and 86.4% of the Italian student teachers wanted to acquire ethical skills (response levels 'agree' and 'strongly agree'). Italian student teachers rated the acquisition of ethical competence that had already taken place in their teacher training programme (G: M = 2.75; SD = 1.6; I: M = 5.09; SD = 1.03; $t_{(138.35)}$ = -14.77, $p \leq .001$, $d = -2.10$) and the acquisition of ethical competence that is desired in the further course of their training (G: M = 4.88; SD = 1.15; I: M = 5.40; SD = 0.95; $t_{(135.39)}$ = -3.60, $p \leq .001$, $d = -0.51$) significantly higher than German student teachers. Respondents were also asked to indicate the specific learning and competence objectives they were aiming for in acquiring ethical competence. In both countries, only a minority of student teachers wished to be introduced to the basics of philosophical ethics (G: 23.4%; I: 38.7%; response levels 'agree' and 'strongly agree'). Instead, the majority of student teachers preferred to achieve application-based competence objectives. Above all, student teachers want to be able to reflect critically on ethical decisions (G: 84.1%; I: 86.3%), to choose the best ethical course of action in specific school situations (G: 84.0%; I: 88.7%), and to justify ethical decisions in communication with others (G: 83.9%; I: 83.0%; response levels 'agree' and 'strongly agree'). In both countries, student teachers' assessments did not differ significantly from one another, with two exceptions: Italian student teachers were signifi-

cantly more likely to want to be introduced to the basics of philosophical ethics and significantly more likely to want to be able to evaluate the prediction of pupils' learning and development from an ethical point of view than German student teachers (see table 3).

Learning and competence objectives when acquiring ethical competence I want …	M(G)	SD(G)	M(I)	SD(I)	t	p	d
to be able to use arguments to justify ethical decisions in communication with others	5.21	0.91	5.24	1.07	-0.21	.835	-0.03
to be able to reflect critically on ethical decisions	5.27	1.04	5.28	1.04	-0.11	.910	-0.02
to be able to reflect on the values and norms that underlie my pedagogical activities	5.13	1.02	5.18	1.16	-0.32	.750	-0.04
to be able to select the best course of action from an ethical point of view in specific school situations	5.25	0.99	5.40	0.98	-1.18	.238	-0.16
to be sensitized to ethical areas of tension in my educational activities	5.10	1.01	5.15	1.21	-0.33	.745	-0.04
to be able to ethically evaluate and weigh up alternative courses of action when accompanying students	5.12	1.01	5.22	1.11	-0.63	.526	-0.09
to be able to evaluate the handling of diversity and heterogeneity in school from an ethical point of view	5.11	1.04	5.20	1.09	-0.62	.537	-0.08
to be able to evaluate the learning and development predictions of students from an ethical point of view	4.78	1.16	5.21	1.02	-2.88	.005	-0.41
to be introduced to the basics of philosophical ethics	3.43	1.30	4.06	1.45	-3.34	.001	-0.45

Table 3. Primary student teachers' assessments of learning and competence objectives in the acquisition of ethical competence in teacher training programmes (1 = 'strongly disagree' to 6 = 'strongly agree'; G = German student teachers, n = 82; I = Italian student teachers, n = 176)

On a ten-point Likert scale (1 = 'very low' to 10 = 'very high'), the student teachers surveyed rated the current status of ethics in their teacher training and the status that ethics should have in future teacher education for primary schools. Italian student teachers rated the status of ethics in teaching significantly higher (M=7.94, SD=1.83) than German student teachers (M=3.70, SD=2.19; $t_{(255)}$ = -16.16, p ≤ .001, d = -2.17). In addition, Italian student teachers advocated a significantly higher status for the teaching of ethical skills in future teacher training programmes (M=9.09, SD=1.41) than German student teachers (M=7.28, SD=1.73; $t_{(130.68)}$ = -8.21, p ≤ .001, d = -1.19). In both countries, the current status of ethics education was rated lower than the desired status.

4. Discussion

In Europe, there is widespread consensus that student teachers need to be prepared for ethically reflective teaching, rooted in ethical attitudes (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2020). This is in line with a global understanding of ethical practice in schools (Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2020). The results of the present study indicate whether student teachers of primary education from exemplary samples in two European countries with different histories of inclusive education feel adequately prepared by their teacher education to face ethical challenges in inclusive schools, whether they express different training needs in ethics, and what specific educational goals they strive for in acquiring ethical competence.

As the study relates to inclusive schools, the attitudes and expectations of prospective primary school teachers in this regard were first explored. While a recent systematic review of primary teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education shows that they are not fully supportive of inclusion in primary schools but rather neutral (Lindner et al., 2023), the student teachers surveyed here were strongly supportive of inclusive schooling and most of them expected to work in an inclusive school and to teach pupils with and

without special needs. The study has adopted a theoretical framework that defines inclusion as a systemic transformation of educational practices and school structures to accommodate the diversity of all learners (Booth & Ainscow, 2014), rather than those of integration that is focused on the adaptation of individual students to existing school systems without significant systemic changes (D'Alessio, 2011; Medeghini & Fornasa, 2011). This distinction was operationalised in the questionnaire design by focusing on questions that addressed structural changes, collaborative practices, and the co-creation of inclusive environments rather than individualised adjustments. Italian student teachers had significantly more positive general attitudes towards inclusive schools and significantly higher expectations of working in an inclusive primary school in the future than German student teachers. This is probably due to the fact that attitudes towards inclusive schooling in Italy and Germany are based on different social and cultural socialisation experiences. It is also in line with other findings showing that Italian teachers are highly committed to inclusive education (Aiello et al., 2017). In a study by Saloviita and Consegnati (2019), more than 90% of the Italian teachers surveyed agreed that pupils with special educational needs should be educated in mainstream classrooms. However, positive attitudes towards inclusive education alone do not ensure successful inclusive education (Donath et al., 2023). Another important success factor for inclusion in primary schools is the multi-professional collaboration of the school team (Wiedebusch et al., 2022). German and Italian student teachers also differ in their expectations in this respect, with future primary school teachers in Italy expecting more regular multi-professional cooperation and more joint lesson preparation and delivery at school. The different educational pathways in the two countries may explain this. In Germany, primary and special education teachers follow different training programmes, although a greater exchange between general and special education teacher training is considered necessary (Frohn & Moser, 2021). In the Italian school system, specialist and support teachers undergo the same initial teacher training and are considered equal in their responsibility for all children (Ianes et al., 2020). Despite this, the authors recognise that specialist teachers are often given a higher status than support teachers, leading to challenges in working together. In terms of ethics, the development of shared team values is crucial for successful multi-professional collaboration in inclusive schools (Bhroin & King, 2020).

The primary student teachers surveyed considered ethical competence to be necessary for a selection of key teaching tasks in inclusive schools, with higher rates of agreement among Italian than German primary student teachers. It can therefore be assumed that Italian student teachers are more sensitive to the wide range of ethical issues that may arise in inclusive school contexts. However, it could be possible that some responses may reflect elements of integration rather than inclusion. For instance, the Italian student teachers' emphasis on individual support could be interpreted as aligning with practices of integration, which focus on adjusting students to existing structures rather than transforming the educational system itself. Nevertheless, emphasis on some aspects like multi-professional collaboration is an element that could support an interpretation of the students' answers oriented toward inclusion, also because, as noted, collaboration is an important value of the inclusive teachers. This is also highlithed in the «Profile of Inclusive Teachers» by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (2012). Future studies could explore these differences more deeply by employing qualitative methods, such as interviews or focus groups, to better capture how student teachers conceptualize and differentiate inclusion and integration. This could include examining their understanding of systemic *versus* individual adjustments and their views on the removal of structural barriers to inclusion. More generally, it would be valuable to investigate how future teachers perceive the very idea of barriers to inclusion, or more precisely, how they understand exclusion itself, whether they take it for granted or, conversely, consider it to be socially constructed. In the latter case, it would be crucial to explore whether they view it as essential to engage in the project that Titchkosky (2011), within the framework of Disability Studies, defines as the «denaturalization of exclusion».

Continuing with the analysis of the responses and focusing in particular on ethical competence, an interesting difference between both countries is that German student teachers consider these competences to be most helpful in preventing exclusion and facilitating social participation for all pupils, whereas Italian student teachers emphasise the need for ethical competence to support individual learning for all pupils.

Presumably their focus on individual support is related to the need to overcome the barriers to inclusion that still exist in Italy in terms of finding appropriate and tailored responses to pupils' needs. From a philosophical point of view, this finding expresses that German and Italian student teachers associate different goals with inclusion. Preventing exclusion is a central element of anti-discrimination and thus belongs to the ethic of autonomy, which is the milestone of the liberal thought and any liberal-oriented ethic, and is based on the principles of equality and justice (Freeden, 2015). On the contrary, the individual support of individual pupils corresponds to an ethic of empowerment, which is a form of perfectionist ethic. Expressed in the words of the current ethical positions, it identifies the goals of the «capability approach» which aims at detecting, assuring and safeguarding the conditions for the flourishing of each human being (Nussbaum, 2011). This approach is based on the principles of free participation, well-being and the idea of the good life as the goal of ethical behaviour. Given this distinction, the difference in the basic ethical orientation of the student teachers surveyed revealed by the present results can be explained in two ways regarding, respectively, the political experience and the historical tradition of self-understanding of the two countries. First, the results on this point reflect the path dependency of ethical attitudes: Since the 1970s, social and political issues of anti-discrimination and the establishment of equal rights have been at the centre of attention in Germany (Quante, 2017; Childress & Quante, 2022). This is a form of justice discourse characterised by the principle of respect for personal autonomy. In Italy, on the other hand, the long tradition of enabling participation characterises the ethical understanding in which the development of individual abilities and integration into the community are fundamental. This also corresponds to the different normative self-understandings of the two countries. In Germany, inclusion takes place within a liberal conception characterised by the primacy of autonomy, whereas in Italy a more communitarian conception prevails, in which social participation and values connecting to community, identitity and sense of belonging are the defining features (Galli della Loggia, 2010; Almagisti et al., 2021).

With regard to ethics education in teacher training, there was a clear discrepancy between the German and Italian student teachers' self-assessment of their acquired and desired competence in this area, with significantly higher scores for Italian participants. Although they were already in advanced teacher education, less than one in ten German student teachers reported having acquired ethical competence so far, whereas this was the case for over three quarters of Italian student teachers. This suggests that ethical issues are discussed more in Italian than in German teacher education and that ethical issues are more embedded in Italian teacher education, at least in the perceptions of Italian student teachers. Accordingly, the need to acquire this ethical competence in the further course of their studies was expressed by the student teachers, also with greater agreement among the Italian student teachers. Presumably, the familiarity of Italian student teachers with inclusive education goes hand in hand with a strong awareness of the ethical complexity of teaching, which plausibly explains the more pronounced desire for a comprehensive acquisition of ethical competence: The awareness of the problem corresponds to a greater need to be able to do justice to the ethical aspects.

Irrespective of individual skill acquisition, student teachers in primary education rated the teaching of ethical competence as less important in the German teacher education programme and much more important in the Italian programme. Furthermore, student teachers were in favour of increasing the relevance of ethical competence in future training courses, again with greater agreement from Italian student teachers. Overall, the results indicate that from the students' perspective there is a strong desire for curriculum change in teacher education to give more weight to the acquisition of ethical skills as part of an inclusive teacher education which is shared from a scientific perspective (e.g. Forster & Maxwell, 2022). In terms of specific ethical learning and competence objectives, student teachers were more in favour of application-oriented training than basic training in philosophical ethics. When dealing with ethical issues, student teachers would like to see training content and methods that enable them to act reflectively, justifiably and responsibly in individual cases and in communication with others. These aspirations can be linked to the professional debate on the design of ethics education in teacher education programmes. Several authors argue for combining the basic introduction to ethics, which provides knowledge about theories, concepts, terms and types of argument of applied ethics, with a strongly application-oriented

teaching of ethical competences using case vignettes (Gereluk, 2020) or ethical dilemmas (Hyri-Bei-hammer et al., 2022) in schools to guide student teachers in analysing and reflecting on ethical conflicts. In addition, Ta et al. (2023) emphasise the need for discussion spaces to address the ethical dimensions of teaching. According to them, normative case studies offer promising support for perspective sharing and internal reflection on ethical dilemmas in teaching.

Study limitations. The study is limited by two non-representative samples of primary student teachers surveyed at the University of Muenster and Students of Primary Education Science programme at the Suor Orsola Benincasa University of Naples. The results are therefore valid for the Master's programmes at these two universities and cannot be transferred to other teacher training programmes without restriction. It should be noted that the results are based on subjective assessments and a non-standardised questionnaire. A bias in the sample could be due to the fact that student teachers with a greater interest in or sensitivity to ethical issues may have felt that the survey was more relevant to them. Respondents may not have assumed a completely consistent understanding of ethical competence in their assessments, which could be another limiting factor. Despite these limitations, the survey results provide a first insight into the differences in ethical teacher education from the perspective of Italian and German student teachers in primary education.

Beyond country differences, the results of this study show that student teachers in primary education recognise the ethical challenges of their profession and want to be empowered to face them. In both Italy and Germany, they express the need for basic ethical training in their teacher education. The key implication for teacher training in both countries is that ethics training should be strongly anchored in the curriculum of initial university education in order to enable future primary teachers to meet the ethical requirements in inclusive schools, to strengthen teacher resources and to achieve sustainable teacher qualification. So far, on the basis of what has alredy been argued above regarding the inclusion construct also taken as reference for the construction of questionnaire, this seems to be better implemented in Italy, a country with a longer history of inclusion and a more positive attitude towards inclusion in schools, than in Germany. A further question to address in the future regards whether an academic training in ethical competence or a strengthening of the philosophical background with a focus on ethical competence can be seen as desiderable, adequate or even necessary in the university curriculum of each student teacher (and not only for student teachers in primary education) in order to provide not only future primary teachers with ethical skills and tools but, more extensively, teachers at every degree of the education system in the perspective of building a comprehensive inclusion oriented education community and society.

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