

## Specializing online during the pandemic: an exploratory survey on support teachers in the initial training phase

### Specializzarsi on line durante la pandemia: un sondaggio esplorativo su insegnanti di sostegno nella fase di formazione iniziale

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OPEN ACCESS

Double blind peer review

**Citation:** Limone, P., Simone, M. G. (2022). Specializing online during the pandemic: an exploratory survey on support teachers in the initial training phase. *Italian Journal of Educational Research*, 28, 76-84.

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**Received:** September 30, 2021

**Accepted:** May 2, 2022

**Published:** June 30, 2022

Pensa MultiMedia / ISSN 2038-9744

<https://doi.org/10.7346/sird-012022-p76>

#### Abstract

The paper aims to deepen the characteristics, training needs and critical issues related to the initial training of the support teachers in the era of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The first part offers a synthetic theoretical framework about the problem.

The second part presents the results, still in the initial phase of elaboration, of an exploratory survey conducted among some students attending the active training internship (TFA, fifth cycle) at the University of Foggia.

An initial analysis of the results reveals the profile of a rather motivated aspiring support teacher, eager to acquire new skills, with a good level of confidence in technology.

The article proposes, in the final part, paths for reflection and action that can be used by training designers and academic decision makers in order to optimize future specialization training for support teachers, at multiple levels.

**Keywords:** support teacher, incoming training, professional role, pandemic, inclusion.

#### Riassunto

L'articolo intende approfondire caratteristiche, bisogni formativi e criticità legati alla formazione iniziale del docente di sostegno in epoca di pandemia da Covid-19.

Nella prima parte si offre un quadro teorico di sintesi sul problema.

La seconda parte presenta i risultati, seppur ancora in fase iniziale di elaborazione, di una indagine esplorativa condotta presso alcuni allievi frequentanti il tirocinio formativo attivo (TFA, quinto ciclo) all'Università degli Studi di Foggia.

Da una prima analisi dei risultati emerge il profilo di un aspirante docente di sostegno piuttosto motivato, desideroso di acquisire nuove competenze, con un buon livello di confidenza con la tecnologia.

L'articolo propone, nella parte finale, delle piste di riflessione e di intervento che possono essere utilizzate dai progettisti della formazione e dai decision makers accademici allo scopo di ottimizzare i percorsi di specializzazione futuri per i docenti di sostegno, a più livelli.

**Parole chiave:** insegnante di sostegno, formazione iniziale, ruolo professionale, pandemia, inclusione.

#### Credit author statement

The overall structure of the contribution is the result of a shared reflection of the Authors. Paragraphs 3 and 4 were written by Pierpaolo Limone; Paragraphs 1 and 2 were written by Maria Grazia Simone.

## 1. Literature Review

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

During the university specialization to become a support teacher, the student is called to fight against many stereotypes, and even «misunderstandings» (Cottini, 2017). They are rooted in school practices and can become obstacles for the development of the professional role idea and for inclusion in teaching / learning contexts in which disabled pupils are present.

These stereotypes may concern the teaching role, others the idea of the student. They can be summarized as follows:

- The assimilation of the support teacher figure to a «minor» category, compared to the curricular one, even in the presence of specialized training (Trisciuzzi, Galanti 2001).
- The difficulty in seeing, in support teacher, a «system figure», a professional resource available to the whole class, and not just the one who cares about the disabled student (Mura, 2014; Nes, Demo and Ianes, 2017).
- The idea that the disabled student is «owned» by the support teacher. This generates the tendency to delegate and relieve the teaching team from a series of responsibilities (Trisciuzzi, Galanti 2001, Canevaro, d’Alonzo and Ianes, 2009; Canevaro et al., 2011). This situation produces many obstacles to participation and inhibit the creation of an inclusive learning environment.
- The poorly evolving representation of the disabled pupil and his consequent being above all a «case» (D’Alessio, 2011; Dovigo, 2014; Goussot, 2015), rather than a person.

Despite these numerous critical issues, we agree with those who said that another support teacher training is possible (Canevaro, Ianes, 2019). It is feasible, according to our point of view, if the students, in academic specialization paths, is offered quality of the learning activities, calibrated on his training needs and with a strong technological component.

The issue of training and initial academic specialization for support teachers represents, today, an open question that is requiring important reflections. It is no longer tolerable, in fact, that this kind of teachers may find themselves taking care of children, pre-adolescents and adolescents, with various types of disabilities or deficits, without being able to boast adequate theoretical and methodological skills.

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

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

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

From the attendance of the Active Training Internship Courses, the figure of a support teacher emerges with teaching, planning, theoretical, methodological and relational skills regarding disabilities, capable to influence contexts (Santi, 2015; Santi & Ruzzante, 2016) and promote learning and inclusion of all.

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

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

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

For a year and a half now, the dramatic planetary presence of the Covid-19 virus in our daily lives has made it essential to resort to distance learning to face the emergency of the closure of schools of all levels. At the same time, communication, education and learning technologies have made it possible to attend university specialization courses for support teachers entirely online.

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

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

In University of Foggia case, the redesign actions, due to the persistence of the pandemic, were carried out taking into account three convictions:

- a) See in the online course not an emergency learning path, a substitute for what the face-to-face course should have been, but an important possibility to free learning from the space and time of the university classroom and thus make it more accessible for a wider audience of students. Clear advantages are thus obtained also with respect to the needs of social distancing for reasons of prevention, the reconciliation of life / work times, transport, etc.
- b) Perceive, in the possibility of specializing online, a significant opportunity for professional and also personal growth. It is necessary to react to the adverse event, by tracing living in a pandemic era, as a significant opportunity for learning and developing resilience. We can look at the emergency beyond a deficient perspective (the one that complains about the lack of personal freedom, security, direct contact with the other, etc.), to see it as a «generative field of stimuli, actions and reflections and even conceptualizations from which to derive learning. In this sense, it can be an emancipating experience (Paparella, Limone, Cinnella, 2020).

- c) Set up the teaching activities by providing practical tasks not only in the workshops but also during the moments of frontal teaching, to encourage learning by doing.
- d) From unforeseen situations, from great upheavals, it is not possible to go out the same as before. Every opportunity for change, in an evolutionary perspective, must be welcomed and exploited in one's favor. In this way, a precious opportunity for education and development is gained (Limone, Simone, 2020).

## 2. Materials and Methods

The research problem is the following: the support teacher profile requires to develop, in the initial training phase, a good synthesis of skills, both specialized and transversal of inclusive teaching (Cottini, 2014; d'Alonzo, 2016; Camedda, Santi, 2016). This must also be guaranteed through online specialization courses.

The research questions, at a general level, are the following: who are those who prepare to become support teachers in times of pandemic? what are their needs and expectations?

To try to answer to these questions, in the period February-June 2021 we conduct an exploratory survey at the Specialization Courses for support teachers activated at the University of Foggia (Italy). The qualitative-quantitative survey, carried out using a multiple choice questionnaire administered to about n. 383 postgraduates, aimed to outline: the profile of the trainees, their training needs, the teaching motivations, the representation of the necessary skills, the inclusion idea, the relationship with technologies and educational experience in a pandemic era.

The sample survey was total: the information survey is performed on all units that make up the population under study. The interviewees were attending the following study subjects: special teaching for intellectual disability and generalized developmental disorders (Grade: Second Grade Secondary School); pedagogy of the helping relationship (Grade: Primary School).

Numerically, the first group was made up of n. 202 subjects, the second from n. 181 subjects. The students were joined by the exploratory survey in the final phase of these two courses. In both courses, they were asked to fill in the protocol individually and, subsequently, to confront each other within on line discussion groups between students, discussing their impressions. During the plenary discussion phase, with the coordination of the teacher in charge of the two courses, all the students were able to socialize the impressions collected in their group following the compilation of the questionnaire and listen when it emerged from the discussion of all the other groups.

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

There is a large Italian debate on the initial training of the support teacher (Ciraci, Isodori, 2017; Chiappetta Cajola, Ciraci, 2013; Zappaterra, 2014; Cottini, 2014; Florian, 2014; Goussot, 2014; Ianes, 2014; Ianes, 2015; Mura, 2014; Mura, 2015; Boccia, Guerini, Travaglini, 2020) which was used as the theoretical background for the formulation of the questionnaire.

As a reference for the processing of the questions and for the formulation of the items, the Profile of inclusive teachers from the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (EADSNE, 2012) was used. As is known, the macro-areas of competence defined by the Profile are described as a set of three elements (personal beliefs, knowledge and skills) e they are organized around 4 core values and 8 categories.

The survey tool was uploaded to Google Forms and the interviewees were able to access the on line compilation via the relative link. The questionnaire consists of n. 30 multiple choice questions. It was an exploratory questionnaire of inquiry (de Ketele and Roegiers, 2013), anonymous and self-administered online.

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

## 0. Registry and personal data section

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

The questions relating to the detection of attitudes provided for structured responses on a 7-point Likert scale. An open question was provided for any in-depth and narrative needs. In the design of the questionnaire, the known critical elements linked to its use were considered (Bailey, 1982): social desirability (tendency to respond in a conformist way), acquiescence (tendency to agree on everything) and systematic tendencies (constant bias that leads to giving extreme responses or always using the central point of the response scale).

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

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

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

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

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

## 3. Results and Discussions

The data was collected using a web questionnaire administered with CAWI method and anonymous distribution on Google Forms.

Here we offer a first analysis of the results, produced collecting data through frequency analysis. For the moment, this first analysis intends to provide the general identikit of the student who attends specialization courses for support at Foggia University, their needs and expectations. Further and more in-depth interpretation of the data is needed in the future.

The group under investigation is mainly represented by women (F = 372, M = 37). The prevailing age group is 40-50 years old (49%). The main educational qualification is high school diploma (44%). The vast majority of the people has no other qualifications (63%). A substantial share is employed as a teacher with an annual assignment (56%).

### 3.1 Teaching role and skills representation

We are faced with a trainees group absolutely satisfied to have approached this profession (52%). The reasons for choosing teaching role are a specific vocation for teaching (51%) and on the interest in developmental age students (50%).

Among the teacher skills, 90% preferences focused on relational and empathic ones, followed by observation skills (84%), pedagogical and psychological ones (77%) and methodological ones (75%).

The largest portion of the interviewed group (66%) believes that teaching is configured first of all as

an educational relationship with the student, soliciting his «knowing how to be» (65%) and which translates into support actions to be offered to the student (59%). To a lesser extent, teaching is seen as simple moment of knowledge transmission (63%) or social mission (72%).

Those who already teach, show discomfort because they feel a certain lack of specific skills in terms of special education (24%) and the extent of student disabilities (37%).

### 3.1 Inclusion area

Regarding the involvement of the support teachers in class activities, as many subjects (56%) complain of feeling scarcely involved. 44% of them found little willingness on the part of colleagues to adapt the curriculum to the rhythms and learning needs of disabled pupils. Support teachers feel poorly valued by their colleagues (46%). On the part of the class, on the other hand, they feel perceived as a valid resource (54%). The relationship with the family of the disabled student is also positive (62%).

Regarding the strategies to favor the disabled student inclusion in the classroom and a more direct relationship with peers, the interviewees had multiple answer options and indicated group work (70%), peer tutoring (61%), theatrical, artistic and musical activities (59%).

To raise the quality of inclusion of disabled students, it is useful to increase their skills in the area of effectiveness and self-esteem (77%), social and relational skills aimed at peers (84%), personal autonomy (73%). Technologies are considered, by a large portion of the interviewed group (56%), as valid tools to encourage inclusion.

### 3.2 Technology area

The interviewees (in the percentage of 54%) judge their relationship with the technologies and computer tools used in their usual teaching practices to be quite good. The presence of technology in teaching is considered quite important (69%) and very important (25%). The frequency of use for educational purposes is daily (4.9%) and weekly (37%).

Support teachers make more frequent use of technology to support disabled pupils learning, considering it an important aid for preparing teaching materials (40%), for carrying out research and disciplinary insights (35%). Among the various tools, there is a preference for IWB, multimedia interactive whiteboard (33%). The possibility to use specific software for disability (26%) and specific App for disciplinary learning is discreet (24%).

The utility dimension that the interviewees find in information technologies in teaching concern: support to disabled student learning motivation (45%), favoring collaborative learning opportunities among peers (40%), sharing knowledge with the class group (39%), guaranteeing the possibility for the teacher to build personalized teaching materials (42%).

Among the critical issues founded with technology, the interviewed group agrees on a lack of ICT equipment and devices in the school where they work (35%) and the school structural limitations (37%). Few people report deficiencies in their computer skills (10%) or disinterest of disabled student towards them (8%).

### 3.3 Area relating to pandemic and distance learning

During the health emergency caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the interviewees who already teaches were able to continue to meet their students with disabilities in school (47%) while an equally consistent part of them made use of video lesson (37%). The difficulties most encountered in distance learning can be summarized in technical problems, related to connection (26%) and equally relatively difficult to understand by the disabled student (79%) and how to help from family (21%). Overall, the experience of distance learning is assigned a sufficiency rating (30%) and very few are enthusiastic about it (12%). In interviewees opinion, distance learning was found to be deficient mainly on inclusion front (54%) and on the relational one (51%).

This poor consideration of distance learning by interviewed group was confirmed in some control questions and open questions. In summary, it is stated that distance learning was a necessary support in this period of emergency but, at the same time, it failed to guarantee the inclusion and relationship needs of disabled student.

#### 4. Conclusion

The data emerged from this exploratory survey, although still embryonic, make it possible to develop a summary of the professional profile of Italian support teachers who are entering the school system in a difficult historical moment like the one due to the pandemic. Some points of reflection can be taken to identify the training needs of support teachers but also of academic training programs.

Respondents are gradually building their professional role. As Pellerey (2018) states, the focus of the process of building professional role and identity is undoubtedly on the human person. This kind of identity is less and less defined and solicited externally and socially, while the constructive process that the subject must carry out becomes more and more central. An important lever for addressing the critical issues currently connected to the exercise of the teaching role, especially during initial training, is to work in a double sense: supporting the structuring of professional identity and supporting teaching motivation (Piccinno & Simone, 2015). The support teacher should be conceived not as an additional figure, but as a strategic one to make the school an increasingly inclusive environment capable of enhancing differences.

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

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

In training inclusive teachers (European Development Agency in Special Needs Education, 2012) collaboration, in particular, is identified as a fundamental element of the teacher's professionalism.

It is now agreed that the lack of specific preparation in this sense, through the preparation of specific training courses (Limone & Pace, 2016), inhibits the planning of quality educational itineraries; this can only generate additional difficulties in teaching and learning in times of emergency and also in usual teaching practice.

The development of information and communication technology has brought a surprising and revolutionary challenge to the idea and practice of traditional education. Internet technology offers new opportunities to integrate face-to-face learning with online learning methods. In the future, there is a trend towards using blended learning scenarios, combining various forms of learning and integrating a variety of ways to access content using mobile technology.

It is now necessary that the technological results obtained become part of the teacher's professional action, between presence and distance, through the reconstruction of new identity meanings recognizable only in the light of an authentic, meaningful and strategic learning (Entwistle & McCune, 2004).

The university, in this process, plays a fundamental role as driving force for continuous teachers training and to respond to the needs, not only emergency ones, of the present time. University is asked to redesign training courses that propose technologies not as simple teaching support tools, but as cultural mediators, capable of affecting the logic and practice of the university institution also with regard to higher education and research (Loiodice, 2011). From the university institution training opportunities and experiences are hoped to make the teacher an effective protagonist of the complexity of scientific, methodological and technological innovation. Research, teaching and learning practices, student growth and social development will benefit.

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