

School, university and community collaboration for inclusivity: the Turin experience with the university courses “expert in the processes of inclusive education” and “expert in educational and didactic processes”

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on the persistent disparities in the Italian education system and the urgent need for inclusive education. This study focuses on the crucial role of university training programs in addressing the issue of school dropout and promoting inclusiveness in the education system. The University of Turin has taken a pioneering approach by launching programs for secondary teachers and social educators aimed at providing them with the necessary skills and competencies to design and implement effective inclusive educational interventions. The university has also established partnerships with other organizations to further foster the culture of inclusiveness in the region. The programs offered by the University of Turin serve as a model for bridging the gap between inclusive theories and socially just practices, paving the way for a more equitable and inclusive education system.

Keywords: *Expert; inclusion; multi-professional work; school dropouts; social educator; teacher.*

1. Introduction

In Italy, a comprehensive reform of teacher training programs is underway to meet the demands of a changing society. This is especially crucial given the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, which have further exacerbated existing disparities in the education system. According to the Italian National Institute of Statistics [ISTAT] (2022), students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, those who speak a different language, or those with disabilities still face difficulties accessing and participating in school activities. This is reflected in the rising rates of school dropouts and failures, as well as declining levels of learning (AGIA, 2022; Save the Children Italia, 2022).

A 2016 report from the OECD [Education at a Glance] revealed that Italy has one of the lowest rates of educational mobility in Europe. Only 8% of young Italians between the ages of 25 and 34 whose parents did not complete upper secondary school obtain a university degree, compared to the OECD average of 22%. The percentage rises to 32% among young people with parents who have completed secondary education, and 65% among those with parents who have a university degree. These figures demonstrate the persistent impact of socio-economic status on educational outcomes, which the OECD refers to as a "lottery of nature".

It is also important to note that equalizing action of the school can only be effective if pupils from different socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds have equal access to the same schools. If school segregation is high, the school may be formally open to all but not equally accessible to all students, thereby limiting its ability to provide equal opportunities (Caritas, 2022; Pacchi & Ranci, 2017; Ranci, 2019).

In addressing the issue of exclusion in education, it is crucial to consider various factors beyond socio-economic conditions. For example, factors such as belonging to ethnic minorities, having a disability, or being female, can contribute to marginalization and reduced educational opportunities (Migliarini et al., 2022). To mitigate these challenges, it is necessary to provide teachers with theoretical and practical tools that are suitable for their daily work environment (Tino & Fedeli, 2015). Additionally, social educators must also be equipped with up-to-date and relevant skills, as they play a crucial role in supporting students with disabilities and collaborating with classroom teachers. By employing workshop-style didactics that emphasize student participation, both teachers and social educators can effectively enhance the learning experience. Ultimately, the objective is to not only strengthen the theoretical and operational abilities of teachers and educators, but also promote inter-professional collaboration and exchange, resulting in more comprehensive and impactful educational interventions.

2. Enhancing Competencies of Educational Professionals: Addressing Gaps in Training for Inclusive and Equitable Education

According to several studies on the competencies of educational staff (Sharma, 2012; Caena, 2011; OECD, 2019), the implementation of training programs that specifically target these competencies is crucial for promoting inclusive educational practices. This shift in perspective moves away from the notion of "fixing" differences, and instead aims to empower pupils to become critical individuals who can live and participate as conscious citizens.

Unfortunately, many teachers continue to have a rigid and unchanging approach to their teaching methods, which can hinder the creation of inclusive classrooms (Aiello et al., 2019; Mura & Zurru, 2019). Without proper training, teachers can perpetuate inequalities and struggle to provide educational opportunities for students with special needs (Fiorucci, 2019; Romano et al., 2021). This is particularly concerning in Italy, where at the moment there is a lack of university courses specifically designed to prepare secondary school teachers.

The promotion of inclusive practices within educational institutions requires the engagement of educational staff who are capable of embracing diversity and utilizing it to advance educational and pedagogical outcomes for all students (Bocci, 2021). However, a tendency to treat students with special educational needs as a challenge to be managed rather than as a valuable asset to be cultivated has been documented in the literature (Harry, 2014). This mentality, rooted in a charitable rather than a rights-based approach, is partially the result of insufficient and inconsistent training opportunities for school professionals (Gavosto, 2020).

The absence of specialized training programs for secondary school teachers in the Italian education system has significant consequences for the education system as a whole. Furthermore, social educators often navigate the complex educational landscape without sufficient preparation to design and implement effective interventions. As a result, they are forced to develop their own competencies, relying on their own strengths and dedications to compensate for gaps in their training.

3. Collaborative Efforts for Inclusive Education: An Analysis of the University of Turin's Inter-regional Partnership for Teacher Training

The University of Turin has been making efforts to bridge the gap between the theories and practices of inclusion in the education system by providing support to the schools. To achieve this, the University has launched a series of initiatives aimed at empowering educational professionals with the necessary tools to drive positive change (Damiani et al., 2021). In accordance with a memorandum of understanding signed between the University of Turin, the Piedmont Region, the Regional School Office for Piedmont, the Metropolitan City of Turin, the University of Eastern Piedmont, in collaboration with the Trade Unions

representing schoolteachers, the Department of Philosophy and Educational Sciences at the University of Turin launched the University Course of Professional Development (CUAP) "Expert in the processes of inclusive education" in the academic years 2020/21 and 2021/22.

In the academic year 2022/23, the University further strengthened its offerings by launching the First Level Master Course "Expert in educational and didactic processes at school". The aim of this course is to prepare future teachers and social educators to operate in an increasingly inclusive and conscious manner, by providing them with the necessary knowledge and skills to engage in inter- and multi-professional work. The course has been designed in a modular format that takes into account both the demands of high-level university teaching and the training needs of working students. The goal is to support the professional growth of teachers and social educators, filling the void left by the abolishment of qualifying pathways and promoting didactic innovation.

These initiatives align with the national teacher training guidelines set by the Italian Ministry of Education (Pettenati, 2021), which prioritize the development of "facilitator teachers" to support continuous and widespread training within schools.

4. The Development of the Competences of Educational Professionals through Interdisciplinary and Inter-Professional approach

The development of non-disciplinary competencies among university students is becoming a crucial aspect of higher education. These competencies, including personal traits such as character, judgment, and empathy, are significant for both employability and active citizenship (Chignoli et al., 2020).

This shift in focus is supported by the literature, which stresses the need to study teachers' attitudes and personal competence, as well as to consider the interplay between technical and disciplinary competencies and personal qualities in professionals. Effective teaching involves constant adaptation, evaluation, and response to student engagement and participation. Hence, training approaches must be based on comprehensive and integrated perspectives that account for the multi-dimensionality of competencies. The literature highlights the importance of "Teacher Thinking" (Perla, 2015; Buitink, 1993; Clark & Lampert, 1986) and participatory approaches (Cardarelli et al., 2009) that showcase the unique professional aspects of teaching. Training models such as those based on Transformative Learning Theory (Taylor & Cranton, 2012), mixed method approaches (Suchman, 1987), and educational principles (Fabbri, 2007) are instrumental in supporting the development of non-disciplinary competencies. For example, the Embedded approach integrates cross-curricular skills and teaching of disciplinary content (Yorke & Knight, 2004). Non-disciplinary competencies are not distinct from other technical knowledge or skills and must be incorporated into the curriculum (Gopalaswamy & Mahadevan, 2010).

4.1. Fostering the Professional Growth of Teachers and Social Educators through Training

The courses "Expert in Inclusive Education Processes" and "Expert in Educational and Teaching Processes at School" aim to enhance the professional development of teachers and social educators in the area of inclusiveness and to prevent school dropout. These courses aim to foster positive relationships, improve teachers' emotional and relational skills, and enhance their overall well-being. Additionally, they aim to increase both the technical and disciplinary knowledge and skills of school professionals, aligning with the core principles outlined in the European profile of inclusive teachers (EADSNE, 2014). The courses place equal emphasis on both the non-disciplinary and disciplinary aspects, encompassing cultural, organizational, cooperative, and strategic awareness, as well as emotional-relational and body dynamics.

The didactic structure of the courses is founded on a Competency-based education and training approach. The CUAP pathway consists of a total of 100 hours of blended training, divided into general and workshop parts, where trainees work together to develop a shared culture and exchange good practices. On the other hand, the modular master's course consists of 60 ECTS and 1600 hours, which are tailored to the needs of educators, teachers, and social professionals. Trainees have the option of taking the entire course or specific modules, depending on their requirements. Furthermore, the core of the course is a 100-hour internship coordinated by a university supervisor and a 50-hour discussion reflecting on the experience. The internship takes place in schools participating in the 'Play It Again, Sam' project, which has a primary prevention intervention implemented in the majority of Turin schools, aiming to prevent unfavorable learning conditions and school attendance. Trainees participating in this project gain a unique opportunity to gain a multi-professional outlook on education, working alongside educators, teachers, and social service workers.

4.2. Teacher Inclusiveness in Teacher Training: Achieving Personal and Social Competencies

The training approach outlined in earlier sections emphasizes the practical application of acquired competencies and is in line with the Embedded model. The focus of this training is to enhance the personal and social competencies essential for both learning support teachers and teachers combating school dropout, through a blend of lessons, workshops, curricular, and transversal activities. These activities were carefully designed to promote inclusiveness, both in terms of methodology and content, and were well-received by the participants for their effectiveness in mitigating stressors such as online learning or a heavy workload. The participants emphasized the importance and effectiveness of the focus on inclusive teaching, particularly in terms of professional development. They recognized that both the emotional and communicative aspects are just as crucial as the technical and educational ones, with the

element of sharing and awareness consistently highlighted as a key factor in developing a professional demeanor that promotes inclusion. It was noted that the creation of inclusive networks is the most effective means of achieving this goal (Damiani et al., 2021).

5. Conclusions

The training approach described in this article constitutes a valuable contribution to the field of pedagogy and teacher education. The innovative blend of practical lessons, workshops, curricular and transversal activities, as well as the focus on personal and social competencies, make this approach unique in its nature (Di Masi et al., 2023). Furthermore, the approach has demonstrated positive results in enhancing the professional skills of learning support teachers and reducing school dropout rates.

In conclusion, the present study provides novel insights into the support of teachers in creating inclusive educational environments and promoting student well-being. The potential impact of the Expert in Processes of Inclusive Education and Expert in Educational and Didactic Processes at School courses on the international scientific community serves as a stimulus for future research and advancement in the field of teacher training and professional development. The results of this project reinforce our conviction that universities have a critical role to play in advancing inclusive processes and treating education as a means to effect social change, rather than perpetuating existing inequalities.

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