EDITED BY ROSA BELLACICCO
AND DARIO IANES

TEACHERS WITH DISABILITIES

DILEMMAS, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

TRAIETTORIE
INCLUSIVE

FrancoAngeli

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COLLANA DIRETTA DA
**CATIA GIACONI, PIER GIUSEPPE ROSSI,
SIMONE APARECIDA CAPELLINI**

La collana "Traiettorie Inclusive" vuole dare voce alle diverse proposte di ricerca che si articolano intorno ai paradigmi dell'inclusione e della personalizzazione, per approfondire i temi relativi alle disabilità, ai Bisogni Educativi Speciali, alle forme di disagio e di devianza. Si ritiene, infatti, che inclusione e personalizzazione reifichino una prospettiva efficace per affrontare la complessa situazione socio-culturale attuale, garantendo un dialogo tra le diversità.

I contesti in cui tale tematica è declinata sono quelli della scuola, dell'università e del mondo del lavoro. Contemporaneamente sono esplorati i vari domini della qualità della vita prendendo in esame anche le problematiche connesse con la vita familiare, con le dinamiche affettive e con il tempo libero. Una particolare attenzione inoltre sarà rivolta alle comunità educative e alle esperienze che stanno tracciando nuove piste nell'ottica dell'inclusione sociale e della qualità della vita.

La collana presenta due tipologie di testi. Gli *"Approfondimenti"* permetteranno di mettere a fuoco i nodi concettuali oggi al centro del dibattito della comunità scientifica sia nazionale, sia internazionale.

I *"Quaderni Operativi"*, invece, documenteranno esperienze, progetti e buone prassi e forniranno strumenti di lavoro per professionisti e operatori del settore.

La collana si rivolge a tutti i professionisti che, a diversi livelli, si occupano di processi inclusivi e formativi.

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Preface
Follow the hummingbird, not the white rabbit!

by *Filippo Barbera*

Keating: «Keep ripping, gentlemen! This is a battle. A war. And the casualties could be your hearts and souls. (…). Now, my class, you will learn to think for yourselves again. You will learn to savor words and language. No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world».

In one of his poetry classes, teacher John Keating invites the students to rip out the pages of the introduction written by Professor Emeritus Jonathan Evans Pritchard. After a brief moment of hesitation, the students complete the extravagant task assigned by the teacher. Crazy idea? Maybe! But the lesson was learned, and the intended goal achieved.

With the hope that this introduction will have a completely different destiny than that of illustrious Prof. Pritchard, I would like to share the importance of this volume, a potential engine of generative thoughts. Generative thoughts are a necessary condition, but their effectiveness is linked to the FAITH in the possibility of improving the current state of things. This Faith is not a simple desire or hope, but a deep conviction in one's own abilities and in the usefulness of one's own contribution. There is a tale about a great fire that broke out in the forest which only a small hummingbird thought to face. The hummingbird dived into the waters of the river, took a drop of it, and then, rising in flight, let it fall over the forest invaded by smoke. The lion who was observing, asked him what he was doing. The small bird answered, "I am trying to put out the flames". The lion laughed and started to make fun of him together with the other animals. The hummingbird, heedless of the laughter and criticism, continued with his feat. He wanted to do his part. At that point a little elephant dipped his trunk in the river, sucked up as much water as he could and sprayed it on a burning bush. A young pelican also followed suit, filling his beak with water to release it on a tree invaded by flames.

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Soon all the animals followed the example of the hummingbird and the fire was tamed.

We can follow the example of the hummingbird by starting to do our part facing our prejudices and stereotypes related to diversity. Disabilities, or more in general diversity, are a matter present in every historical moment and are addressed in different ways in relation to cultures, politics and economies. Think, for example, of the contemporary society in which the values linked to the myths of image and success have greatly reinforced discrimination and the development of prejudices against those who are different. We must go beyond the definition of Disabilities and Specific Learning Disorders (SLDs)[1], beyond the vision of deficit and diagnosis, also to avoid or reduce the risks of the Pygmalion Effect and labels. The Pygmalion Effect, also known as the Rosenthal Effect, indicates the inclination of people to behave in a way that conforms to the expectations that others have of them. In this regard, I mention the example of my middle school Italian literature teacher, who boasted that she was able to immediately identify low- or high-performing students. Her predictions were always correct simply because of the Pygmalion Effect.

Even labels can lead to self-fulfilling prophecies, and it is very difficult for people to change them. Here is an example. When I was a student immersed in a thousand difficulties and bad grades… they would always tell me: «You are dyslexic!» alluding to the fact that I had to stay in my place, that I had no chance to improve and that I would never accomplish anything in life. Upon becoming a teacher, the line changed to: «You are dyslexic?» implying «but how is that possible?», «how did you get there?», «who helped you?».

As it can be noted, the label of dyslexic and the negative connotation have remained. What has changed is only the punctuation, thus preventing people from conflicting with what was previously stated (and preserving their egos).

The work, edited by Dario Ianes and Rosa Bellacicco, is important because it helps to find the "right punctuation" – highlighting, thanks to the tools of research, aspects that are often invisible even to experts

1. It is important to note that there are differences in the terminology used to describe disabilities and SLDs in Italy and internationally. Although we are aware that in other countries the different types of disabilities (physical, sensory, etc.) and SLDs (dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysorthographia and dysgraphia) fall into the same category called "disability", we have adopted a small formal adaptation in the text, i.e. the use of the formula "person/student/teacher with disabilities/SLDs" to maintain the specificity of the Italian context, where two different laws protect the two conditions distinctively (Italian Law no. 104/92 for disabilities and no. 170/2010 for SLDs).

– and to follow the example of the hummingbird. The work presents resources to intervene and dismantle a whole series of prejudices and stereotypes that limit and hinder access to teaching for people with SLDs and disabilities. We cannot ask the youth to imagine a future or to believe in their potential if we ourselves do not believe in it. The role played by schools is fundamental in promoting a new vision of diversity based on the enhancement of individual differences as a source of wealth, rather than their dismantling. The challenge that diversity poses is complex, starting within us from the comparison of our ideas and stereotypes. Why is it so difficult to imagine a dyslexic teacher, a blind writer or a handless painter? This volume finally demonstrates that it is possible, that it is possible for a teacher to teach with their own characteristics and to do it well.

The book *Teachers with disabilities: dilemmas, challenges and opportunities* collects all the documentation of the research project "Becoming a teacher with disability (BECOM-IN abbreviated)". It is worth mentioning that this research work was born in response to a significant lacuna in the Italian scientific literature. We are witnessing an exponential growth of studies and regulatory interventions on the topic of inclusion, but what is missing is the development of a culture in schools and in the society capable of responding to the challenge of diversity.

This volume collects data and information on university educational paths aimed at the development of the teaching profession and the professional career of teachers with disabilities and with SLDs through an empirical survey at the national level. Within the survey, space is given to the voices of students and teachers to better understand the existing dynamics and to try to identify viable ways to break down the existing walls.

In its whole architecture, the BECOM-IN research design is multi-method. Two data collection techniques are used – the questionnaire and the interviews –, involving different target populations: academic staff members, student teachers with disabilities/SLDs, teachers with disabilities/SLDs and colleagues without disabilities/SLDs, but with experience of the phenomenon explored. The interview questions specifically concern several topics: difficulties/supports encountered and coping strategies and strengths developed by student teachers and in-service teachers with disabilities or SLDs during the teaching, as well as the so-called "dilemma of professional competence". The latter is a concept found in the international literature which refers to the tensions emerging between the receipt/offer of specific customized reasonable accommodations and the need to become/be a competent teacher according to a standard professional profile. This dilemma also implies

the trade-off underlying disclosing or not disclosing disabilities/SLDs in educational or work contexts.

This volume is "the first foundation stone" on which future projects can be built, dedicated to the inclusion and enhancement of teachers with disabilities/SLDs, with the awareness – paraphrasing the sentence of the book *Un'insolita compagna la dislessia* (literally, *An unusual companion, dyslexia*) – that disabilities/SLDs are not a walled-up door, but a double-locked door. You need to find the right key to open it. Enjoy the reading!

1. Student teachers with disabilities/SLDs: the state of the art

by *Rosa Bellacicco, Heidrun Demo*[1]

1. Introduction

The homogeneity of the teaching profession is of particular relevance worldwide, with most of the teaching staff being female and belonging to the average prevailing ethnic and socio-economic background (Schleicher, 2014; Billingsley *et al.*, 2019; UNESCO, 2020). The data are clear. In terms of gender, for instance, in 2018, 68% of teachers on average in OECD countries were women, and in each country the majority of teachers was always female (OECD, 2020). The *American Community Survey* reports that, in 2015, just over half of US children aged between 5 and 17 were white, but almost 80% of young teachers (from kindergarten to secondary school, aged between 25 and 34 with a university degree) were white.

The promotion of greater diversity in the socio-demographic profile of the teaching staff has therefore been the subject of increasing interest both in the policies of the various countries and – albeit more quietly – in research (Keane & Heinz, 2015; Keane & Heinz, 2016; Keane *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, the discussion on teacher diversity has so far focused on gender and ethnicity, with very little attention to other aspects such as sexual orientation and disability (Heinz *et al.*, 2017; Makris, 2018; Ware *et al.*, 2020). In particular, the role and contribution of teachers with disabilities/

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1. The present chapter is the result of the joint work of the two authors. However, it should be noted that the paragraphs *Introduction* and *In-service teachers with disabilities/ SLDs* are to be attributed to Rosa Bellacicco. The paragraphs *Literature review*, *Students with disabilities/SLDs attending teacher training programs* and *The dilemma underlying the presence of people with disabilities/SLDs in teacher training and in the teaching profession* are to be attributed to Heidrun Demo.

specific learning disorders (SLDs-dyslexia, dysgraphia, dysorthographia, and dyscalculia) have been largely underestimated and under-researched (Pritchard, 2010), although the importance of their recruitment has been stressed in a number of international statements. The *Salamanca Statement* (UNESCO, 1994) has clearly affirmed:

[…] Special needs students require opportunities to interact with adults with disabilities who have achieved success so that they can pattern their own lifestyles and aspirations on realistic expectations. […] Education systems should therefore seek to recruit qualified teachers and other educational personnel who have disabilities and should also seek to involve successful individuals with disabilities from within the region in the education of special needs children (paragraph 48).

This is in line with what is subsequently mentioned in the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UN, 2006, Article 24, paragraph 4), which suggests the adoption of adequate measures to employ teachers with disabilities. More recently, the call was reinforced by two documents by the *European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education* (EADSNE) from 2011 and 2012 which express the importance of embracing student and teacher diversity as a fundamental value. Again, in 2020, a document by the *International Disability Alliance* devotes ample attention to the fact that teachers with disabilities are part of a "*win-win-win*" strategy for inclusive education, as they represent significant role models and expert resources for inclusion processes. The statements therefore show a common tendency towards understanding inclusive education implementation processes addressing those who participate in school settings and not only students. Moreover, they claim that it is no longer possible to limit the discussion to inclusive education, but special attention must be given to all the different moments of the life of people with disabilities/SLDs, including the right to independent living and social and work inclusion.

In this cultural atmosphere, at least on paper, several action plans for including teachers and candidates with different profiles in the teaching profession and teacher training programs were developed and are being consolidated. The policies adopted by the *Council for Exceptional Children* (CEC) – the leading US professional organization for special education educators/teachers – are dominated by a specific commitment in this direction. Its document *Policy on Educators with Disabilities* (2016) affirms the importance of supporting educators with disabilities in the teaching profession, by quoting their «unique and powerful insights based on their personal experiences» and capacity to «serve as role models, helping students with disabilities form positive self-identities» (p. 311). EADSNE

(2012) itself emphasized the need to protect students with disabilities entering teacher training programs, "demolishing" the initial selective requirements and developing flexible teaching pathways. The goal is to ensure that recruitment strategies address issues related to the diversity of the student population and are aimed at attracting teacher candidates from diverse backgrounds. This input closely resembles the statements articulated in Ireland's *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education* (2015-2019), which devotes ample attention to the heterogeneity of the student population in teacher training programs and pushes for an increase in accesses by students from underrepresented groups (HEA, 2015). More recently, also *The Education Commission* – a global initiative that engages world leaders, policymakers and researchers in achieving equitable educational opportunities in line with Goal 4 of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* – reaffirms that an increasingly diverse student population needs a diverse teaching force (Education Commission, 2019).

In summary, there are basically two motivations underlying the movement aimed at promoting diversity in the teaching profession. On the one hand, ensuring equity of access to teacher training and careers for people with disabilities. On the other hand, recognizing that they can embody inclusive values and practices and provide valuable competences and experiences. Teachers with disabilities/SLDs have great potential in this sense (Menter *et al.*, 2006). Glazzard and Dale (2015) state that these teachers can be «agents of change in terms of advancing an agenda for educational inclusion» (p. 179) and contribute to overcoming dominant and negative prejudicial attitudes towards disability and other minority groups (Campbell, 2009; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). According to a growing number of articles, it is especially those groups of pupils who are disadvantaged who benefit from these teachers. It is interesting to note that foreign pupils often score higher on standardized tests, have more regular attendance, and are suspended less when confronted with at least one teacher of the same ethnicity. This may involve students enacting different behaviors or having been treated differently by teachers, or both (Egalite *et al.*, 2015; Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Holt & Gershenson, 2019). Gershenson *et al.* (2018), moreover, show long term results. If a black male student from a disadvantaged background has at least one black teacher in his primary school years, he is much more likely to graduate from high school later and more likely to enroll in a four-year college[2]. Having role models of the

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2. In detail, a disadvantaged black male's exposure to at least one black teacher in primary school significantly increases his likelihood of graduating from high school by almost 9%.

same minority in the classroom thus seems to be a significant source of inspiration for students in the same group and may affect the teachers' own expectations about those students. This, by extension, may also apply to teachers with disabilities/SLDs.

These reflections are not intended to argue simplistically that increasing the diversity of the teaching workforce is a panacea in terms of inclusion. Some authors have warned of the danger of these teachers being considered role models for the reference minority group, highlighting that this may lead to reductive constructions of their identities. This would result in identifying these teachers only with the label of "experts" of the culture of reference or of their disorder (referring to teachers with disabilities/SLDs). They also argued that this diversity "matching" approach would hesitate to "delegate" all the issues concerning special educational needs to these teachers (Santoro, 2015)[3]. However, these complex facets of the issue coexist with the unique and unquestioned role that teachers belonging to underrepresented groups can play in reshaping the expectations and aspirations towards/of students with difficulties and, in the specific case of teachers with disabilities/SLDs, in combating the discriminatory ableist attitudes still prevalent in schools, through their daily presence in the classroom (Storey, 2007; Campbell, 2009; Pritchard, 2010).

A final point concerns the underrepresentation of teachers with disabilities/SLDs. Although the agenda towards greater diversity in the teaching population – as noted above – is expanding, teachers with disabilities/SLDs are still limited in number as to be "invisible" even among those of other minorities (Pritchard, 2010; Keane *et al.*, 2018). Some studies speak of "apartheid" or "intellectual oppression" connected with the absence of teachers with the same disability as students', which may deprive them of some culturally necessary stimuli for educational success.

In fact, with regard to students attending university, the very limited data available found a positive increase – from 5.9% in 2013 to 8.9% in 2014 – in the quota of enrollees with disabilities in postgraduate courses for secondary education in seven Irish institutions (Keane & Heinz, 2015; Keane *et al.*, 2018). The Canadian trend is similar, but not across all institutions (Holden & Kitchen, 2018). A slightly different discussion must

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3. Keane and Heinz (2016) emphasize in this regard that the efforts to diversify the teaching profession should be accompanied by a critical exploration of the discussions about the identity of "different" teachers and by better preparing *all* teachers – regardless of their socio-demographic status – to become effective in valuing student differences in a context of social justice.

be made for students who apply for selective tests. Irish studies again show that the percentage (in 2014) varies from 7.0% to 12.2% depending on the course, but people with disabilities are, for instance, significantly less likely to be accepted into undergraduate primary initial teacher education programs than those without (8.9% unaccepted applications compared to 4.8% of entrants; Keane *et al.*, 2018).

However, it is with regard to in-service teachers that the available data – still limited – are of most concern. A survey conducted in 2004 by Simms *et al.* (2008) notes an increase of less than 10% compared to 1993 of deaf professionals (teachers and administrators) employed in training programs for deaf people. Moreover, only 2.5% of these minority teachers were deaf and black. More recently, Ware *et al.* (2020) report estimates from the 2016 Census conducted by England's Department for Education, according to which only 0.5% of the teaching staff – slightly more than 2 thousand teachers – reported having disabilities (Department for Education, 2017)[4]. However, it is also true that only 50% of schools had filled out the section on the teaching staff's disability. In conclusion, in terms of statistical data and research, significant work is needed to understand the phenomenon.

2. Literature review

At the heart of the research described in this book is a systematic review of the literature aimed at summarizing the findings of primary studies dedicated to the same topic, in a transparent and replicable way (Pellegrini & Vivanet, 2018).

In specific, two systematic reviews were conducted. The first is dedicated to students with disabilities attending teacher training programs and the second one focuses on teachers with disabilities. For both reviews, the time period between 1990 and 2018 was considered, with respectively 22 and 32 primary studies included. The detailed findings of the reviews were published in three articles (Bellacicco & Demo, 2019; Bellacicco & Demo, under review; Bellacicco *et al.*, under review), which offer the opportunity to further explore the state of the art that will be more briefly outlined in this chapter.

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4. The data are more reliable regarding, however, the ethnicity of the teaching staff. Recent estimates show that 15% of teachers in England described themselves as belonging to an ethnic minority group. This is an 11% increase since 2010 (*School workforce in England*, 2021; https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-workforce-in-england).

2.1. *Students with disabilities/SLDs attending teacher training programs*

In this part of the review, the issue of accommodations is the most investigated and discussed in the primary studies analyzed. The findings provide a generally consistent and positive response to the question of whether universities make reasonable accommodations available to students with disabilities/SLDs. This is consistent with the indications of the *UN Convention* (2006) and many local regulations and/or legislative indications (Morgan & Rooney, 1997; Baldwin, 2007; Leyser & Greenberger, 2008; Leyser *et al.*, 2011; Csoli & Gallagher, 2012; Griffiths, 2012). The only exception is one study that is rather dated (Komesaroff, 2005). University directors and faculty members express general willingness to provide compensatory tools and strategies such as extra time in examinations, a classroom note-taking aid or assistive technology (Baldwin, 2007; Leyser & Greenberger, 2008; Leyser *et al.*, 2011). The findings are confirmed by studies that focus on students' perspectives, which complete the picture and confirm this readiness. They moreover attribute a positive perception that access to accommodations is not linked to experiences of stigma or marginalization (Csoli & Gallagher, 2012; Griffiths, 2012).

However, this overall encouraging representation of teacher training programs committed to a process of inclusive development shows – through the lens of empirical research – two critical elements on which further reflection is needed. The Baldwin study (2007), conducted in the UK and involving 60 teacher-training university course directors, reveals greater resistance to activating forms of differentiation that modify the nature of the assignment in exams or the curriculum. Through a questionnaire, the respondents indicated how ethically acceptable they considered a range of different accommodations. This showed how measures that involve more substantial changes (e.g. modifying grading or replacing one discipline with another in the curriculum) are perceived as less ethical and are less widely used. In summary, the willingness to make compensatory forms of adaptation available seems to be present in universities, but this openness diminishes when the adaptations imply a differentiation in the content of the standard course or in the forms of assessment.

Secondly, the Baldwin study itself along with other studies raises the practicum issue (Baldwin, 2007; Leyser *et al.*, 2011; Csoli & Gallagher, 2012; Griffiths, 2012; Parker & Draves, 2017). Compared to

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the teaching and assessment moments in universities, accommodations are much less prevalent in the professional practice, as confirmed by both student and teacher/course director voices. Griffiths's qualitative study (2012) asked six students with dyslexia to indicate useful measures to improve the practicum experience of future fellow students with dyslexia. They indicated the importance of two key aspects: informing mentor teachers at school about dyslexia so that they could be aware of the impact that this disorder may have and adapting materials for the practicum preparation and documentation (design sheets, portfolios), consistent with compensatory measures granted in other situations. Several works show the lack of guidelines or protocols. In many countries there are clear indications on the forms of accommodation to be provided during lessons or exams, which are instead missing for the practicum (Griffiths, 2012; Barwood *et al.*, 2018). However, it should also be highlighted that accommodations involving the professionalizing moment of work at school raise more ethical concerns among lecturers and course directors (Baldwin, 2007; Sokal *et al.*, 2017), especially if they are related to the final stage of the program – a time when the lecturer's expectation of the student's full autonomy in carrying out the activities grows (Lebel *et al.*, 2016). Finally, regarding accommodations in schools, it is worth mentioning how the literature relevant to the experiences of in-service teachers documents the substantial lack of institutional adaptations and/ or compensatory measures for teachers with disabilities/SLDs (Gerber, 1992; Lewis *et al.*, 2003; Ferri *et al.*, 2005; Lamichhane, 2016; Pereira *et al.*, 2017; Hankebo, 2018), a situation that could in turn be reflected on practicum experiences.

The topic of accommodations was then analyzed in relation to entry selection procedures. As aforementioned, students with disabilities are underrepresented in university courses qualifying for the teaching profession (Pritchard, 2010; Keane *et al.*, 2018). However, it is difficult to state with reasonable certainty to what extent this can be attributed to entry selection or, more upstream, to the cultural fact that teaching is not what many youth with disabilities/SLDs imagine for themselves. Two studies conducted in Canada (Holden & Kitchen, 2018) and Ireland (Keane *et al.*, 2018) do not indicate generalized disadvantage suffered by applicants with disabilities when admitted to these university courses (except, as noted above, the primary initial teacher training). In contrast – although represented in a research dated almost 15 years – a lower likelihood of admission seems to characterize the experience of applicants with dyslexia in Israel (Sharoni & Vogel, 2007). In relation to this, articles from those years highlight the need for clear indications for admission tests

(Riddick & English, 2006; Sharoni & Vogel, 2007). The latest Canadian and Irish research data seem to indicate a somewhat more positive trend.

On the issue of access, however, it may be interesting to consider Riddick and English's reflection (2006). They highlight the unilaterality of the access procedure in the UK, stressing the barrier for applicants with dyslexia created by the focus on reading and writing skills during the admission test. Specifically, the two authors question whether these skills are more significant than others in the teaching profession. They suggest that this attribution may be the result of the dominant and partial representation of the teacher's competence profile, excluding that there can be "good" teachers with different competence profiles (Bellacicco & Demo, 2019).

Alongside the topic of accommodations, some articles show the centrality of the development of coping strategies by students with disabilities/SLDs. These are tools or techniques that enable them to prevent some of the difficulties that the disability or disorder might entail or, at least, reduce the impact. In this sense, examples include preparing on paper what to write on the blackboard during an hour of practicum or using memory aids to overcome a working memory deficit (Riddick, 2003; Griffiths, 2012; Parker & Draves, 2017). These are personal, often creative, solutions that respond to the challenges posed by disabilities within the learning environment. This is well indicated, as an additional example, by the solution developed by a student with visual disabilities during the practicum: performing the roll call with the support of an interpreter (Barwood *et al.*, 2018). Or, again, the arrangement of desks to facilitate visual communication suggested, during the practicum, by a student with hearing disabilities (Bailes *et al.*, 2010). This shows how the process of building an effective reasonable accommodation system requires the active and conscious participation of students with disabilities/SLDs. They cannot be seen as passive recipients of compensatory measures and aids, but rather as active players in this process.

A final aspect investigated in several of the primary studies analyzed concerns disclosure, i.e. the choice to openly talk (or not) about the personal experience of having a disability or a SLD. Research reporting students' perspectives describes a careful evaluation process of pros and cons, in which the attitude of teachers, fellow students and staff of the school where the practicum takes place play an important role, as well as the student's fear of experiencing forms of stigma (Riddick, 2003; Macleod & Cebula, 2009; Griffiths, 2012; Sokal *et al.*, 2017).

The universities' perspective on this topic is profoundly different. Academic teaching and guidance service staff see disclosure as a

necessary prerequisite to define the most suitable forms of accommodation and therefore consider it an essential step (Csoli & Gallagher, 2012), also in terms of organizing support during the practicum (Sokal *et al.*, 2017). Students' choice to not disclose their disability or SLD is even identified as a barrier to inclusion processes.

This stance of universities is related to the fact that some research has highlighted the importance of integrating disabilities into one's own professional identity through narrative practices such as dialogue in the classroom or writing in learning journals, which require a willingness to disclosure (Duquette, 2000; Gabel, 2001; Riddick, 2003; Dvir, 2015). In this process, when the experience of disability becomes the subject of explicit reflection, it becomes an opportunity for the construction of a richer and more competent professional self (Gabel, 2001). Narratives and reflections facilitate empowerment processes through which experiences of marginalization are transformed into an empathy particularly sensitive to new forms of injustice or exclusion experienced by pupils.

A more recent study analyzes the choices of two students with visual impairments to not work as teachers even after pursuing such studies (Parker & Draves, 2017). This critical reflection reveals the dominant role assigned – more or less explicitly – to sight in the teaching profession. An essential role which made it difficult, if not impossible, for these two students to build a professional identity that integrates their disability. This conclusion leads to recognizing how the possibility of integrating a SLD or a disability in the profile of a teacher's competences is not only an individual responsibility of students (who must activate personal reflection processes), but also a social responsibility with respect to the plurality or unilaterality of the way in which this profile is conceived.

2.2. *In-service teachers with disabilities/SLDs*

In this second part of the review, the barriers encountered in the workplace are discussed in more depth. A first area of concern among teachers with disabilities/SLDs are the cultural barriers and negative attitudes still prevalent in the professional community. Although some studies disagree (Gerber, 1992; Lamichhane, 2016; Smith, 2017), most indicate the existence of prejudices and underestimation of competences (Valle *et al.*, 2004; Ferri *et al.*, 2005; Burns & Bell, 2010; Glazzard & Dale, 2015; Hankebo, 2018; Romário & Dorziat, 2018). The participants in the study by Ferri *et al.* (2005) quote the perception of a pathologizing view reifying a binary interpretation between able-bodied and disabled

teachers. Even Glazzard and Dale (2015), a decade later, argue that there is a real risk of discriminatory attitudes towards these teachers, regarded by colleagues as a threat to professional standards.

Another evident barrier, as already mentioned, recalls the issue of reasonable accommodations that schools do not always seem to provide. Studies from the late 1990s/early 2000s (Gerber, 1992; Lewis *et al.*, 2003; Ferri *et al.*, 2005) and more recent ones agree (Lamichhane, 2016; Pereira *et al.*, 2017; Hankebo, 2018). The premise is that the topic of in-service teachers with disabilities/SLDs seems to have been much less researched than the topic of student teachers, considering the weaker regulatory framework that protects people with disabilities/SLDs in professional environments. However, the picture that is drawn confirms the – human, material and administrative – lack of preparation in work settings, as well as the lack of resources, including volumes and documents in accessible format, technological tools/training or interpreters/communication assistants. In Hankebo (2018), deaf teachers mention that there is no interpreting support and that its absence has crucial repercussions on their careers, eliciting emotional instability, limited self-confidence, and poor interaction with students. The lack of technology also exacerbates the complexity of daily teaching.

Other kinds of barriers intervene at the micro level of the classroom. The high number of pupils in the classroom seems to negatively affect the ability of teachers with disabilities/SLDs to manage the class (Smith & Ramsey, 2004; Burns & Bell, 2010; Lamichhane, 2016; Hankebo, 2018). Some obstacles are associated with the individuals' specific characteristics and arise from the encounter between the environment and their areas of greatest difficulty. These include: difficulties in maintaining discipline in the classroom; describing images; drawing pictures and using the blackboard for teachers with visual disabilities (Lamichhane, 2016); barriers experienced by deaf people in organizing lessons and in communicating with pupils, especially pupils with disabilities (Smith & Ramsey, 2004; Hankebo, 2018). With regard to teachers with SLDs, there are issues highlighted in spontaneous writing, calculation and slowness in reading and comprehension of extensive texts, but also difficulties in memory, focus, etc. (Burns & Bell, 2010; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011; Burns *et al.*, 2013). Other challenging situations for teachers with SLDs exist in verbalizing meetings, as well as participating in brainstorming or other group tasks that require producing conclusions in a short amount of time (Burns & Bell, 2010).

Certainly, it is important for these teachers to find ways to "counteract" these obstacles. It is no coincidence that individual coping strategies are of

great interest in this field of studies. The clear identification of one's own strengths and weaknesses often results in the development of shrewd and ingenious tactics to counter the abovementioned barriers (Compton, 1997). Investing more time in all the teaching phases – from lesson planning to meticulous preparing and filing of materials, from reading tests to assigning grades – is identified in numerous articles as one of the main facilitators to achieve effective educational actions (Lewis *et al.*, 2003; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011; Burns *et al.*, 2013; Smith, 2017). However, this entails immense effort and – according to evidence collected by Burns *et al.* (2013) – puts teachers with dyslexia in the position of committing even 20 hours to perform a task that requires colleagues 1 hour.

Another topic highlighted in literature is the use of ICT, where present, or other tools (e.g. magnifying glasses) to access information, as well as seeking support in the network of family, friends and colleagues, although not always available (Lewis *et al.*, 2003; Burns & Bell, 2010; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011; Burns *et al.*, 2013; Wormnæs & Sellæg, 2013; Glazzard & Dale, 2015; Lamichhane, 2016; Smith, 2017).

A central role is also played by the implementation of personal strategies, including mnemonic and visualization techniques, for example, to recall the various steps and contents of the activities (Smith & Ramsey, 2004; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011; Burns *et al.*, 2013; Hickman & Brens, 2014; Glazzard & Dale, 2015). Smith (2017) supports this argument by introducing in detail some simple methods used by teachers with dyslexia that help realize their full potential. Examples include: strategies to shorten the expressions to be written in front of students (e.g. use of pictures, drawings, single letters, acronyms to illustrate the topic); designing lessons based on their strengths, such as creating hands-on activities and concrete demonstrations; concentrating, before long breaks, on the most substantial tasks to be assigned to students in order to assess them with the necessary time; and using calendars and checklists to maintain adequate organization.

The importance attributed to the coping strategies used in daily school activities emphasizes what previously mentioned by Riddick (2003) about student teachers. According to the author, more than worrying about the professional standards achieved at the end of the training program, it is important to focus on the complexity of the learning/teaching process and how to best support it through the development of valid coping strategies for student teachers.

In this section of literature, we moreover note that few articles on in-service teachers with disabilities/SLDs describe changes in organizational and instructional systems – thus contextual factors – to remove barriers

present in the various settings. Lamichhane (2016) reports the assignment to teachers with disabilities of a subject that enhances their skills and possibly does not require the use of tools that are not available to them. This means, for instance, avoiding wherever possible the match between teachers with visual disabilities and disciplines such as mathematics or science, which require the explanation of formulas/images or the use of the blackboard. There is no mention of other cultural, organizational and teaching actions typical of schools that want to grow in a truly inclusive way, also from the point of view of the teaching staff.

In any case, the coping strategies painstakingly developed by teachers with disabilities/SLDs are sometimes so effective that their colleagues, students, and other school staff members remain unaware of their difficulties (if invisible), unless the teachers themselves decide to disclose them (Burns & Bell, 2010). This opens up the topic of disclosure, already mentioned with reference to student teachers. Somewhat similarly, teachers with disabilities/SLDs report the disorder when it becomes an opportunity to build a more competent professional self or a positive example, a role model, for students, especially those with difficulties, and their parents (Ferri *et al.*, 2001; Valle *et al.*, 2004; Burns & Bell, 2010). Ferri *et al.* (2001) interpret disclosure as a means of turning disability into an advantage. In their study, teachers report disclosing their disability to their pupils as a means of increasing their motivation and positive expectations. These reflections are combined with the fact that disclosure by teachers with disabilities/SLDs is less frequent to their colleagues and, in particular, to Principals. It occurs, in general, after having achieved some degree of success in the professional environment, in the face of fears of discrimination (Valle *et al.*, 2004; Ferri *et al.*, 2005; Burns & Bell, 2010; Sharoni & Vogel, 2011) also triggered by the discussion on professional standards permeating the educational system (Glazzard & Dale, 2015). As a result, disclosure is not just a "technical" act, especially to employers. Sharoni and Vogel (2011) document the existence of the following pattern in all their teachers with SLDs. Initially, they fear being "discovered" by other members of the school staff and perceive themselves as not very competent. Only when their teaching is subject to some sort of validation by the professional environment is a virtuous circle established, nurturing a sense of efficacy, leading them to disclose the disorder.

It should be considered that disclosure also impacts the lack of reliable and certain data on the quota of teachers with disabilities/SLDs working in schools. This is not to deny their profound underrepresentation, highlighted in the opening of the chapter and in some of the studies included in the systematic review (Simms *et al.*, 2008; Ng Lee *et al.*, 2011), but to

recognize that the teachers' failure to disclose the disorder takes on a certain prominence in the phenomenon and cannot be underestimated.

In concluding the categories emerged with reference to the personal experiences of teachers with a disability and/or SLD, it should be mentioned that several studies have explored the issue of professional identity. The findings show a certain unambiguousness in concluding that experiences of marginalization or stigma related to having a disability and/or a SLD have an impact on professional identity. A qualitative study involving seven teachers with hearing disabilities describes how failure to address the specific needs of deaf students during teacher training programs can result in difficulty in developing important teaching skills. In fact, the marginalizing lack of accommodations in training is expressed in difficulties in teaching once a professional career is undertaken (Hankebo, 2018). All other studies, instead, point to the career choice of becoming a teacher as transformative in a positive sense. Negative experiences in school as pupils are "overwritten" in professional practice by experiences where the sense of self-efficacy is reconstructed (Gerber, 1992; Compton, 1997; Ferri *et al.*, 2001; Valle *et al.*, 2004; Ferri *et al.*, 2005; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011; Burns *et al.*, 2013; Glazzard & Dale, 2015). In the case of teachers with dyslexia, three research studies highlight how actively nurturing a sense of self-efficacy and good self-esteem are critical to a positive professional experience. This awareness requires a process and a proactive attitude. It is more prevalent among more experienced teachers and several teachers voice very challenging first teaching experiences in this respect (Vogel & Sharoni, 2011; Burns & Bell, 2011; Burns *et al.*, 2013). Other research studies highlight how it is autobiographical memories of marginalization or stigma that awaken the motivation for becoming teachers capable of preventing other pupils from similar experiences (Compton, 1997; Ferri *et al.*, 2001; Valle *et al.*, 2004; Ferri *et al.*, 2005; Glazzard & Dale, 2015). One teacher interviewed in a qualitative study focused on the professional identity of teachers with dyslexia reveals that his reason for being a teacher is rooted in his own feelings of exclusion and, simultaneously, his desire for things to be different for pupils who are in school today. It is precisely with those who have negative school experiences that the teacher feels that they can identify better (Burns & Bell, 2010).

However, the most investigated topic within this field concerns the benefits of having people with disabilities/SLDs in the teaching staff (Bellacicco *et al.*, under review). Many studies focus on describing how teachers with disabilities may represent a professional with some particular sensitivities and competences, developed in part because they

have integrated their experience of disabilities/SLDs into their professional identity. A first issue concerns how these teachers can be positive role models, also thanks to their biographies that bear witness to stories of self-empowerment. The ability of facing obstacles and overcoming them with motivation, commitment and activism can positively inspire pupils (Gerber, 1992; Compton, 1997; Ferri *et al.*, 2001; Valle *et al.*, 2004; Burns & Bell, 2011; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011; Burns *et al.*, 2013; Glazzard & Dale, 2015), but also colleagues (Gerber, 1992; Burns & Bell, 2011; Lamichhane, 2016) and the families of children or youth with disabilities/SLDs (Valle *et al.*, 2004; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011). The biography of these teachers can challenge prejudices and contribute to building an inclusive culture in the schools where they work (Bellacicco *et al.*, under review).

Especially in the case of children and youth experiencing similar challenges, their life stories can become a positive role model to emulate (Roberson & Serwatka, 2000; Roald, 2002; Green *et al.*, 2008; Smith, 2008). This occurs because – as mentioned in several papers – personal experiences of disabilities/SLDs are often linked to strong empathy (insider status) and particularly effective communication and interpersonal skills towards pupils who have the same disability and/or SLD (Gerber, 1992; Compton, 1997; Ferri *et al.*, 2001; Roald, 2002; Smith & Ramsey, 2004; Valle *et al.*, 2004; Ferri *et al.*, 2005; Sutton-Spence & Ramsey, 2010; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011; Hickman & Brens, 2014; Glazzard & Dale, 2015; Lamichhane, 2016; Smith, 2017). Teachers are those who feel this aspect as an advantage, their own strength. Thanks to having personally experienced barriers in the educational environment, they are now able to understand the students who struggle to make progress. In this process – as partly described – they explicitly express their difficulties in order to lay bare their own vulnerabilities alongside their professional competence and thus support a positive development of self-esteem in youth (Burns & Bell, 2011).

Lastly, a final potential added value of teachers with disabilities/SLDs is the use of effective teaching strategies, derived from a careful reflexive process in search of effective learning strategies in the past of pupils and students with disabilities/SLDs. Several studies, for instance, focus on the search for plural forms of communication and the activation of metacognitive self-regulation strategies (Gerber, 1992; Burns & Bell, 2011; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011; Burns *et al.*, 2013; Hickman & Brens, 2014; Glazzard & Dale, 2015; Smith, 2017). Some papers, for instance, document particularly positive experiences of student active involvement especially by teachers with visual and hearing disabilities, precisely because of their ability of reflecting explicitly and consciously on the communication and

organizational processes of the classroom (Compton, 1997; Roald, 2002; Daniels, 2004; Marlatt, 2002, 2004; Smith, 2008; Ducharme & Arcand, 2010; Kurz, Schick & Hauser, 2015; Lamichhane, 2016; Villanueva & Di Stefano, 2017). A study dedicated to teachers with dyslexia, on the other hand, shows their strength in using visualization strategies, such as summarizing using images drawn on the blackboard instead of more traditional key word lists (Burns *et al.*, 2013). The same article further described how these teachers manage to activate, in some cases, these strategies with a dual function: activating and motivating pupils, but also compensating for the difficulties associated with their specific learning disorder. An example is the practice of summarizing the conclusions of cooperative learning activities on the blackboard by pupils themselves, valuing once more the result of the process as a "they", but also allowing the teacher to delegate a writing task and focus on the oral structuring of the presentation (Burns *et al.*, 2013). In brief, what emerges from this last category of benefits is that the presence of teachers with disabilities/ SLDs in the teaching staff has some advantages, particularly strong for pupils living a similar experience, but also in a more general sense in the perspective of the development of a culture sensitive and attentive to all forms of injustice and active against inequalities.

In outlining these arguments, it is furthermore necessary to briefly acknowledge the limitations of the research on which they are based. In addition to being limited, the studies are mostly based on first-person narratives of people with disabilities (for example the voice of parents is absent; Neca *et al.*, 2020). Particularly in the line of in-service teachers, there is a lack of method-based robust research data (Bellacicco *et al.*, under review). It is also puzzling that the existing knowledge corpus appears inattentive to the variety and profound differences in conditions of disability/SLD, often considered as a monolithic group (Tal-Alon & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2019; Bellacicco *et al.*, under review). Capturing a further atypicality of the literature in this field, Makris (2018) commented on these aspects, stating that so far researchers have only examined the experiences of teachers belonging to underrepresented groups based on isolated identity categories (e.g. either disability or ethnicity), neglecting to read the complex constellation of their interacting, changing and overlapping characteristics, and how they are transformed and negotiated in different contexts, from an intersectional perspective. Reflecting on these limitations, at least two risks are noticeable. The first – as already mentioned – is that teachers are identified in a single, crystallized role as "experts" for their ethnicity or disability (typecasting) and are placed in positions that do not consider their actual competences (Dickar,

2008; Santoro, 2015). The second, interconnected, is that there are naïve generalizations failing to recognize the specific characteristics of these people and connecting them deterministically to certain potentials and difficulties, with no case-by-case, diversified look. With regard to (student) teachers with disabilities/SLDs, it is, for instance, a matter of imagining that they may have peculiar talents and inclinations, additional to or different from, for example, the widely stated empathy. Moreover, it is possible that they may have difficulties such as to sometimes fail to achieve professional standards or develop appropriate coping strategies, while in a positive dialogue with the academic or school environment.

Lastly, another issue that needs more focus is the role of school settings – relationships, spaces, timeframes, etc. – in systemically supporting student teachers and in-service teachers. In the examination of the current literature – aforementioned – it is possible to find a number of problem areas that focus on the institution's organizational and cultural perspective. In this sense, the fact that people with disabilities/SLDs are part of the teaching staff only serves as a magnifying glass towards some critical aspects of the functioning of schools, such as the poor diffusion of an inclusive ethos, the limited communication, dialogue and collaboration within the teaching staff or the lack of an adequate level of support resources. Schools, therefore, must do their part. Precisely for this reason, an active investment in overcoming the barriers – still very present – for teachers with disabilities/SLDs represents a guarantee for the individual right of the person with disabilities/SLDs to work in the field that they want, but also for the development of an inclusive school community with benefits for all.

3. The dilemma underlying the presence of people with disabilities/SLDs in teacher training and in the teaching profession

By definition, schools and universities are called upon to be guarantors of the quality of a country's educational offer and the quality of the professional profile of (student) teachers who (will) work in the field of education. The presence of people with disabilities/SLDs in teacher training programs and the teaching profession adds an additional mandate, i.e. ensuring their right to participate in teacher training programs and, then, performing the teaching profession. The two issues are not easily reconciled. In most countries, the profile of the "good teacher" is formalized in a list of defined and limited competences, which varies in

its rigidity from real standards, as for example in the UK or in the USA, to more vague professional profiles, as in the Italian case. At the same time, however, the indications to support the presence of people with disabilities/SLDs in teacher training programs and the teaching profession point to accommodations and therefore to flexibility and pluralization. The principles of formalization through standards and accommodation through pluralization are opposites and produce practices that are not easy to harmonize. On a theoretical level, this issue can be better illustrated through the concept of dilemma.

The idea of dilemmas in education has a certain tradition and describes all the situations in which two conceptual extremes, potentially both valuable but contradictory, meet/clash (Judge, 1981; Minow, 1990; Croll & Moses, 2000; Dyson, 2001; Ho, 2004). In this paper, we draw on the definition proposed by Norwich (2008, 2013). This definition does not merely see the dilemma as the tension between two contradictory alternatives but specifies that there is a dilemma if the choice for either of them implies disadvantageous consequences that can be attributed to the exclusion of the other possibility. In his well-known paper dedicated to inclusive education dilemmas (Norwich, 2008), the author declines, for instance, the dilemma of identification. The author shows how, if children and youth are identified as children and youth with special educational needs, they are exposed to a risk of stigma; if they are not, they risk not having access to the resources that could support their educational development and participation.

This type of conceptualization reveals that there cannot be a solution to the dilemma by simply backing one or the other conceptual perspective, without accepting the negative consequences known from the beginning. In this sense, numerous authors involved in the reflection on school inclusion – even from different cultural backgrounds – propose a complex solution (Prengel, 2001; Ianes, 2006; Norwich, 2008; Boger, 2017). The common reference – although not explicit in all authors – can be found in the dialogical principle of complex thinking, as conceived by Morin (1993). It consists in the recomposition of duality in a unity, with no ambition of synthesis in the Hegelian sense. The dialogic is a unity featured by a generative and heuristic conflict, a precarious equilibrium point between two elements in contradiction, but in dialogue with each other, open to mutual contamination. Precisely that dialogue protects from the risks that a radical choice for one of the two elements would imply.

Based on this idea of dilemma we conceptualize the challenges posed by the presence of people with disabilities/SLDs in teacher training and the teaching profession among student teachers and in-service teachers in terms of "dilemma of professional competence" (Table 1).

Table 1 - Dilemma of professional competence

Students with disabilities/SLDs in teacher training programs	If the student has access to reasonable accommodations, their professional profile will move away from the standardized idea of an outgoing professional profile. If the student does *not* have access to reasonable accommodations, they will encounter more barriers in their program.
In-service teachers with disabilities/SLDs	If the teacher with disabilities/SLDs has access to reasonable accommodations, their profile will move away from a standard professional profile and the tasks associated with it. If the teacher with disabilities/SLDs does *not* have access to reasonable accommodations, they will encounter more barriers in their professional experience.

The analysis of the literature presented above confirms the presence of this dilemma in the field of teacher training (Bellacicco & Demo, under review). It is made explicit in the tension between two mandates on which university courses are held accountable. On the one hand, there is the right of people with disabilities to access these courses and the consequent duty of universities to respond with reasonable accommodations that can ensure accessibility to the curriculum. On the other hand, there is the social responsibility of universities to guarantee the outgoing quality of the future teaching population. Reconciling the unilaterality of teacher training programs conceived on the basis of a standardized idea of the outgoing professional profile with the flexibility and plurality suggested by the concept of reasonable accommodation poses challenges not easy to reconcile. This becomes, for example, particularly evident in those studies that highlight resistance by lecturers and/or course directors to making compensatory measures or other adaptations available – if these alter the curriculum or standard forms of assessment or the moment of practicum perceived as highly professionalizing (Baldwin, 2007; Leyser *et al.*, 2011; Lebel *et al.*, 2016).

In the context of the analysis of the literature pertaining to teachers with disabilities/SLDs, the dilemma appears with less strength, probably – as already hypothesized – due to the fact that legislative indications regarding accommodations for in-service teachers are less formalized than in the university contexts (Bellacicco *et al.*, under review). In the two works in which – to our knowledge – this is discussed, it takes on

a more personal significance and connects to the issue of disclosure. An in-depth analysis of a teacher with dyslexia shows how fear of not adhering to competence standards can, at least initially, keep teachers from talking about their disability (Glazzard & Dale, 2015). A more recent qualitative study on 20 teachers with physical disabilities published in 2019 (not included in our review) describes a similar phenomenon. Although teachers are aware of their right to receive forms of accommodations, in some situations they prefer to forgo them in order to show that they are as capable as their colleagues without disabilities (Tal-Alon & Shapira-Lishchinsky, 2019). Besides, this more personal declination of the dilemma is also present in the experiences of students who – as evidenced in the state of the art outlined above – carefully weigh disclosure, even considering the possible marginalizing consequences of not being recognized as potentially "good" teachers (Riddick, 2003; Macleod & Cebula, 2009; Griffiths, 2012; Sokal *et al.*, 2017).

In summary, the dilemma seems to have at least two forms. There is a first "institutional" form, different for universities and schools in its formulation (see Table 1) and relevance, currently more evident in Higher Education as evidenced in the analysis of the former primary studies described above. A second declination is the more "personal" one, which touches people with disabilities/SLDs engaged in training or working and is significant in both the university and school environments.

The literature analysis allows to consider the dilemma by grasping some aspects of complexity which, at a first reading, risk remaining implicit and therefore hidden. A first issue concerns the way in which the idea of accommodations is conceptualized. Research dedicated to students and research focused on teaching staff show the importance of coping strategies actively developed by people with disabilities/SLDs (Riddick, 2003; Smith & Ramsey, 2004; Bailes *et al.*, 2010; Burns & Bell, 2010; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011; Griffiths, 2012; Burns *et al.*, 2013; Lamichhane, 2016; Parker & Draves, 2017; Smith, 2017; Barwood *et al.*, 2018; Hankebo, 2018). Awareness leads to thinking of accommodation as a two-sided process. On the one hand, it requires universities and schools to be readily available to provide compensatory tools, communication tools and/or assistive technology. On the other hand, institutions must create the conditions for the person with disabilities/SLDs to be able to autonomously and creatively determine and design the strategies that they need. In this sense, it is crucial that universities and schools legitimize plural, varied and equally effective ways to manage learning and teaching situations.

The findings of the two reviews support a broad view of the concept of barrier. Some of the barriers highlighted in research are related to

the encounter between the person's particular disability and/or SLD and the environment, such as the barrier of reading aloud for teachers with dyslexia (Riddick, 2003; Ferri *et al.*, 2005; Griffiths, 2012; Lamichhane, 2016; Parker & Draves, 2017; Barwood *et al.*, 2018; Hankebo, 2018). These can be addressed with accommodations as described above. Other barriers, however, can be attributed to the context alone, such as colleagues' or students' attitudes or the culture and atmosphere of a university or school (Valle *et al.*, 2004; Ferri *et al.*, 2005; Burns & Bell, 2010; Glazzard & Dale, 2015; Pereira *et al.*, 2017; Hankebo, 2018; Romário & Dorziat, 2018). In this sense – as mentioned – the overcoming of barriers is not conceivable with the mere activation of accommodations, but requires profound changes, i.e. the rethinking of the more or less inclusive, more or less open to differences, more or less ideologically normalizing cultures of universities and schools (Csoli & Gallagher, 2012; Lebel *et al.*, 2016; Sokal *et al.*, 2017; Mellifont *et al.*, 2019; Saltes, 2020).

Another aspect that the two literature reviews highlight is that the presence of people with disabilities in teacher training programs and in the teaching profession has broader effects than "merely" guaranteeing an individual right, i.e. the right for the person with disabilities to study and work. Some studies reiterate the value of diversity in the teacher population as a rich potential for the development of inclusion in schools. Some describe, for example, the particular sensitivity of teachers belonging to traditionally minority groups in schools in recognizing forms of discrimination and inequality and in positively supporting students who experience them. Other reflections focus on their role as "models" for a culture that is open to differences. Through their professional biographies, they testify to the possibility of taking action against a dominant unilateral representation of the teacher profile (Gerber, 1992; Compton, 1997; Ferri *et al.*, 2001; Roald, 2002; Smith & Ramsey, 2004; Valle *et al.*, 2004; Ferri *et al.*, 2005; Burns & Bell, 2010, 2011; Sutton-Spence & Ramsey, 2010; Villegas & Irvine 2010; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011; Hickman & Brens, 2014; Glazzard & Dale, 2015; Goldhaber, Theobald, & Tien, 2015; Santoro, 2015; Lamichhane, 2016; Smith, 2017). In this sense, an underrepresentation of people with disabilities/SLDs among teachers would be a disadvantage to the school as a whole.

Lastly, it may be worth highlighting a minority of studies that urge the questioning of an underlying assumption of the dilemma. The "dilemma of professional competence" assumes that schools and universities can adequately respond to the characteristics of people with disabilities by means of accommodations. In this type of approach, however, we lose sight of the crucial role played by how a teacher's competence profile

is conceived, both in formal terms of professional standards and competence lists, and more subtly through a dominant and shared implicit representation of the teacher's professional identity (Riddick & English, 2006; Parker & Draves, 2017; Tal *et al.*, 2019). Shifting the focus to this aspect, the crucial issue would then become not so much if and how many accommodations are made available, but rather if and how much the professional profile underlying teacher training programs and teacher professionalism is conceived in sufficiently plural terms to allow the integration of a disability and/or SLD into it (Bellacicco & Demo, under review).

Overall, the findings presented and discussed suggest the need to develop both the conceptual views of the "professional competence dilemma", as illustrated in Table 1. For the one focused on the right to accommodation for students and teachers with disabilities/SLDs, greater recognition of their active role becomes crucial. This translates into rethinking reasonable accommodations that cannot be standard lists to be made available, but customized solutions to be negotiated in a fruitful relationship between a person who is aware of their own talents and difficulties and a context that is willing to change to ensure everyone's maximum professional potential. In this way, even the topic of disclosure can be more widely shared, not burdening those with disabilities/SLDs with the evaluation of the pros and cons of this decision but granting institutional support. This may at the same time guarantee actions in support of a culture open to differences.

In addition, the view dedicated to the teaching profession competence profile requires a rethinking of the idea of the standard profile as a guarantor of quality. This implies recognizing the existence of different ways of being competent teachers and that teachers with different pedagogical profiles can take on different roles, all equally valuable. In practice, this would translate into a diversification of the profiles of teachers capable of valuing different talents, with consequent diversifications also in educational training. It is important to clarify that this is not a suggestion for a simplistic view whereby any person – regardless of their individual characteristics – can be a "good teacher". Thus, it is not a matter of making the professional profile so general as not to define a minimum level of quality. It is, instead, a matter of avoiding monolithic definitions, as if there was only one way to be a good teacher: that corresponds to owning a rigid list of competences, the same for every teacher. There are teachers who can do without one or the other because they use alternative strategies, or teachers who have a network of support and collaboration that completes their professional work with

complementary competences and thanks to this activate a different profile from that of their colleagues, but equally effective. When this happens – whether the (student) teacher has a disability or SLD or not – we believe that there is every basis for recognizing a quality profile. In this sense, the concept of pluralization does not contradict the idea of a guarantee of quality, but only of a quality defined in standardized terms.

In conclusion, in the perspective of the dialogic principle suggested as a solution to the dilemma, we believe that the constant dialogue of the two conceptual perspectives of the "dilemma of professional competence" can protect against some risks. In the first place, the diversification of professional profiles aimed at enhancing each teacher in their strengths and mitigating the impact of any difficulties – SLDs or disabilities – cannot completely remove the need for accommodations for some people with disabilities/SLDs. This aspect must remain in focus even in a context that is becoming more pluralistic, as highlighted by the presence of the dilemma. In addition, the diversification of the profiles must embrace the challenge of quality – as mentioned above – because plurality as understood in this research is intended to correspond to enhancing educational environments and not to lowering their quality standards. In the second place – even if they are co-built and shared – accommodations risk being stigmatizing if they are not integrated into broad cultural processes of openness to differences that involve large segments of the school and academic population, and not only people with disabilities/SLDs and the staff and offices in charge of this task. The presence of the dilemma, again, highlights the need for wide-ranging information and awareness actions.

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2. The "BECOM-IN" research project: method and context

by *Rosa Bellacicco, Heidrun Demo, Dario Ianes*[1]

1. The "BECOM-IN" research

It is well known that Italy represents an emblematic example of institutional and regulatory commitment in favor of a school of all and for all. However, this long tradition – which has characterized the school system in the country since the 1970s – seems to be essentially aimed at pupils in vulnerable conditions and does not seem to have integrated the perspective of the inclusion of teachers with disabilities/specific learning disorders (SLDs). Interest in the topic has not made its way into Italian research. To the best of our knowledge, there is no previous research that has explored the experiences of (student) teachers with disabilities/SLDs. Only a few valuable accounts/narratives are available, such as the recent one voiced in first person by Barbera (2020), a teacher with SLDs, or those described by Canevaro (2013) and Guaraldi (2018).

In addition, Italy lacks official statistics regarding enrollees with disabilities/SLDs in teacher training programs and in-service teachers. With reference to the former, the existing data – as already mentioned – are limited to the total number of university students with disabilities/SLDs, which is nevertheless growing (over 36,000 according to the 2020 National Evaluation Agency of the University System and Research - ANVUR survey conducted in Italian universities)[2]. However, we are not

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1. The present contribution is the result of the joint work of the three authors. However, it should be noted that the paragraphs *The "BECOM-IN" research* and *The research context: peculiarities of the "dilemma of professional competence" in Italy. The perspective of reasonable accommodations* are to be attributed to Rosa Bellacicco. The paragraph *The research context: peculiarities of the "dilemma of professional competence" in Italy. The perspective of professional standards* are to be attributed to Heidrun Demo. Lastly, the paragraph *Method*, to Dario Ianes.

2. Out of 98 (state, non-state and e-learning) universities existing in Italy, 90 universities responded.

informed of how many students with disabilities/SLDs attend individual courses of study (level of detail not covered by the survey). With regard to in-service teachers, it seems that, according to a journalistic investigation of a few years ago by Ofcs.Report[3], a full 15% of the total teaching staff (more than 750,000 at the time of the survey) had a disability, considering disabilities that emerged during their career as well. In addition to being unofficial data, the characteristics of these teachers are not clear[4]. Moreover, information from the labor market is by no means more explanatory. ISTAT (National Institute of Statistics)'s *Aspects of Daily Life* survey (2019) – one of the few sources related to the topic of disability in the workplace – indicates some promising directions. Among people with disabilities, 63.4% of those with at least a degree are employed (vs. 42.7% of high school graduates and 19.5% of those with at most a middle school diploma). The analysis by position in the profession also shows a greater concentration in correspondence with the category of employees (executives, middle managers, line managers). Despite the accurate survey, knowing the proportion of individuals with disabilities specifically employed in the teaching profession remains utopia.

This lack of statistics finds a connection with other structural trends in the country characterized by the lack of a reliable monitoring of a whole series of important variables in the education system (Ianes, 2021). Although – as mentioned above – even at the international level it is difficult to share formally collected data on the number of students and teachers belonging to underrepresented groups (EADSNE, 2011)[5], it is also true that some countries have activated, over the years, *ad hoc* data collection to derive such estimates on university applicants (e.g. Ireland - Keane *et al.*, 2018 or Canada - Holden & Kitchen, 2018) or have included the "disability" variable in the already existing surveys, aiming at outlining the profile of the teaching workforce (e.g., United Kingdom; Ware *et al.*, 2020). It is worrying that Italy is at the bottom of the list in data gathering on the topic.

It was this cultural and research atmosphere to generate the need to conduct the project "BECOM-IN: becoming a teacher with disabilities or

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3. www.ofcs.it/internazionale/difesa-e-sicurezza-nazionale/docenti-disabili-un-esercito-100mila-invisibili-siede-dietro-le-cattedre/#gsc.tab=0

4. Ofcs.Report's estimate is based on the number of requests for assistance under Law no. 104/1992 by school personnel. However, requests related to personal difficulties or support of family members with disabilities cannot be distinguished for privacy reasons.

5. The *European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education* had already shown in 2011 that only 7 out of 29 Countries had shared such data.

specific learning disorders (SLDs)" nationwide. The study was conducted between November 2018 and June 2021[6].

2. The research context: peculiarities of the "dilemma of professional competence" in Italy

2.1. *The perspective of reasonable accommodations*

Some background information can help locate the "dilemma of professional competence" in the Italian context.

In terms of reasonable accommodations to be granted during the university career, inclusive legislation relevant to school has expanded to Higher Education since the 1990s. For people with disabilities, the Italian Law no. 104/92 sanctioned the right to university education and provided for the guarantee of technical equipment, teaching and auxiliary aids, as well as individualized treatment during exams. The subsequent Law no. 17/99, which integrated and amended Law no. 104/92, refined the reasonable accommodations to be provided in the academic environment and set the establishment of specific support Services (Services for Students with Disabilities and SLDs), with a strategic role of reception, analysis of needs and provision of the services required by law[7]. On the other hand, with regard to students with SLDs, the promulgation, more than ten years later, of another law (Law no. 170/2010) recognized them the same amount of compensatory and dispensatory measures.

Today, university students with disabilities/SLDs are provided for the achievement of the learning objectives indicated by each course of study, including, therefore, the university course in Primary Teacher Education (PTE), designed to train the professional profile of kindergarten and primary school teachers. However, it is possible for them to make use of reasonable accommodations during course attendance and during exams, including specific assistance services (such as, for example, the presence of a communication mediator, reader, peer tutor, etc.) and compensatory and dispensatory measures (such as, for example, a recorder, calculator, extra time, equivalent exam tests, the possibility of breaking down the exam

6. The study was supposed to end in 2020 but was extended due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the suspension in data collection occurred during the lockdown.

7. Law no. 17/99 also made it mandatory to appoint a Rector's Delegate for disabilities (later extended to include SLDs), with tasks of planning, awareness, coordination, monitoring and evaluation of the quality of the university's inclusive policies.

subject into several partial tests, etc.). Unlike what has been defined for school contexts (in particular for students with disabilities), universities do not envisage the possibility of differentiated courses in terms of learning objectives. The choice of support measures is made in agreement with the lecturer of the subject, with a view to finding, precisely, the best "reasonable accommodation" between the student's individual ability profile and the peculiarity of the teaching.

A similar discussion also applies to selective entrance tests. Students with disabilities/SLDs must pass the same tests as those that other students sit for admission to programmed number courses (i.e. with a restricted number of students), but they are entitled to some supports (such as extra time, calculators or readers). In the PTE program there are no quotas of places "reserved" for people with disabilities/SLDs.

Finally, in terms of the practicum, the legislative framework does not "prescribe" particular reasonable accommodations and leaves the possibility to individual universities to define their policies in this regard. The Italian Ministerial Decree no. 249/2010 – which regulates the requirements and procedures for the initial training of kindergarten and primary school teachers – alludes to these situations by quoting them as «cases at risk» (p. 6), without specific homogeneous support practices.

Furthermore, our country has not enacted any special rules for the schools' provision of supports for in-service teachers with disabilities/SLDs. Only blind teachers are permitted by law to rely on an assistant for the purpose of disciplinary control (Art. 2 of Law no. 601/1962). The assistant's presence, at first mandatory, was then made optional and at the discretion of an evaluation of the concrete possibility for the blind teacher to independently exercise their supervision duties (Art. 61 of Law no. 270/1982). In conclusion, it is up to the teacher with disabilities/SLDs to request the necessary reasonable accommodations and up to the school, in its autonomy, to decide whether and how to grant them.

2.2. *The perspective of professional standards*

Let us now move to the other perspective of the dilemma. In Italy – as previously mentioned – it is the PTE program that trains kindergarten and primary school student teachers. It is a qualifying degree course, activated for the first time in the Academic Year 1998-1999. Originally, it was a four-year course (240 Credits - ECTS), with a two-year basic course and then two-year specialization in either primary school or kindergarten. It was and is a programmed number degree course with an entrance

test. The number of places is calculated on the basis of the needs of the labor market on a regional basis. Since the beginning, the course has been strongly professionally oriented. The curriculum included, and still does, an alternation of courses, workshops and practicum that support the connection between the teaching contents and school practices and a considerable number of credits dedicated to the practicum (Barbieri, 2011).

In 2010 (Italian Ministerial Decree no. 249/2010) the course was reformed to a single-cycle 5-year degree course (300 ECTS). The course is now qualifying for teaching in both primary schools and kindergarten. The curriculum maintains its structure including courses, workshops and practicum. It distributes credits as follows: psycho-pedagogical and methodological-educational area (78 ECTS), teaching disciplines (135 ECTS), teaching for the reception of students with disabilities (31 ECTS), practicum (24 ECTS).

An important issue to be explored is precisely its *qualifying* value. This implies that, at the end of the course, there is the thesis discussion and the practicum final report, which, in addition to the academic value, has a directly qualifying value for the specific profession. A Ministry of Education representative serves on the final examination committee, and the degree allows graduates to enroll in permanent lists, from which Regional School Offices draw for the assignment of both temporary and permanent positions in public schools (Barbieri, 2011).

However, the institutional framework is different to other countries, where the professional standards to be achieved (either at the entry, during the course, or at the exit) are more rigidly defined. Here a brief discussion is in order. In the context of the debate about how to improve the quality of teaching and under the impetus of neoliberal policies, an emerging strategy – already described in a number of countries (such as countries in Europe, the UK, the USA and Australia) – has been the articulation of professional standards related to what teachers should learn and be able to do (Adoniou & Gallagher, 2017). This has led to a new focus on the work of schools and universities and their role in the production of workers, regarded as resources in the global economic competition among states (Goodson, 2001; Clarke & Moore, 2013). In this direction, a teacher's ability is defined on the basis of the achievement of narrow performance indicators that oversee the accreditation of training programs, and, in practical terms, the entry selection of (student) teachers, their continuation in the course/practicum, the granting of the degree, and then professional practice (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Examples from other countries can help clarify the above. The UK has adopted teaching standards that address the competences, pedagogical

practices, but also the attitudes and personal and professional conduct of teachers[8]. The standards define the minimum level of skills that are expected of candidates when they are awarded the Qualified Teacher status. Glazzard and Dale (2015) in this regard argue that the government, in England, has recently introduced unfair changes – in their view – to the ability tests for achieving this status. These changes include limiting to two the test replications and increasing the cut-off score. With regard to the reading and writing skills test, according to the authors, the risk of failing is high for trainee teachers with dyslexia. In Finland, the teaching standards are very strict and operate in two ways. They determine the shared framework that guides the teacher training curriculum in universities, as well as the entrance exam that applicants must take to be selected into the course. The latter includes an assessment of their academic study skills in education and an assessment of their disposition to teach. Lastly, in Australia, AITSL (*Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership*) outlines seven professional standards for the four stages of a teaching career: graduate teacher; competent teacher; highly qualified teacher; and teacher leader (AITSL, 2011). The standards cover three domains – professional knowledge, professional practice, and professional engagement – and, for newly trained teachers, emphasize the importance of, for instance, «(knowing) literacy and numeracy strategies» and «maintaining student safety». Echoing Glazzard and Dale (2015), other researchers have also concluded that such professional standards can be discriminatory, discourage people with disabilities from applying to teacher education (Matt *et al.*, 2015), as well as «perpetuate ableist practices and contribute to the negative association of disability» (Saltes, 2020, p. 4).

In Italy, there are no actual standards for student teachers, but rather a profile of competences – identified at the national level by the Italian Ministerial Decree no. 249/2010 – which students must achieve during the training to obtain the degree title. The reference is the one outlined in Article 6 of the Italian Ministerial Decree, which indicates: disciplinary knowledge related to the areas that will be taught (e.g. linguistic-literary, mathematical, physical and natural sciences, English language, motor activities, etc.); ability of articulating the contents of the disciplines according to the different school levels and the age of the children; pedagogical-educational skills; choice and use of the most

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8. www.gov.uk/government/publications/teachers-standards#history (Department of Education).

appropriate tools for the course provided; relational and managerial skills; active participation in the management of the school and of the teaching, in collaboration with colleagues. In fact, it provides a very broad set of training references, common to all universities and PTE programs, which have the faculty to articulate them in their educational regulations.

With regard to in-service teachers, an analysis of the relevant legislative framework shows that reference professional standards are not regulated in the country. It should be noted, however, that there are a number of criteria mentioned in various documents, although not functional to career or salary progression. Examples are: the professional profile in the 2018 *National Collective Labor Contracts* (in Italian, CCNL - Contratto Collettivo Nazionale del Lavoro) - Teacher Area; the framework of skills found in the *National Teacher Training Plan* (Italian Ministerial Decree no. 797/2016) and the MIUR document of April 14th, 2018 *Professional development and quality of in-service training. Working Papers*. Only with regard specifically to newly hired teachers, the legislation (Italian Ministerial Decree no. 850/2015) identifies objectives, training activities, methods of verification and criteria for evaluating their training and probationary period. The school leader verifies the mastery of professional standards according to the criteria provided by law. These criteria include: proper possession and exercise of cultural, disciplinary, teaching and methodological skills, with reference to the foundations of knowledge and the competence goals and the learning objectives provided by the regulations in force; proper possession and exercise of relational, organizational and managerial skills; observance of the duties related to the status of public employee and inherent to the teaching function and participation in training activities, and achievement of the objectives provided by them.

3. Method

3.1. *Research questions*

The "BECOM-IN" research project – conducted by the research group of the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano, in partnership with the University of Turin[9] – aims at exploring some of the core issues emerged

9. The research group is composed by Dario Ianes (Scientific Coordinator), Heidrun Demo and Vanessa Macchia (Free University of Bozen-Bolzano), Rosa Bellacicco (Free University of Bozen-Bolzano until June 2021) and Marisa Pavone (University of Turin).

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from the review of the literature on the topic (reported in the previous chapter) and, specifically, the "dilemma of professional competence" inherent to kindergarten and primary school and teacher training for these school levels. It is therefore a matter of investigating the dilemma on at least two levels. First, there is the institutional level, with its two different declinations in university and school; it is crucial to understand how schools and universities balance the issues related to reasonable accommodations for students and teachers with disabilities/SLDs and those related to the quality of the professional profile of the future teaching population. Subsequently, there is the more personal level of describing how students and teachers personally experience weighing the pros and cons of a disclosure, in the balance between the right to accommodations and the wish to prove themselves equally competent to colleagues.

Overall, the general learning objectives of the research can be categorized into the following areas:

1. perception of the "dilemma of professional competence" at the institutional and personal level by those directly affected (students and teachers with disabilities/SLDs) and by the university and school environment (academic staff members and colleagues of teachers with disabilities/SLDs);
2. attitudes towards the effectiveness of (student) teachers with disabilities/SLDs;
3. facilitators and barriers encountered and coping strategies developed by students and teachers with disabilities/SLDs during training and professional practice at school;
4. number of student teachers with disabilities/SLDs in Italian universities.

3.2. *Data collection*

To answer the various questions, two data collection techniques were used sequentially: a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The research design is multi-method (Anguera *et al.*, 2018), as the two approaches – quantitative and qualitative – were used without processes of integration, connection between the two paradigms, until the inference phase[10]. This allowed to "exploit" the strengths of both methods to provide

10. The synergistic combination of the two paradigms is instead typical of mixed methods (Trinchero & Robasto, 2019).

solid evidence on the phenomenon. On the other hand, each method was more functional and apt to answer the different, specific research questions. Multiple informants – students and teachers with disabilities/SLDs, their colleagues, and academic staff members – were involved in order to capture different perspectives on the topic.

First, the survey was administered to a number of academic staff members. The questionnaire was used in order to reach the widest possible number of participants and provide a sufficiently extensive picture of the phenomenon of university training in the 33 universities that provided the PTE program (in the A.Y. 2019/2020). The decision was then to proceed with the semi-structured interviews, involving (student) teachers, already in-service teachers with disabilities/SLDs and colleagues of the latter (teachers without disabilities/SLDs, but experts on the topic)[11]. The semi-structured interview was preferred, in this case, to the questionnaire because it was deemed to allow a better and deeper exploration of the personal experiences lived by the target population. In addition, the choice was guided by practical reasons. As already mentioned, there was no database available from which to draw the contacts of students/teachers with disabilities/SLDs and their colleagues in order to spread a possible survey at the national level. Finally, the fact that the interviews were to be conducted by 4 different project collaborators incentivized the use of a semi-structured format, a property that allows a uniform collection of information and comparison of responses among them.

A more in-depth description of the research questions covered in the two phases, the sample involved, the tools used, and the data analysis techniques can be found in the following chapters, specifically dedicated to the results obtained from the survey and interviews.

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3. Student teachers with disabilities/SLDs from the perspective of academic staff: a questionnaire about the "dilemma of professional competence" and the attitudes

by *Rosa Bellacicco*

1. Theoretical framework of the questionnaire

This chapter presents the findings of the questionnaire addressed to the academic staff from the Italian universities providing the program in Primary Teacher Education (PTE). The aim was to explore the reasonable accommodations granted to students with disabilities/SLDs during the training program, the academic staff's perception of the "dilemma of professional competence" at the institutional level, as well as their attitudes towards the effectiveness of (student) teachers with disabilities/SLDs.

The first part of the volume has introduced several international studies which suggest that the academic staff involved in teacher training often deal with conflicting ethical tensions. On the one hand, these tensions are the result of the growing pressure for the provision of reasonable accommodations in an inclusive perspective; on the other hand, of the need to train competent teachers and provide them with essential teaching skills (Baldwin, 2007; Leyser & Greenberger, 2008; Leyser *et al.*, 2011; Sokal *et al.*, 2017). In summary, these studies show that academic staff are less willing to provide certain types of measures, especially those perceived to lower course standards, and that they consider the supports provided during the practicum less effective and less ethical (Baldwin, 2007; Leyser & Greenberger, 2008; Leyser *et al.*, 2011). For example, the comparative survey by Leyser *et al.* (2011) highlights the emergence of these tensions. On the one hand, lecturers are resistant to lowering the grade average required of students with disabilities entering teacher training programs; on the other hand, they are willing to allow them to demonstrate competences in ways other than entry standardized tests. This stance is in line with Baldwin's (2007), already mentioned on various occasions. According to the author, the practicum and the initial stage of

the training program need specific focus. These are the times when most frequently students with disabilities/SLDs show they are failing to achieve the professional standards.

With regard to their attitudes, academic staff members consider people with disabilities/SLDs as effective as teachers without difficulties in both the studies analyzed by Leyser *et al.* (2011) (that of 1996/1997 and of 2006/2007). Only 10% expressed a negative judgement. The literature also evokes the background variables that affect the attitudes towards (student) teachers with disabilities/SLDs. Examples include: the students' type of disorder, on the one hand; gender, previous (teaching and personal) contact with people with disabilities/SLDs, training on the topic, the academic rank and the faculty members' disciplinary area, on the other (Leyser *et al.*, 2003; Leyser & Greenberger, 2008). Being a woman, having greater familiarity with the disability population and having been trained on the topic, as well as having a lower-ranked academic position, and teaching within the area of education, do appear to be associated with more positive attitudes (Leyser *et al.*, 2003; Leyser & Greenberger, 2008). In terms of the type of disability, the findings reported by Sokal *et al.* (2017) confirm that directors feel less ethically and legally confident in managing situations related to students with mental disabilities, and generally seem more distrustful of students with invisible disabilities. This is in line with the "hierarchy of impairment" proposed by Deal (2003), according to which the more "hidden" the disability, the less willing lecturers are of providing supports.

Finally, the figures. The very few studies that have investigated this aspect (Keane & Heinz, 2015; Holden & Kitchen, 2018; Keane *et al.*, 2018), mentioned above, not only indicate an increase, but also reveal that, in Ireland, students with disabilities/SLDs represent between 4.8% and 13.8% of the total enrolled in teacher education (in 2014). In Canada, the proportion of applicants with disabilities/SLDs across Ontario universities is lower, between 0.9% and 6.9% across the various institutions (in 2014).

In order to conduct such a study in Italy – considering the absence of research – it is necessary to acquire the perspective of the professionals involved in supporting students with disabilities/SLDs in teacher training. The research questions that specifically guided the survey are:

1. What reasonable accommodations do academic staff grant to students with disabilities/SLDs throughout the various phases of the PTE programs? What accommodations are perceived to put at risk the development of essential teaching skills ("dilemma of professional competence" at the institutional level)?

2. In what training activities do students with disabilities/SLDs more frequently show difficulties in achieving the course's qualifying learning objectives? What strategies are typically implemented to overcome them?
3. What are the attitudes of the academic staff towards the effectiveness of (student) teachers with disabilities/SLDs?
4. How many students with disabilities/SLDs are enrolled in the PTE program? How many are supported by the Careers & Practicum Service across Italian universities?

With reference to the last question, it should be noted that – given the lack of official statistics – the questionnaire was completed by a section aimed at including secondary data on students with disabilities/SLDs. In addition, studies on the topic identified the existence of specific difficulties in the disclosure of the disability/SLD during the practicum (Macleod & Cebula, 2009; Griffiths, 2012). The two estimates requested in the questionnaire should therefore provide two different indications. First, the number of students who have disclosed their disability/SLD to be granted reasonable accommodations[1] during course attendance and exams. Second, the proportion of enrollees who have decided to disclose their condition to be granted accommodations also during the professionalizing moment of the practicum[2].

1.1. *Sample*

Privileged witnesses from the PTE academic staff from the 33 Italian universities which provided the program in the A.Y. 2019/2020 were selected to answer the research questions[3].

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1. It is also necessary to consider that, unlike students with SLDs, if students with disabilities disclose their condition, they obtain financial benefits regarding tuition and university fees.
2. For privacy reasons, Careers & Practicum Service offices are not informed of the number of students who have disclosed the disorder during their training. The underlying assumption is that there is no formal requirement for students with Slds/disabilities to disclose it.
3. University of Turin; University of Aosta Valley; Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore; University of Milano-Bicocca; University of Bergamo; Free University of Bozen-Bolzano; University of Udine; University of Genoa; University of Modena and Reggio Emilia; University of Bologna; University of Florence; University of Pisa; University of Perugia; University of Macerata; University of Urbino "Carlo Bo"; Sapienza University of Rome; Roma Tre University; Libera Università Maria SS. Assunta - LUMSA; European University of Rome; University of L'Aquila; University of Molise; Suor Orsola Benincasa

Various profiles from each university were involved:

1. PTE program director (no.=33);
2. the Rector's delegate for disabilities/SLDs (as a reference figure within the university for all matters concerning disabilities and SLDs; no.=32)[4];
3. the coordinators for disabilities/SLDs of the department/faculty including the PTE program (i.e. figures who, where present, act as tutors in the training programs of students with disabilities/SLDs, allowing to better identify any learning issues inherent to the specific disciplines of the course; no.=24)[5];
4. lecturers belonging to those disciplinary areas in which students with disabilities/SLDs may experience greater difficulties, namely: Italian Linguistics, Mathematics and English (3 lecturers per university, 1 per discipline) (no.=97)[6];
5. practicum tutor supervisors[7] (1 Careers & Practicum Service office per university) (no.=32)[8].

The mailing list was created by the author, based on the information found on websites or provided by the administrative offices of the universities contacted.

The sample of respondents consists of 92 people: 38 lecturers of one of the three disciplines, 17 PTE program directors, 15 practicum tutor

University of Naples; University of Salerno; University of Bari Aldo Moro; University of Salento; University of Basilicata; University of Calabria; Mediterranea University of Reggio Calabria; University of Palermo; Kore University of Enna; University of Cagliari; University of Verona; University of Padova.

4. The Delegate of the University of Turin was not involved, since she is part of the BECOM-IN research group.

5. The Coordinators of the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano were not involved, since they are part of the BECOM-IN research group. Another university indicated two Coordinators: one for students with disabilities and one for students with SLDs. It should be noted that this role does not exist in all universities.

6. In one case, it was not possible to find the email contact of the English lecturer, while in another university, as the PTE program had recently been activated, the Linguistics lecturer had not yet been appointed. It should also be noted that in some cases contact with English lecturers was made through the mediation of the University Language Centers.

7. Practicum tutor supervisors are responsible for «organizing and managing relationships among universities, schools and school leaders; managing all the administrative activities related to the secondments of practicum tutors, to the relationship with schools and the Regional School Office, to the relationship with the students and the practicum activities in general; coordinating the distribution of the students in the various schools; assigning to practicum tutors, from year to year, the quota of students to be followed in the practicum» (Italian Ministerial Decree no. 249/2010, art. 11 paragraph 4).

8. Generally, the communication was sent to Careers & Practicum Service offices, asking one of the practicum tutor supervisors to respond. For one university, the email address of the practicum tutor supervisors/Careers & Practicum Service could not be found.

supervisors/Careers & Practicum Service offices, 11 Coordinators for disabilities/SLDs of the department/faculty including the PTE training program, and 11 Rector's delegates for disabilities/SLDs. Overall, the response rate was 42.2%, consistent with other questionnaires on the topic (e.g. Baldwin, in 2007, found a response rate from course directors of 34.9%).

The descriptive analysis of the characteristics of the respondents reveals that the majority are women (62%). They are mostly permanent staff (61% vs. 39%)[9], 65% of whom are from humanities and 35% from health/science/social disciplines, aged 53 on average. Only 35% have received in-depth training on the topic of the inclusion of students with disabilities/SLDs within the university environment[10], despite the fact that more than half (56%) of the sample have been working in Higher Education for over 20 years, with an average of an 8-year work experience in PTE programs. Geographically, most of the academic staff involved belong to universities located in Central-Southern Italy/Islands (67% vs. 33% in Northern Italy) and mega or large universities (53% vs. 47% of medium or small universities)[11]. Finally, a full 61% reported frequent contact with people with disabilities/SLDs in their personal life experience.

1.2. *The questionnaire and the administration procedure*

The survey was launched in December 2019 and concluded in June 2020. The administration took place online, through software Opinio, i.e. the platform adopted by the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano for the management of computerized surveys, including the type CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interviewing) implemented here.

Three separate, slightly different surveys were designed and prepared for the various target groups (one for PTE program directors, coordinators and lecturers; two for the delegates; one for practicum tutor supervisors). The format was customized with items related to the specific role.

Overall, the questionnaire consists of four modules. The first one investigates the frequency of use of specific reasonable accommodations

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9. Reference is made to: full professors, associate professors, researchers with indefinite or fixed-term contracts.

10. The remaining 65% has had partial training or no training.

11. The CENSIS ranking of the size of universities was used as a reference (mega university: over 40,000 enrolled students; large university: 20,000 to 40,000 enrolled students; medium university: 10,000 to 20,000 enrolled students; small university: up to 10,000 enrolled students).

for students with disabilities/SLDs and the "dilemma of professional competence". The entire module consists of six questions. Two of them are aimed at understanding, precisely, the frequency (4-point Likert scale, from 1=often to 4=never; plus the option "I do not know") of provision of the main measures both during the entrance test/course attendance/ exams (25 reasonable accommodations proposed, among those provided by Law no. 17/99 and Law no. 170/2010) and during the practicum (3 reasonable accommodations proposed, taken from international literature). Two other questions exactly replicate these items in order to assess how much their use is perceived to put at risk the development of essential teaching skills (1=to a great extent, 4=not at all; plus the option "I do not have a position"). Finally, two open-ended questions are presented to supplement the battery of measures outlined by the authors with other reasonable accommodations that may be granted by individual universities in the various training activities.

The second module consists of three questions. Two are designed to investigate the knowledge of PTE program dropout experiences by students with disabilities/SLDs (1=yes, 2=no, 3=I do not know, filter question) and the activities where it mostly became apparent to academic staff that these students would not be able to achieve the qualifying objectives envisaged (multiple response). Finally, the last question in the module investigates the strategies activated when it became clear that students would not achieve the professional standards (open-ended question).

The third module is aimed at understanding the existence of specific policies, guidelines, resolutions, or other official acts designed to regulate the course attendance by students with disabilities/SLDs (1=yes, 2=no, filter question), plus an open-ended question to describe these documents.

Finally, the last module aims at detecting some background variables (gender, academic role, disciplinary macro-area, age, years of teaching in university and in the PTE program, specific training, personal contacts with one or more people with disabilities/SLDs) and at understanding the respondents' attitudes. Among these, two questions aim at investigating the knowledge of teachers with disabilities/SLDs already in service in kindergarten or primary school (1=yes, 2=no, filter question) and the opinion regarding their professionalism (4-point Likert scale, from 1=very positive to 4=very negative, plus the option "I cannot provide an overall opinion, as I am aware of very different situations"). Finally, the last eight questions, on a self-anchoring scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree)[12], assess the respondents' degree of agreement with

12. Plus the option "I do not have a position on this".

the effectiveness of teachers with different types of disabilities (physical, visual, hearing) or with SLDs, in kindergarten and primary school. At the end, a further open-ended question is proposed for any additions and comments.

Specific adjustments were made to the format for the Rector's delegates for disabilities/SLDs, both considering their role in guiding the university's general policies for disabilities and SLDs and the fact that their knowledge of the PTE program might be limited (not necessarily part of the pedagogical-educational area). In response to the first aspect, the decision was to include four questions aimed at understanding how delegates implemented specific advising and support activities for the PTE program (1=yes, 2=no, filter question) and addressed the relevant issues (multiple response). In addition, a short version of the survey was prepared, not including modules 1 and 2, for the delegates of other programs – as it was assumed that it would be difficult for them to further explore the reasonable accommodations granted and the dropout cases in the PTE program. Overall, 6 delegates completed the "short" survey, and 5 delegates completed the full one. At the end, an additional question was included for all of them, regarding the number of students with disabilities/SLDs enrolled in the PTE degree program in three academic years (2012/2013, 2015/2016, 2018/2019).

An additional section was included for practicum tutor supervisors – as previously mentioned –, regarding the data of students who had reported a disability/SLD to the Careers & Practicum Service, in the same three years as those asked from the delegates. Finally, it should be considered that special surveys – resulting from the union of the various modules – were created for those profiles in which the figure of the delegate corresponded, for example, to that of the PTE program director.

The pre-test phase, which preceded the general administration, involved 10 people, a convenience sample composed of lecturers belonging to the PTE degree program. Its aim was to verify the reliability of the instrument, as well as to refine and improve the final version by verifying the intelligibility and clarity of the items. The most critical items from the pre-test were reformulated.

A project email address was created to send the invitation email to complete the questionnaire. The invitation was personalized with the references of each individual lecturer.

In addition, a communication plan regarding the management of deliveries and reminders was defined and organized as follows:
1. Delivery of the invitation email with the link to complete the computerized questionnaire: December 2019;
2. I reminder: February 2020;

3. II reminder: March 2020. The latter was actually postponed to June 2020 because of the pandemic emergency.

Both the email contact and the questionnaire's privacy policy contained information on the anonymity of the survey and the fact that the subsequent data analysis would be conducted in aggregate form.

The analysis was conducted with the support of SPSS software (ver. 26.0). Given the number of respondents, the data were analyzed mostly by descriptive statistics. The analysis of the association among variables was conducted with the chi-squared test.

2. Findings

2.1. *Modules I and II of the questionnaire*

The first battery – as already mentioned – detects the reasonable accommodations used throughout the training program. Table 1 shows that during the admission test, 65.1% of lecturers report using extra time "often or sometimes". Approximately one third (33.7%) report using the calculator. During lectures, the standard and most common practice is to provide learning materials in accessible formats (slideshows, handouts, workbooks; 81.4%), and allow "often or sometimes" the use of the recorder (64.0%). It should be noted that there is an increase in the faculty members reporting the use of extra time during exams, reaching 79.1%. Moreover, approximately 6 out of 10 members reveal using – "often or sometimes" – specific accommodations: the assessment of content rather than form and spelling (64.0%); tables, worksheets, concept maps (62.8%); breaking down of the exam subject into several partial tests (60.5%). In general, very high percentages of "I do not know" responses are noted, especially with regard to the reasonable accommodations granted during the admission test. The findings shown in the following question are consistent with this, i.e. most respondents are not informed of the use of other support measures in their course of study for students with disabilities/ SLDs (53.5%). That said, among the few who answered affirmatively instead (18.6%)[13], the alternatives to the accommodations presented in the battery can be summarized in: 1) interviews/meetings with students with disabilities/SLDs for the definition of customized support strategies[14];

13. The remaining 27.9% answered "no" to the question.
14. In this regard, the account of one lecturer is significant: «for my course […] I ask all students with a disability certificate who wish to do so to come to the meetings on

2) specific spatial solutions (e.g. desk close to the video projector display), devices, especially for students with sensory impairments, and adaptation of texts (e.g. in Braille); 3) different text format for examinations (e.g. larger font; differently-organized space for the answers, etc.); 4) in-depth study sessions on certain subjects, managed by trained tutors; 5) mock tests (from previous exams) to familiarize with the procedures and timing of the exams.

Table 1 - Frequency distributions of responses to the question "Please indicate how much, in your opinion, each measure is used in the various training activities of your PTE program by students with disabilities/SLDs" (No. responses=86)[15]

	Often/ Sometimes	Seldom/ Never	I do not know
During the admission test			
Extra time	65.1%	3.5%	31.4%
Reader (for the test questions)	32.6%	22.1%	45.3%
Calculator	33.7%	16.3%	50.0%
PC with spell checker	12.8%	34.9%	52.3%
Other types of aids (e.g. video magnifier)	15.1%	29.1%	55.8%
During lectures			
Recorder	64.0%	22.1%	14.0%
Digital textbooks	41.9%	37.2%	20.9%
Learning materials in accessible formats (slideshows, handouts, workbooks)	81.4%	14.0%	4.7%
Learning materials provided in advance of lectures	43.0%	44.2%	12.8%
Educational tutoring (support figures for learning activities)	60.5%	26.7%	12.8%

various occasions from the beginning of the course, to work together on various exercises that I assign for homework. This allows me to better understand their ways of thinking and what support tools make them comfortable and are more suitable for them. Each case is different. I often ask them to work with me on concept maps or worksheets which they can bring on written and oral exams, and I watch them read and write to see if the adjustments I use in the written text for everyone are suitable for them or not».

15. University delegates with a "short" questionnaire were exempt, as previously specified, from responding to these questions.

	Often/ Sometimes	Seldom/ Never	I do not know
Communication assistants/ LIS interpreters	18.6%	48.8%	32.6%
During examinations			
Extra time	79.1%	11.6%	9.3%
Tutors with a reading function	33.7%	44.2%	22.1%
Communication assistants/ LIS interpreters	20.9%	46.5%	32.6%
Calculator	34.9%	25.6%	39.5%
Tables, worksheets, concept maps	62.8%	18.6%	18.6%
PC with spell checker	26.7%	39.5%	33.7%
Text-to-speech programs	10.5%	51.2%	38.4%
Other technological tools (e.g. video magnifier)	24.4%	37.2%	38.4%
Breaking down of the exam subject into several partial tests	60.5%	20.9%	18.6%
Change of the test format (e.g. oral instead of written tests or vice versa)	59.3%	26.7%	14.0%
Change of the written test format (e.g. multiple choice test instead of open-ended questions)	32.6%	45.3%	22.1%
Quantitative (not qualitative) reduction of the test	31.4%	44.2%	24.4%
Assessment of content rather than form and spelling	64.0%	16.3%	19.8%

It is now worth focusing on the "dilemma of professional competence" (Table 2). The use of the PC with spell checker, both during the admission test and exams, is for sure the most discussed accommodation. Approximately 4 out of 10 lecturers (37.2% and 43.0%, respectively) claim that it can compromise the assessment/achievement of essential teaching skills. Another finding is the most interesting one, though. The provision of dispensatory measures during examinations – e.g. change of the written text format; quantitative (not qualitative) reduction of the test; assessment of content rather than form and spelling – are all considered to negatively affect, "to a great extent" or "somewhat", the achievement of essential

teaching skills by well more than one third of the respondents (37.2%, 34.9% and 39.5% respectively). Finally, it is worth noting the data on the use of the reader. The sample consider the use of this accommodation unethical, during the admission test (by 27.9%), and during examinations (by 31.4%).

Table 2 - Frequency distributions of responses to the question "Please indicate how much, in your opinion, their use may compromise the development of essential teaching skills in students with disabilities/SLDs" (No. responses=86)

	To a great extent/ Somewhat	Very little/ Not at all	I do not have a position
During the admission test			
Extra time	8.1%	84.9%	7.0%
Reader (for the test questions)	27.9%	61.6%	10.5%
Calculator	17.4%	65.1%	17.4%
PC with spell checker	43.0%	46.5%	10.5%
Other types of aids (e.g. video magnifier)	10.5%	72.1%	17.4%
During lectures			
Recorder	11.6%	83.7%	4.7%
Digital textbooks	12.8%	82.6%	4.7%
Learning materials in accessible formats (slide shows, handouts, workbooks)	10.5%	86.0%	3.5%
Learning materials provided in advance of lectures	7.0%	90.7%	2.3%
Educational tutoring (support figures for learning activities)	19.8%	74.4%	5.8%
Communication assistants/LIS interpreters	15.1%	69.8%	15.1%
During examinations			
Extra time	10.5%	84.9%	4.7%
Tutors with a reading function	31.4%	60.5%	8.1%
Communication assistants/LIS interpreters	15.1%	70.9%	14.0%
Calculator	18.6%	66.3%	15.1%
Tables, worksheets, concept maps	23.3%	73.3%	3.5%

	To a great extent/ Somewhat	*Very little/ Not at all*	*I do not have a position*
PC with spell checker	37.2%	55.8%	7.0%
Text-to-speech programs	17.4%	70.9%	11.6%
Other technological tools (e.g. video magnifier)	12.8%	74.4%	12.8%
Breaking down of the exam subject into several partial tests	15.1%	82.6%	2.3%
Change of the test format (e.g. oral instead of written tests or vice versa)	24.4%	72.1%	3.5%
Change of the written test format (e.g. multiple choice test instead of open-ended questions)	37.2%	58.1%	4.7%
Quantitative (not qualitative) reduction of the test	34.9%	60.5%	4.7%
Assessment of content rather than form and spelling	39.5%	55.8%	4.7%

The next step was investigating the reasonable accommodations granted to students with disabilities/SLDs during the practicum, given that – as already mentioned – there is currently no specific legislation in Italy. In this case, the brief battery presented made reference to measures which have been frequently mentioned in international literature (Table 3). The "careful choice of the school to which the student will be assigned to ensure their positive welcoming" is reportedly a quite common accommodation (42.4% uses it "often" or "sometimes"), whereas in the second place there is the "careful choice of the mentor teacher" (38.0%)[16]. It is worth also noting the percentage of "do not know" responses, which is not at all negligible (almost or more than half of the responses for each option). Finally, it is not surprising that the "adaptation of the criteria

16. Regarding the possibility of selecting "the mentor teacher to whom the student will be assigned to ensure their positive inclusion in the classroom", a respondent raises two issues. Firstly, the fact that often, for privacy reasons, there is no information about the presence of students with Slds/disabilities in practicum activities. Secondly, the fact that universities have a limited possibility to guide the choice of the mentor teacher, whose final appointment, in addition to being the responsibility of the school leader, also depends on other variables including the actual availability of the school's teachers to play the role of mentor teachers.

for the assessment of direct and indirect practicum activities" is, instead, among the least systematically used measures (20.7%). The few responses that have further specified how the assessment criteria are adjusted suggest that the customization of the practicum takes place through, for example, "one-to-one interviews", a "careful review and analysis of the materials and the observations made in the direct and indirect practicum" or the "use of assessment tools in the perspective of reasonable accommodations agreed with the student, as a sign of educational alliance".

Table 3 - Frequency distributions of responses to the question, "Please indicate how much, in your opinion, each accommodation is used in your PTE program, by students with disabilities/SLDs, in the practicum setting" (No. responses=86)

	Often/ Sometimes	Seldom/ Never	I do not know
Careful choice of the school to which the student will be assigned to ensure their positive welcoming	42.4%	15.2%	42.4%
Careful choice of the mentor teacher to whom the student will be assigned to ensure their positive inclusion in the classroom	38.0%	15.2%	46.7%
Adaptation of the criteria for the assessment of direct and indirect practicum activities (Indicate which)	20.7%	21.7%	57.6%

In terms of the existence of other reasonable accommodations, only 21.0% reported being informed of the use of further measures. They are interesting practices which are not only based on individualized intervention, but also built throughout the university system. The examples mentioned include close collaboration with the Services for Students with Disabilities and SLDs and the establishment of special committees to provide specific indications or psycho-pedagogical support for the possible reorientation of students. Other fundamental measures include: the activation of support from a specialized or peer tutor; individual activities/interviews, according to a tutoring perspective aimed at specific needs (e.g. in the writing of the Portfolio, the Practicum Journal…); the use of assessment tools with indicators calibrated on the customization of the practicum and, finally, a constant monitoring of the practicum activity.

The last part of the module analyzes the "dilemma of professional competence" concerning the reasonable accommodations provided for the practicum (Table 4). Consistently with the responses provided above, the sample is particularly skeptical of granting the adaptation of the criteria for the assessment of direct and indirect practicum activities. A full 39.1% believe that it may put at risk – "to a great extent" or "somewhat" – the development of essential teaching skills.

Table 4 - Frequency distributions of responses to the question, "Please indicate how much, in your opinion, the use during practicum activities of each reasonable accommodation listed below may compromise the development of essential teaching skills" (No. responses=86)

	To a great extent/ Somewhat	Very little/ Not at all	I do not have a position
Careful choice of the school to which the student will be assigned to ensure their positive welcoming	18.5%	63.0%	18.5%
Careful choice of the mentor teacher to whom the student will be assigned to ensure their positive inclusion in the classroom	21.7%	60.9%	17.4%
Adaptation of the criteria for the assessment of direct and indirect practicum activities	39.1%	40.2%	20.7%

The second aspect investigated in the questionnaire are the training program dropout experiences by students with disabilities/SLDs, connected with the impossibility of achieving the qualifying objectives envisaged. Only a relatively small quota is informed of these cases (15.2%), while most do not know how to answer the question (60.8%)[17]. Those who observed dropouts in their careers were subsequently asked to specify in what training activities it became more apparent that students with disabilities/ SLDs would not be able to achieve the professional standards (Table 5). At the top of the list is the direct practicum (particularly the trainee's active teaching; 72.7% of cases) and, at the same level, the observation phase of the direct practicum and examinations (54.5% of cases).

17. Response "no"=23.9%; No.=92.

Table 5 - Frequency distributions of responses to the question, "In what training activities, among those listed below, did it become apparent for the academic staff that students with disabilities/SLDs would not be able to achieve the qualifying objectives envisaged?" (multiple choice question; No. responses=34; No. cases=14)

	% on responses	% cases
Attendance of lectures	2.9%	9.1%
Examinations	17.6%	54.5%
Disciplinary/pedagogical learning workshops	11.8%	36.4%
Indirect practicum	8.8%	27.3%
Direct practicum - observation phase	17.6%	54.5%
Direct practicum - active teaching	23.5%	72.7%
Practicum final documents (e.g. report)	11.8%	36.4%
Thesis	5.9%	18.2%
Tot.	100%	309.1%

The strategies activated when it became clear that the student with disabilities/SLDs would not be able to achieve the qualifying learning objectives are described by few members of the sample, but they capture a large investment by academic staff in these situations. These include: the provision of interviews with the PTE program director, with practicum tutors and, in some cases, also with parents; the establishment of "special cases" committees; the proposal of further customization of the work with the student, as well as catching up and monitoring of the practicum, in order to understand the elements to work on and to strengthen in order to complete it. However, two participants pointed out the failure of any measures. It is interesting to note that one of them attributed it to the severity of the student's disorder. The other one, instead, mentioned the belief of a part of the academic staff that they should "fail" students with SLDs in the practicum phase and direct them, almost by default, to other courses of study, which triangulates with the ethical concerns of the faculty members reported earlier.

2.2. *Modules III and IV of the questionnaire*

The third module of the questionnaire explores the existence of any policies, guidelines, resolutions, or other official acts that the PTE program – or the department/faculty or university – have designed to regulate the

attendance of student teachers with disabilities/SLDs. The findings show that in approximately half of the cases (55.4%) specific provisions have been made[18], even though, when asked to indicate and describe them, most of them referred generically to the Services for Students with Disabilities and SLDs, to the guidelines in force for the whole university in order to promote the inclusion of these students during their university career, or to the *vademecum* for lecturers. On the other hand, the policies specifically concerning PTE program students include "resolutions on a special path for the learning of English", the "identification of a specific coordinator for the program – in addition to the faculty coordinator – to provide support primarily with regard to complex situations, but also to the specific learning objectives of the course"; the possibility of "partial attendance and the assignment of suitably-equipped classrooms" and a "protocol for a constant monitoring" of difficult situations.

The third module is completed by two questions about the role of the Rector's delegate for disabilities/SLDs concerning the PTE program. On the one hand, the focus is on whether the delegate performs advising and support activities similar to those performed in other courses of study in the university. On the other hand, the question is whether special issues related to the attendance of students with disabilities/SLDs in that particular program have arisen over the years. 9 out of the 11 Delegates state that they did not have to devote specific attention to the students of the course. In contrast, the issues on which the two Delegates focused and on which they responded positively consisted of advising academic staff regarding the reasonable accommodations to be provided during examinations or during practicum activities and supporting the student in the supports/strategies to be adopted to overcome the difficulties encountered.

Finally, the last module – in addition to collecting the background information of the respondents described above – investigates several opinions and attitudes on the topic. First of all, it is striking that only a niche of the sample (40.2%) knows one or more teachers with disabilities/SLDs already in service in kindergarten or primary school. By looking at the remaining members of the academic staff who are familiar with these teachers, most of them (72.9%) express a favorable opinion. In detail, 40.5% "quite good" and 32.4% "very good". Nevertheless, a minority is perplexed: 10.8% claim having a "quite bad" opinion in this regard, whereas 16.2% do not manage to express an overall judgement.

18. Response "no"=28.3%; "I do not know"=16.3%; No.=92.

Table 6 - Frequency distributions of responses to the question, "With regard to kindergarten, express how much you agree with the effectiveness of…" (No.=88)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I do not have a position on this
Teachers with physical impairments	25.0%	39.8%	21.6%	1.1%	12.5%
Teachers with visual impairments	15.9%	31.8%	34.1%	1.1%	17.0%
Teachers with hearing impairments	13.6%	29.5%	31.8%	3.4%	21.6%
Teachers with SLDs	29.5%	54.5%	4.5%	1.1%	10.2%

The fourth module is concluded by asking the lecturers to express their opinion about the effectiveness and competence of teachers with different types of disabilities (physical, visual, hearing) and SLDs, in kindergarten and primary school. Tables 6 and 7 report the statements proposed in the questionnaire.

Table 7 - Frequency distributions of responses to the question, "With regard to primary school, express how much you agree with the effectiveness of…" (No=88)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	I do not have a position on this
Teachers with physical impairments	33.0%	43.2%	14.8%	/	9.1%
Teachers with visual impairments	18.1%	33.0%	33.0%	/	15.9%
Teachers with hearing impairments	15.9%	35.2%	29.5%	1.1%	18.2%
Teachers with SLDs	28.4%	37.5%	18.2%	2.3%	13.6%

More than 8 out of the 10 lecturers (84.0%) strongly agree or simply agree with the fact that teachers with SLDs can be effective and competent in kindergarten. Furthermore, the findings reveal that teachers with physical disabilities are considered competent (64.8% "strongly agree" or "agree"). As easily expected, the highest percentage of participants who disagree with their effectiveness is observed with regard to teachers with visual and especially hearing impairments (more than one third in both cases). In primary school, the findings show a different picture. On the one hand, the percentage of the sample considering teachers with physical impairments competent increases by approximately 10 points (76.2% "strongly agree" or "agree"). On the other hand, the percentage of those who agree with the effectiveness of teachers with SLDs decreases overall by almost 20 points compared to kindergarten (65.9%). The quota of those who strongly disagree with the competence of teachers with SLDs in primary school is not residual either (2.3%). With regard to teachers with hearing and visual impairments, the proportion of academic staff members who express a negative judgement remains substantially constant (more than 3 out of 10), while only approximately half of them recognize a possible effectiveness.

2.3. *Analysis of the relationships between variables and background data*

A further aspect investigated were the relationships between certain background features and the academic staff's perception of the "dilemma of professional competence", as well as their attitudes towards the effectiveness of teachers with disabilities/SLDs. The degree of agreement with (1) the fact that some reasonable accommodations may put at risk the students' achievement of essential teaching skills and (2) the effectiveness of these teachers once in service was used to compose two sum indexes. These indexes were dichotomized (0=score below/equal to the median and 1=score above the median)[19] and cross-referenced with the background information in our possession, which was dichotomized as well[20].

19. The responses "I do not have a position on this" were excluded.
20. In particular, the dichotomized variables are: gender (1=women; 2=men); geographical area of the relative university (1=Northern Italy; 2=Central/Southern Italy and Islands); university size (1=mega/large; 2=medium/small); academic rank (1=permanent position; 2=non-permanent position); scientific area (1=humanities;

With regard to the first one – the so-called "indicator of perception of the dilemma" –, the chi-squared test shows that only the university's geographical area and the training received on inclusive topics achieve statistical significance ($\chi^2(1)=9.782$; p-value<0.05). More specifically, it is possible to observe that academic staff members from Northern universities (vs. Central/Southern Italy and Islands) are more worried about possible compromises of the professional standards because of the provision of supports, while those who have had in-depth training are less skeptical in this respect.

On the other hand, with regard to the "index of the attitude towards the effectiveness", three of the analyses conducted achieve statistical significance. In this case, the respondents with a "non-permanent" academic role ($\chi^2(1)=9.782$; p-value<0.05), with less experience in Higher Education ($\chi^2(1)=5.583$; p-value<0.05) and younger ($\chi^2(1)=4.855$; p-value<0.05), show more positive attitudes towards the competence of teachers with disabilities/SLDs.

Lastly, the secondary data. Unfortunately, only 10 universities responded to the request of indicating the number of students with disabilities/SLDs – both enrollees and students who disclosed their condition during the practicum (Tables 8 and 9).

Careers & Practicum Services were also asked if they keep track in a structured way (e.g. registry, database) of students with disabilities/SLDs who disclose their condition before or during the practicum. Almost all universities (5 out of 7) responded that they established a registry to focus on students who make the disclosure.

2=health/science/social); training in the field of disabilities (1=in-depth; 2=none/ partial); age (1=over 53; 2=under 53); years of work in the university (1=over 20 years; 2=maximum 19 years); years of work in the PTE program (1=over 6 years; 2=up to 5 years); contacts with people with Slds/disabilities (1=frequent; 2=occasional).

Table 8 - Enrollees with disabilities[21]/SLDs in PTE in the years 2018/2019, 2015/2016 and 2013/2012

	Enrollees with disabilities A.Y. 2018/2019	Enrollees with disabilities A.Y. 2015/2016	Enrollees with disabilities A.Y. 2012/2013	Enrollees with SLDs 2018/2019	Enrollees with SLDs 2015/2016	Enrollees with SLDs 2012/2013
Free University of Bozen-Bolzano	2	2	0	7	4	0
European University of Rome	1	0	0	1	0	0
University of Macerata	12	10	10	na	na	na
University of Salerno	1	1	0	1	0	0
University of Turino	13	11	7	16	10	3

Table 9 - Students with disabilities/SLDs who disclosed their condition to the Careers & Practicum Service staff in the years 2018/2019, 2015/2016 and 2013/2012

	Attendees with disabilities A.Y. 2018/2019	Attendees with disabilities A.Y. 2015/2016	Attendees with disabilities A.Y. 2012/2013	Attendees with SLDs A.Y. 2018/2019	Attendees with SLDs A.Y. 2015/2016	Attendees with SLDs A.Y. 2012/2013
University of Bergamo	1	0	0	1	0	0
University of Bologna	0	1	0	0	1	0
Free University of Bozen-Bolzano	2	0	1	2	0	1

21. A student with disabilities is a student in possession of a certificate of disability with a percentage both greater than/equal to 66% (completely exempted from fees and taxes) and lower to, and/or in possession of a certificate of disability pursuant to Italian Law no. 104/92.

Table 9 - continued

	Attendees with disabilities A.Y. 2018/2019	Attendees with disabilities A.Y. 2015/2016	Attendees with disabilities A.Y. 2012/2013	Attendees with SLDs A.Y. 2018/2019	Attendees with SLDs A.Y. 2015/2016	Attendees with SLDs A.Y. 2012/2013
Kore University of Enna	0	0	0	0	0	0
University of Pisa[22]	1	0	0	1	0	0
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore	na	na	na	12	na	na
University of Turin	7	na	na	7	8	0

3. Discussion

In terms of the support measures, the questionnaire findings confirm what had been detected by previous research (Baldwin, 2007; Leyser & Greenberger, 2008; Leyser *et al*., 2011; Sokal *et al*., 2017), i.e. that student teachers with disabilities/SLDs are mainly granted the most "traditional" types of accommodations. These include: learning materials in accessible formats; the recorder; extra time; tables, worksheets, concept maps, and the breaking down of the exam subject into several partial tests. In the practicum, the two most common measures among those proposed in the survey concern the careful choice of the school to which, and the mentor teacher to whom the student will be assigned to ensure their positive inclusion. These data as well are in line with international literature. For instance, the course directors interviewed by Sokal *et al*. (2017) mention precisely the placement of trainees with disabilities in welcoming schools among effective accommodations. Considered as a whole, none of the measures listed so far substantially affects the qualifying learning objectives of the course nor the direct nature of the task. Not surprisingly, these accommodations are also considered ethical by the respondents.

Participants are distinguished by having less frequently provided those supports that instead change, somehow, the assessment methods

22. The PTE program has been active only since A.Y. 2018/2019.

or compensate for the performance required in a specific deficit skill. These accommodations are also those deemed most at risk by academic staff for the achievement/demonstration of essential teaching skills. These include the use of the PC with spell checker (especially during the entrance test, but also during examinations); the provision of dispensatory measures, such as the change of the written test format or its quantitative reduction, as well as the use of the reader. These measures – as previously noted – are judged unethical, on average, by one third (and more) of the respondents. The same applies to the practicum. Almost 1 out of the 4 participants considers the adaptation of the criteria for the assessment of direct and indirect practicum activities among the most "dangerous" measures for the achievement of core teaching skills and, at the same time, the least frequently provided. The only exception in this regard is found in the accommodation of the "assessment of content rather than form and spelling", which is among both those mostly granted and those judged unequal. For the purposes of a more general reflection, with regard to dispensatory measures, the picture which can be deduced from the questionnaire findings, once again, confirms the data of the aforementioned studies (e.g. Baldwin, 2007; Sokal *et al.*, 2017). However, it is surprising that a high number of academic staff members expressed such a negative opinion about the PC with spell checker. Scientific literature actually seems to be in favor of the use of technological accommodations, including the spell checker (Leyser & Greenberger, 2008; Leyser *et al.*, 2011). An explanation for these findings may be associated with the fact that the spell checker compensates for an essential teaching skill, especially in primary school. While this is undoubtedly true, it should be mentioned that – as shown by other studies (e.g., Riddick, 2003; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011; Griffiths, 2012; Smith, 2017) – in real-world professional practice teachers with disabilities/SLDs have the opportunity to prepare the work in advance, to double-check spelling and, above all, to use specific coping strategies, such as jointly checking with pupils the correctness of what they have written, in an active teaching perspective. During tests (entrance tests or exams), the compensation through the spell checker can therefore be fundamental as students do not have the time to implement these techniques or develop adjustments which allow them to perform as well in spelling. The skepticism aroused by the use of the reader is an aspect to be further analyzed. This may be a sign that universities sometimes pair students with disabilities/SLDs with peer tutors (other students) in that role. The presence of peer tutors may cause concerns among academic staff about the fact that they may provide students with "extra" help, not limited to the enunciation of texts.

These responses overall reflect the dissemination of the "dilemma of professional competence" at the institutional level described above. One third of the respondents show concerns regarding the provision of certain measures, triggered by one of the perspectives of the dilemma. They feel a growing urge to introduce increasingly rigorous criteria for the selection of candidates and the achievement of the Qualified Teacher Status, also found at the national level (Margiotta, 2011). It is also very clear that this can be caused by the significance assumed by the topic of the connection between teaching quality and student performance in the literature on accountability in education. Studies on the topic are increasingly investigating the characteristics of teachers – cognitive skills, experience, level of training, etc. – that can have a positive effect on student learning (Wayne & Youngs, 2003; Rockoff, 2004; Harris & Sass, 2011; Keller *et al*., 2017; Bhai & Horoi, 2019).

On the other hand, there is the idea that if students with disabilities/ SLDs are required to complete the course, exams, and practicum according to expected standards (and thus without being provided with some reasonable accommodations), they are more likely to encounter barriers. In this perspective of the dilemma, it is significant to note that numerous academic staff members described many customized pedagogical-educational solutions, which go beyond those legislatively mandated and are being implemented in the training program to meet the emerging needs of students with disabilities/SLDs. The additional accommodations described by the participants include: the provision of further one-to-one interviews; the possibility of jointly reviewing the class materials with the lecturer or the practicum tutor; the provision of in-depth sessions on certain subjects or mock tests. It is evident that these solutions can benefit the entire student population and not only students with difficulties. With regard to the practicum, as well, it is possible to note the emergence of many practices that allow, *a priori*, the guarantee of equal training, study and research opportunities for students. In addition to the practices proposed in the questionnaire, it is worth mentioning the more constant monitoring of the practicum of students with disabilities/ SLDs; the provision of additional spaces for discussion; the design of shrewd activities. In light of this, it can be said that Italian universities, and specifically those involved in the survey, are immersed in the "dilemma of professional competence" and are still searching for solutions to safeguard its two inherent perspectives.

In this context, it is also worth mentioning the data of the participants who did not know how to answer the question about the accommodations used in the PTE programs by students with disabilities/SLDs, which, in

some cases, reaches 50%. The open question is whether this finding stems from the low number of students with disabilities/SLDs in PTE programs – ergo, it is possible that some academic staff members have never engaged with them directly – or whether this is fueled by a still blurry awareness regarding their rights and the practices to support them throughout the course.

The last aspect to be noted are the variables that affect the perception of the "dilemma of professional competence". The major concerns of Northern universities about the risk that the accommodations granted may lower the level of competence of student teachers with disabilities/SLDs may be the result of a deeper pressure perceived towards the professional standards – of which academic staff members feel they are gatekeepers. In terms of inclusive training, the findings reopen the discussion on the possible scarce homogeneity of awareness and dissemination actions among university contexts, introduced above. The strong argument here is the fact that only 35% of the sample have benefitted, in general, from in-depth training on the topic. On the other hand, those who have received a more thorough training show significantly smaller ethical concerns about the measures to be delivered. This raises an important question and suggests the need for further training of the academic community in terms of inclusive attitudes, knowledge and skills.

Moving onto the second module, there is small information about course dropouts by students with disabilities/SLDs, suggesting that it is not frequent or, more likely, little known (more than 6 out of the 10 academic staff members are unaware of it). However, it is equally interesting to consider the strategies explained by the other (residual) respondents when it became apparent that the student would not be able to achieve the qualifying learning objectives. It is possible to observe again a thorough activation of all the different elements, processes and activities of the degree course, including the proposal of meetings with the PTE program director, with practicum tutors and, in some cases, even with parents; the establishment of ad hoc committees or "catch-up" provision for parts of the practicum. Moreover, the questionnaire reports that the practicum represents the moment when most frequently students with disabilities/SLDs experience their difficulties (in over 70% of cases). This confirms what has already been stated in literature (Baldwin, 2007) and calls for further attention to this part of the training program. Ryan (2011) in this regard highlighted that the practicum plays a crucial role in the preparation of these professionals. According to the author, the practicum is the context where issues related to professional competence most frequently emerge. It is indeed the context mostly affected by the tensions between the need

for support measures and professional standards and where, at the same time – today – the reasonable accommodations to be granted and essential teaching skills are defined the least.

The following items of the questionnaire explore the existence of policies or other official acts designed to regulate the attendance of students with disabilities/SLDs, as well as the intervention of the university's Rector's delegate with regard to the specific course. The responses show that the latter does not seem to request specific support measures and that the universities' general inclusive projects are a constant benchmark, since the majority of the policies reported by the sample are attributable to the traditional collaboration with the Services for Students with Disabilities and SLDs. A similar pattern can be found in the university's Rector's delegates who – except two of them – state to manage the PTE program similarly to all other programs, and that it was not necessary to activate any "special" support committees for lecturers or students. By looking at the few specific strategies reported, it could be interesting to call for the identification of a specific program coordinator (in addition to the department's/faculty's) to provide support with regard to the most complex situations.

The agreement and disagreement opinions and responses about the effectiveness of teachers with disabilities/SLDs then highlight the dual presence of certainties and perplexities in the academic staff's perception.

The first striking fact is that less than half (approximately 40%) of the respondents know an in-service teacher with disabilities/SLDs in kindergarten or primary school. The figure confirms a matter known and discussed in research, especially at the international level. In addition to stressing that the number of these teachers is limited, although growing, it highlights that the university does not perform a post-graduate monitoring of these careers, which could be really useful for the improvement of the educational offer of the training program. According to several authors (Duquette, 2000; Gabel, 2001; Riddick, 2003; Dvir, 2015), the accounts of these teachers are powerful elements for reflection to change traditional practice. Moore *et al.* (2020) highlight that:

candidates who are comfortable sharing their experiences could be encouraged to tell their stories so that others can begin to see disability as a strength versus a deficit. Teacher candidates with disabilities offer an additional benefit to teacher education programs, which is to contribute to the preparation of candidates to meet diverse needs in their classrooms (p. 282).

In terms of the opinions on the effectiveness of the teachers known, a high quota of respondents considers them competent. However, there is also one third who express a "fairly negative" judgement or do not express one. At the same time, in terms of the more general question, a fairly large portion consider that teachers with disabilities/SLDs can be professionally effective (evidence found also in Leyser & Greenberger, 2008). However, the analysis of the analytical findings shows that there are considerable differences both among the types of disabilities and between kindergarten and primary school. For both levels, academic staff express a more negative attitude towards teachers with hearing and visual impairments. The picture outlined clearly highlights the prevailing concerns about the safe management of children in the classroom by teachers with disabilities. However, far from a perspective that denies the existence of certain difficulties – as already pointed out (Bellacicco, 2022) – when evaluating their work, it is plausible to imagine their daily professional practice in synergy with colleagues – one of the main potential facilitators identified in literature (e.g. Sharoni & Vogel, 2007; Burns & Bell, 2011; Burns *et al.*, 2013; Lamichhane, 2016; Smith, 2017; Bellacicco *et al.*, under review). Both in professional standards and the respondents' representation, the prevailing vision sees them act exclusively alone in the classroom. On the other hand, the majority of the respondents consider teachers with SLDs competent in kindergarten, but less competent in primary school, where only approximately 6 out of 10 trust their effectiveness. Here, the figure may be associated with the crucial role played in this school level by the reading and writing and calculation skills, areas known to be involved in the Specific Learning Disorder. Also in this case, as discussed above, the prevailing idea neglects the coping strategies and accommodations developed in daily practice by these teachers. Finally, it is not surprising that teachers with physical disabilities are considered quite effective both in kindergarten and primary school, but more effective in the latter (by approximately 70%), where the students' physical care needs are expectably more limited and considered by the sample less impactful on their work.

A further aspect identified were the background variables affecting the attitudes of academic staff members. Respondents with fixed-term contracts – younger and with less academic experience – show more positive opinions towards the effectiveness of teachers with disabilities/SLDs, as can be found in Leyser & Greenberger (2008) and Leyser *et al.* (2011). According to the Israeli authors, this finding can be explained with the fact that younger members and with less academic experience have been much more exposed to the value of inclusive orientation during

their own educational career. The hypothesis that non-permanent staff are less in contact with the pressures associated with professional standards cannot be neglected. Numerous other variables – such as the intensity of the relationship with people with disabilities or the scientific-disciplinary area, which were determining in previous studies – did not, however, reach statistical significance. Nevertheless, it seems probable that this result is due to a structural limitation of this survey, connected with the small size of the sample. It is clear that a wider response rate would have promoted an overall greater reliability of the findings. Another limitation of the study can be found in the tool of the survey itself, which did not enable to investigate in depth the attitudes of the academic staff towards student teachers with disabilities/SLDs. In addition, the pressure risen by social desirability may have led the respondents to provide a better representation of themselves, thus leading them to "silence" opinions less inclined to their inclusion.

Finally, a reflection on the (few) secondary data provided. The trend observed is certainly growing. In this regard, the University of Turin presents the highest numbers. Considering the last Academic Year (A.Y. 2018/2019), 29 enrollees with disabilities and with SLDs applied, against 10 enrollees with disabilities and with SLDs in the A.Y. 2012/2013. These numbers, however small (specifically, equal to 0.7% of the total enrollees in the program)[23], cannot be neglected. This element – as already mentioned – supports international literature findings which show an increase in students with disabilities/SLDs in teacher training programs (e.g. Keane *et al.*, 2018). At the same time, it is in line with the findings outlined at a national level, which more in general find an increase in the student population with disabilities/SLDs across universities (ANVUR, 2020).

The second figure reported considers the quota of students with disabilities/SLDs who disclose their condition during the practicum, which is still very limited. Taking as an example the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano (the only one, together with the University of Turin, which allows a comparison) only 2 out of the 7 students with SLDs attending the PTE program in the A.Y. 2018/2019 disclosed their condition during the practicum. The fact that these students struggle to share their difficulties reflects the well-known issue of disclosure and the fear of stigma, which is more common during the practicum, considering the close connection with the labor market and the fear about the future placement

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23. According to MIUR statistics, enrollees in the PTE program are 1.856 in the A.Y. 2018/2019.

in the school setting. Very recent studies explore these aspects as well (Greene, 2021; Wood & Happé, 2021), highlighting the fact that numerous students with disabilities/SLDs at the beginning of their career want to try to build their professional identities without «attracting uncomfortable attention to themselves» (Greene, 2021, p. 57) and prefer to rely on self-accommodation rather than disclosing their disability to obtain official/legal measures from the welcoming institution.

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4. Student teachers with disabilities/SLDs: an analysis of experiences and expectations

by *Luca Decembrotto, Andrea Mangiatordi*[1]

1. Introduction

These pages present the findings of a research into the experiences of students with disabilities or SLDs attending university courses to become teachers. As known, this research is part of a wider study, called "BECOM-IN", which further explores the experiences of teachers with disabilities already in-service. These two parts of the research are connected in the discussion on the "dilemma of professional competence" which may emerge – on an institutional and personal level – both in teacher training programs attended by students with disabilities/SLDs and in the workplace, with reference to the coping strategies adopted by teachers already in-service.

The research design is based on a theoretical framework outlined in a recent systematic review (Bellacicco & Demo, 2019) and discussed in more detail in the previous chapters. Here the discussion will focus on some key passages, useful in understanding the need for research aimed at student teachers studying at university. The UN *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UN, 2006) adopted on 13th December 2006 establishes the right of access and participation of people with disabilities at all levels of education. Moreover, Article 24.4 highlights the need/opportunity of hiring qualified teachers – "including teachers with disabilities" – in schools to provide them with staff able to guarantee and promote an inclusive education system at all levels.

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1. The findings presented are shared by the two authors, who collaborated in the writing of the chapter. However, the writing of the paragraphs *Introduction*, *Method*, *The "dilemma of professional competence" and the ways to deal with it* and *Future career: strengths and challenges* is to be attributed to Luca Decembrotto. The writing of paragraphs *Barriers, facilitators and coping strategies encountered or developed* and *Conclusion* is to be attributed to Andrea Mangiatordi.

According to Keane *et al.* (2018), the reasons for increasing the participation of teachers with disabilities in the education system are to be found primarily in the benefits that this could imply, as they embody inclusive values and practices. However, it is possible that their underrepresentation is linked to barriers present at different stages of the Initial Teacher Training (ITT). The few existing studies show that student teachers face countless challenges. The decision to disclose one's disability is subject to a number of personal and environmental considerations (Von Schrader *et al.*, 2014) and often this decision is postponed until the student has the opportunity to demonstrate their success in the classroom (Riddick, 2003). Among facilitators (helping factors), great importance is given to the consolidation of good relationships with practicum tutors who are prepared to deal with their needs (Csoli & Gallagher, 2012; Griffiths, 2012) and to the acquisition and enhancement of coping strategies actively developed by student teachers themselves (Riddick, 2003; Griffiths, 2012; Parker & Draves, 2017), as efficient ways to overcome barriers. Finally, the topic of the "dilemma of professional competence", which is developed as a strain on two levels, i.e. the personal (disclosure) and the institutional one. When considering the institutional level, it assumes a number of connotations. The individual one of student teachers (but also in-service teachers) with disabilities/SLDs, who experience their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as the barriers and facilitators of the environment, struggling to find balance between their vocation to become/be a teacher and the limitations experienced (Burns & Bell, 2010; Dvir, 2015; Griffiths, 2012; Vogel & Sharoni, 2011). The educational offer of teacher training institutions, which try to not discriminate by offering students with disabilities reasonable accommodations when needed and, at the same time, by providing them with the skills needed to become competent teachers (Baldwin, 2007; Leyser & Greenberger, 2008; Riddick & English, 2006). Finally, the operational level, which needs to find solutions that actually value differences and support the use of alternative strategies to be good teachers with disabilities and, at the same time, ensure quality teaching for all students within the learning environment.

Research on these topics is basically non-existent in Italy. The "BECOM-IN" research is thus concerned with three aspects of students' narratives: 1) barriers, facilitators and coping strategies developed by student teachers with disabilities/SLDs to enter and complete the course of study; 2) how Primary Teacher Education (PTE) programs deal with the "dilemma of professional competence", i.e. the tensions emerging from the reception/offer of specific reasonable accommodations during the degree course attendance and the need to become competent teachers according to

a professional standard profile; 3) the dilemma underlying the disclosure; 4) the impact perceived (in terms of benefits) with regard to their inclusion in the teaching profession – impact imagined or developed since the first experiences as trainees.

2. Method

The research concerning the experiences of students with disabilities/ SLDs is part of a larger project, divided into two studies. The first one – as seen in the previous chapter – investigated the inclusion in 33 Italian universities of the provision of the Primary Teacher Education program. The second one – of which this report is part – was conducted through semi-structured interviews with 16 student teachers with disabilities. Please refer to the previous chapters for insight in the research process as a whole. Students with sensory or physical disabilities or learning disorders enrolled in Primary Teacher Education were identified throughout Italy through a call for applications sent out by the Services for Students with Disabilities and SLDs or through the researchers' direct contacts.

The questions were organized according to a semi-structured format. The interview was previously tested in a pilot phase, which implied some changes to improve the clarity and order of the questions. It is divided into five macro-sections: (a) basic information; (b) barriers and facilitators encountered and coping strategies developed; (c) academic staff possibly being reluctant towards offering "reasonable accommodations" which could be linked to the "dilemma of professional competence"; (d) ways to deal with and solve the dilemma; (e) impact perceived, in terms of benefits, about their future access to the teaching profession; (f) disclosure.

The interviews – which varied in length from 40 to approximately 60 minutes – were conducted online due to the country's severe restrictions as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak. Each interview was recorded, transcribed ensuring the anonymity of the interviewee and subsequently analyzed using a software which facilitated qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2012; Schreier, 2012).

Both inductive and deductive categories were used in the analysis. The deductive categories are based on the research questions and assume some significant content a priori, emerged from the literature review. The inductive categories were created on the basis of the interview text, using the process described by Kuckartz (2012). Each researcher independently examined the interview transcripts and then collaboratively discussed and agreed on the coding to be adopted with the other members of the research team. The following is the findings of this analysis.

3. Data analysis

Before proceeding with the interview content analysis and the research findings, it is necessary to contextualize the 16 interviews, providing some basic information about the interviewees in an aggregated way. The students who took part in the research are aged between 19 and 28 (average age 23.5 years), enrolled in a single-cycle Master's degree course in Primary Teacher Education, a degree course qualifying for the profession of kindergarten and primary school teacher. Their year of enrollment covered the whole university educational career, being enrolled in the first (2), second (2), third (2), fourth (4) and fifth (4) standard year and first supplementary year (2). This enabled to gather a number of perspectives: from those who have just started university, to those who are about to complete it, and have already conducted a number of practicum experiences in the field. Finally, it is convenient to provide a representation – albeit limited – of the disabilities declared during the interview. These can be grouped into learning disorders (9), physical disabilities (4), syndromes with debilitating effects (1) and sensory disabilities (2).

3.1. *Barriers, facilitators and coping strategies encountered or developed*

The experiences of the interviewees are dense with anecdotal references to different moments of their university life, which in the case of Primary Teacher Education includes the accomplishment of an admission test. The reflection on education, which starts from the participation in lessons and workshops, culminates with the exams, which often see the emergence of difficulties that remain unexpressed – or in any case in the background – during class. The analysis also focused on the practicum at school, another significant element especially because of the particular relationship which is established between students and tutors during such an important experience. With students enrolled in at least the fourth year, it was also possible to discuss the topic of writing a dissertation.

Going through these various and decisive phases of the university studied, it is possible to identify the admission test as the first place where barriers may be encountered, but where it is also possible to detect the importance of effective support services, which guarantees opportunities for all students. The interviewees reported various concerns, most of

which resolved by the provision of compensatory tools and dispensatory measures:

The moment of the entrance test was quite… let's say there were no particular obstacles, earlier when I booked it I had provided the documents concerning my disability, so that the various services could be activated (S12[2]).

Or again:

It was very easy right away, you know, sending the certification, sending everything… and they immediately gave me the chance to have time during the entrance test and also to keep the calculator by my side (S13).

Among compensatory tools, calculators and ergonomic aids such as special desks stand out, but the main dispensatory measure provided for the majority of the interviewees was test time extension. This is a dispensatory measure requested by students with SLDs for all the exams. Some students mentioned that «the university office for disability services… [was] a facilitator» (S5), while other students mentioned that it made them more conscious of their rights – compared to previous course editions in which students did not present their diagnosis (S3). However, the narratives are not only positive. For some, the distancing from colleagues, especially during the period of the pandemic and its additional constraints, «highlighted the fact that we were somehow different» (S9), with a need for an «aseptic environment» (S16).

With regard to the lessons and access to them at the various campuses, the difficulties reported mainly concern access to the buildings, for students with physical disabilities, but also organizational ones for those who have major health constraints:

I had periods of cortisone therapy even before I was diagnosed, so every morning I would go to the hospital, get a cortisone drip and then arrive at university […] It was difficult to make these schedules fit together as much as possible, so I fought until the cortisone was given to me at 8 a.m. (S14).

These are therefore issues that can certainly affect the future of these people as teachers. While the pandemic, and the distance learning, has alleviated the effects of these barriers, it has also led to greater fatigue for those who have trouble staying focused in front of a computer. On the

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2. For the sake of brevity, the various participants will be referred to by the letter S (Student) and a progressive number.

other hand, many reported adaptation problems and barriers experienced in face-to-face learning, especially when related to practices linked to previous school levels:

One difficulty I found was the speaking speed of the teachers, because usually let's say in high school, in any case, in other levels of education, you take your time and also slides… Everyone had time to copy them and everything, while in the early days I found it very difficult to get used to it, to take notes because I never take notes on my laptop, but I always take them by writing. And then, when I re-read the notes that I have to check, there are many more mistakes because I was in a hurry… but then I started to ask, for example, for the slides beforehand, so that I had them next to me (S13).

The computer, however, has been mentioned several times as a facilitator, even in the context of distance learning, because of the greater availability of materials which can be consulted independently and at one's own pace, thus returning to a concept of organization of work time. In the context of class attendance, relationships with teachers – usually explicitly mentioned as facilitators of the process – emerge, but also those with fellow students, with whom dynamics of peer collaboration and support in staying focused are often established. At this level, situations where students feel the need to explicitly talk to fellow students or teachers about their diagnosis do not emerge, as they are more frequently associated with the examination.

Assessment tests – especially when in written form – indeed make students with disabilities/SLDs face the need to disclose their condition to the teacher, especially if they want to make use of compensatory tools or dispensatory measures. The request for extra time never seems to encounter any kind of resistance, even though small incidents may occur:

I remember that in one situation a teacher, alas I can't remember who, says "I'm looking for [surname]", so, in a very blatant way, "because he has 30% extra time"… Granted that ok, it is not a state secret, but in that situation, I say, […] at least I got a right to privacy (S11).

On the other hand, complex situations are more likely to arise when the object of the request for facilitation concerns elements that are considered essential for the role of the teacher, such as spelling skills. A first-year interviewee reports an episode learned in a chat room where a number of her colleagues with SLDs exchanged messages:

That's it, and the teacher answered, obviously with a reason that is valid, in my opinion, but at the same time is absurd: that is to say that she… this girl, like me, will be a teacher, so she cannot not evaluate spelling mistakes, considering that we will have to teach children grammar. And this is absurd (S16).

This is where the "dilemma of professional competence" comes into play, as outlined in the brief reconstruction of the state of the art presented at the beginning of this chapter and in the previous pages. Situations like this are sometimes a prelude to the realization of being «protected, but at the same time something is missing» (S16). We will return to this topic in the next paragraph, discussing the possible solutions that the interviewees propose from their experiences and beliefs.

Going back to the examinations – while there are generally few difficulties reported in connection with the relationship with teachers – some of these are particularly striking because some relationships are established based on a lack of recognition of the difficulty:

Also because she kept telling me that these kinds of problems aren't present at Primary Teacher Education […] and she started asking me questions, just to explain what dyscalculia was, what my journey was (S9).

Situations like this do not only occur in the university environment. As another student reports,

[…] already in high school my professors would tell me: "no, but you don't have anything", in spite of the certificate and everything, psychologically I've always been a bit restrained to say what my problem is (S10).

Again, support services to students with disabilities/SLDs play a key role, allowing orientation in practical terms:

[…] in order to know what to do […] they just told me to contact the professor, to make arrangements with him as well (S3).

Or receiving customized support, discovering:

[…] that there was the chance for the tutor to help me because we didn't know if my difficulty was… I don't know, it was just mine or linked to a matter of spatiality, geometry of figures, so it could be linked to my pathology as well (S12).

The support services for students with disabilities and SLDs have the delicate task of identifying the necessary facilities and clarifying the

terms and conditions of their use, acting as mediators with teachers and facilitators of processes that guarantee equity and at the same time avoid the risk of excessive facilitation in the process.

The barriers encountered in the practicum environment, which someone described as an important «growth process» (S12), are primarily related to the topic of entering another space, with the need to establish relationships with practicum tutors and pupils:

Let's say that […] it's more me who creates obstacles in going to school, in front of the child and also in front… not so much in front of the child, but in front of the teacher, who's competent and therefore recognizes if I'm wrong (S5).

Time is another significant barrier: «trying to manage it as well as you can» (S6) by considering the features and needs of the hosting context is not obvious. This is especially the case of students who are facing the last steps of the process and are having trouble in the management of organization:

I was a bit nervous about the fact that I had to make the practicum, exams and writing of the dissertation fit together. Then of course it's something you can do, but I was very anxious about it […] Maybe because you need better organization… it could be due to the disorder itself, but I'm happy about this thing. I mean, I'm still trying to understand how to do it (the dissertation, Ed.), but I'm working on it step by step (S9).

The topic of the disability or learning disorder disclosure reappears with greater emphasis in the practicum environment. The first element of doubt for the interviewees is the opportunity to reveal "invisible" problems to their tutors. Some describe this aspect in negative terms:

It's always been a bit of an Achilles' heel of mine to admit to being SLD (S5);

I hope my tutor doesn't know about my dysorthography (S13).

On the other hand, some respondents report having based their relationship with the tutor on full disclosure:

[…] I felt like telling my indirect practicum tutor about it, because anyway she saw my writings, maybe she saw that I made some mistakes, maybe she didn't understand why sometimes I was brilliant while sometimes I had lapses, as she defined them; so I felt like telling her about it, […] I asked her to keep it secret of course… (S11).

The relationship with the mentor teacher then becomes the basis of «great security» (S9) as long as it allows the student's difficulties to be clearly identified. The tutors' investment of resources may cause performance anxiety but can result in the consolidation of positive collaborative relationships. In some cases, the mentor teacher also acts as a support for direct communication with pupils, in which the disability or specific learning disorder are subject of explanation and discussion, also in relation to the visibility of the condition:

Since I was 11 years old, I've lived with the fact that children come to me and ask me, ask me questions […]. I told my tutor: «well, look, this is going to be impossible because of course children will come to me and ask me… I will find myself in the position of having to answer, because I don't want other people to answer for me» (S8).

The last element of the university course before entering the labor market is represented by the thesis, defined in one case as a «creative act» (S11), which requires the development of further coping strategies, but which can be managed in relative autonomy, without particular limitations related to the use of compensatory tools. However, it is not clear to all interviewees that support services are available. The relationship with teachers is crucial, as it is for all students, but it is particularly important when the interviewees recognize that they need support in managing bibliographical resources and structuring their work.

3.2. *The "dilemma of professional competence" and the ways to deal with it*

Awareness of the existence of a dilemma between the right of students with disabilities/SLDs to receive specific compensatory/dispensatory measures in their educational career and the institutions' duty to train competent professionals, summarized here as the "dilemma of professional competence", does not emerge in a recurrent or homogeneous way. A number of students have elaborated or are elaborating on this tension, sometimes as a result of past experiences or dialogues that have marked the hypothetical contrast between a competent teacher and one with disabilities and SLDs. In some cases, they reflect on the possible effects in their future career and strategies to be adopted to overcome any obstacles. Other interviews highlight the lack of developed thinking starting from this question and, in some cases, the difficulty in understanding what

was asked. Not seldom, alongside terms more connected with the rational sphere, emotional experiences are reported, connected with the existence of the dilemma and the perception that it will (or could) affect one's life.

Some show a high degree of awareness about the dilemma by reasoning on the future professional role, also in relation to their own difficulties:

I certainly feel it, I do feel it, because in any case I want to feel, let's say in quotes, up to the task, so, to transform theoretical knowledge into skills, therefore, to be a good teacher [… which also means taking care of] people's safety because let's say my disability may have an impact and finding strategies so that everyone can play their role safely (S12);

It's a question I've often wondered about, because sometimes I really have trouble communicating, for example I remember that in my fifth year in high school I couldn't say totalitarianism; so, imagine if I had to teach totalitarianism to my children, how could I do it? It's a question I've wondered about very often (S13);

I think that honestly the dilemma exists […] we have to be, I speak as education professionals, precise and punctual, we have to be ready to write minutes that have no mistakes (S11).

These questions can also be very deep-rooted, especially when the career path choice precedes the moment of diagnosis:

The first time I wondered about this question was when I was diagnosed. So, we're talking just about 10 years ago now. So, I already knew that I wanted to be a primary school teacher and anyway to work in the teaching field. So, when I was diagnosed, I was very doubtful whether it was my way or not (S6).

Some argue more on the topic of rights. Although there is no shortage of those who see the dilemma as a matter of institutional barriers to be removed («a disabled person needs their rights and duties to be respected, especially the duties that the institutions have with regard to this disabled person», S4), there are those who perceive not only the need for the enforceability of rights, but also for specific real-world preparation:

This is a question I always ask myself, and I must say it made me a little anxious when I started teaching, not because I think I'm not prepared from a pedagogical point of view, but from a legal point of view (S1);

There is the right, that is the fact of giving rights to people with SLDs, therefore of giving them facilitators. But there's also the duty to, let's say, mold the best

possible teachers […] in my opinion it will be difficult to reach a real solution to this fact because they are two things that let's say can coexist, but they will never coincide […] after my university course I will have to enter a public competition to become a permanent teacher, and honestly… I'd need to check because honestly I don't know, but I don't know if also during a public competition I will be given dispensatory measures. I think so, I hope so (S16).

The "preparation" of the school environment and, more generally, of the labor market is one of the recurrent topics concerning the dilemma and can be linked as much to representations of disability as to the adequacy of physical spaces in the workplace.

It happened to me outside the university world because I did my community service for a while and I found it difficult, I saw it, I could really experience this dilemma first hand (S2);

I saw the labor market a bit reluctant and it almost sees you as a problem (S1);

I found the dilemma especially in the facilities themselves… the school physical structure (S10).

When discussing the dilemma there is also room for doubt regarding the presence of teachers with disabilities/SLDs in schools, given the lack of their narratives and relevant positive representations («I think there haven't been so many teachers to try and enter the competition, I mean dyslexic teachers, in recent years», S16). The need for stories and representations other than those of inadequacy could become an important element in discussing the dilemma, overcoming the threshold of stigma, including the introjected one. In this respect, one student's lack of perception of the dilemma coincides with positive examples from her teachers:

I've never perceived it because I've had teachers with SLDs and I didn't know about it, they were fantastic teachers, they are fantastic teachers so if they hadn't told me honestly, I'd have never guessed (S8).

Lack of awareness of the dilemma may be associated with not having encountered difficulties in one's course of study («I personally haven't encountered any difficulties», S4) or, conversely, the perception of its existence – even when explicitly linked to social representations – may be read in terms of "inner strength" to be drawn on in order to cope with the difficulties of the environment:

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[the dilemma] is certainly felt and then it's also a matter of character that is how you act, how you accept this… this disability, this disorder of course (S9).

The solutions put in place to deal with the dilemma often start from self-awareness of one's own difficulties and skills («the important thing is to be aware of your own difficulties», S16; «for me it is necessary to do a thorough self-analysis and to really understand your own skills and to act in case of difficulties», S5), and then move on to the search for concrete solutions («I prepare my math lesson two weeks before and not two days before», S14; «my kind of disability concerns, let's say, the reworking of information; so, if for example I go to school and I have to prepare certain things, I do it before», S6). There is a fear that these solutions, intended as tools, might be abused («it is right for you to get some supports or integrations or any other possible help… I just think that you shouldn't take advantage of it», S8). However, the predominant stance is of those who do not speak in terms of specific supports, but of what we could translate as the need to change one's own point of view about the teacher. This is well represented by those who claim that the solutions needed to deal with the dilemma are already used by other teachers (therefore to be considered as "ordinary" solutions), since they face common difficulties:

I've had many doubts and still have… but it seems that all the compensatory tools I'm using are compensatory tools that even a person who is not SLD can use (S13);

[I'm sure that if] I take a healthy fellow student and ask them a physics question, they might not be so well prepared in physics; or, if I take a fellow student, if I may say so, who's a bit plump, well, maybe they don't have the sprint to chase the child who runs away […] has anyone ever mentioned the difficulties that a teacher may have, which just aren't necessarily disabilities? Well maybe, I remember in a course during the first year in which they mentioned problems with vocal cords […] in the end it's not such a distant reality (S14);

A professor, that professor actually, told me: if one day a student, even in those hypotheses that you thought of as plan B, makes a question in which they ask you a date and you don't remember that date or don't know it… Apart from the fact that my answer was that it's not said that everyone always remembers dates in any case. We have tools just as active learning which allow students to be involved in the first place […] I really believe in active learning strategies, not only when I have difficulties […] once, for example, a child has asked me what was the average speed at which the earth revolves around the sun. I'd like to see how many teachers really know this answer. Just by heart. I don't for sure […] But we got together with the children and started to look for the answer (S6).

This awareness can also be a helpful tool to orient the decision of one's own education career, considering oneself "more suitable" or thinking to "do less damage" in one situation rather than another:

In my case, I haven't perceived it [the dilemma] and I understand where this dilemma may arise. At the same time, however, I think that I clearly wouldn't be able to teach Maths in a middle school, in a high school, I think; but in a primary school I feel that I'd be able to maybe give students tools that, beyond a learning disorder, may be useful… (S3);

Let's say that kindergarten is the institution where my specific learning disorder can have a smaller impact than in primary school, because children aren't taught spelling in kindergarten […] I've already put another restraint on myself and I say to myself: I'm going to teach in kindergarten where – I usually say this as a joke – I can do as little damage as possible (S16).

Finally, for some, dealing with the "dilemma of professional competence" means questioning the representations they have of the teacher, particularly with regard to the topic of teachers' "omniscience". Such a representation – which they do not intend to sustain in their future profession as teachers – is replaced by that of a teacher capable of "disclosing" their own weaknesses and implementing collaborative learning processes, as read in the interview extracts reported in the previous passages, without affecting their sense of professionalism and effectiveness in teaching:

So, admitting that even you as a teacher might not know something, that you might have a difficulty and how you can work all together (S6);

By explaining to the children: "look, I have this difficulty so I use the calculator for this reason", in the meantime also the children become aware of the fact that there are learning disabilities and it doesn't take away from the fact that I can still explain how to calculate the area of a triangle (S3).

3.3. *Future career: strengths and challenges*

By asking the group of interviewees about their professional career, it was possible to investigate in general what beliefs and expectations they have about schools and society in general. In the final part of the interview, the respondents were asked to describe the reasons why they decided to enroll in Primary Teacher Education: an element of the past but propelling them towards a well-defined and sometimes idealized profession. If for

some becoming a teacher has always been a dream («I was determined to get in anyway», S7; «I've wanted to be a teacher since I was little», S4), for others, this choice originates from a "family tradition" and from a series of positive experiences:

I think the main reason is the fact that […] I grew up in a so-called "village of teachers", because my mum is a teacher, all her friends are teachers and so I've always seen them as a figure to be admired a lot and in my journey since kindergarten I've always admired my teachers, then consequently my professors, I mean my first kindergarten teacher, even from the play area… (S16).

Some live their choice almost as a mission, thinking to «contribute somehow to give an alternative vision… of disability» (S8), but there are also those who declare to have «always thought to do something else, to be a doctor, a biologist» (S2), but then changed their mind after the onset of a disease, which caused a physical disability. The expectation is generally that of personal growth, as well as the possibility of being a reference point for one's own pupils, especially those with Special Educational Needs.

This "privileged relationship" with diversity emerges in a number of interviews as a strength of the teacher with disabilities, in general to enhance a developed ability to relate in a positive and constructive way with pupils with special needs («I know what it feels like and so this helps me not to close my eyes to the children's difficulties», S4; «I think I've sharpened my eye a little bit, if I may say so, on the potential difficulties a child may have», S11; «[My position allows me to] know what children who have the same problem as me are up against», S13). The expectation of being more attentive «to those students who may have them [Special Educational Needs]» (S3) is often accompanied by the belief that they can «understand them more» (S2), by virtue of having experienced the same difficulties and knowing how to identify them more easily. (S3).

The practice of developing coping strategies creates the expectation of being able to help pupils do the same:

[…] to have faced many difficulties in my school career, […] I take it very light-heartedly, but it's actually caused me some problems. Maybe I could encourage children to face their difficulties, or at least… maybe above all to face them in a different way, taking the problem and maybe facing it from behind, from the side and not necessarily head on (S16).

Other elements that the interviewees highlight as strengths of the teacher with disabilities/SLDs relate to the use of compensatory tools or having invested a lot in the study method so as to feel perfectly capable

of conveying this competence to others. Determination, then, plays an important role, especially considering the recognition of rights:

I've learned about my skills, my limits because I had to, I had to come up against them and this will certainly help me understand the right compensations, which I'm entitled to as a teacher. Therefore, also the right strategies when I'm presented with an Italian or a math teaching position. And I owe this, although I say that regrettably, to all this experience I've had (S5).

We wondered if and how the background of personal skills, knowledge and experiences orients the professional career towards the role of the special education teacher and, by reviewing the answers received, we have the impression of being faced with various orientations. There are those who have not considered this option («I've never really thought about special education», S9) or who need more time to reflect upon the consequences of such a choice, also in terms of further years of study. There are those who consider special education a desirable choice («yes, it's something I'd like», S10; «I'd like to be a special education teacher, also because what I like the most is to help and above all from an emotional point of view I don't rule out a second university course», S1; «there are teachers who prefer the class, whereas I don't make distinctions», S8) and maybe had started the university course with the idea of subsequently becoming a special education teacher («I started my course thinking that I wanted to become a special education teacher», S13; «at the beginning, when I took into consideration the idea of being a teacher, my first idea was to be a special education teacher», S16). There are also those who reject this hypothesis («not so much as a special education teacher, because I'd like to become a SLD tutor», S5), connecting special education to past experiences of inadequacy and fatigue in individual relationships («it had started to weigh on me so much, I couldn't go on», S6). Finally, some questioned the association between pupils with disabilities/SLDs and special education teachers with disabilities/SLDs, perceiving it as a discriminatory dimension and questioning whether the society can enhance its stereotypes:

Before I excluded this, meaning that it's […] that maybe I had the impression of ghettoizing. At the beginning, I had excluded it because uhm, I had this idea that from the outside, that a disabled special education teacher teaching a disabled child ghettoizes (S12).

The previous paragraph introduced the topic of the school environment's readiness to include teachers with disabilities/SLDs, also connected to imagining a professional career:

I believe there are people who… I mean possible colleagues who need to be shown this, not because it's a duty, but just to show them that the disability or SLD anyway is not a limit (S8).

This future is uncertain, «maybe it depends on the people you meet» (S6) and some believe that there is «still more to do. Because it still sounds weird…» (S14). It is "weird" for the social environment to conciliate the idea of an "infallible and omniscient" teacher – as discussed above in relation to the "dilemma of professional competence" – with the "imperfect" reality that is also manifested through the interviewees. It is interesting then that at least two of the interviewees have the perception of not having any basis for comparison, of being among the first representatives of a new teacher generation:

I don't have […] the example of a person older than me who's had the same journey as me (S12);

Maybe my generation is the first generation where there are really a lot of dyslexic people, because I don't know so many people older than me who are dyslexic… While I see also my mum, who's a teacher, in her last classes at least 10 people either are dyslexic or have some type of disability, so it's normal that now… there will be the real struggle with institutions also in this respect, because we need to be protected in this, somehow… and I've seen we're not so much from this point of view… (S16).

If university is seen as a mostly welcoming and «more open-minded» (S4) environment, schools are considered – by a number of participants – as potentially less welcoming to a teacher with disabilities/SLDs. «The teacher with SLDs is never mentioned» (S13), at times presented and perceived as an obstacle. However, a number of experiences in the school environment are reported, often connected with the welcoming role of mentor teachers, with whom – as mentioned in the previous paragraphs – students feel free to talk about themselves and discuss openly the future as teachers.

4. Conclusion

Reflecting on the need to train competent and effective teachers, a student wondered about the possibility that disabilities/SLDs are not an obstacle for the pupil, but an opportunity:

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People with disabilities sometimes have greater sensitivity and talking about these things indeed helps children understand, I mean, better understand. Therefore, I think they see the world with a different perspective and that they teach in the exact same way as I do, I mean, by just using the tools that just like children are given, also teachers are given (S10).

As emerged from the interview analysis, the perception that one's own difficulties can become a resource for pupils is recurrent. This perception is linked to two factors: a) a potential greater understanding, also at an emotional level, of pupils who will experience a disability or SLD themselves («I see myself very much as on an empathic level I can get into it more, because I've experienced it, I've gone through it», S6; «I can see certain things and so this maybe allows me to approach the difficulties and what children experience in a definitely different way», S14); b) the search for inclusive teaching methods («I approached them saying: "look, I'm like you; let's find a way to try and understand these things"», S3). This offers interesting ideas for the current debate on the "dilemma of professional competence". Moreover, considering how much the personal experience affects the inclusive perspective that these student teachers will bring to the school environment, there are stimulating perspectives also in this sense. As a matter of fact – as already argued – although pupils with disabilities/SLDs are a privileged interlocutor, the approach suggested is not limited to them, but calls for a change from other pupils as well, trying to introduce them to the other's point of view.

Maybe we should also deal with the matter of method in terms of the approach with… between children and people with disabilities… the approach that is also used by teachers to explain the disability also to other children, because during my course of study I was also told that, for example, if a child with disabilities or SLDs arrives in a class you must not talk about this with the children. And I wonder why? (S8).

The analysis of the interviews with students with disabilities/SLDs has therefore enabled to explore a variety of topics based on the literature analysis presented earlier in this book and briefly outlined above. In addition to the deductive categories presented, a number of aspects to be further discussed have emerged. An example are rights, including duties that are less represented; the experiences linked to previous school levels, which give the idea of an educational circularity that strengthens a certain vision of the role and figure of the teacher; the study method, seen as a key element for success at university and an element which can be useful in the school environment. These various dimensions must be considered by

keeping in mind that there are different perspectives, which can become an element of discomfort. Discomfort may arise from the admission test and be alerting during an examination conducted using dispensatory measures, then found in the eyes of tutors, colleagues – even pupils.

In conclusion, the transcripts show a reminder that inclusion is for everyone, not just a right or benefit of some. What is needed is an overall vision capable of considering, from the outset, needs which – also thanks to the greater knowledge we have today on disability and SLDs – are leading more and more people with special needs to try ways that were previously unthinkable. To conclude with the words of a student: «these people are the future» (S16).

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5. Teachers with disabilities/SLDs and their colleagues: an analysis of experiences from university to professional career

by *Ines Guerini, Clarissa Sorrentino*[1]

1. Introduction

The teaching profession is undoubtedly one of the most stimulating jobs from the perspective of enhancing personal and professional experience, but at the same time requires numerous competences as well as a certain predisposition.

We refer, for instance, to communication skills, to flexibility in what you do, teamwork and problem-solving skills, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) skills, organizational skills, logical-mathematical skills, and so on.

Competences, skills and abilities believed to be essential in determining teacher professionalism, also in the light of the perceived need to dispel the common idea that teaching is «a "pseudo-profession" linked either to a personal vocation ("I love children, so I want to teach") or to an apprenticeship, i.e. the job is learned as you go, almost by osmosis, from those who have more years of experience» (Nigris, 2017: 303).

What has just been stated finds an answer in the care and attention that, for several years, Pedagogical Sciences have given to the issue of teacher training. In this regard, we can cite the contributions dedicated to the tutor training of newly hired teachers (Fiorucci & Moretti, 2019) and to the problematic situation of secondary teacher training (Bocci, 2018; Baldacci *et al.*, 2020).

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1. The present contribution is the result of the joint work of the two authors. With regards to the identification of the parts, it should be noted that the paragraphs *Introduction*, *Method*, *Sample* and Conclusion are to be attributed to Ines Guerini. The paragraphs *Data Analysis* and *Discussion, Conclusion* are to be attributed to Clarissa Sorrentino.

Given these beliefs, the question then arises as to whether a Specific Learning Disorder (SLD) or a disabling condition related to a physical or sensory deficit can hinder the development of the competences required by the teaching profession. In other words, the question is whether a person with disabilities/SLDs can become an effective and competent teacher. At the same time, we are interested in understanding what encourages teachers to openly talk to their colleagues about their condition of SLD/disability or what, on the contrary, discourages them, and if the social and cultural context around schools is ready to welcome teachers with disabilities/SLDs.

These questions reflect some important aspects investigated in the present research.

In the previous pages, it has been possible to highlight that becoming a primary school and/or kindergarten teacher requires a long and sometimes demanding training process. The complexity lies in the variables involved in the path which leads to the job itself: from the procedures to access university, to traineeship, to the competitive selection for the role.

This chapter, instead, will deal with all those elements that come into play in facilitating or not the teaching profession in the eyes of school stakeholders and, in particular, teachers and colleagues of teachers with disabilities/SLDs.

The next pages will focus on the issues emerged from the interviews conducted with teachers with disabilities/SLDs and colleagues of teachers with disabilities/SLDs.

2. Method

Qualitative techniques were chosen for the data collection and the analysis conducted was descriptive. In particular, the opinions of privileged witnesses to the topic of disability and teaching profession were surveyed through interviews conducted online (using the platforms Teams and Zoom) and recorded. Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees.

To conduct the interviews, the researchers used a structured interview (Table 1) built on the theoretical background emerged from the systematic review (Bellacicco & Demo, 2019) conducted on the research which investigated the experiences of teachers with disabilities/SLDs (cf. Ch. 5).

Table 1 - Interview format adopted with teachers with disabilities/SLDs

1. Let's start by focusing on your professional career.
Let's imagine that, like all teachers, there have been difficulties but also elements that have supported you in the process.
To identify them, we will go through the different stages of the process together, starting from, for instance, the work period during university. If you've had this experience, what were the obstacles and facilitators?
Let's move on to the trial period. What were the obstacles and facilitators?
Let's move on to daily school work. What are the obstacles and facilitators?

2. Let's now focus on the disclosure process of the condition of disability/SLD.
Have you openly talked about your disability/SLD in the professional environment? If so, with whom in particular? What motivated this decision?

3. If and how has your SLD/disability and all that it entails affected your relationship and socialization with your colleagues in the various contexts?

4. To manage some of the professional activities, did you have to develop also individual coping strategies? If so, which ones?

5. Let's now focus specifically on "institutional/structural" compensatory/dispensatory measures. Have you by any chance requested or been suggested any kind of support – also in terms of positive organizational actions – by the school?

6. Have you ever found teachers/staff reluctant towards offering one of these measures? If so, why in your opinion?

7. In literature, some studies conducted on the topic report the existence of a dilemma between the right/importance to provide these measures and the school's duty to guarantee quality teaching to all students.
Have you perceived this dilemma in your experience or in any case can you find it in your colleagues' experiences? More in general, what is your opinion on the dilemma? What solutions did you adopt/would you suggest to overcome it?

8. We're almost at the end of the interview. Investigating a more subjective dimension, could you tell us the main reason why you chose the teaching career?

9. Overall, would you judge your experience at university positively or negatively? Do you think that such events have somehow affected your subsequent professional life?

10. Are there any features linked to your personal condition of disability/difficulty that you think you have blended into your professional identity and that represent a strength in performing your profession?

11. Beyond your individual situation, do you think that people with disabilities/SLDs can become effective and competent teachers?

12. Based on your experience, do you think that the socio-cultural context (especially universities and schools) is ready to include teachers with disabilities/SLDs in the teaching staff?

In particular, as highlighted in the interview format shown in Table 1, the researchers aimed at investigating the aspects emerged in literature (Burns & Bell, 2011; Sharoni & Vogel, 2011; Lamichhane, 2016; Hankebo, 2018; Ianes *et al.*, forthcoming) such as, for instance, the development of individual coping strategies; the obstacles encountered; institutional facilitators; the attitudes of colleagues and disclosure of the condition.

The interviews were then transcribed for analysis. To facilitate their reading and interpretation, the textual data collected were subsequently processed in a systematic way and reassembled by association with the single categories, using ATLAS.ti 7 software.

2.1. *Sample*

As shown in Table 2, the sample (non-probability snowball sampling) that took part in the research consisted of 20 teachers. More specifically, it consisted of 3 teachers (1 with SLDs; 2 with physical/sensory disabilities) from kindergarten and 17 teachers from primary school. Of the latter, 6 have a specific learning disorder, 5 have a sensory/physical disability and the other 6 are colleagues of teachers with a physical/sensory disability. The majority were female teachers (*F*=15; *M*=5) working as subject teachers (*Subject Teachers*=13; *Support Teachers*=7).

The teachers, whose age ranges between 27 (minimum value) and 60 (maximum value), come from Northern, Southern and Central Italy. The sample is heterogeneous also for the years of service, with a range that varies from a minimum of 3 years to a maximum of 44 years.

Table 2 - Features of the sample

	Teachers	SLDs	Disabilities (physical/ sensory)	Subject Teachers	Support Teachers
Kindergarten	3	1	2	2	1
Primary	11	6	5	5	6
	Colleagues	SLDs	Disabilities (physical/ sensory)	General Education	Special Education
Kindergarten	0	0	0	0	0
Primary	6	0	6	6	0

3. Data analysis and discussion

Each interview was analysed in two stages. First, a "paper and pencil" content analysis was undertaken, and then the data were analyzed using Atlas.ti 7 software. The objective was to identify, within the interviews, the categories emerged in literature through the systematic review. More specifically, the categories found are the following:

a) barriers perceived in the school environment;
b) institutional facilitators;
c) non-institutional facilitators;
d) coping strategies implemented;
e) perception of the dilemma;
f) overcoming of the dilemma;
g) disclosure;
h) readiness of the socio-cultural context (to include teachers with disabilities/SLDs);
i) strengths of being teachers with disabilities/SLDs;
j) competence and effectiveness of teachers with disabilities/SLDs.

The elements characterizing the different categories under investigation are reported below.

In relation to the category of *perceived barriers* in schools, teachers with disabilities/SLDs indicated the presence of negative attitudes from colleagues and parents, the existence of chaotic space in the classroom (i.e. characterized by noisy, disorganized, small environments with desks placed in such a way as to cause accidents or bumps when going past them); the persistence of architectural barriers in the school where they work; the lack of understanding (from their colleagues) of the specific needs related to their particular condition and the awareness of having some memory difficulties (Ianes *et al.*, 2021; Ianes *et al.*, forthcoming).

While discussing the barriers, colleagues of teachers with disabilities/SLDs also reported the presence of negative attitudes from colleagues and parents (especially at the beginning of the child's schooling). Other interesting issues that emerged concern the presence of rigid bureaucracy (in terms of slow procedures for requesting certain tools); the lack of flexibility of colleagues in adapting teaching (both organizational aspects and communication methods) to the needs of the teacher with disabilities/SLDs and the lack of financial resources in schools (not all schools are equipped with interactive whiteboards in rooms that enable the teacher with disabilities to bypass some difficulties in managing the teaching).

On the opposite axis of barriers are *facilitators*, i.e. all those elements that can support the teacher with disabilities/SLDs in the teaching profession. The analysis of the interviews shows that both teachers with disabilities/SLDs and colleagues claim that classes with limited number of pupils; the use of co-teaching and the location of the school in accessible areas (i.e. located in noise-free areas, with limited distance across its various sites and no physical barriers within them) are supportive factors.

In addition, teachers also mention the use of devices, the possible use of compensatory tools (for example memory aids) and the adoption of dispensatory measures such as the writing of minutes during board meetings, councils or other school meetings.

Alongside institutional factors, the presence or absence of *non-institutional facilitators* is noted. In this regard, teachers indicate that the same communication processes with children – based on face-to-face communication – facilitate interchange (especially for teachers with hearing disabilities). Another non-institutional factor considered fundamental is the support of colleagues and the creation of good relationships.

Colleagues, from their point of view, mention the school location. The importance of the location of the school near or at a short distance from the domicile of the person with disabilities emerges again as a means of facilitating their mobility and improving their life quality. In addition, colleagues believe that frequent breaks and, in some situations, the possibility for the teacher with disabilities/SLDs to hold lessons outdoors are essential. The support of colleagues and maintaining good relationships with them are transversal factors in the perception of facilitators for teachers and their colleagues. As a result, the possibility of experiencing a serene working environment, above all in terms of the possibility of relationships, exchange and support, are highlighted as fundamental.

A further aspect that is worth pointing out is related to face-to-face/distance learning. Given that the research was conducted in the midst of a global pandemic, one issue that emerged was precisely that of teaching in emergency situations. In this respect, the analysis shows the usefulness of distance teaching and the possibility of better organizing activities for children through this method – less chaotic in the eyes of the teacher. The following passage from the interview with a deaf teacher is significant:

last year, we suddenly found ourselves from face-to-face teaching to distance teaching. For me this was a success. I'm sorry about the pandemic, but at primary school I've been doing a lot of supply face-to-face teaching over the

last few months, but with distance teaching I've played the real role of a support teacher, trying to integrate two children with difficulties in grade 4 and grade 5 into the class group and learning... for that period I preferred distance teaching because if we had been in the classroom, with the mask, it would have been even more complicated. I saw face-to-face teaching here and there as more of a barrier than distance teaching, which actually allowed me to focus on just two classes.

A further category surveyed was that of *coping strategies*, used to deal with problematic situations with particular reference to the professional activity. Among the strategies indicated by teachers with disabilities/SLDs, multi-channel learning, prior planning of daily school activities, and again the use of compensatory tools emerged. Learning from error is given specific attention. In particular, according to many teachers with SLDs, the possibility of making a mistake and accepting it becomes a learning opportunity to share with the student the processes of accepting difficulties and the strategies to deal with situations of school failure.

With reference to the strategies adopted by teachers with disabilities/SLDs, colleagues report the importance of having extra time to plan (teaching or school) materials; the use of compensatory tools (computers, apps, and devices); a greater disposition than other colleagues to perform activities to feel actively part of the team and the school environment; and the quantity and quality of time spent at school. In fact, colleagues report that teachers with disabilities/SLDs spend more time at school than other colleagues, commit extra time and are generally very helpful.

Investigating the perception of the dilemma (cf. Ch. 3) that teachers and their colleagues experience has become a significant aspect of the research. In this regard, the data analysis shows that teachers mainly perceive the dilemma from colleagues and/or pupils' parents (to the point that many teachers choose to keep their condition as a person with disabilities/SLDs hidden as much as possible) and they themselves perceive to a lesser extent the existence of the dilemma between being a teacher with SLDs (and, therefore, using compensatory measures) and being an effective and competent teacher.

Furthermore, teachers with SLDs believe that according to their colleagues and pupils' parents "it is impossible to be an effective teacher if you have a SLD" (Table 3). Subsequently, the presence of a SLD would hinder the acquisition of competence and effectiveness. As mentioned above, this is also a question for teachers with SLDs themselves (Table 3).

Table 3 - Teachers' interview extracts (Category "Perception of the dilemma")

Dilemma	
4:2 instead, parents are obviously perplexed: "how can a teacher with a hearing impairment work at school?"	4:5 meaning that they have often raised the question whether I could work at school, having this problem
5:1 Mainly because having had this practicum experience where I was told very clearly, "but you can't teach", well, this fear remains a bit, you know?	1:3 There's still a lot of obtuseness, the teacher with SLDs does not exist for them, your colleagues don't believe you have this problem, as for the child who suffers of SLDs
12:5 Anyway, my summer was awful, because I relived those moments from… when I was a young girl, of this experience that you always have of stupidity, of not being up to certain things and therefore… also saying, "but how can I be a teacher, if I am dysorthographic or dyslexic or whatever?"	7:8 There's a dilemma but it's also a contradiction, it's pointless to ask for an accommodation if there is no training at the base. For example, some colleagues of mine this year used to wear a mask behind plexiglass, which didn't favour the quality of teaching… or made it useless to call the LIS interpreter at primary school for a deaf child, if then that interpreter stood in front of a light source

Contrary to teachers with disabilities/SLDs, their colleagues initially do not seem to perceive the existence of the aforementioned dilemma. However, reflecting on this during the interview, and exploring this perception in more depth, some of them argue that it is important to invest in teacher and school leader training and to increase the number of teachers in order to find solutions to overcome the dilemma (Table 4).

Teacher training on disability is also one of the conditions mentioned by teachers with disabilities/SLDs to overcome the existing dilemma. Other *solutions* concern the opportunity to demonstrate one's competences during the whole professional career (competition phase, the training itself and in the classroom); the dissemination of the positive experiences of teachers with disabilities/SLDs and, in extreme cases (as previously mentioned) the choice to hide one's situation of disability/SLD. In this regard, we report some extracts from interviews with teachers concerning the overcoming of the dilemma (Table 5).

Table 4 - Colleagues' interview extracts (Category "Overcoming of the dilemma")

Overcoming of the dilemma	
3:8 The problem is precisely what investments are being made to increase the number of teachers? Because this is the issue. It's a matter of training, of teachers that are trained to provide support and it's a matter of investments and, therefore of general choices, because at the moment there is no perception of this need… the idea of a non-functioning teacher does not exist. The non-functioning teacher is sent elsewhere	6:1 In my opinion everything has to be managed upstream, it's so important, as to say the imprinting that a school leader gives to a certain operational framework within a school, it's so important if the school leader gives messages that show they have no interest, they don't particularly care about these individuals who are more fragile, then a certain part of the team… perceive this as a form of weakness of the individual and as such considers them, marginalizes them

Table 5 - Teachers' interview extracts (Category "Overcoming of the dilemma")

Overcoming of the dilemma	
1:4 To overcome this dilemma, this idea, your colleagues must not know too much and you must not say this, it's so sad. We are in the year 2020 and inclusion is doing a lot, but you can't still say this 5:4 For sure, providing the school with aids that may help them be included in the school environment, […] and for sure the fact that in schools, especially in primary schools, there is more than one teacher present in class can be helpful for the teacher themselves and… I'm thinking about a borderline case… a blind teacher, but anyway there's a teacher next to you who manages to check on children, […] I mean, I don't know to what extent this is a problem	11:14 Yes, I think that it can be overcome through examples of people who do make it 4:6 Well, but I let it go because well, I didn't think it was a good idea, let's say, let's say… to start discussions…, I just did my job and that's it. Let's say, I carried on with my work demonstrating that I was capable of doing it

Another element of reflection within the interviews was the process of communicating one's disability/SLD defined as *disclosure*. In this regard, the teachers' answers are controversial and diversified among teachers with disabilities and teachers with SLDs. Almost all teachers (with disabilities/SLDs) think that it is opportune to talk about diversity with children and parents. However, numerous teachers with SLDs think that it is better not to talk about their disorder due to the significant prejudice regarding the presence of a specific learning disorder and of a competent teacher. In Table 6 we report some extracts that we believe are particularly significant for our discussion.

Table 6 - Teachers' interview extracts (Category "Disclosure")

Disclosure		
4:1 when I approach new parents, new colleagues, I talk about my problem first thing. I immediately say, I have this problem, I'm deaf. I need to read your lips well	8:2 Because visual and hearing disabilities are linked to a rare congenital disease from the paternal side, when I first approach hesitant pupils, who are scared and ask why I'm like this, I say I've got radars in my ears and that I see them well with my glasses	8:1 I talk in depth about my disability only with my dearest friends or colleagues as soon as we get to know each other

Colleagues also perceive the existence of a prejudice that revolves around living with a disabling condition and being a teacher, to the extent that they claim that teachers with disabilities prefer to elect a few colleagues as *confidants* to talk about their lives, rather than disclose their condition to everyone.

Regarding the strengths of being a teacher with disabilities/SLDs, both the teachers and the sampled colleagues report an improvement in the teaching-learning process in terms of greater openness to diversity, greater empathy with students with disabilities/SLDs, accurate screening competences (in the sense that they recognize in their pupils some predictors of specific learning disorders and are particularly attentive to some recurrent errors in the composition of texts, oral production

and are more likely to notice difficulties in vocabulary access or in retrieving numerical facts, having experienced the same difficulties as pupils at school) and inclusive teaching competences (in the sense that they design teaching activities/units in such a way that each pupil does not feel excluded). In particular, a colleague reports the use of alternative communication channels as a strength of a deaf teacher and a colleague says that the condition of the teacher whom she talked about led him to be extremely creative (and hyperactive) in the activities he did for pupils (Table 7).

Table 7 - Colleagues' interview extracts (Category "Strengths")

Strenghts	
3:9 it led him to live every moment as a precious one. So he is a person… I think one of the most hyperactive people I've ever met, a person that would do activities for children that no teacher had ever, in my opinion, done in class. For instance, one day I saw him arrive with two Ikea-like bags full of wooden logs that he wanted the children to cut up to make fishes	5:3 he focused much more on oral activities. So starting from his condition, he encouraged children to develop speech and therefore they never experienced it as a difficulty most importantly the colleague never made the children feel burdened and by the end of the year they not only had acquired the study topics but also a greater ability to express themselves on what they had studied so I saw this as a positive thing

Lastly, the analysis of the socio-cultural context and, specifically, the *readiness* to welcome teachers with disabilities/SLDs, highlights that universities are prepared to include, within their environment, teachers with disabilities/SLDs, while schools are often less inclusive. In fact, some interviewees report that normally «it depends on your colleagues» or «it depends on the school where you work» (Tables 8-9) o «on the school leaders' leadership skills».

Table 8 - Colleagues' interview extracts (Category "Socio-cultural context")

Socio-cultural context		
3:4 So, the university is, because university is historically also ideologically always ahead of the game. The school is not, but not because there wouldn't be the elements culturally, but because of the type of organization, of requests… what I was saying earlier, that are made, they have such a complex apparatus that… then means how can I translate what I had imagined in a practical manner? In my opinion now it's not ready […] or maybe it is, depending on the area	4:2 I don't know, from a theoretical point of view, in my opinion, we do lots of things, we implement lots of research also tools, you know, novelties. We do a lot. From a practical point of view, however, it seems to me that everything stops at a certain point	6:2 well honestly I don't think so even though you know it's not good to say but in the light of what I see every day and that I have seen in many years it's now been 19 years since I've worked at school… what I see every day and I've seen over time… I think we still have long way to go. Unfortunately, it's a long way away

As an explanation, teachers and colleagues claim that entrance tests for degree courses and the professional practicum often do not take into account the specificities of individual situations of disability/SLD. Moreover, they do not consider that current workplace policies are unclear about the construction of inclusive organizational environments and that colleagues and parents are in many cases not completely in favour of the presence of teachers with disabilities.

Table 9 - Teachers' interview extracts (Category "Socio-cultural context")

Socio-cultural context	
2:4 well, I'd love that but for SLDs I think, yeah, for disabilities the Italian school is not ready yet. Other countries are – the Italian school is not	4:3 It has a prejudice that I have often let's say… had to get others to overcome, in spite of my 18-year career that should be enough as, as a curriculum… as feedback let's say for families, but it's not always like this
6:2 What I have noticed […] is the high competition existing both in the university and working sphere, which leads to always see the negative side of others, highlighting then more the faults than the potentials… so it's difficult to create a welcoming environment when you just think: "this person can't do this, this person can't do this, this and this". I think we really must change our mindset…	3:9 here and there. First, because there are no facilities, I mean, the school itself as a building doesn't allow so. I mean, think of the children… those in wheelchairs must be picked up to go down to the canteen, you know. Now a teacher cannot be picked up, you know
11:17 Well, not yet unfortunately but there are, let's say, the foundations to build something and now precisely it's about understanding what we want to do with the experience and history that have been built thanks to, I repeat, the Law 170 that for better or for worse uncovered positive and negative aspects that now… before we could not build anything, now we can do a little something	5:5 the teacher faces these and even seeing a peer with a disability does not make as much of a clamour as it did before, you know. Therefore, in my opinion, we are ready, for sure. Then the resources are what they are, especially in state schools

4. Conclusion

What has been illustrated so far shows that teachers with disabilities/ SLDs still struggle to feel fully accepted in the school system. For example, think of the dilemma they usually perceive as a result of stereotypes on disabilities/SLDs; the secretness they maintain on their condition and the choice to *confide only* in those whom they feel are more ready to accept them.

It is therefore clear that schools need to improve (in terms of accommodations) so that teachers with disabilities/SLDs are truly included in the teaching staff. It should be highlighted that the cultural-disciplinary,

methodological-educational, organizational, institutional-social, training-professional dimensions of teachers with disabilities/SLDs can be effectively achieved with the accommodations due. However, these are not always and not necessarily granted by the reference schools – but acquired thanks to the individual problem-solving skills of the person with disabilities/SLDs.

On the other hand, the presence of teachers with disabilities/SLDs is a forerunner to the management of a more inclusive classroom (d'Alonzo *et al.*, 2015; d'Alonzo, 2016) and of a competent process integration management in light of specific needs. These teachers, as the interviews emphasized, seem to have greater skills and aptitudes in the field of special education. For example, consider teachers' empathy, which appears to be greater among those with disabilities/SLDs towards pupils with disabilities/SLDs or other differences.

Moreover, the pupils can compare themselves more with less mainstream models of teachers and therefore become more open to what is commonly understood as *diversity*. This may produce further positive outcomes in the pupils' education, at the heart of any action that is to be considered educational.

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6. Policy implications of the BECOM-IN project findings

by *Dario Ianes*

1. A new perspective

The BECOM-IN research project has started to investigate a complex and still little-known reality: in-service teachers with disabilities or SLDs and students attending the Primary Teacher Education (PTE) program who are studying to become one. The various knowledge sources, the international literature systematic reviews, the interviews, the questionnaire have explored the training and work experiences of people with disabilities/SLDs. The aim was to understand what happens in the various contexts both considering the issue of the "dilemma of professional competence" both at the institutional level, i.e. the tension between the right to study/work and the right for school users to have fully competent teachers, and at the personal level of disclosure. As a result, several policy and concrete operational implications emerged for Italian universities and kindergartens and primary schools.

1.1. *General system-based implications*

Italian universities, which grant a license to practice, and schools should considerably increase the percentage of students and teachers with disabilities/SLDs to gradually counteract the blatant underrepresentation of these individuals in training programs and in the workplace. The underrepresentation of these diversities is only a part of the more general discussion on the underrepresentation of different minorities. Italy shares this topic with the rest of the world, see also the 2006 UN *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.

1.2. *Implications for universities*

Considering that Italian Primary Teacher Education degree programs generally have an inclusive approach – even by osmosis with the schools' inclusive approach – several concrete implications emerge clearly.

– **Training for lecturers and researchers**: there is the need for systematic and recurring initiatives of continuous and disseminated professional development on the key issues of inclusive education, such as planning according to the Universal Design for Learning, competence-based education, compensatory measures, as well as the reasonable accommodation understood as a customized solution and not as a standard list to be agreed, especially during the assessment/ examination (since in the other stages of the training program, it seems to be a well-established practice). Owning and continuously maintaining these competences should be one of the elements of the initial and continuous assessment of the academic staff, i.e. lecturers and practicum tutors. Training activities will be needed for technical and administrative staff, as well.

– **Study method support initiatives for students**: where activated, in the most diverse forms, they have proved to be very useful and effective training workshops aimed at the development of various study skills, including: organizing time and materials; taking notes; preparing for exams; using compensatory measures and tools; writing reports and papers; ultimately, achieving and using a number of customized coping strategies. The latter are meant to be used at this stage in the university, but then to be extended, with the necessary adjustments, in the schools where students will work. A note of caution should be expressed with respect to the risk of creating homogeneous groups/courses/workshops of students with disabilities/SLDs, which would very easily take on a stigmatizing connotation, also considering the fact that many students have not taken the step of disclosure. A possible positive factor in counteracting this limitation lies in starting these initiatives as early as the first semester of the first year, orienting them to every student as a support for the university career and not as a course only for those with difficulties.

– **Awareness and disclosure process support initiatives for students**: as seen, the process of opening up and disclosure about one's condition to fellow students and lecturers is not at all easy and is controversial. Initiatives of mutual exchange and comparison among students involved in these situations can be very helpful, with a view to raising awareness of one's condition, the various personal and professional identity implications, as well as the various coping strategies and their

rights. Peer-to-peer paths and professional counseling activities are also very useful to raise awareness of the "dilemma of professional competence" in a context of mutual support rather than loneliness and doubts about one's professional career. The aim of these initiatives is obviously not that of disclosure, but that of increasing the freedom to choose to say/to not say (and to whom) what the person decides for themselves in full autonomy.

– **Careful monitoring of direct and indirect practicum experiences**: given the extraordinary importance of the practicum in a professionalizing and qualifying degree course, it is necessary that this area is particularly structured for students with disabilities/SLDs. This means offering a protocol of planning-tutoring-verification and assessment which provides for the various reasonable accommodation measures both in university and school activities, in practical experiences. The choice of the school where the practicum takes place and that of the mentor teacher who accompanies the student during the experience are significant, as well as the mutual commitment, among the various stakeholders, to sharing precise and objective competence contents to be developed, observed and assessed (and self-assessed).

– **Specific training for practicum tutors and mentor teachers in schools**: in order to properly build and implement the protocol and the actions mentioned in the previous paragraph, there is the need for structural, systematic and recurring professional development initiatives for these staff members, i.e. practicum tutors from the university and mentor teachers in the schools where the practicum takes place. In these training activities, there will have to be both specific (i.e. one-to-one) meetings and others shared with lecturers – mentioned in the first paragraph of these implications – to achieve a good synergy of support interventions.

As can be seen, these 5 policy strategies represent the elements of a complex and interconnected ecology that should characterize an inclusive university, starting from broader cultural and value dimensions to concrete practices aimed at all the university experience stakeholders, namely, students, faculty members and technical and administrative staff.

1.3. *Implications for schools*

The Italian school has an inclusive DNA, at least for forty or more years now, but still has a long way to go, not only to successfully include all students, but also to fully include its teachers with disabilities/SLDs. A number of concrete implications can be drawn from the research project.

- **Make available useful or needed compensatory tools**: as known, many devices to support teaching or, more generally, knowledge management are necessary for some but useful for all, for the purpose of innovating several teaching practices.
- **Support co-teaching strategies**: co-teaching has proven to be an effective teaching method, not only to support teachers with disabilities/SLDs, but also to achieve a more inclusive teaching for all, and to activate as much as possible the latent resources in the class group, such as cooperation among students.
- **Achieve the highest level of organizational flexibility**: within the context of the guarantees of the organizational and educational autonomy of schools, the more flexible the context is in terms of schedules, co-teaching, number of pupils per class, and so on, the more teachers with disabilities/SLDs will be able to fully express their great potential, to the benefit of the entire school community.
- **Implement reasonable accommodations also in teachers' activities**: a further organizational flexibility point concerns the concrete professional attributes of the teacher, who should be able to work by enhancing their strengths, expressing them in certain activities thus avoiding other activities, derogating from the reality in which "everyone does the same thing".
- **Monitor the attitudes of colleagues with regard to any forms of discrimination**: as seen, the tension created by the "dilemma of professional competence" is very present in the colleagues of teachers with disabilities/SLDs and lecturers. Additionally, 30/40% of academic staff does not consider them effective. It is very likely that this percentage is underestimated. That is why the attitudes of colleagues must be carefully monitored, in order to avoid direct and indirect discriminations or any forms of mobbing.

1.4. *Common implications for both universities and schools*

The research highlights an area of implications common to these two major contexts, i.e. the one of training and that "on-the-job". It is a wide area of 360-degree awareness actions, addressed to the whole human ecology of these two contexts. Awareness means attributing a positive value to the figure of the teacher with disabilities/SLDs, for the added value they bring into their profession. Research on the topic is very explicit in terms of teaching added value, deconstruction of negative stereotypes, affirmation of positive role models and coping strategies, insider-status

empathy, and so on. However, these advantages must be made known and manifested also through the direct work of testimonials, i.e. teachers with disabilities/SLDs. A second area common to the university and school contexts is that of the plural elaboration of the "dilemma of professional competence". Everyone must be aware of the presence of this tension and that it should not be removed, nor solved by turning a blind eye – thus denying the personal and professional dignity of those who find themselves in the condition of SLD or disability – with a paternalistic attitude or with a rigid and authoritarian one, such as, "if you're not there, you're not there and that's it…". The tension created by the dilemma must become an object for mutual cultural (and practical) elaboration. Everyone is involved, in various roles – students, lecturers, colleagues, school leaders, families and students –, and everyone can contribute democratically to overcome the dilemma with various and different solutions, in a win-win perspective of pluralization, diversification of teacher profiles capable of enhancing different talents.

1.5. *Implications for research*

The BECOM-IN research project undoubtedly has a number of methodological and implementation limitations – as seen in the various chapters. However, it can suggest some implications for similar or better future research studies in this field. The first element which greatly affected the research in the field was the lack of quantitative data on the phenomenon, even though we are conscious that this lack is inherent to the Italian education system at many different levels. The second significant implication concerns the differences between the situation of a teacher with SLDs – e.g. dyslexia, dysgraphia-dysorthographia, dyscalculia – and that of a teacher with physical, visual or hearing sensory impairments, as well as clearly in the school level in which they teach, or the university program they attend. The third implication – of particular importance in the situation of in-service teachers – concerns their experience, their colleagues' characteristics, school leaders' administration, the cultural-organizational dimension of the school, the social context, etc. In addition to this, the information collected through questionnaires or interviews should be checked against the presence of social desirability prejudices, particularly present in research on inclusion topics.

One thing is certain, however. Processes of inclusion of students with disabilities/SLDs in the university are growing irreversibly, and this growth impacts and will increasingly impact Italian schools.

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The promotion of greater diversity in the socio-demographic profile of the teaching population is the subject of an increasing international interest. However, the perspective of teachers with disabilities/specific learning disorders (SLDs) is still poorly investigated, especially in Italy.

The entry of teachers with disabilities/SLDs into the teaching profession can represent a decisive step towards the development of increasingly higher levels of inclusion both in teacher training and in the school setting, also considering the benefits that teachers with disabilities/SLDs can bring in terms of inclusive values and practices. Although, the topic raises some dilemmas and tensions, elicited by the dual mandate of schools and universities, which are called to ensure the quality of: a) the educational offer; b) the professional profile of (student) teachers who (will) work in schools. At the same time, they need to grant (student) teachers the right to use accommodations during their educational and professional career.

The volume presents a multi-perspective reflection on the subject, presenting — in particular — two systematic reviews on international research on the topic and an empirical study conducted within the Italian context. The latter investigated the facets underlying the inclusion of (student) teachers with disabilities/SLDs through a multi-method approach.

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