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

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Index

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

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:

[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:

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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