

The Process Of Formative Self-Assessment As A Methodological Device For The Acquisition Of Inclusive Skills In Trainee Support Teachers.

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Abstract: In light of the *Assessment as Learning* construct, the research proposes an exploratory inquiry based on the key role of *formative self-assessment* as a methodological device facilitating the development and enhancement of *inclusive skills* useful in developing the *professional habitus* of the inclusive teacher. The purpose of the exploratory investigation is to highlight the process of formative self-assessment (formative self-assessment) as a methodological device that, through self-reflection on attitudes and opinions experienced in situated learning experiences through in *Embodied* approach experiential workshops, can contribute to a positive change in the *inclusive skills* of teachers in training through the acquisition of a reflective attitude more conducive to the translation of the principles of inclusion with a possible spillover to their own daily teaching as well. Through a metacognitive questionnaire, it was intended to evaluate assess the spillover of reflective practice on the development of greater awareness of inclusive principles and values and contextual spillover of the same on attitudes, *inclusive skills* with a possible spillover in teaching action from an inclusive perspective. The results of the exploratory investigation showed that the process of *formative self-assessment* activated in the teachers in training to be agent-experimenters of reflective practice facilitating in them the approach to a new *modus operandi* of the *reflective teacher*.

Keywords: formative self-assessment; inclusive skills; feedback; reflective teacher; teacher training.



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1. Introduction

With reference to the synthesis document prepared by the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education (2012), in addition to disciplinary, methodological and specialized competencies, the *inclusive skills* of teachers (curricular and support) represent that foundational and transversal dimension in which to invest in order to achieve an *inclusive professional profile* that can have repercussions on the teaching-learning process and instructional design aimed at inclusion. The same document defines and frames the teacher as a "*reflective*

practitioner" by placing at the center the issue of self-awareness and one's position with respect to inclusive dynamics (Zappalà, Di Gennaro, Aiello, 2022). Among the essential components identified by the "*European Profile of the Inclusive Teacher*" (attitudes and opinions; personal knowledge; behaviors) the most difficult to reach and modify through training paths turns out to be that of attitudes, perceptions and beliefs (Dovigo, 2019). The issue of inclusion is increasingly relevant to teaching professionalism and, in the face of these considerations, it is necessary that all teachers (starting with specialization courses on support) be trained to develop a *professional habitus* characterized by specific *inclusive skills* that orient them to consider the design of teaching practices as the result of a reflective, conscious and participatory act (Sibilio, Aiello, 2015). Promoting and developing *inclusive skills* means providing teachers not only with pragmatic tools but also with conceptual and value-based tools useful for didactically declining the principles of inclusion (Amatori et al., 2021). Such an oriented training places at the center the education of the teacher in his or her wholeness (body, mind, emotions and affectivity) who, starting from itself, from the self-reflection on his functioning and on his own subjective dimension, can develop an inclusive perspective more conducive to the translation of the principles of inclusion and which, in turn, can have implications on his or her own actions and teaching practices. Such an approach opens the horizon toward a broader look at the conception of the inclusive teacher that goes beyond the "*special*" logic and lands in the "*inclusive*" one by responding to the educational task of having to teach everyone. Providing teachers-in-training with tangible experiences on acquiring skills of self-reflection in action and on action (Schön, 1993) involves a landing to knowledge conducted through a path of questioning about oneself and one's actions, experimenting with practices, and promoting the active role of teachers (Crotti, 2017) as an agent-experimenters engaged in the realization of new understandings and to produce a change in experiences and situations (Striano, 2012) by implementing what transformative theory (Mezirow, 2003) calls reflective action or consciousness-raising. Accompanying the trainee support teacher to develop the self-reflective attitude means accompanying him or her to reflect on the work experience in order to develop an inclusive perspective in the design and implementation of teaching practices that can be an important resource for daily work. The self-regulating learner, like the teacher in training, dynamically participates in self-learning processes from various perspectives: from the motivational to the metacognitive to the emotional (Buccolo, 2020). *Assessment as Learning* is considered as a moment in which learning itself is generated (Earl, 2013; Trincherò, 2018). In this perspective, it is assessment itself that becomes a learning experience that takes shape in a

continuous process of self-regulation activated by metacognition, which takes place when the learner personally and systematically monitors what he or she is learning and uses the feedback from that monitoring to make adjustments, adaptations, and changes, even substantial ones, in his or her own understanding, product, or performance (Trinchero, 2023). Based on these premises, the paper aims to present an exploratory investigation highlighting the process of *formative self-assessment* as a methodological device aimed at the acquisition of inclusive competencies of teachers for support in training. Through *formative self-assessment*, it was intended to acquire feedback from future support teachers arising from the self-reflection inherent in a situated learning experience, in an *Embodied Cognition* perspective with an inclusive background, centered on relational competencies (the basis of inclusive competencies) and to investigate the implications in terms of awareness regarding how much thinking in an inclusive perspective is incisive on the acquisition of *inclusive skills* that are reflected on acting attitudes and postures that also translate into inclusive teaching actions and practices. The *Embodied Cognition* perspective responds to an interdisciplinary scientific paradigm converging on the recognition of the role of corporeity, intersubjectivity, embodied simulation and implicit dimensions in development and learning (Damiani, Minghelli, D'Anna, Gomez Paloma, 2021). Perception, action, reflective thinking and metacognition, constitute key dimensions of transformative processes for the training of professionals (Fabbri, 1999). From this theoretical scenery, the present research therefore aimed to investigate:

- Does *formative self-assessment* enable the exploration of processes that foster a dialogue between being in situation and reflecting on action?
- Is self-reflection able to produce an effect of positive "*thawing*" of inclusive attitudes?
- Is *formative self-assessment* as a formative methodological device able to facilitate the transformation of thought forms about the principles and values of inclusion into greater awareness useful for developing greater inclusive skills?
- Can self-reflection on awareness of one's own inclusive thoughts and attitudes have spillover effects on *inclusive skills* that also translate into instructional actions and practices declined according to the principles of inclusion?

The study returns the importance of the self-reflective tool in terms of increased awareness from which emerge stimuli and attitudes tending to inclusive behaviors arising from a change of perspective that pushes teachers to a new approach also in teaching and in their teaching by preparing interventions in an increasingly inclusive perspective.

2. Materials and Methods

The research was conducted on a non-probabilistic sample of 74 teachers in training (69 women and 5 men) enrolled in the specialization course for educational support activities for pupils with disabilities (Cycle VII), held at the European University of Rome in A.Y. 2021/2022, as part of the psycho-educational and educational interventions laboratory with relational disorders, and in training for secondary school.

To probe reflections and attitudes toward inclusive education, the teachers were administered a semi-structured self-completed questionnaire voluntarily and anonymously by Forms Forms application. The survey instrument consisted of a structured list of eight items divided into six open-ended questions (with the option to include a written comment), one closed-ended question and one closed-ended multiple-choice question.

The Format of the metacognitive questionnaire, which can be traced back to the construct of the *reflective practitioner* (Schön, 1993), presents a deliberately very simple and essential structure in order to: quickly find information useful for an initial analysis of the data and the return of formative feedback and shared concluding reflections; and to encourage a process of elaboration of possible evaluative tools centered on *formative self-assessment* for the evaluation of a teaching proposal to be constructed in full autonomy.

The request to write down one's thoughts in the first person was an additional stimulus that offered teachers to reflect on their own identity. Every time one pauses to reflect on oneself, one brings back to mind experienced facts receiving confirmation of one's existence by rediscovering the uniqueness of lived experiences: all this is an expression of that *pedagogy of introspection* (Demetrio, 2000) that gives memory the possibility of becoming the "place" where, through reflective processing, a life story materializes.

The intervention research interest was developed in four phases:

- *Theoretical introduction* to the specific theme on which the experience is focused: the development of relational skills (with self, with other, with context) aimed at facilitating inclusive dynamics.
- *Situated experiential workshop* with an embodied approach, functional for teachers to practically experience the concept of inclusion through the application of inclusive principles and values in a classroom group context through playful-expressive-motor activities (experienced individually, in pairs, small groups and/or the whole group) focused on active listening, intersubjectivity, dialogue, respect for others' time, and oriented to increase self-aware perception in the here and now.
- *Formative Self-Assessment* with the administration of the metacognitive questionnaire in order to stimulate in teachers self-reflection on the experience just lived, on the moments that characterized it and on the perception of the contextual fallout in terms of self-awareness and emotional, relational and social skills (at

the basis of the concept of inclusion) and their impact on the acquisition of conceptual tools and values that would lead to convey what has been experienced and consciously experienced in teaching actions in an inclusive perspective.

- Concluding *debriefing*, conducted by the facilitator and shared in the group (through a video projector), in order to allow, analysis, comparison and immediate commentary of the results of the questionnaire, consolidate learning and facilitate further reflection through *formative feedback*.

The questionnaire was prepared by choosing stimuli capable of facilitating the processes of interconnection between the different dimensions examined (emotions, affectivity, bodies, cognitiveness) and supporting teachers in a process of reflection on their professionalism through the strategy of storytelling in terms of awareness, metacognitive exploration, reflection on experience, motivation and comparison to foster useful margins for improvement in teacher professionalism.

3. Results

The questionnaire, administered following the experiential workshop, returns immediate reflections, opinions and attitudes about the experience just experienced. Items regarding the possibility of developing the inclusive approach on the teaching level show significant variations. In particular:

- ITEM 1: "what words come to in my mind when thinking back to the experience I had?"

The function of the item, in terms of awareness, is to introduce to the practice of the reflective approach and accompany teachers to dive in progressively in order to detect perceptions, attitudes related to the lived experience as a whole. From "figure 1" emerge the key words that characterized the lived experience for most of them with lightheartedness in an atmosphere of confidence, trust, excitement, cheerfulness, inclusion while, for a minimum, with the feeling of confusion, constriction and disorientation. Embarrassment originates precisely from finding oneself in new (unfamiliar) situations and to cope with them through the mobilization of one's skills, knowledge and problem solving to reinforce greater self-awareness and develop new emotional and inclusive skills.

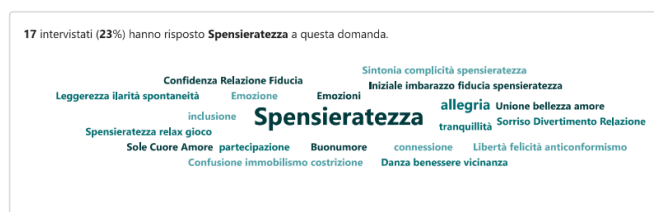


Figure 1. Teachers' answers: words related to feelings, perceptions and conditions that represent personal experience during the experience.

- **ITEM 2.** "Did my participation change during the experience?"
The function of the item, based on metacognitive exploration, is to return data on the change in participation in the experience in terms of immersive quality. The responses observable in "figure 2" show that, in almost all of the number of teachers, active and participatory participation during the experience increased (93%); while for a small part of them it did not change remaining constant (5%) and in only one case it appears to have decreased (1%). This finding can be linked to the specific function of the experiential workshop of progressively engaging people by facilitating the activation of bodily, emotional, affective and cognitive dimensions, the lowering of defenses, the increase of good humor and active listening.



Figure 2. Teachers' answers: self-reflection on the change in their own participation during the experience

- **ITEM 3.** "What did I experience/perceive in relating to different groups? What emotions went through me?"
Item "3" includes two activation cues: the first related to a specific proposed activity and the second with a reinforcing function to the reflective stimulus, in terms of a deeper metacognitive exploration contextualized in a specific situation. It returns the perception of one's functioning in the relationship with self and others within a given context during moments experienced independently alternating with others shared in different groups. From the analysis of the responses, compensating for the transpiring sense of shame and fear in trying a new experience, is the joy generated by the encounter with others that opens the door to change, to a positive attitude, to a greater willingness to get involved, to curiosity to try new experiences and acquire new knowledge oriented toward acceptance, socialization and inclusion: *"Initially I was ashamed and afraid to get carried away, then later I felt joy in sharing this experience with each other"; "Initial embarrassment, involvement, fun"; "fear curiosity desire to be accepted"; "fun, discomfort, change"* (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Teachers' answers: self-reflection on the change of their own participation during the experience.

- **ITEM 4.** "What did I experience/perceive in relating during the experience of following the other's design? What emotions went through me?"

In terms of self-reflection of the contextualized experience in a two-way dialogue situation through nonverbal communication, the function of item "4", in an exploratory key, focuses on the ability to empathize. It is found that in a large proportion of cases, entering into empathy was achieved through the passage of several stages that starting from feeling in awe evolved toward states of mind tending toward calmness, listening, and understanding (Figure 4): "*sharing, listening to the other without words, empathy*"; "*awe, lightness, calm*"; "*anxiety fear inadequacy*"; "*tension, relaxation, exchange*".



Figure 4. Teachers' answers: metacognitive exploration on the relational dynamics of empathizing.

- ITEM 5. "What did I experience/perceive in relating with my eyes closed while remaining contact with the other only with my index finger? What emotions went through me?"

The function of item "5" focuses on introspective skills through self-reflection on inner dialogue with self and, simultaneously, sensitive dialogue with the other with eyes closed and in physical contact only through the fingertips of the index finger. In a deep experience geared toward stimulating introspection, an initial difficulty emerges in managing both the relationship with the inner dialogue and a relationship with the other experienced with more intensity. This situation, while for some remained unchanged throughout the experience, for a good portion of the other teachers was transformed by progressively allowing them to enter into active listening with themselves and the other in a condition of mutual trust: "*calm serenity tenderness*"; "*difficulty*"; "*initial embarrassment, entrusted, sharing*"; "*fear, tenacity, resourcefulness*"; "*awe, embarrassment, discomfort*"; "*awe, tranquility, calm*".



Figure 5. Teachers' answers: introspective exploration on entering into active listening with self and other.

- ITEM 6. What aspects characterized the experience?
The function of item "6" is aimed at detecting the aspects that characterized the experience through a self-reflection that can return greater awareness and an elaboration related to the acquisition of inclusion-oriented thoughts, approaches, attitudes. From the teachers' returns, aspects emerge that are responsive to the objectives-stimulus identified to facilitate the process from which reflections on attitudes and attitudes such as "the natural inclination toward the other"; "*be-*

coming aware of respecting the rhythm of the other"; "rediscovering one's own emotional world and relationship with the other"; "communicating thoughts and emotions with the different sensory channels"; "to inclusiveness, great willingness and communication with the other" (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Teachers' answers: aspects that characterized the experience and should characterize.

- **ITEM 7.** Why will this experience contribute to my professionalism as a teacher? The function of item "7" is based on metacognitive exploration and self-reflection regarding the added value that came out of the experience and the spillover in terms of professionalism as a teacher also with a view to possible future progress. From Figure "7" we find that 53% of people responded, "it made me reflect on the value of the educational relationship"; 15% return, "it represented a formative enrichment": 15% say, "what I learned today represents an additional resource when I will be in school"; 3% believe: "the experience "provided me with more skills"; 14%, with the response other, claim "it gave me an additional tool for both observation and exchange with the other," "it made me think about some aspects of the relationship, the effects of certain behaviors and feelings.



Figure 7. Teachers' answers: reflections on what possible contribution the experience can make to teacher professionalism.

- **ITEM 8.** Personal comments and reflections: what did this experience leave me, what awareness?
The function of item "8" is to offer an additional space for self-reflection that can be a stimulus to the consolidation or acquisition of a *modus operandi* proper to the *reflective teacher* aimed at delineating the *habitus of the inclusive teacher*. The teachers' responses return the awareness that *"the value of relationship is something that is not only written in books but is learned by living it"*, *"we are not always ready to open up to others"*, *"we need to start having relationships of bodily closeness again in order to educate our students in affective-emotional relationships"*, and that *"it was fundamental and interesting to reflect on and understand the foundational cores of a relationship: respect for the other, attention to the other, tuning in to the other"*.

4. Discussion

The specialization path is of particular importance in the construction of the *professional habitus* of the support teacher which is not only based on knowledge and skills, but which is substantiated by an essential value dimension in which individual biographies, intertwined with training and professional experiences, constitute determining factors within inclusive processes (Aiello, Di Gennaro, Girelli, Olley, 2018).

The attitudes of support teachers (and curricular teachers) play a fundamental role in the development of an effective inclusive activity.

The exploratory investigation presented aimed to activate a reflective process during the action and on the action (Schön, 1993) which, starting from the attitudes implemented by the teachers in relational processes, contributed to creating a repertoire of experiences and practices that can serve as inspiration for specific inclusive action strategies to be implemented.

In agreement with the evidence in the literature (Farrell, 2012; Mezirow, 2003; Michelini, 2013), the study confirmed how *formative self-assessment* appears to be a very significant methodological device for triggering that process of re-elaboration useful for exploring profound and detect those soft emotional-affective variables considered an indispensable part of the inclusive skills of professionals who work in the school context, especially as support teachers.

The *formative self-assessment* allowed each teacher to explore processes that favored a dialogue between being in the situation and reflecting on the action, between being immersed in the context and knowing how to distance oneself from it according to a multi-perspective vision and reflection (Rossi and Giannandrea, 2010). In this sense, the self-reflective process has therefore allowed them to self-evaluate their skills and improve their relational and inclusive skills also with a view to immediate usability at a professional level in their work both in terms of attitudes and behaviors and, in a prospective vision, also as an investment in a possible impact on the planning of educational interventions.

Knowing the functioning of the mind to build teaching that is more suitable for integrated and global functioning promotes the recognition and development of *inclusive skills* and socio-emotional and relational skills and allows teaching to be made more accessible and suitable for all students, even for those with special educational needs.

From the metacognitive questionnaire, the characterizing traits of the laboratory experience most directly related to the dimensions and principles of inclusive educational practices emerge in the items (items 6 and 7) recognized by teachers as a further possibility of becoming agents of change. While item 8 shows the impact of the reflective experience on the *modus operandi of the reflective teacher* as a useful factor in contributing to the emergence of the *habitus of the inclusive teacher*.

Even considering the multiplicity of factors that may have contributed to outlining some answers, it is still possible to hypothesize that the use of *formative self-assessment* contributed significantly to orienting teachers towards a change of perspective, to encouraging an "*thawing*" of attitudes resistant, to encourage problem solving mechanisms in dealing with critical moments, to rework and transform in an evolutionary form an approach aimed at openness towards others and active listening, to encourage dialogues with oneself and with others through empathic communica-

tion, to acquire a reflective attitude more favorable to the translation of inclusive principles within one's daily teaching action.

The emergence of new awarenesses in situations experienced intensely and with intentionality is an indication of the transformative capacity of reflective paths in a prospective vision that focuses on possibilities as well as constraints (Ceruti, 2009).

It is essential to increasingly and consolidate the culture of self-evaluation since in the complexity of the 21st century all teachers (not just support teachers), including university ones, need to learn to be able to self-evaluate their own work and capitalize on the results by tending to develop one's *growth-mindset* (Dweck, 2017).

5. Conclusions

The research work presented here is part of the projects accepted by the IRCIT (International Research Center for Inclusion and Teacher Training) of the European University of Rome.

Naturally, the preliminary results presented here will require rereading in a broader context and, in reference to the size of the sample, the survey does not allow a generalization of the data collected.

Nonetheless, these seem to constitute a good starting point for a work which, starting from the exploration of feelings, emotions and thoughts of teachers in training, can offer a contribution to the debate relating to the importance of *formative self-assessment* as a training methodological device in able to transform thought forms on the principles of inclusion into greater awareness, *inclusive professional skills* functional to undertaking educational actions in an inclusive perspective.

In order for this reading to find new confirmations, further future studies of similar experimental paths dedicated to the formation of inclusive teaching both in Italy and abroad are hypothesized.

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