

Analysis of the contest of support teacher training and renewal of teacher inclusion methods at school

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Abstract: This article describes what was found through a field survey carried out through the administration of a questionnaire addressed to support teachers regarding the identification of their fears, fragilities, expectations, interpersonal relationships with colleagues, pupils and parents, and training needs. The results point toward prospects for training investment, aimed precisely at the training compensation of this important profile of professional for the educational and helping relationship in school integration on the prevention of distress and management of behavioral dynamics.

Keywords: Support teacher; Training; Formative fragility; Outdoor education.

1. Introduction

During the experience of university teaching in the TFA, i.e., the Active Formative Apprenticeship for support teachers, a certain phenomenology of exclusion of those placed on support emerged several times, experiencing directly on their own person, forms of bullying, estrangement from programming, hostility from managers and colleagues, misunderstanding of families, and malaise of minors. The research delves with qualitative and quantitative data into the perceptions of contemporary concerns of teachers, of all grades, with respect to their instructional duties. Among the strongest concerns, a prominent place is occupied by the experience of marginalization and exclusion from the teaching profession. Instability in the function of the teacher is evident both in the relationship between teachers and in the feedback with families as a negative perception of authority of the support teacher. It is scientifically interesting to investigate the actual consistency of these concerns, since it is assumed that the construction of the identity profile is more solid in the presence of a demand for high professionalism to be acquired in university training courses. The qualitative and quantitative survey was conducted in the University of Roma Tre by administering a questionnaire sent online prepared with Google Forms. Through 20 questions, appropriately structured, an attempt was made to give substance to the concerns of teachers, the degree of satisfaction in teaching and the proposals of current and future teachers regarding the management of their professional role.

2. The University Context

The survey was conducted in TFA support courses during the academic year 2023-2024. The selected sample consisted of 97 support teachers who voluntarily responded to the invitation to participate anonymously in the survey. Both closed and



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open-ended questions were treated with the value scale from 1 to 5. Closed questions were assigned a value between 1 and 5 where 1 corresponds to the lowest rating and 5 to the highest rating using the Likert scale. From the point of view of pedagogical literature, we recall that some studies on the curriculum and competencies (Frabboni, 1987; Ranieri, 2022; European Commission, 2023), as well as contributions on the support teacher (Birch, 2018; Bertagna, 2011; Chistolini, 2011; Murdaca, 2022) highlight the extent of change in Italian and European schools along the path, not always easy, oriented to the construction of professional profiles adapted to the expectations of the increasingly complex and varied society, in terms of content and tools of teaching. We reflect on the proposed construction of a training model, open to the innovation of inclusive methods, such as that on outdoor education (Chistolini, 2022) that can be considered, in order to create positive spaces of interdisciplinary communication among all teachers in training environments where the constrictive patterns of the most usual intersubjective behavior are loosened. Finally, the scientific assumptions elaborated in the medical-pedagogical research in support of the developmental age (Villanova 2010; 2012) allow us to reason about the status of the issue of the training of professionals with high degrees of responsibility and to make assessments with respect to the data emerging from this research, which, although circumscribed, is significant about the takeover of the role of younger support teachers in the school.

3. The characteristics of the selected sample

From the battery of eight questions on gender, age, teaching discipline, years of service in the school, educational qualification, degree of achievement in the job, motivations in choosing the teaching profession, and repetition of the choice to teach over time, intended to collect the sociodemographic data of the participants, the identity profile of the sample emerges, which is composed of 87 % females and 13 % males. The most represented age group is 31 years and above with 87 % of respondents, the minority % age of 11 % concerns teachers between 24 and 30 years of age. As for the discipline of affiliation, 50 % of the sample teaches humanities-literary subjects, 28 % teach science, physics-mathematics, 12 % technical-practical, and 10 % art subjects. Eighty % have been teaching for less than 10 years and 20 % for more than 10 years. Regarding educational qualification, 80% say they attend TFA and have post-graduate degrees represented by postgraduate courses. Although 67 % of the sample state that they feel fulfilled in the profession, there is a 10 % who trust in the future on improving their skills and focus with respect to affective and empathetic relationship with children. The uncertain observe everyday life in anticipation of noticeable changes. Interestingly, 83% of the sample chose the teaching profession out of free and passionate conviction. 90% of the respondents would redo their choice to teach, and among those who would not redo this choice, amounting to 7% of the sample, emerges the observation of the long process to obtain tenure, low pay, having come to teaching after years of experience in other roles, finally a 3% declare themselves undecided. Overall, a profound adherence to the profession prevails even with the various difficulties reported among which should not be underestimated the frustration related both to concerns in interpersonal relations with colleagues, managers, pupils and parents and to the impassable road leading to tenure. In the background is the resigned profile of the teacher who despite everything believes in the real value of the profession.

4. The relationship between type of degree and willingness to continue studying

The responses on the possession and specificity of the degree show that there is a certain reluctance to state this fact: 80 % of the sample answered the question, compared to 20 % of the sample not answering the question. Among the respondents, 77 % hold a bachelor's degree and about a quarter of the sample holds only a high school diploma. Humanities degrees predominate with 37 % and pedagogical degrees with 27 %; 18 % hold a scientific degree and another 18 % do not specify. In fact, the university qualification course mainly interests those who come from literary, legal, pedagogical, psychological, and sociological studies, while those who indicate a strictly scientific background, with studies in biology, physics, chemistry, are a minority. The graduate who comes from humanities studies is evidently willing to continue education throughout his or her working career. Whereas, the graduate who comes from scientific studies finds himself having to go back to study, however he accepts the challenge of renewing his education and agrees that for the school, previous preparation is not sufficient, when even inadequate for the needs of adolescents and the school community.

5. Support teacher self-evaluation and sense of exclusion

In the vast majority of cases, the attitude of self-evaluation is definitely positive and reaches high statistical levels. In fact, on most of the 20 propositions brought to the attention of the respondents, responses of broad agreement are received. From the point of view of major choices, we note that the most supported propositions concern the commitment to weave good relationships with family and colleagues and to value commitment, personal experience, and empathetic collaboration while there is a particular propensity to value Research, Continuing Education and improvement of one's work tools. The sample prefers documentation activities, active participation, reference to pedagogical models, disciplined specificity, motivation to involve all students with special care to the most vulnerable segments of the student population, resources and strategies for better teaching. There are those who complain of problems in educational planning in different teaching situations, thus there is a clear difficulty in working as a team in the complexity of the school situation. In general, we can say that it is considered important to collaborate on the issue of planning, which would certainly need a strengthening of the ability to work in teams with appropriate strategies and with a greater investment in the pedagogical, didactic and docimological skills of teachers. Support teachers suffer from the lack of a real space for discussion with the curricular teachers, who are the only ones who plan in a general sense on the whole class. Support colleagues are entrusted with the task of adapting what has been defined in the general lines.

6. The fields of expression of professionalism

The prevailing fields that best measure the expression of the professionalism of the support teacher concern: the classroom, the pupils, the daily relationships of interaction for the performance of responsible and institutional tasks that for many hours concern the relationship with the pupils. Regarding empathic, motivational and collaborative relationships, reference is made to the teacher's willingness: to attribute trust, open-mindedness, behavioral and affective; to care for the pupil thus substan-

tiating motivation in the educational relationship. Finally, support teachers report on the relevance of teaching methodologies and strategies for learning. This area highlights teachers' concern to express themselves in the knowledge, sharing and application of methodologies and strategies for learning. The sample is structured in such a way as to view the acceptance of disability as a time not only of empathetic relationship but also as an opportunity for curricular growth in the classroom. On the other hand, those who accentuate the value of disciplinary teaching refer to the goal of providing students with the cognitive tools necessary for inclusion in school and society. On training, there emerges an awareness of the teacher's need for continuing education aimed not only at improving his or her relationship with children but also at acquiring more knowledge, skills and competencies related to the chosen teaching discipline. In conclusion, we can say that the teacher's concerns are maximally about the environmental context in which the educational relationship takes place.

7. A pupil-centered school

The teachers sampled emphasize that their greatest concerns are about, in order of importance: pupils, colleagues and family members. The 97 responses collected can be grouped into seven broad categories described below:

1. pupil-centered responses, numbering 23;
2. responses on the value of society, numbering 19;
3. responses addressed to the evaluation of the work environment, numbering 10;
5. responses of appreciation of the institutions, numbering 13;
6. responses on teaching, numbering 12;
7. multi-articulated responses that include elements present in the previous categories, numbering 4.

Pupils, placed in the first category of analysis, always occupy a priority position. As an example, we report some thoughts recorded in the survey of the questionnaire administered online:

"Today's difficulty of arousing interest and motivation in young people. At the same time it is a challenge and a cause for concern".

"Behavioral dynamics, especially related to emotional dysregulation, which are emerging more and more".

In addition to the focus on interest, motivation and behavior of pupils, teachers speak of concern for school success, classroom management and involvement. They also emphasize the presence of "oppositional pupils," hinting at the limits of their specialized preparation. Regarding the responses collected in the second category, which we denote as *society*, we note the strong weight assigned to the social context and its protagonists, as a concern about what others think of the teacher and his or her work. This includes parents, who are a very important sounding board and such as to influence and condition the teacher's own dedication to his or her work. The two significant statements below show the high impact of interpersonal communication and intergenerational changes.

"Communication with parents is increasingly difficult".

"The inability to keep up with the rapid changes in society and the new generations".

Prejudices and poor training complete the picture of concerns. With respect to the work environment, the gruesome reality emerges about colleagues who seem to have little awareness of both the paths of inclusion in the school and their own professional qualification. In this regard, some respondents write,

"Incompetence of colleagues and little inclusiveness".

"What worries me most are the colleagues whose goal is to finish notebooks, but they do not go beyond that ... they don't know updates, they don't document themselves, and with them it is almost impossible to have a confrontation. "

In the fourth category are the responses of self-assessment of one's human and professional personality. Here the doubts and misgivings about one's role continually challenged by agents outside and inside the school emerge.

"The fear of not being able to transmit knowledge to everyone".

"The not being up to the task of meeting the needs of my children. "

Fear, appropriateness, limitations are the variables that most affect the self-assessment of the teaching role. In the responses collected in the fifth category, there emerges a call to institutions that do not facilitate educational tasks through the rigidity of procedures and rules, as written in the thoughts of two teachers here extrapolated from the general sample.

"Too much bureaucracy being imposed on teachers".

"Lack of respect for school rules and the figure of the teacher. "

The sixth category groups comments on the structure of teaching. One complains about the unsustainability of the quantity of subjects to be taught, atavistic methodologies, and plurality of learning styles:

"Number of subjects I teach".

"The immobility of some teaching methods, constantly the same over the decades that do not pose the slightest question of having to first observe the school population profoundly changed over time".

"When there are many in the classroom, I cannot simultaneously manage the different learning styles".

There are also observations on the problematic nature of digital ethics. In addition, there emerges a keen awareness of the failure of good practices introduced in the classroom:

"To have the awareness that the strategic and methodological inclusive good practices that I am so active so that they are understood and implemented by all are not always understood in their modality or practiced effectively".

Finally, we report the observations of the four teachers who make multi-articulated comments in which we see the teachers' broad concern about themselves, society and the future.

"Relating with new students with disabilities by seeking the right strategies and methodologies useful for developing social, relational, sensory-motor, communicative autonomy. Also of concern is the evolution of the new generations, their education and the new educational challenges that characterize today's society".

"Non-collaboration between teachers and between teachers and families turns out to be one of the great relationship issues in the school context. Collaboration is essential to understand the student's experience and starting from that and his peculiarities to understand how to carry out personalized educational planning to enhance his potential and once understood his weaknesses, thanks to the collaboration with families and all the figures in the school help him to better face the school path."

"We find ourselves having to carry out in addition to the teaching activity and the related submerged work of preparing lessons and tests, as well as the bureaucratic part of processing paperwork, and we also have to carry out important organizational roles for the benefit of the entire school community as referees or members of committees: these are activities that sometimes require a lot of commitment in extracurricular hours."

"I am concerned about not sharing with the leadership the educational-didactic goals and to achieve, even the methodologies and strategies used to achieve the goals. Not having experience, I am at my first experience in school, I worry about not knowing how to manage some dynamics"

Overall, the experience of support teachers is characterized by conspicuousness of the importance of their role and attention to the limits and possibilities for improvement of their educational and pedagogical action.

8. Sufferings in work and attempts to solve them

Question number 5 asks respondents to indicate any unpleasant experiences experienced in the performance of the teaching profession, to specify the characters of particular unpleasant experiences, and to indicate how the condition of professional discomfort was overcome. Such unpleasant experiences are a source of distress in the workplace and generate the search for solutions. This is a rather articulate open-ended question to which 13 subjects of the 97 sampled did not respond. Detailed analysis of the 84 open-ended responses received allows the judgments to be grouped into 7 categories for the qualitative study of the sample's lived experience. The seven categories are identified qualitatively and quantitatively as:

- 1.NR responses not received, numbering 13 or 13% of the sample;
- 2.NN responses in which subjects state that they did not have unpleasant experiences, numbering 15 or 16% of the sample;
- 3.CO responses in which unpleasant experiences are to be reported to colleagues, in number of 30 or 31% of the sample;

4.AL responses in which unpleasant experiences are to be reported to pupils, in number of 22, accounting for 23% of the sample;

5.FA responses in which the unpleasant experiences are to be reported to the pupils' family, numbering 12, accounting for 12% of the sample;

6. DI responses in which the unpleasant experiences are to be referred to the school leader, in number of 3, accounting for 3% of the sample;

7. GE responses in which the unpleasant experiences are indicated in a generic way that cannot be linked to a specific context of reference, in number of 2, or 2% of the sample. Overall, we note that 54% of the sample attributes the clearly negative situation experienced to colleagues and pupils.

The strong and substantial reference to colleagues highlights the relevance of the work environment that determines the quality of teachers' professional life. Equally worrisome is the figure on pupils perceived not always to be in favor of the teacher. The family is mentioned mainly for lack of understanding of the teacher's work, for non-acceptance of the evaluation deemed untrue of the real abilities of the child who manifests learning difficulties, for lack of communication between parents and teachers. The figure of the school principal does not often appear in the teachers' arguments, he may be a controversial figure, sometimes totally supportive of the teachers, but he may also appear as a person with poor interpersonal mediation skills, far from the teacher's conception of teaching and even capable of discriminating against certain subjects to the advantage of subjects perhaps considered stronger and weightier in the overall assessment, subjects presumably placed in an implied, though not overtly stated, merit ranking. Generic statements evade the response by remaining on the periphery of personal experience. Generic responses include mentioning bullying as a word and without data to understand how and when it was emergent in the unpleasant experience, or mentioning the presence of the unpleasant experiences without giving elements for understanding the specific school situation. We report significant examples referring to the categories with the acronyms CO AL FA DI GE by selecting an example to grouping so as to have a picture of the unpleasant experience.

"I had unpleasant experiences with a support teacher, in that she was uncooperative and above all had a superior air, just because she had just specialized in TFA, she did nothing but criticize her colleagues and also me. There was a civil relationship after a discussion, but the situation was not completely overcome, as that colleague was convinced of her ideas, which in my opinion were wrong and not constructive for the boy with disabilities."(CO)

"I faced unpleasant experiences during my first substitute teaching in a middle school. I was a novice and the classes I was assigned were quite turbulent and disrespectful of each other. Over time, however, I learned to get to know the students and adapt my teaching to their "liveliness" by making this the strength of the class and the reason to work on. It is never easy, but with the right tools that you often build and choose as you go along, you are able to enrich your experience."(AL)

"Parents often do not realize the role that the educator, in my case of a children's service, plays. They often demand things that are impossible to do with classes of 15/29 children and do not realize the work we do."(FA)

"Employers, while valuing me, felt that my empathy and collaborative spirit was something that needed to be corrected because it served individualism and competition."(DI)

"I experienced them and overcame them by being committed."(GE)

Defense and escape mechanisms from unpleasant experiences mostly refer to building confrontation, dialogue among colleagues and with families. In the case of pupils, there is a tendency to turn to specialist personnel, such as psychologists, and to review one's teaching methods, avoiding rigid and crystallized positions.

There is no lack of persistence of critical situations, which are not easy to solve and can lead to transfer to another school, dismissal, as in the cases of Gender Identity, isolation and resorting to massive doses of resilience. A few teachers also speak of patience as an indispensable endowment in the face of children defined as "oppositional," thus meaning pupils who manifest conflict behaviors toward the teacher and for whom there is a clear need for collaborative, ethical-social education pathways. We can observe how the collected results show a tendency to actually escape awareness of the school community's deficiency. It is almost absent the sense of belonging to a supportive community on which the future of the school and the best success of the educational path depends.

Just as almost absent is the fourth goal indicated by the 2030 Agenda on raising the level of quality education. Indeed, the fourth goal speaks of "ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education" and "promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all."

These two aspects, school community presence and commitment to improving the quality of education emerge as significant challenges destined to be weakened by the eventual persistence of unpleasant experiences in the practice of the teaching profession.

9. Conclusions

In the face of a common platform of discomfort in the working relationship between professionals and in the construction of the network, salient features of a positive projectuality aimed essentially at three areas of awareness in the construction of an identity profile of high professionalism emerge.

1. Need and motivation for real Continuing and Transversal Training since the construction of the most solid identity profile was assumed in the presence of a demand for high professionalism to be acquired preferably in university training courses.

2. Awareness of the greater investment that educational planning requires from all teachers who should work better together by relating to each other, also taking into account the skills gained by each on both disciplinary and docimological levels. Support teachers and curricular teachers can be understood as needing to mature attitudes of fruitful confrontation for the good of the male and female students, avoiding exclusions and all involving each other under the banner of a fruitful interaction between professionals in order to finally arrive at a widely shared planning. It is emphasized that the push for real collaboration that needs more than just alignment to verification codes needs to be implemented more effectively.

3. The growing awareness of an educational responsibility that goes beyond that of simple literacy or that is limited to providing notional content. Conversely, there transpires as a critical element the realization that communication defects, which have

become discomfort and maladjustment, configure real scenarios, sometimes mobbing, of which people often do not know who to ask for help. Such scenarios are not only present in homogeneous environments by professional profile recruitment but also among figures who should create synergy and continuity of delegation among themselves as curricular teachers, support teachers and educators. Moreover, a disconcerting element that emerges from the survey is how much the drive toward curricular achievement neglects indispensable reflections on the causes of any failures and thus substantially on primary prevention policies (absolute risk reduction). Such deficient policies affect by exacerbating the teacher's formative fragility, in the face of an objective and reported worsening emotional and behavioral distress of pupils. Pupils' vulnerability has an incidental impact on teachers' awareness and ability to convey human and curricular content and is such that it creates an unstable situation in the teacher's function, both in the relationship between teachers and in the feedback with families that weaken the teacher's perception of authority. On the whole, a deep adherence to the profession prevails even with the various difficulties reported among which should not be underestimated the frustration related both to concerns in interpersonal relations with colleagues, managers, pupils (emotional dysregulation) and parents and to the impassable road leading to tenure. In the background is the resigned profile of the teacher who despite everything believes in the real value of the profession. The analysis of these data offers a definite direction in which to invest training resources in the future on the prevention of distress and the management of behavioral dynamics. In this sense, the training proposal is increased by the new offer represented by the courses, currently being prepared, on the Pizzigoni method. These courses aim to strengthen the research capacity of innovation strategies, preparing for specific methodological training, including in outdoor education, which has been extensively tested and validated with teachers and managers in service and in university preparation.

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