Journal of Inclusive Methodology and Technology in Learning and Teaching
ISSN 2785-5104
Anno 6 n. 3 (2026)

EDIZIONI UNIVERSITARIE ROMANE
editoria scientifica dal 1952

Inclusive and Generative Teacher Agency: A National Systematic Review within Evidence-Based Practice (EBP)

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Abstract: The context in which teachers work on a daily basis is constantly evolving and encompasses diverse cultures and life circumstances, requiring carefully tailored programmes that focus on the acquisition of *professional skills* and *competencies*. Ever since teachers were recognised as 'key figures' in institutional and social change, *agency* has been regarded as one of the cornerstones of the *teacher's professional profile* and as one of the objectives of professional development programmes. This focus on agency naturally draws on the paradigm of *Inclusive Education* as a regulatory criterion and guiding principle for teaching practice, requiring the mobilisation of resources, knowledge and values that entail a continuous process aimed at bringing about change. From this perspective, teachers' agency is characterised by the element of intentionality, by their own perception of effectiveness, and by the ability to outline possible courses of action that enable the exercise of choice from an ecological perspective, connecting the individual and the environment and highlighting the mutual influences between cultures, structures and action in educational and training processes. To this end, this paper presents a *systematic review* of the national literature (using the *PRISMA protocol*) focusing on Teacher Agency from an inclusive and generative perspective.

Keywords: Teachers, Generative Agency, Research, Teaching Practice

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1. Introduction[2]

Over the past few decades, one of the most hotly debated topics in the field of pedagogy and teaching — both nationally and internationally — has been the initial

[1] This article is the result of a collaborative effort by the two authors. For the purposes of individual attribution, the authorship of the individual paragraphs is as follows: paragraph 1 was written by Paolina Mulè; paragraphs 2 to 7 were written by Daniela Gulisano. The conclusions (paragraph 8) were drafted jointly.

[2] This paper forms part of the University's PIACERI research project entitled "*Design for All. Progetto di vita e Patti di Comunità tra Scuola, Famiglia e Territorio per una Società più inclusiva*", coordinated by Prof. Paolina Mulè. It was developed as part of the activities of the research laboratory on *Teacher Agency e pratiche professionali in-azione*, coordinated by Profs. Daniela Gulisano and Paolina Mulè, Department of Education, University of Catania.

and in-service training of teachers. Based on well-established *scientific evidence*, this is recognised as a decisive factor in teaching and learning processes, closely linked to improvements in academic outcomes and the *well-being* of both teachers and pupils. First and foremost, there is no doubt that teachers must possess a broad cultural grounding and a rigorous theoretical background in the humanities: psychology, pedagogy, sociology, philosophy and anthropology, as Dewey foreshadowed in *The Sources of the Science of Education* (1929) (Mulè, 2005; 2024), but also methodological and didactic competence, as well as skills in planning and practical application. The latter should not be understood as mere empirical knowledge or an impromptu «practice of the practitioners» (Laneve, 2023, p. 73), but rather as that *professional knowledge* which, whilst drawing on practical experience, is reworked by the teacher through a constant process of professional, individual and collegial *reflection*, in order to then design empowering and inclusive learning environments with challenging individual and cooperative tasks "for everyone and for each individual". According to the dominant pedagogical tradition of the Gentilian model, which has favoured the transmission of (Theory) – which for many years was widespread in Italian schools and still persists in some cases, to the detriment of practice – the latter still all too often reduced to a mere application of theoretical models – together with a lack of tools to address the complexity of real school dynamics, has generated and continues to generate a significant gap between academic training and day-to-day classroom practice. This disconnect exposes future teachers to phenomena known in the literature as '*reality shock', 'transition shock' or 'choc de pratique'* (Voss, 2019).

Hence the need to move beyond mere "transmissive" teaching, placing training programmes linked to contextualised work practices at the heart of curriculum design and classroom management. It is the act of formative self-analysis that must be valued and elevated to a new paradigm of contemporary *Teacher Education*: a process capable of 'deconstructing and reconstructing, whilst always highlighting the complexities inherent in the trajectory of every profession, which, precisely when it is rethought, is renewed' (Gulisano, 2026, p. 32). This paradigm is linked to the *collegial and co-design dimension of Teacher Agency*, as foreshadowed by Lave & Wenger, Hargreaves and Fullan. Agency is never an isolated act, but develops within professional educational communities.

Underlying this training model is a professional epistemology of a dialectical and reflective nature, through which the interconnections between general pedagogy, special needs education and subject-specific pedagogy can be re-examined (Mulè, 2018). The teacher is thus conceived as an *intentional agent* (Calvert, 2016) of personal and social development, whose role is not limited to promoting subject-specific learning, but extends to fostering the overall processes of personal growth.

Ever since teachers were recognised as key actors in institutional and social change, teacher agency has become a cornerstone of the teaching profession and a priority objective of training programmes. This focus on action aligns naturally with the paradigm of *Inclusive Education* (Mulè, 2022), adopted as the regulatory criterion and guiding principle of teaching practice, requiring an integrated mobilisation of resources, knowledge and values geared towards change.

From this perspective, the *teacher's agency* (Ferrari, Taddei, 2017; Gulisano, 2019, 2022, 2024, 2026; Ellerani, 2021) is characterised by the element of intentionality, by their own perception of effectiveness, and by the ability to outline possible courses of action that enable the exercise of choice from an ecological perspective,

connecting the individual and the environment and highlighting the mutual influences between cultures, structures and action in educational and training processes. This generative tension inherent in educational practice, in fact, implies a constant exercise of transformative competence and reflexivity, as an interpretative and methodological framework aimed at bringing to light knowledge of and within action, at unravelling the implicit, and at acquiring greater self-awareness and awareness of one's own theories in support of intentionally oriented action. Thus, the concept of agency (Sen, 1992; Nussbaum, 2002; Priestley & Biesta, 2015) requires an exploration along a continuum in which the teacher's individual characteristics, contextual factors and the actual opportunities for action offered by the school community are interwoven.

If Agency is understood as the ability of teachers to act deliberately and constructively in order to steer their own professional development and influence that of others, it is essential to *reflect* on the ways in which interaction takes place between the agent (the teacher) and the student. It is through teaching practice that we can study teaching itself, as well as the teacher's professional competence, in order to grasp its crucial aspects and the meaning and purpose behind any *action undertaken*.

From this perspective, generative agency (Bracci, 2017; Fabbri, 2018; Gulisano, 2026), understood in pedagogical terms, can only be investigated by immersing oneself in real teaching contexts, where the value of action also emerges from the recognition of pupils as bearers of their own agency and relational agency. This gives rise to the pressing need for initial and in-service training geared towards developing this reflective and collaborative approach; training that should no longer be viewed as a mere bureaucratic formality or institutional duty, but as a genuine right to the teacher's personal and professional growth, to be pursued through situated methodological approaches (such as action research, case studies and the reflective analysis of peer practices).

In this sense, the contemporary world calls for a reinterpretation of agency, even in the face of the complexity of technological or hybrid learning environments, as agency is now also expressed through the fruitful and conscious integration of media and educational technologies. In the current socio-technical landscape, the exercise of teacher agency transcends the purely methodological and relational dimension of face-to-face teaching to extend to the fruitful and conscious *hybridisation of media and educational technologies*. The teacher is not limited to the instrumental or functional adoption of digital devices, but acts as an intentional curator of learning environments (Selwyn, 2016; Rivoltella, 2017). From this perspective, technological and pedagogical practice takes the form of a reflective act and an act of cultural resistance: *Teacher Agency* is expressed in the ability to deconstruct the presumed neutrality of media, by selecting, redesigning and integrating technologies in accordance with the contexts and the inclusive and educational needs of the class (Koehler & Mishra, 2009; Biesta, 2015). The teacher exercising agency neither passively submits to nor accepts the dictates or pressures of technological innovation, but critically re-appropriates them, directing them towards cognitive emancipation, equity and the promotion of the students' own agency.

2. Systematic Review Methodology

In light of these considerations and the growing number of empirical studies on *inclusive and generative teacher agency* recorded in recent years, it was deemed necessary to conduct a *systematic review* of the most recent national (and subsequently international) literature. The aim of moving beyond a purely theoretical perspective, in order to understand how inclusive teacher agency is put into practice, made it appropriate to provide an overview of the findings emerging from empirical research. This approach sheds light on multiple dimensions of the construct, leading to a more rigorous conceptual definition and synthesising the available evidence. Finally, the results of the review were discussed in the light of the specific characteristics of the Italian context, analysing in particular the factors that facilitate or hinder the development of professional teacher agency.

To this end, the PRISMA (*Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses*) protocol was adopted, whose *workflow* is divided into four stages: identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion. The flowchart based on the PRISMA 2020 Statement (Page et al., 2021) was adapted to ensure complete transparency in the study selection process (Figure 1).

This review focused on analysing inclusive and *generative teacher agency in school setting*s, with the aim of identifying its recurring patterns and distinctive features. Specifically, the study set out to answer the following research questions:

• RQ1: How does the national empirical literature describe and analyse teacher agency from an inclusive and generative perspective in school contexts?
• RQ2: What teaching, organisational and co-design practices characterise the exercise of inclusive and generative teacher agency in everyday school life?

3. Database Analysis

The search for and compilation of the bibliographic corpus were carried out in August 2026 using the academic search engine *Google Scholar*. This methodological choice was dictated by the absence of a unified bibliographic database specifically dedicated to Italian scientific journals, which made it appropriate to use a tool with broad coverage. The articles were identified using the following search terms: *Teacher Agency, teachers, inclusion, generativity*.

4. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

A search of the databases yielded a preliminary corpus of 135 entries. These *records* were subjected to a systematic selection process, defined by precise inclusion and exclusion criteria, in preparation for the subsequent phase of categorisation and qualitative analysis.

		Description
Inclusion criteria	Population	Teachers in pre -school, primary and secondary schools (lower and upper secondary).
	Context	Formal school settings (state or state -recognised) and/or university-level or in-service teacher training programmes.
	Topic	Articles must contain at least one of the keywords included in the search query within one or more of the following parts of the work: title, abstract, keywords.
	Type of study	*Peer-reviewed* empirical research (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, case studies, action research).
	Language and Time Period	Articles published in English or Italian over the last 10 years (2016–2026).
Exclusion criteria	Population	Corporate mentors, parents, purely administrative staff or school leaders without a focus on teachers' agency.
	Type of study	Purely theoretical essays without an empirical basis, editorial notes, book reviews, corporate reports.

Table 1: Inclusion - Exclusion Criteria

5. Research and screening processes

Following a careful analysis aimed at removing duplicates and studies lacking adequate methodological transparency, the selection process — carried out by *screening titles and abstracts* — led to the identification of 13 eligible studies. Subsequent examination of the full text led to the exclusion of 8 articles, as they were either irrelevant to the subject of the investigation or did not meet the established criteria.

This initial selection process represents a fundamental methodological step in focusing the analysis on the most significant contributions. The in-depth examination ensured that only those studies strictly complying with the inclusion criteria were included in the final corpus (N=5).

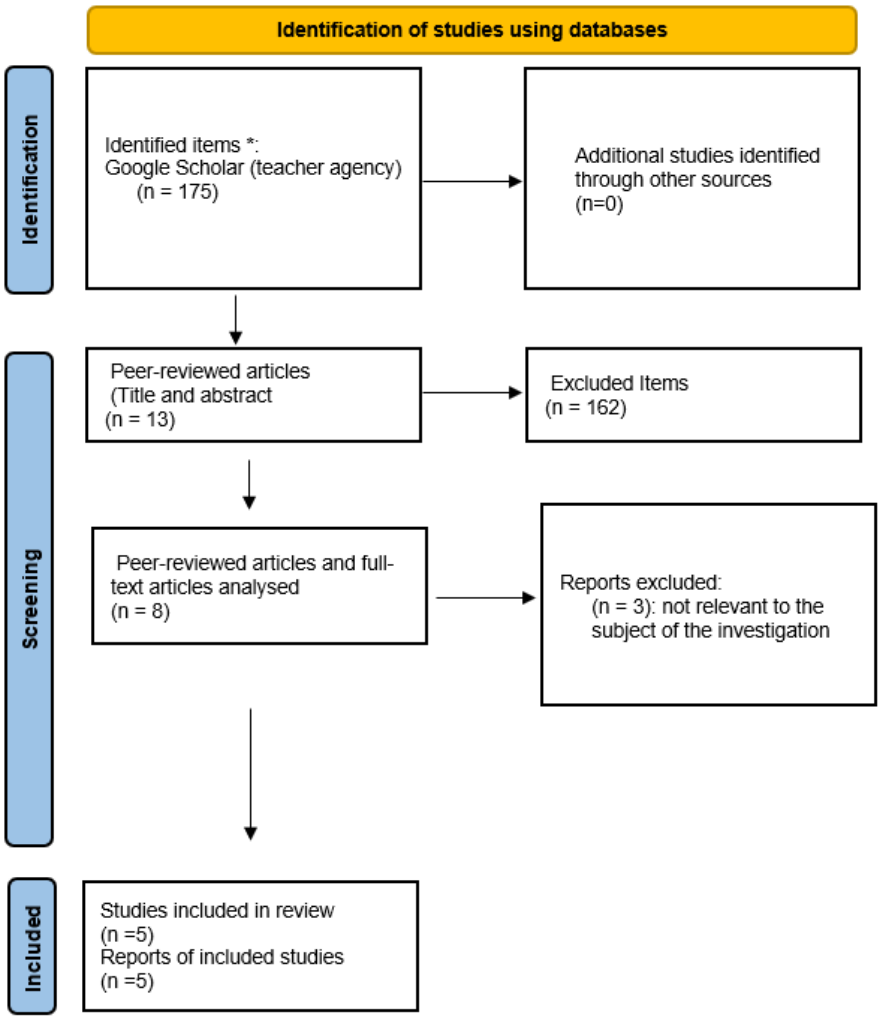


Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 Statement flowchart (Page et al., 2021).

6. Data encoding and extraction

The five articles were analysed using a data extraction framework based on predefined procedures (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). The coding process took the following aspects into account: authors and year of publication, title, aim of the study and research design. A descriptive summary of the studies examined is presented in Table 2.

Authors	Title	Aim of the study	Research design
D. Morselli, E. Ellerani *(2021)*	*Lo studio dell'agency secondo il Capability Approach nei paradigmi d'indagine qualitativa*	This paper provides a reasoned synthesis of studies on agency, particularly in an international context, to identify theories, tools and methodologies for studying and promoting teachers' agency according to the *Capability Approach*.	Theoretical review
M. Andreoli, L. Zaniboni et al. *(2022)*	*Mappare evidenze e framework teorici dell'agency docente in relazione all'inclusione: una scoping review sistematica*	This paper explores teachers' agency and the practical implications this entails for the full inclusion of all pupils.	Systematic review of the literature
D. Gulisano *(2025)*	*L'agire didattico del docente inclusivo. Alcune risultanze di un'Indagine esplorativa nazionale effettuata nei Corsi di Specializzazione per le attività di sostegno didattico agli alunni con disabilità*	This paper aims to analyse the teaching practices of inclusive teachers (inclusive teacher agency), drawing on the potential of teachers' professional action in 'situations' within both school and out-of-school contexts.	Exploratory research / Nation-wide survey
G. Zavatta, A. Lazzari *(2026)*	*Costruire, certificare e valutare l'identità professionale del docente in formazione: una revisione sistematica della letteratura*	This paper examines the construct of teachers' professional identity by exploring the theoretical and pedagogical link between models of initial teacher training and the main systems and methods for certifying and qualifying teachers' professional competence.	Systematic review of the literature
M. Valenza, A. Serbati et al. *(2026)*	*Teachers self efficacy e pratiche di inclusione: una scoping review*	This paper aims to outline which dimensions of teaching professionalism are identified in the literature as factors that improve teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy and collective efficacy, and to examine the correlation between these dimensions and the ability to implement inclusive practices in schools.	Systematic review of the literature

Table 2: Summary of studies reviewed.

7. Clusters of Results

The findings emerging from the synthesis of the five studies examined provide a detailed and integrated picture of the relationship between *teacher agency, self-efficacy, professional development and inclusive practices*. A cross-analysis of the literature enables us to put forward a number of key interpretations, situating the theoretical and empirical evidence within the contemporary pedagogical debate.

Scope	Corpus analysis (N=5)
Time frame	2021–2026 (3 very recent studies from 2025 to 2026, 2 between 2021 and 2022)
Research Type	Secondary Studies (N=4): 2 scoping reviews, 1 systematic review, 1 theoretical review. Primary Studies (N=1): 1 exploratory study (national survey).
Main Thematic Focus	Teacher agency, educational inclusion, teacher self-efficacy and professional development/identity.

Table 3: Results cluster

Three overarching themes emerge from the analysis of the five studies:

1. Overarching Theme A: *Teacher Agency* as an Inclusive Construct and Practice:

• *Morselli & Ellerani (2021)* and *Andreoli et al. (2022)* form the theoretical core of agency. The *Capability Approach* provides the interpretative lens for understanding how teachers' potential capabilities are transformed into real, context-specific actions.

• *Andreoli et al. (2022) and Gulisano (2025)* apply the concept to classroom pragmatics, demonstrating that agency is not an isolated individual trait, but a *situational practice* aimed at ensuring the full inclusion of pupils.

2. Macro-Theme B: The Relationship between *Self-Efficacy and Inclusion Practices:*

• *Valenza et al. (2026)* identify how perceptions of *self-efficacy* (both individual and collective) act as an enabling factor for the implementation of inclusive teaching strategies. This is consistent with the empirical study by *Gulisano (2025)*: effective teaching practice in the context of support is underpinned by perceived competences and specialist training.

3. Macro-Theme C: *Professional Identity and Training/Certification Frameworks*:

• *Zavatta & Lazzari (2026)* analyse the scope of initial teacher training.

The paper highlights the need to link theoretical models of professional development with rigorous systems for assessing teachers' professional identity, a preparatory stage for developing agency and self-efficacy throughout their career path

The Triangulation between *Agency, Self-Efficacy and Inclusion*:

The first key point concerns the conceptual convergence between teachers' agency (*Teacher Agency*) and practices of educational inclusion.

• *Agency as an Inclusive Practice*: According to the reviews by *Andreoli et al. (2022) and Morselli and Ellerani (2021)*, agency does not emerge as a mere individual trait or an innate characteristic of the teacher, but rather as an ecological and situated process. The adoption of the *Capability Approach* (Morselli & Ellerani, 2021) proves

particularly fruitful: inclusive action is realised when teachers' theoretical 'capabilities' encounter enabling school and out-of-school contexts.

- *The Driving Role of Self-Efficacy*: This perspective is confirmed and reinforced by the findings of *Valenza et al. (2026*). Self-efficacy (both individual and collective) acts as an essential psycho-pedagogical determinant: high levels of self-efficacy predict a greater willingness on the part of teachers to modify the learning environment and to adopt flexible and inclusive teaching strategies.
- *Verification in 'Situ-Action'*: The theoretical findings from the literature reviews are supported empirically by *Gulisano's (2025)* nationwide survey. The teaching practice of an inclusive teacher is characterised precisely by the ability to respond actively and contextually to the complexities of the classroom (*situation)*, demonstrating that inclusive agency is the culmination of a strong sense of efficacy applied to the real-world context.

8. Conclusions in Progress

This review of the literature provides a comprehensive and up-to-date overview of the factors that define teaching professionalism and guide teachers' inclusive agency. Four main concluding implications emerge from the convergence of the contributions analysed:

1. *Agency as a pillar of inclusion*: bringing *teacher agency* to the fore means moving beyond a purely subjective view of teaching professionalism to understand it as strategic resources determined by context. It serves as an essential link for translating theoretical approaches to inclusion into flexible, pragmatic teaching practices that are attentive to the specific complexities of each pupil.
2. *The centrality of professional identity-building training*: The exercise of agency is not a spontaneous outcome, but rather the result of initial training and specialisation pathways aimed at consolidating the teacher's professional identity. It is therefore essential that training frameworks and the associated certification processes recognise and support the *teacher's professionalism as an agent of change*, valuing their reflective practice and the effectiveness of their educational and teaching activities.
3. *The Integration of the Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) Approach*: To guide teachers' agency towards informed decisions rather than ad hoc choices, teaching practice must be grounded in the *Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) approach*. The convergence of practical experience, the constraints and opportunities of the learning environment, and the available scientific evidence ensures the quality and sustainability of the inclusive practices adopted.
4. *The need for empowering policies and learning environments:* In line with the Capability Approach, the promotion of inclusion in education cannot rest solely on the initiative of individual teachers. Educational institutions and decision-makers are called upon to structure 'enabling' organisational contexts, capable of breaking down structural constraints and creating the conditions for evidence-based agency to be fully realized.

In conclusion, educational and pedagogical research on this topic is well-established in terms of theoretical and conceptual definitions, but urgently calls for the launch of new longitudinal and action research studies. Only by consolidating a professional culture oriented towards EBP and through constant monitoring of

teaching practice in '*real-life situations*' will it be possible to assess the true effectiveness of training models and to establish genuinely inclusive, sustainable schools that are geared towards developing the potential *of every individual.*

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