

ENHANCING INCLUSION THROUGH TEACHERS' SELF-ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

In last years the issue of teacher education is high on the policy agenda across Europe and globally and the role of teachers and therefore of teacher education in moving towards a more inclusive education system is being recognized. The changing role of teachers is increasingly acknowledged, emphasizing the need for significant changes in the way teachers are prepared for their professional roles and responsibilities. This paper, based on educational challenges required today by society particularly related to demand of community, inclusion, respect for diversity, proposes to promote a culture of self-assessment that improve teaching, by training actions needed to help pupils with special educational needs. Teachers' self-assessment is systematic process of review and revision of actions handled by a professional community. In this process teachers can analyse, reflect, problematize, debate about their own professionalism; about the meaning of their own action; about the possible differences between what was planned and what is actually achieved in practice. The concept of self-assessment is linked also to the design changes. In this work, we propose a tool that allows teachers to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the school situation in which they are working and, at the same time, that supports them on designing development actions to improve it. This tool aims to promote inclusion and the effective combination between self-evaluation and development, having as goal an organic design of inclusive educational processes. For the current study, an ad hoc survey to assess the perceived training needs for promoting inclusion of school teachers was developed. A sample of 236 pre-service teachers was considered.

Keywords: Inclusion, primary school, research projects, self-assessment tool.

1 INTRODUCTION

The contemporary school is a multifaceted and complex institution. For inclusive values and practices to embed in educational systems the nature of school culture and the change process must be considered. Inclusion has progressively been seen to be an ethical issue [1] and as an issue of social justice [2][3] relating to all students opposite exclusion from full and meaningful participation in the life of the school [4]. Values embedded in this interpretation of inclusion include supporting everyone to feel that they belong; reducing exclusion, discrimination and barriers to learning and participation; emphasizing the development of school communities and values as well as achievements; and restructuring cultures, policies and practices to respond to diversity in ways that value everyone equally [3].

This paper, based on educational challenges required today by society particularly related to demand of community, inclusion, respect for diversity, proposes to promote a culture of self-assessment that improve teaching, by training actions needed to help pupils with special educational needs.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Many authors have stressed that transforming schools into inclusive settings requires responding according to the needs of their pupils and developing teaching proposals to improve and encourage the participation of all students. Therefore, if schools want to be more inclusive and move towards an educational response according to students' heterogeneous and diverse characteristics it is necessary to reflect on aspects such as the organization and operation, the existence or not of coordination and collaborative work among teachers, the participation of the entire community, the use of resources and the educational practices [5][6][7]. A just society must not overlook the educational needs of every individual, but must devise the necessary actions and firstly consider the burden on professionals and institutions that have this educational task [8].

2.1 Special educational needs and inclusive education

The concept of special educational needs (SEN) is formulated in official documents of UNESCO in 1997, in the United Kingdom laws in 2001 (Special Educational Needs and Disability Act) and in documents of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education in 2003, as purpose to treat people with SEN also other people during developmental age having learning and behavioral difficulties different than disabilities. Internationally, the concept of special educational needs (SEN) is being revised. According to the basic postulates the inclusive educational process relies on, each child has its special needs. Hence, every modern society has an assignment to provide the best conditions that will enable a flexible educational system in which each child could develop and prosper according to its own abilities [9] [10]. In a UNESCO (2011) report the definition of special needs is seen as education designed to facilitate the learning of individuals who, for a wide variety of reasons, require additional support and adaptive pedagogical methods in order to participate and meet learning objectives in an educational program. Reasons may include (but are not limited to) disadvantages in physical, behavioural, intellectual, emotional and social capacities. These pupils require particular educational attention, diversified didactic actions, depending on the deep causes of their school problems and on the diversity of their validly ascertained potential. The risk of social exclusion is high. Diversity within the school context is a challenge¹ which involves all the main agents of change: teachers, school heads, families and non-school education agencies - each with specific functions. Achieving the goal of inclusion of these pupils requires teachers to implement increasingly new teaching practices as well as original and timely solutions, adapted to individual pupils and contexts. What emerges above all else is the need for early and timely actions with adequate tools in order to accompany the activation of the potential of every children subjected to multiple risk factors.

We must recognize that all pupils have the right to a quality education that caters, to the extent possible, to their individual needs: so inclusive education is defined by UNESCO (2005) as a process of addressing and responding to the diverse needs of all learners by increasing participation in learning and reducing exclusion within and from education. Inclusive education has been internationally recognized as a philosophy for attaining equity, justice and quality education for all children, especially those who have been traditionally excluded from mainstream education for reasons of disability, ethnicity, gender or other characteristics [11]. Inclusive education is opposed to any form of segregation and to any argument justifying separation by defending the rights to education for all [5] [7] [12]. Ainscow, Booth and Dyson [13], in advocating a broader understanding of inclusion, write: «We question the usefulness of an approach to inclusion that, in attempting to increase the participation of students, focuses on the 'disabled' or 'special needs' part of them and ignores all the other ways in which participation for any student may be impeded or enhanced» (p.15). Booth came to the research with an involvement in developing ideas about inclusion since the 1970s [13]. While some people now wish to draw a clear line between the meanings of integration and inclusion, Booth and his colleagues always saw the notion of integration as carrying an approach to school and social reform [14] [15]. Recently, the debate has focused upon inclusion, a concept which differs significantly from integration. Integration refers to "fitting" the child to existing provision (with necessary support and individualized modifications to curriculum, teaching processes, etc.). Inclusion refers to reorganizing educational provision to promote "belonging" [16], i.e. all students in a school see themselves as belonging to a community, including those with SEN [17]. As such, inclusion embraces the concept of diversity as a natural state of being human or, in educational terms, of being a learner [18]. Furthermore, "integration" can be seen as representing a kind of continuum along which a child with SEN will be offered a place according to his/her needs and circumstances. Views of integration and then inclusion were linked to a notion of comprehensive community education. Inclusion was connected to a principle of equality of value of all students and staff within education. Inclusion presupposes a significant restructuring of mainstream schooling so that every school can accommodate every child irrespective of disability (accommodation rather than assimilation). The term inclusion embodies a range of assumptions about the meaning and purpose of schools [19] and embraces a much deeper philosophical notion of what integration should mean. Consequently, there has been a widespread interest on the part of academics and researchers across the world who see inclusion as a radical alternative to the somewhat faltering approach which has been characteristic of

¹ The response to diversity involves moving from a homogenizer focus which offers the same to all and reflects the aspirations of the ruling classes and cultures, to an approach that considers the different individual identities, needs and choices and that values differences as something that enrich people and societies. This fact highlights the need for training, of both faculty and the administration to address the challenge of achieving success for all students. We believe that this challenge must begin by an adequate training of education professionals to participate in transforming their schools into inclusive schools, where the "Focus on Diversity" will become a fundamental principle.

integration [20][17]. Inclusion involves change and an inclusive school is one that is on the move. It is an unending *process* of increasing learning and participation for all students. It is an ideal to which schools can aspire but which is never fully reached. But inclusion happens as soon as the process of increasing participation is started [21] [22].

Inclusive education is the process whereby the school responds to the needs of all learners regardless of their background [23] [24]. Learners should be accommodated by the school in all aspects of teaching and learning. They should not be expected to adapt to the school; rather, the school should adapt to the learners by ensuring that all their needs are met [25]. The purpose of inclusive education seems to be mutual to that of educational change because the ultimate aim of educational change (reform) is to benefit all learners [26]. Therefore implementing inclusive education requires some form of change process. The focus of inclusive education is the transformation of educational systems and cultures, as well as the educational practices and the organization of schools in order to meet the diverse educational needs of students, so learning and full participation of each child can be achieved.

2.2 Teachers' involvement in the inclusive education

Teachers are main actors in an inclusive school. While many research highlights the benefits of integration for students, those ones focused on teachers demonstrate a mixed positioning towards integrative / inclusive policies [27]. The OECD (2005) suggests that raising teacher quality is the policy initiative most likely to result in improved school performance. This suggestion can be developed further: preparing teachers to respond to the diversity of needs they will face in today's classrooms is potentially the policy initiative most likely to impact on the development of more inclusive communities [28]. Winter and O'Raw [29] propose teacher training as a key to success with respect to The concept of special educational needs (SEN) is formulated in official documents of UNESCO in 1997, in the United Kingdom laws in 2001 (Special Educational Needs and Disability Act) and in documents of the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education in 2003, as purpose to treat people with SEN also other people during developmental age having learning and behavioural difficulties different than disabilities. Inclusive education. A high degree of teacher efficacy for inclusive practice must be in evidence. In order to accomplish this, adequate teacher education must be provided, and teachers must take ownership over their own learning and seek out opportunities for professional growth.

We can talk of full inclusion when school is able to deal properly with every pupil's individual differences [31] [32]. In this perspective, school arises as an entity open to changes, raising questions leading to a continuous review of organization, enhancing all professionals having a role in school life [22]. Teachers need to work within organizations – schools and teacher education institutions – that are learning communities. Such learning communities will value them as professionals and support their work via a clear vision and shared culture that promotes inclusive education at all levels. It is essential for teachers to be committed to inclusive education, to reject exclusion processes and to engage in the full inclusion of all students as full members of their classrooms [33]. In-service and pre-service teachers' training is one of the ways to address the presence of students with very different needs in the classrooms. Researchers [34] describe the initial step to inclusive education as having an accurate understanding of 'what is', in preparing for 'what may be' on a much broader scale. To do this, it follows that teachers must be able to assess inclusive education.

Self-assessment is a powerful technique for self-improvement and for improving achievement. Self-assessment is a mechanism for professional growth that provides avenues for peers and change agents to influence teacher practice [35]. Training of future teachers is a delicate activity aiming to train the *magister*, i.e. the one who knows something so well to be able to teach it to others and, at the same time, that cares to train and continuously improve himself in order to achieve a greater humanity, that allows him to be a wise and authoritative guide. The definition of this training start leads to assert a model of teacher as reflective practitioner [36]. In the wake of a tradition descending from Dewey's thinking [37], taken up more recently by Schön [38], reflexivity, intended as attitude of the teacher on analyzing and reflecting recursively on his own practices, is considered as crucial to achieve educational success and for the development of a specific professional knowledge. "Reflection-in-action" becomes, for above reasons, a focal point between the skills of a professional teacher, as it constitutes the optimal way to know its own practical action. The reflective practitioner, as teacher's ability to analyze and evaluate its own practices, is a key element for training of future teachers. Indeed, through reflection, a practitioner is able to bring out and comment the unspoken compressions of a specialized practice, and can find a "new meaning" for every situation [38]. Literature and identification of the importance of the ability to reflect, as an essential component of training teachers, introduced in training programs for future teachers initiated by Italian universities,

the use of technological tools and specific training activities supported by these ones, aiming to developing reflexivity.

3 THE OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESIS OF THE RESEARCH

The assumption underlying adoption of our self-assessment tool, dedicated to those ones who are about to become primary and kindergarten school teachers, is that it helps to improve the ability of a conscious reflection and to make explicit the dimensions of professional competence, by developing the skill of self-evaluation. The features of professional competence on which we wanted the pre-service teacher to reflect intentionally, by using the self-assessment tool, refer to five different dimensions involved in the exercise of the teaching profession related to the challenges raised by an education really wishing to be inclusive. We assumed that by using the instrument described below, the abilities of pre-service teachers to reflect on their own inclusive actions and to manage a classroom also in presence of a problematic educational situation, would be improved.

4 THE RESEARCH

We are interested in examining how pre-service teachers develop and apply inclusive knowledge throughout their teacher preparation program and classrooms during practicum and student teaching experiences. We specifically designed the instrument for pre-service teachers majoring in primary school or early childhood Education. The first step in developing the framework survey involved reviewing literature that cited instruments that were already being used as a framework for teaching use in educational settings. As part of this research plan, we constructed a tool² to collect data on pre-service teachers' self-assessment of the five domains within the framework. These domains include: planning, classroom environment, instruction, assessment, professional responsibilities. The self-assessment tool introduced in below pages, is based on the criterion that the presence of a SEN in the classroom does not cause a nonconformity from the norm, but it is a positive potential to be valorize. Purpose of the tool is to help teachers to reflect on how we can create favorable conditions for a pupil with SEN to be able to learn and develop their skills. We need to highlight that the teaching methods suitable for children with SEN are valid for each child, and not vice versa.

Referring the studies of Danielson [39] and Stronge [40] [41] [42], and the analysis of Index criteria for inclusion [21] [22], 70 items of the framework have been defined. Ten researchers with expertise in teacher training were given the initial pool of 70 items to evaluate for content validity. Each expert was asked to rate to what extent each question measured one of the five domains using a 10-point scale (with 1 being to the least extent and 10 being to the greatest extent). The experts were also encouraged to provide comments and suggestions for each question and, in some cases, offered their own lists of possible questions for each domain. The mean ratings for items in the five domains were 6.84 (planning), 7.85 (classroom environment), 8.33 (instruction), 9.00 (assessment), 7.68 (professional responsibilities). The research team then collaborated to review the ratings and suggestions, and made revisions to several items. Consequently, the instrument constructed contained 50 items for measuring pre-service teachers' self-assessments of the five domains. Reliability analyses by using the Cronbach Alpha coefficient were performed. The internal consistency reliability (coefficient alpha) ranged from .71 to .89 for the five dimension. These findings support the reliability of the measure.

For these 50 items, participants answered each question using the following five-level Likert scale (1= never; 5= always). The framework was then administered after students completed a required 10-credit Special Pedagogy course designed specifically for degree course Primary Education. The research team collected data for this survey development project from 236 students who were enrolled in a 10-credit Special Pedagogy course at a Palermo university. This 10-week course focused on inclusive education with an emphasis on SEN. The pre-service teachers were required to attend 5-hour lectures and 4-hour laboratory session per week. One member of this research group manages the course and teaches the two lectures and laboratory offered each week. Normally, Ph.D. teaching assistants cooperate to laboratory sections. All participants completed the survey in their laboratory session during the first day of the course. Answering the self-assessment items, students had to refer to the practicum conducted, until that moment, within a classroom. The survey took approximately 15–20 minutes for participants to complete. Of the 236 students who completed the survey, 218 (92.4%)

² The self-assessment tool need to be bundle with other professional growth strategies: peer coaching, observation by external change agents, and focused input on teaching strategies.

were female and 18 (7.6%) were male. We will introduce now the 5 dimensions of the self-assessment tool, and the related items.

The first domains (Tab. 1) refer to planning. It describes how a teacher organizes the content that the students are to learn and how a teacher design instruction. The domain covers several aspects of instructional planning. Teaching is a complex activity that requires careful preparation and planning of goals and activities, for the short and long period. Teacher essential responsibility is to ensure that student learn, to design (or select or adapt) learning activities such that students learn important content. Planning is a purposive activity that ensures that teachers are well prepared before crossing the door of a classroom. Further, planning is an asset to create valid learning experiences.

Tab. 1

PLANNING		Internal consistency $\alpha=.71$
1	Teaching is planned to support learning rather than to deliver the curriculum	
2	Curriculum materials reflect the backgrounds, experience and interests of all learners	
3	Planning reflects on and attempts to minimize barriers to learning and participation for particular pupils	
4	The teachers examine ways to reduce the need for the individual support of pupils	
5	The lessons are planned on differences in student knowledge and experience	
6	The lessons are built on the language and literacy experiences of students outside school	
7	Teaching activities are planned so as to make full use of all adults present in the classroom	
8	Teachers share in planning schemes of work for lessons and homework	
9	Teachers append, in their lesson plans, activities and strategies involving student with different skill levels	

The second dimension refers to classroom environment (Tab. 2). These aspects of learning are not associated with the learning of any particular content, instead they set the stage for all learning. The components of this dimension establish a comfortable and respectful classroom environment that cultivates a culture for learning and creates a safe place for risk taking. Classroom management is a challenge for teachers, as a fundamental feature of the quality of teaching. Classroom management is based on respect, fairness, and trust, wherein a positive climate is cultivated and maintained. The effective teacher have to know both how to help students learn by using teaching techniques, both to be able to create an environment (physical, but especially social and emotional) that leads to learning. Teachers can create an atmosphere of excitement about the importance of learning and the significance of the content. They care deeply about their subject and invite students to share the journey of learning about it. These teachers consider their pupils as real people, with interests, concerns and intellectual potential.

Tab.2

CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT		Internal consistency $\alpha=.83$
1	There are opportunities for students of different ages to support each other	
2	Everyone, irrespective of attainment or impairment, is seen to make an important contribution to teaching and learning	
3	The students are involved in finding ways to overcome their own and each other's difficulties in learning	
4	The students are consulted about the quality of lessons	
5	The students are consulted about the support they need	
6	The support given to students helps them to move on in their learning while drawing on the knowledge and skills they already possess	
7	The classroom environment, displays and other resources help independent learning	
8	Students are taught to question stereotyping in curriculum materials and classroom discussion	
9	The learning activities develop an understanding of differences of background, culture, ethnicity, gender, impairment and religion	
10	Teachers demonstrate that they respect and value alternative views during class discussions	
11	Teachers offer opportunities for students to work with others who differ from themselves in background, ethnicity, impairment and gender	

Dimension 3 (Tab.3) refers to instruction and contains the components that are at the essential heart of teaching, the actual engagement of student in content. After planning the teaching and having organized the classroom, teachers must teach effectively. Effective teaching mixes the essence of a good classroom management, organization, effective programming and personal features of the teacher. The components are unified through the vision of students developing complex understanding and participating in a community of learners. Teachers' work in the classroom is fluid and flexible; teacher can shift easily from one approach to another when the situation demands it. They must be attentive to different student in the class. In an inclusive perspective we need to highlight the importance of the students' involvement in their learning process, the use of different teaching methods, the use of strategies applied to a group rather than to the individual pupil.

Tab.3

INSTRUCTION		Internal consistency $\alpha=.89$
1	The lessons start from a shared experience that can be developed in a variety of ways	
2	The lessons reflect a range of interests for every student	
3	Different subjects can be learnt in different ways, for example, intensive literacy or foreign language courses	
4	The lessons provide opportunities for paired and group activities as well as individual and whole class work	
5	There is a variety of activities involving, for example, oral presentation and discussion, listening, reading, writing, drawing, problem solving, use of library, audio/visual materials, practical tasks and computers	
6	Teachers recognize the additional time required by some students with impairments to use compensatory measures in their work	
7	The lessons pay attention to the emotional as well as the intellectual aspects of learning	
8	The spoken and written language is made accessible to all students	
9	The lessons encourage dialogue between teachers and students as well as between students themselves	
10	The lessons encourage the development of a language for thinking and talking about learning	
11	The students are encouraged to explore views which are different from their own	
12	The students are encouraged to pool their knowledge and experience	

Dimension 4 refers to assessment (Tab. 4). Assessment is an ongoing process that occurs before, during, and after instruction is delivered. The assessment should be used to evaluate the effectiveness of a lesson in terms of learning and commitment by students, to assess their progress and as a basis for future designing. In designing assessment strategies, teachers must consider their use for formative purposes and how assessment can provide diagnostic opportunities for student to demonstrate their level of understanding during the instructional sequence, while there is still time to make adjustment. Students with SEN benefit from teachers who often use assessment, done in different ways to diagnose their learning and that changes teaching methods as result of this diagnose. Effective teachers monitor student learning through the use of a variety of informal and formal assessments and offer meaningful feedback to students. Effective teachers also check for student understanding throughout the lesson and adjust instruction based on the feedback.

Tab.4

ASSESSMENT		Internal consistency $\alpha=.77$
1	The judgments on students are respectful	
2	The assessments are based on detailed observation	
3	The assessment is directed at what is important to learn	
4	The assessments (including national assessments) are always used formatively to develop the learning of students	
5	There are a variety of ways of demonstrating and assessing learning that engage with differences in students' characters, interests and the range of their skills	
6	The feedback to students indicates what they have learnt and what they might do next	
7	The assessments lead to modifications in teaching plans and practice	

Dimension 5 refers to professional responsibilities (Tab. 5). Components are associated with being a true professional educator; they encompass the roles assumed outside of and in addition to those in the classroom with students. These components capture the essence of professionalism by teacher. The effective teacher gives attention to the continuous growth of its own professionalism and reflects on all the elements of his performance in order to improve continuously.

Tab.5

PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES		Internal consistency $\alpha=.79$
1	Teachers reflect on teaching	
2	Teachers maintain accurate records	
3	Teachers communicate with families about the instructional programs and about individual students	
4	Teachers participate in a professional community	
5	Teachers are involved in a culture of professional inquiry	
6	Teachers participate in school and district project	
7	Teachers grow and develop professionally	
8	Teachers enhance of content knowledge and pedagogical skills	
9	Teachers show professionalism, integrity and ethical conduct	
10	The partnership teaching is used as an opportunity for shared reflection on the learning of students	
11	Teachers modify their teaching in response to the feedback from colleagues	

5 DISCUSSION

By using the self-assessment tool, students have developed an awareness of their own learning: reflection is the process allowing us to be aware of what we have learned and it is a key step towards enhancing the capacity of self-regulation. The way begun together with the pre-service teachers allowed them to develop reflection on their own inclusive action and ability on classroom management when there's a problematic educational situation. This approach allowed to connect the cognitive dimension of the research, aimed to realize knowledge about the educational reality examined, with the dimension of implementation of an appropriate intervention plan. The instrument developed for this study provides a promising starting point for work designed to examine and support pre-service teachers' professional development.

This self-assessment tool was designed for a specific purpose: examining pre-service teachers perceived training needs for promoting school inclusion. The tool can help teachers select improvement goals by providing them with clear standards of teaching, opportunities to find gaps between desired and actual practices, and a menu of options for action.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Pre-service training may be the optimal time to address educators' concerns and alter any negative attitudes about inclusive education. Teachers are the main characters of an educational process that sees necessarily teaching as the main resource to be focused for the educational success of all their pupils

Inclusive education should be seen as an approach for all learners. The focus of teachers' work should be upon overcoming barriers to learning for all learners. This involves a move away from seeing inclusion as an approach for a minority of learners, based on identification of their differences, or a consideration of labels that may have negative consequences for learning.

We suggest that providing a self-assessment tool is a constructive strategy for improving the effectiveness of in-service provided it is bundled with other professional growth strategies: peer coaching, observation by external change agents, and focused input on teaching strategies. Teachers can use these indicators and their questions to prompt the planning of lessons over the course of a year; they can use these indicators as the basis for a mutual observation schedule, so they can reflect on each other's teaching styles and to make changes in their own practice.

The best achievement can be an original reinterpretation of students' university experience, an interpretation of their own way of learning; in a word: self-regulation of their own learning, useful both for construction of their own identity, both for the group, intended as a community of people involved in a common educational project. Looking to the specificity of profession for which students are studying, it is fundamental to continue on deepening, with a specific research, the operating procedures by which the dimension of own self-evaluation is combined with the collegial ability to design and evaluate educational interventions in complex situations.

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