

INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY AND TEACHER TRAINING TOWARDS HIGH QUALITY EDUCATION PROCESSES. A RESEARCH WITH FUTURE SUPPORT TEACHERS

PEDAGOGIA INCLUSIVA E FORMAZIONE DEGLI INSEGNANTI ALLA QUALITÀ DEI PROCESSI EDUCATIVI. UNA RICERCA CON I FUTURI DOCENTI DI SOSTEGNO

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Abstract

Providing quality, equitable and inclusive education and learning opportunities for all is the foundation for improving people's lives and achieving sustainable development. Moving from the lessons learned from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), goal 4 of the 2030 Agenda is not limited to primary education, but comprehensively captures all the steps that are necessary to ensure, in every part of the world, quality education, equitable and accessible to all. In this context, it is crucial to pay particular attention to the development of teachers' skills and their reflective and critical reading of their professional experiences. The Brain-based approaches - with regard to the Brain-gym technique - and the storytelling activity – in particular, the Digital Storytelling version- constitute the main axes of the research here described, conducted with 1183 teacher trainees students attending the fifth and sixth cycle, in remote mode, of the special teaching modules: *Metacognitive and cooperative approach* and *Special teaching for sensory disabilities* within the Specialization course for Support Teachers run by the University of Palermo, in the academic years 2020/2021 and 2021/2022. Through the research action, we wanted to verify the validity of the Brain-based model in order to increase the teacher trainees' reflective competence, narrative competence and critical re-elaboration.

Fornire un'educazione di qualità, equa ed inclusiva e opportunità di apprendimento per tutti è la base per migliorare la vita delle persone e raggiungere lo sviluppo sostenibile. Forte degli insegnamenti tratti dagli Obiettivi di Sviluppo del Millennio (OSM), l'obiettivo 4 dell'Agenda 2030 non si limita all'istruzione primaria, ma *fotografa in modo completo tutti i passi che sono necessari per garantire, in ogni parte del mondo, un'educazione di qualità, equa e accessibile a tutti*. In tale contesto è fondamentale una particolare attenzione allo sviluppo delle competenze degli insegnanti e della loro capacità riflessiva e di lettura critica della propria esperienza professionale. Gli approcci di tipo *Brain-based* – con riguardo alla tecnica del *Brain-gym* – e l'attività di narrazione – declinata secondo la

tipologia del *Digital Storytelling* – costituiscono gli assi portati della ricerca qui descritta, condotta con 1183 corsisti frequentanti, in modalità a distanza, il V e il VI ciclo, in modalità a distanza, i moduli di didattica speciale: approccio metacognitivo e cooperativo e didattica speciale per le disabilità sensoriale all'interno del corso di specializzazione per le attività di sostegno dell'Università di Palermo, negli a.a. 2020/2021 e 2021/2022. Attraverso l'azione di ricerca si è voluto verificare la validità del modello di *Brain-based* allo scopo di aumentare nei corsisti la competenza riflessiva, la competenza narrativa e la rielaborazione critica.

Keywords

Inclusione, riflessività, Neurodidattica, tecniche *Brain-based*
Inclusive education, reflexivity, Neuroeducation, Brain-based techniques

Introduction

The need to remove all kinds of poverty and disadvantage by building a high quality and inclusive education system is sanctioned by the United Nations Assembly in 2015, exactly when it elaborated the 17 strategic objectives (sustainable development goals) of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The agenda marks a significant change from the previous Millennium Development Goals, in which access to educational processes was promoted to the detriment of the educational-teaching quality. Inclusive education is conceived as a process aimed at guaranteeing the right to education for all, regardless of diversities deriving from conditions of disability or psycho-physical, socio-economic and cultural disadvantage. At the basis of this concept of education there is an approach to inclusion that goes beyond the limits of the school to project itself into a social dimension, in the perspective of an integral development of the person and of the overall development of society. Hence the importance, according to the 2030 Agenda, of promoting interventions focused on the life project, both individual and group, which is supposed to be developed in the school as well as in any social context (UN, 2015b). In particular, the fourth goal of the 2030 Agenda identifies the goal of "guaranteeing equity and quality in educational processes, to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, throughout the life cycle" providing the international community with the orientation of national policies.

To guarantee the fourth objective, teacher training becomes one of the key factors to ensure the quality of education and improve its level, therefore the need for a continuous training offer for school professionals and operators is relevant (Chiappetta Cajola, 2008 and 2015; D'Alonzo, 2012; Hamilton, 2013; Nilsson & Axelsson, 2013; Reakes, 2007; Wilson, C., Marks Woolfson, L., & Durkin, K., 2020).

Schools and educational institutions can do a lot and must act to deal with complex and not always predictable situations, using interventions to support the entire family balance, allowing adequate growth of the minors, even with disabilities, who would have the opportunity to exploit the potential available to them and feel part of a welcoming social context that allows them to emerge. The Censis 2020 Report underlines the centrality of the school as an educational centre, and at the same time, as a lifeline for the increasingly difficult reconciliation of the life and work times of families.

In this context, we are convinced that it is necessary to reconsider teachers' role and skills, their reflective capacity and critical reading of their professional experience, as well as the ability to self-narrate, relying on the diegesis of practices. Among the contributions on the

centrality of the reflective process, within the construction of educational profiles, the studies on the metacognitive process are of particular importance, because they attest to the mechanisms by which the individual may critically focus on certain cognitive assumptions with a margin of personal interpretation, of autonomously decoding skill, of decision-making impetus.

The wide range of research in the recent field of Neuroeducation & Brain-based Studies, proposing a holistic vision of the subject, contemplates not only the basic cognitive dimension, but also the cognitive one, the emotional and motivational one, with a consequent intensification of synaptic connections. Among the techniques allowing the implementation of the neural network through the qualitative selection of information and with a consequent increase in reflective, creative and strategic capacity, there are those related to the Brain-based Approach, capable of providing constant stimulation of specific brain area yet promoting brain plasticity.

Starting from these considerations, the present paper describes a research designed and carried out to promote reflection within a community of shared knowledge, made up of 1183 (669 + 514) students attending - in remote mode - the modules of "Special teaching: metacognitive and cooperative approach" and "Special teaching & learning for sensory disabilities", within the 5th and 6th cycle of the Specialization Course for Support Teachers (kindergarten & primary school orders) of the University of Palermo, in the Academic Years 2020/2021 and 2021/2022.

1. Inclusive Education, Brain-based approach, and reflective thinking

The expression "scholastic inclusion" reveals the physiognomy of a school context that places the pupil and the educational relationship at the centre with its paraphernalia of choices and active teaching actions, with its drive for social participation and for constant networking with families and territorial institutions. In other words, a school that modulates, and equips itself to welcome and to guarantee "a quality of education for all that goes beyond the mechanisms of delegation or, worse still, of charitable pietism towards pupils with individualized and personalized school paths" (Zambotti, 2013, p. 165).

The protection of the right (or rights) of the person constitutes the *fil rouge* that runs through the history of school integration in Italy, starting from the Seventies, up to the emergence of the theoretical construct of inclusive education, in the Nineties, and not without a significant interweaving with the reflections solicited by the so-called "Disability Studies" which developed in Great Britain in the same period. It is a long path that has led our country to the progressive implementation of mixed inclusive systems up to the model of full inclusion of disabled pupils (Cottini, Morganti, 2015, p. 93), a model not yet fully substantiated by the awareness that school is and remains, in some ways, "a hub for the transformation of social inequalities into school inequalities, which in turn will turn into social inequalities" (ChiappettaCajola, Ciraci, 2013, p. 10). Hence the urgency, manifested within the national scientific debate, of innovation and creativity in educational-teaching practices (bottom-up) that can operationally translate the audacity of (special) pedagogical thinking that evolves beyond aporias of political interventions (top-down), not always targeted and enlightened. And if, on the one hand, in this international framework, educational research is broadening the spectrum of its investigations on the strategies and methods of training teachers and educators, on the other hand, these new acquisitions have not automatically turned into opportunities for transformation for trainee and in-service teachers. An example is the recent research area of Brain-based studies (in Italy known as 'Neurodidattica'), focused on identifying the brain mechanisms underlying the acquisition/learning and teaching processes. Neuroeducation research (Goswami, 2004) is

based on the neurofunctional analysis of the brain, meant as the axis around which to rotate the understanding of the learning process.

Thanks to the Brain-based action, designed to develop pre-existing skills or to create new ones, it is possible to prepare systematic series of stimuli capable of modifying the neural networks of the human brain. Such an approach allows to look at the construct of 'training' in physiological terms, as a potential of neural transformability and of defining cerebral profiles, with the consequent demarcation of cognitive styles and of the hemispheric specialization of intellectual typologies (Gardner, 2005).

The Brain-based approach provides for the construction of paths that allow teachers to orient themselves and their students towards a degree of self-awareness involving the whole person as a bio-psycho-operating unit (Tokuhamu- Espinosa, 2010). This leads to rethinking teacher's training in terms of expertise of the "motor brain" and of the synaptic interconnections and to look at reflexivity as a macro-faculty that oversees the development of cognitive abilities of different degrees, harmonized on a functional level.

The reflexive process, implemented by the neuroeducation methodology, finds expressive completeness in the storytelling act which translates into the narration of oneself, of one's own path, the narration of that 'cognitive making' that systematizes every new experience. In its digital form, storytelling is one of the most flexible tools to enhance motivation and attention, to document processes from a variety of perspectives, to freely select communication codes able to be shared with others.

Narration is but a historical-factual sequencing ability that is not immune to strong emotional-affective connotations. In the act of narration, the brain acts by sequencing the experiences in a historical-factual order, returning them as a set of mnemonic traces not merely crystallized, but held together by one

2. The research

This work shows the results of a research conducted with 1183 students attending - in remote mode - the modules of "Special teaching: metacognitive and cooperative approach" and "Special teaching & learning for sensory disabilities", within the 5th and 6th cycle of the Specialization Course for Support Teachers (kindergarten & primary school orders) of the University of Palermo, in the Academic Years 2020/2021 and 2021/2022. Through the research process we wanted to verify the validity of the Brain-based model in order to enhance the students' reflective competence, narrative competence and critical re-elaboration mediated by technologies.

2.1 The formulation of the research hypotheses

As part of the research project, we predicted that at the end of the experimental action (Brain-based approach), performance indicative of the development of reflexive skills, narrative and critical re-elaboration would significantly increase in the experimental group.

It was hypothesized that the Brain-based methodology, used during the special teaching modules: "Metacognitive and cooperative approach" and "Special teaching and learning for sensory disabilities", would significantly improve in the trainees: a) the ability to reflect on their own learning process; b) the ability to critically evaluate one's work; c) the capacity for critical re-elaboration.

After the formulation of the hypotheses, the initial, ongoing, and final survey instruments were chosen, the research plan was defined, and the training methodology was designed and built to be tested for the verification of the hypotheses.

2.2 The detection tools

Two focus group sessions and digital storytelling, created by each teacher using the model of Alterio and McDrury (2003), were used to evaluate the acquisition of reflexive and narrative skills.

The two focus group¹ sessions took place at the beginning of the course and during the final exams.

We chose to use focus groups because they are particularly effective for collecting qualitative data in a limited time, favouring in-depth analysis. The focus group is also able to open unpredictable perspectives in the study of the theme for which it was essential to acquire significant data on the attitudes and beliefs of the tutors. The line-up² was built based on the objectives of the survey, their theoretical skills, their paradigms, previous research, and literature on the topic. We tried to ensure that the line-up included well-formulated and relevant questions for the topic under consideration³.

The thematic areas chosen for the focus groups are:

- personal reflection on the learning path within the modules,
- the comparison between self-regulation and self-assessment strategies used in the learning process used in the study,
- reflection on the critical re-elaboration process during the learning process.

Each group consisted of 40 participants on average; each focus group lasted an average of one hour and thirty minutes.⁴

We have chosen to use a Digital Storytelling evaluative grid, created by each student using the model of Alterio and McDrury (2003), two researchers from New Zealand who trace a theory of Storytelling as an effective learning tool by relating the art of narration with reflective learning processes.

In the reflective learning process, taking up the five-stage map of Moon (1999), McDrury and Alterio (2003) create a reflective learning model that represents how people identify, tell and construct a story through collaborative processes. The model includes five stages of learning through Storytelling:

1. *Story finding* (find an interesting story). In this first phase, the teacher presents a story that raises questions and reflections, for example a video, a poem, a photo, a short story and invites the students to find and present a story on a specific topic.

¹ The material collected by the focus groups was systematized into a set of statements and links between statements, according to an approach like what happens in the analysis of texts and ethnographic research (Losito, 1993), but considering the specificity of the material deriving from the dynamics that were established during the group discussion (Krueger, 1998). For the analysis of the material obtained from the sessions, grids and diagrams were prepared to systematize opinions and positions on the topics covered.

² The line-up with the guiding questions was built based on the research objectives following the indications of Krueger (1998).

³ Next to the moderator, in each focus group, there was an assistant moderator (logistician), who was able to observe the discussion and note important elements, such as, for example, the non-verbal behaviour of the interviewees, any leadership relationships or additive relationships, areas of influence of members and the impact of their views on the positions of others. During each discussion, the moderators tried to touch on all the topics of the line-up, dedicating a fair amount of time to each one.

⁴ The funneling strategy was used (Frisina, 2010, 41) and therefore the most important topics were put at the centre of the discussion, tackled approximately halfway through the meeting, after the students had become familiar and started to explore the topic.

2. *Story telling* (describe, deconstruct). In the second phase, the teacher encourages students to give an initial sense of the story.

3. *Story expanding* (reflect, make meaningful). In this third phase, the teacher invites the students to reflect on the deepest meanings of the story.

4. *Story processing* (interrogate, research). In the fifth phase, the teacher aids the students to bring out the significant data of the story and to promote a change in the way of seeing the problem.

5. *Story reconstructing* (imagining alternatives). In this phase, the teacher asks students to explore how they could modify the story and promotes effective action for the reconstruction of the story.

In the McDrury and Alterio model, the story is shared in ways that allow the narrator and listener to explore the issues, patterns, and themes of the story.

2.3 The research methodology

The research path for the development of reflexive and narrative skills has foreseen two actions. The first action was aimed at designing and elaborating the path using the Brain-based methodology that would have developed some specific reflective, narrative, and critical re-elaboration skills of teachers-in-training, given that "It appears that the introduction of Neuroscience into an Initial Teacher Education Program can support and facilitate the transfer of neuroscientific knowledge into best practices in the classroom" (Ferrari & McBride, 2011, p. 85).

The second action experimented and tried to consolidate the training methodology in the two modules involved.

Among the application peculiarities of the Brain-based approach, for the construction of the activity we used the Brain Gym technique which is based on a series of movements activating basic and superior cognitive functions ranging from understanding, communication and reflection and metacognition (Dennison, 2008). With the Brain Gym activities, we have activated a combined use of different sense-perceptive and expressive channels that invest the whole person in the training process, favouring a good integration between the physical, mental, and emotional body. This guaranteed the trainee to understand him/herself better and to see how his/her skills improve and his/her commitment is less tiring. Therefore, we started from the consideration of the three brain dimensions identified by MacLean: laterality dimension, centering dimension, focusing dimension considered as "Physical Access to Brain function" (Di Gesù, 2013).

The right / left lateral dimension is involved in the communication and coordination of the right hemisphere with the left hemisphere in the neocortex. In the motor sphere, all the movements that cross an ideal line that divides the right part of our body from the left part and which corresponds to the corpus callosum are involved: writing, reading, the movement on the keyboard of a piano, pulling the bow in instruments such as bow, etc. and any other movement that allows our sensoriality to perceive what happens and what is in the surrounding space to the right and left; in the cognitive sphere it corresponds to the communication between logical and analogical information.

The second dimension involves the limbic zone and the cerebral cortex and those movements that ideally divide the upper body from the lower one. Naturally, the perception of the balance of the centre of gravity is the optimal situation that the individual must seek to allow better circulation of the brain and therefore greater oxygenation.

The forward / backward focus dimension manifests itself in the coordination between the brain stem and frontal lobes and is involved in activities that require moving from back to forward and vice versa, in crossing the line that ideally separates the front from the back of the body; the activities here are those that involve the perception of the area behind in relation to that in front of our body; the primary reflex function for the preservation of the species (attack / flight) is coordinated with the cortical function in the evaluation of the biologically most advantageous solution in favour of social life. This is followed by physiological relaxation and a well-balanced posture which, in the cognitive area, determines fluid learning, marked attention and concentration. The person with a good attitude to focus is flexible and open to the surprise elements of the moment and can follow projects and carry them out to undertake new ones. Dennison integrated the three spatial cognitive dimensions with other four dimensions (motivation dimension, crucial dimension, breathing dimension and body regular dimension) and elaborated a total learning condition, through four activities: Positive, Active, Clear, Energetic, (PACE), to which certain movements correspond. Cook's Crossed contacts correspond to the Positive activity and restore balance after emotional or environmental stress; the Active activity corresponds to the movements of the Cross Crawl that activate communication between the two cerebral hemispheres; to that of Clear correspond the Points of the brain that stimulate the production of neurotransmitters at the level of the synapses; finally, the Energy activity corresponds to the introduction of a conductor of electricity to the body, namely Water. Dennison identified 26 interhemispheric coordination movements. Of these eleven more activate a connection between the two hemispheres and stimulate the lateralization process by activating the eyes, hands, feet, head. To these exercises Dennison gave names such as Cross Crawl, Lazy 8s, Double Doodle, Alphabet 8s, The Elephant ecc.

2.4. The experimental action

The experimental action, in the two years, for its realization has foreseen and achieved three phases.

In the first phase, the first focus group session was carried out and Brain-based activities were built for the development of reflexive, narrative, and critical re-elaboration skills. In this first phase, while the activities were being built, the special teaching modules were started: metacognitive and cooperative approach and special teaching for sensory disabilities.

The second phase of the intervention was characterized by the introduction of the experimental factor and specifically the Brain-based methodology according to a well-defined calendar. The intervention covered a total of 60 hours (30 for each module).

In the third phase, the data coming from the Digital Storytelling and from the final session of the focus groups were processed.

3. The results

The analysis of the data collected made it possible to grasp the changes that occurred in the students; the evaluation moments also served as an opportunity to adjust and reorganise. Out of the 1183 students, 68% carry out service in the 1st cycle school (including kindergarten) or 2nd cycle, 18% do not teach and the remaining 1% is divided between an equal school, an educational institution and reception centres for minors. The sample is divided under the aspect of years of service, within these ranges: 27% between 2 and 5 years, 17% between 10 and 20 years, 17% between 5 and 10 years, 13% between 1 and 2 years, 11% less than a year and the remaining 14% did not hold any service.

3.1 The discussion on focus groups

The data collected through the two focus group sessions were analysed with the NVivo software which offers a set of procedures useful for describing, analysing and interpreting the multiple materials and data that are produced in a research path.

The data were divided into the three thematic areas to which the questions referred, namely:

- personal reflection on the learning path within the experimental pedagogy and evaluation course;
- the comparison between self-regulation and self-assessment strategies used in the learning process;
- reflection on the critical re-elaboration process during the learning process.

The results indicate a rather critical situation. 79% of the interviewed students emphasize that very few times do they happen to reflect on what they learn during a course, that often the goal is only the acquisition of the title. "Very few teachers stop to reflect with us on the skills developed during the course" admits 69% of those interviewed. As regards the strategies of self-regulation and self-assessment of learning, 70% declare that they are not always able to autonomously regulate the learning process and if at the end of the course the teacher asks for a self-assessment, they become anxious. The reflection on the critical re-elaboration process shows that interviewees focus more often on the formal aspects of a course (organization, exams, ongoing tests) rather than on the re-elaboration of the path followed and the skills developed or strengthened and the difficulties encountered.

The second focus group session carried out during the exam session highlights a significant increase with respect to the perception that the students have of the path they have taken but also with respect to the learning process and the related skills developed, despite the training and distance learning path. Most of the interviewees observed how the Brain gym path allowed them to work on their mind and body and how this has benefited the learning process. Everyone agrees in admitting that the reflexive, narrative, and critical re-elaboration exercise has allowed them to arrive at the examination of the discipline aware and responsible for their own learning process and difficulties not yet overcome; they underline that self-regulation and self-assessment activities have helped them to get to know each other better and to pass exams more easily and, at the same time, to deeply engage in studying. Thanks to the self-assessment strategies put into action, they were able to participate in the meaning of the vote taken. Finally, the critical re-elaboration promoted during the intervention helped them to recognize how difficult an evaluation process is.

3.2 The Digital Storytelling

Digital Storytelling offered trainees the opportunity to examine and learn from complex situations through reflective dialogue. Attempts to integrate stories into learning and assessment processes have been complex and several ethical issues have been considered. The storytelling activities offered the opportunity to creatively imagine experiences or to recall others that, in some way, represent aspects of personal and formative life. The reflection strategies used, and the creative writing activities played a significant role in the construction of Digital Storytelling.

Through the construction of Digital Storytelling, it was possible to facilitate the integration between theory and practice and the outcome of the experimentation products illustrated specific stories, revealing the understanding of some processes by the students.

The results indicate that the use of technologies and the openness of the participants to change have improved with reflective, narrative, and critical reworking competence.

Although the intervention was initially disorienting due to the innovative training course proposed, at the end of the intervention the students appreciated and positively evaluated the process put in place and created in a product that became the result of a long and demanding process. We are aware that the results we have reached cannot be generalized, however the path taken can become a tool available to the university teacher to help the student improve the quality of their study and become aware and responsible for their learning process.

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