The teachers' educational needs for early detection of difficulties in kindergarden

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Abstract
This paper presents a reflection on potential training courses addressed to kindergarten teachers, working with children of 3-6 years of age. In particular, the data reported derive from a phase of the action research promoted within the Erasmus + European project More Opportunities for Every Child (MOEC), which involved colleagues from Italy, France, Spain and Poland in order to investigate the possibility to build efficient observational instruments to detect the difficulties of pre-school children.
The outcomes of the project call for a growing necessity to promote a structured reflection on the fundamental value of efficient observation, which should be incremented through the training offer addressed to teachers, and on other aspects deserving special attention, such as educational strategies to guarantee quality, the promotion of true communities of practice, the development of professional skills, increasingly suited to support the educational and learning growth of each child in kindergarten.

Keywords: teacher training; early detection; best practice; observation; early childhood; kindergarten

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1. Research background and State of the Art

The possibility of readily identifying the presence of difficulties, discomfort or developmental disorders during the earliest years of age of a child, and accordingly planning appropriate educational offers, is undoubtedly one of the milestones of general and special needs pedagogy, but it is also a fundamental objective of European and international educational policies.

It is indeed evident how such identification, far from formulating clinical diagnoses or fossilizing evaluations, constitutes a key prerequisite for planning activities, devising intervention strategies, modulating relational modes and thus allowing the reflection to be guided in a mindful and sound way, while avoiding the risk of inaccuracies or gross mistakes. In order for this goal to become feasible and sustainable over time, however, it is essential to promote its conditions, so that the opportunities inherent in the early detection of difficulties do not depend on factors which are internal or external to the organization itself (e.g. the skills of each teacher, the resources of the institute, a possible support from specialists, an inclusive culture promoted by the school, the receptiveness of the Principal, etc.), but are rather a structural component to educational and teaching processes in kindergarten age.

This last aspect calls for different work plans: structuring specific educational offers based on the real needs of teachers, in terms of observation, identification and sharing of child's early difficulties signs; defining pedagogical protocols and tools to support not only the daily action of the teacher, but also a culture of thoughtfulness, of an attitude constantly aimed at finding the meaning of one's own work, and as a measure to avoid the risk – especially in some educational contexts – of translating established routines and practices into a passive and mechanical execution of tasks and sequences; promoting materials and good practices that are already in place, following the example of other European countries; developing a professional *habitus*, and therefore stable and systematically-usable skills, i.e. the ability of reporting data by means of analysis grids or other structured materials; implementing appropriate communication and relational strategies and effective synergies, thus promoting a productive and harmonious work environment, in which the child can be observed under a common and shared perspective, without wasting time and resources.

It is in this theoretical framework that the EU project MOEC – *More Opportunities for Every Child* – was created, funded by the European Commission within the KA2 Eramus+program – *Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices*. Specifically, during the first year of work, each partner country (France, represented by the Université Catholique de l'Ouest, Anger; Spain, by the Universidad Pontificia Comillas, Madrid; Poland,

by the Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski Jana Pawła II, Lublin) led by Italy, with the leading institution Centro Studi e Ricerche sulla Disabilità e la Marginalità (CeDisMa) of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, has started, with each kindergarten involved, a structured path aimed both at understanding and clearly defining the educational needs of teachers, and at building shared languages and perspectives regarding the detection of any difficulties of kindergarten children.

Care, along with the complex implications of such a dimension, represents the epistemological foundation of the pedagogical reflection but it is also, and above all, the basis of the practices and processes through which it is declined. The attention to childhood and to the infinite potential contained in what has been defined as the flower of educability[1] has always been a subject of interest and research in the educational field. There are multiple reasons that can be ascribed to organic, evolutionary, and cultural issues. It can be said that: "at birth, the young of human beings, unlike what happens to other animal species, manifests itself in its condition of psychobiological immaturity and inability to take care of itself, which causes the need for a substantial and prolonged phase of dependence on nursing figures. This neurocerebral fragility has two opposite aspects: that of opportunity, inherent in what has yet to be built and developed; and that of vulnerability, typical of every ongoing reality and with undefined contours" (Maggiolini and Zanfroni, 2019).

Alongside these aspects, it is also important to consider the underlying social factors: each era has been characterized not only by a certain perspective on this specific phase of life, but also by the peculiarity of the responses and the interventions carried out in its favour. Thus, over the years, there has been the emergence, consolidation and even the questioning of theoretical models, principles and approaches that oriented what are defined today as *childcare policies*.

What we are going through nowadays represents a particular, and in some ways unprecedented, historical contingency of many elements that need to be considered in the analysis of the processes aimed at implementing the quality of daily services for the education of children. On the one hand, it thus becomes fundamental to take into account the profound transformations happened within the social structure in the last decades, which contributed to change traditional

[1] Refer to Grange Sergi T., Nidi e infanzia: ricerca pedagogica, educabilità e qualità, in Dozza L., Ulivieri S. (edited by). *L'educazione permanente a partire dalle prime età della vita*, FrancoAngeli Milano 2016, p.95 "The image of the flower, the most beautiful part of a plant […] seems fit to convey the generativity and the precious dignity and intangible delicacy of the principle of educability, which demands a certain care: a pedagogical care, first of all, through constant and attentive commitment to preserve its universality, expression of the utopian direction and of the logic of what is possible, which govern every strictly educational act".

family structures, to review management and support models, highlighting the emergence not only of different needs and demands, but also of new issues related to fragility and difficulty of some parents. On the other hand, though, it is equally essential to consider the achievements of children in the field of knowledge, from their earliest life, and the development stages promoting their growth and maturation.

Although we are only at the beginning of a long journey towards a deep understanding of the human mind, it is undeniable that the last decades have been marked by revolutionary achievements, on the one hand forcing to rethink about theoretical and practical paradigms in the field of education and training, while on the other hand confirming ideas or intuitions and providing them with a scientific foundation. In particular, since the 1990s – not by chance defined "*The Decade of the Brain*"[2] – the amount of research carried out in the scientific field has considerably increased, strengthening the necessary association between educational sciences and the knowledge linked to neuro-discoveries. In this regard, worth of mention are the works by Le Doux on the relationship between emotional states and brain structures (Le Doux, 2003); those by Damasio, who analyzed the intellectual functioning through an understanding of the cognitive dimension of feelings and consciousness (Damasio, 2003); the research carried out by Siegel on the connections between neurobiological processes and interpersonal relations, with a focus on all aspects related to the *Mindfulness* approach (Siegel, 2009); that by Cozolino, who questions the ways in which social relations shape the cerebral architecture (Cozolino, 2008). Highly important, moreover, are the well-known contributions of Rizzolatti and of his research unit (among others, Fogassi, Gallese, Fadiga, Sinigallia) that led to the extraordinary discovery of the mirror neurons, paving the way for a wide and rich series of studies (Rizzolatti, Sinigaglia, 2006). Also, several contributions come from other scientific fields and contexts, which encompass the works of the *National Scientific Council on the Developing Child*, analyzing constructs and dimensions important for the education of kindergarten children, such as the role of resilience[3] and its relevant factors, in relation to the

[2] This expression was created, at the end of the 1980s, by the then U.S. President George H. W. Bush to indicate the expected development in neuroscience during the following decade (1990 – 2000). Later, the British neurobiologist Steven Rose used the definition "The Century of the Brain" referring to the 21st Century.

[3] See Barnes, A. J., Childhood Stress and Resilience, in Health Promotion for Children and Adolescents, Springer US, pp. 85-98, 2016; Obradović J., Physiological responsivity and executive functioning: Implications for adaptation and resilience in early childhood, in *Child Development Perspectives*, 10(1): 65-70, 2016; Ernst J., Johnson M., & Burcak F. (2019). The Nature and Nurture of Resilience: Exploring the Impact of Nature Preschools on Young Children's Protective Factors. *International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education*, *6*(2): 7-18.

possibility of its rooting since the early age by promoting those essential processes of adaptation required to face adversities in life; the role of play, either free or structured, as a privileged moment to learn how to process and manage emotions, to experience relational modes, to make decisions, to develop self-regulation mechanisms, enhancing problem-solving abilities and flexible thinking. Therefore, even in this difficult and uncertain time, there are several reasons to take those transformative, sometimes even generative, opportunities to enhance the extraordinary resources offered by education, starting from its earliest levels, to every child and in particular to those with more difficulties.

In this regard, data about the Italian context can stimulate a reflection. In fact, according to the latest data released by MIUR (Source: MIUR – DGCASIS – Ufficio Gestione Patrimonio Informativo e Statistica – Rilevazioni sulle scuole – May 2019), there is a constant increase in the number of certifications of disability in Italian schools – either public or private: "compared to 20 years ago, the number of students with certified disabilities has more than doubled (123,862 in the school year 1997/1998). Such an increase, which certainly partially reflects a refinement in the survey process, is noticeably considerable if we consider that, during the last twenty years, the total number of pupils attending Italian schools has even decreased" (MIUR, 2019). Particularly, in kindergartens, between school year 1997/1998 and school year 2017/2018, the number of children with disabilities increased from 0.8% to 2.1% of the total number of pupils. The same report states: "the percentage of children with disabilities up to 3 years of age is rather low, 0.6% for children under 3 years of age and 1.3% for 3-year-old children, respectively. For the 4-5-year-old age group, the percentage is higher, 2.1% for 4-year-old children and 2.4% for 5-year-old children, respectively. There is an exceptionally high proportion of students with disabilities over 6 years of age: more than half the children who stay back in kindergarten and move to compulsory education late, have a certification of disability". Therefore, it seems obvious to investigate the links between the scientific achievements mentioned above and their actual, practical translation, between the knowledge in the field of the cerebral development of the child and the possibility of identifying early signs of evolutionary alteration, also making use of appropriate tools for educational professionalism.

As part of the E+ MOEC – *More Opportunities for Every Child* – project, each national research team carried out, during the first year, an exploratory survey aimed at understanding the educational needs of the teachers of the involved kindergartens, in terms of inclusion, difficulties/developmental disorders at age 0-6 and scientific tools to detect signs of potential issues, recognized by national and international literature. The design, structure and results of the research carried out by the Italian working group – CeDisMa –

and by the two participating kindergartens, IC Falcone-Borsellino (Offanengo-CR) and Gabrio Piola (Giussano-MB), will be presented below.

2. Teachers' training needs: a theoretical overview

The analysis of educational needs represents a fundamental subject, particularly at a time when the professional offer is wide and varied, both in presence and in blended mode. This involves different variables: personal, institutional, social, cultural, whose interweaving contributes to form a very articulated and complex structure. Its aim is to help bring out and express the real needs of various school professionals with respect to the development of useful skills in daily activities and to the definition of each worker's profile, with a particular focus on teachers working with students in a critical age such as childhood. In this regard, it is useful to quote Dubar (1980), who defined educational needs as a dialectical process comprising three moments in particular:

- educational needs as hypothetical results of economic standpoints and evolution in jobs and qualifications;
- educational needs as individual representations and motivations in a process of goal setting, requiring an assessment of the current situation and an ability to plan and thus anticipate the future;
- educational needs as differentiated behaviors of different social groups making use of educational opportunities.

This last aspect is, precisely, "dependent on the relationship between the two previous moments. It involves linking collective situations and individual strategies, the constraints of the economic environment and projects of personal development" (Dubar, 1980, quoted in Alessandrini, 2016, p.88). In fact, by virtue of all the above and of the inherent social and cultural complexity, it would be reductive to think that such an important operation of the educational process, i.e. the analysis of needs, could be simplistically declined in a list of what is missing or in a sterile measurement of the gap between the professional skills that one already owns and those that one would like to, or should, acquire. Rather, a survey which significantly aims at reading and understanding the nature of educational needs among explicit statements and implicit messages collected throughout the work described here, using different research methodologies (focus groups, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews), cannot ignore a careful analysis of the different characteristics of territory, organisations and institutions (macrosystem). These dimensions are indeed intertwined with the understanding of the sum of beliefs, convictions,

expectations, and knowledge that people possess, either general, or related to particular epistemological domains (microsystem).

In the light of such considerations, it is believed that an educational need can be conceived as a specific requirement, closely related to the professional skills of individuals and of the team, which is made up not only of what individuals concretely put into practice, but also of what they intend to do and in which ways. Therefore, understanding these needs necessarily implies taking on a multidimensional and complexity-oriented perspective. This is particularly true if the educational project must be structured inside the school environment, where the interweaving that has just been outlined is enriched through strongly intertwined elements: the personal needs of the teachers, the needs of the single school institution linked to its specific historical and cultural path, government guidelines and directives, requests of the territorial network, special educational needs of students and their families.

The European project Erasmus+ Moec – More opportunities for every child – fits right inside this perspective, within a partnership involving Italian, French, Spanish, and Polish research institutions, and kindergardens. In a wider reference framework, the data reported in this essay represent the results of the first phase of implementation of an educational process aimed at teachers working in the kindergardens involved. This process involved the development of survey tools aimed at understanding multiple aspects that are fundamental to the implementation of the European project's work plan. One of them is the knowledge of the educational needs of teachers, with regard to early detection of difficulties of kindergarden children.

3. Research Methodology

The analysis of educational needs lies within a research program adopting a structured methodology, consistent with the twofold requirement of the survey itself: to obtain qualitative answers, which would make sense of the real needs of the school and its professionals, and at the same time, to obtain, through as many participants as possible, quantitatively significant data.

More specifically, the objectives of this research can be summarized as follows:

- to carry out an early identification of the knowhow possessed by teachers, in terms of investigating their previous educational experience;
- to identify the needs of teachers with respect to a particular subject – i.e. the early detection of difficulties – which is considered significantly important, not so much in terms of contents, as in relation to the methodologies of the educational intervention they consider as qualitatively more effective.

The choice of the study type was therefore oriented towards the realization of an action-research, i.e. a methodology of participatory investigation, carried out by people directly involved within an organization or institution, in order to address emerging critical issues and outline possible future prospects (Amado G. & Levy A., 2002; Boog B., Coenenen H & Keune L., 2001; Reason P. & Bradbury H, 2001). The survey was carried out using three data-collection techniques commonly used in pedagogical research: *questionnaire*, *focus group* and *semi-structured interview*.

The **questionnaire**, provided electronically, consists of 31 closed-ended, multiple choice and open-ended questions, divided into 4 areas (fig. 1):

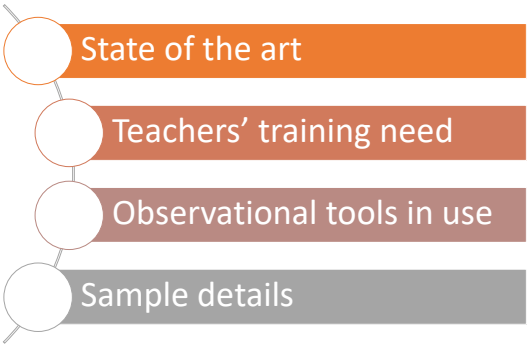

Fig. 1 - Questionnaire research areas

As already mentioned, this essay is mainly focused on the second area of interest.

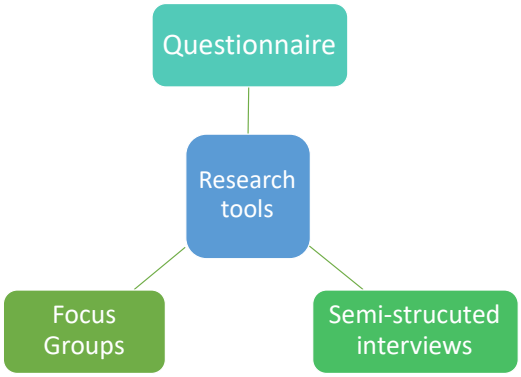

Fig. 2 - Research tools overview

At the same time, the methods of the **focus group** (Krueger, 1994; Bloor,

Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2005) and of the **semi-structured interview** (Trinchero, 2004) have been adopted in order to obtain qualitative data through the active discussion among participants on some key subjects, with particular attention to the critical issues of normally adopted educational models and the potentialities linked to different ways of implementing learning activities (fig. 2).

4. Research Sample

The sample is composed of 68 professionals, 65 of which are teachers (95,6%) and 3 are school educators (4,4%) (fig. 3), working in the public kindergartens belonging to the two school complexes actively participating in the project partnership – the "G. Piola" school complex in Giussano (MB) and the "Falcone e Borsellino" school complex in Offanengo (CR).

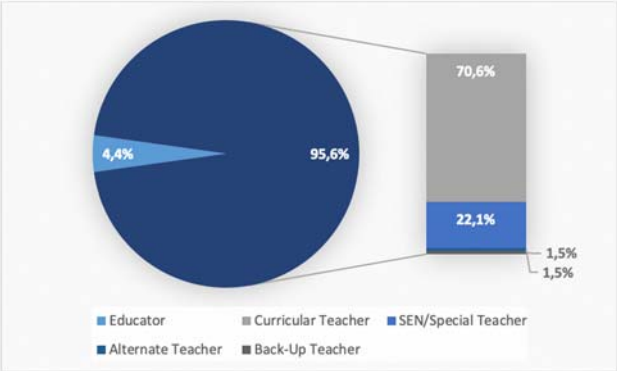

Fig. 3 – Sample Profession

All participants are female; 41% of the sample is over 50 years old (fig. 4 – 51-60 y-o 36,8% and > 60 y-o: 4,4%); 38% has a professional career of over 25 years (32,4% – 26-35 years; 5,9% – >36 years), while only 17,6% of the sample has been working in the school for less than 5 years (fig. 5).

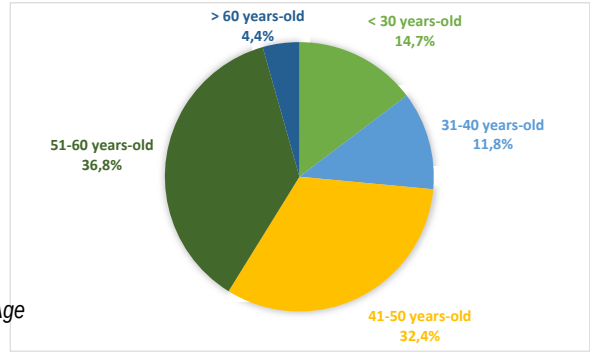

Fig. 4 – Sample Age

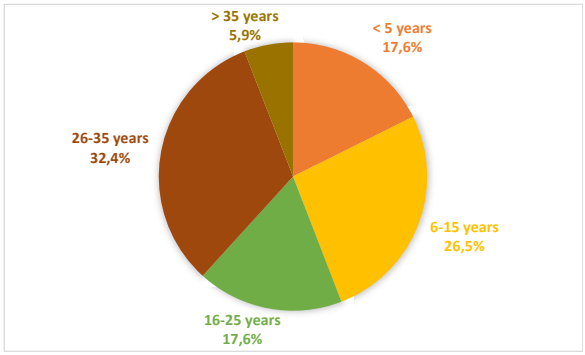

Fig. 5 – Sample school teaching experience

Curricular teachers share longer experience in terms of working years: 51% of them declare to have worked for more than 21 years.

Such data differs if we examine their working experience with students with Special Educational Needs (SEN): one third of the total sample (30,9%) has, in fact, less than 5 years of experience working with children with special educational needs in the classroom, while around 20% of them have been working with such students for more than twenty-five years (26-35 years: 19,1 - > 35 years 1,5%) (fig. 6).

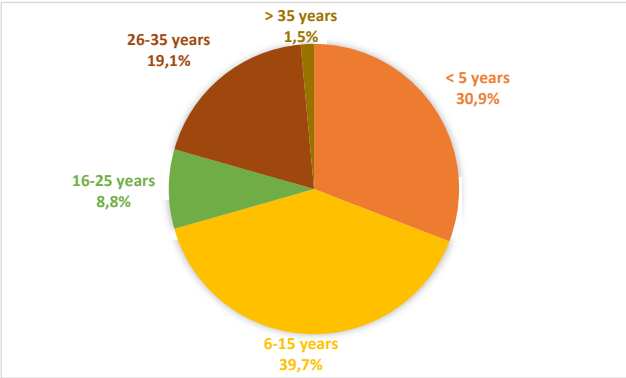

Fig. 6 – School teaching experience with students with SEN

This result, observed in the light of the research sample's profession, does not indicate any noticeable difference and therefore it would seem possible to state that, within the school context of the reference sample, there is no specific category of professionals with a longer teaching experience among children with SEN. In terms of professional competence at school, the picture that emerges is as follows: although the majority of participants have a proven and

long school experience, only a smaller number of them had the possibility to work with children with SEN for a long period of time.

To summarize, the most remarkable aspects of the survey sample are:

- all the participants are female professionals;
- most of them are curricular teachers (71%);
- curricular teachers have longer teaching experience than their support teacher colleagues and school educators.

5. Analysis of the results

The second part of the questionnaire, and a part of the questions during focus groups and interviews, aimed at investigating the educational needs perceived by teachers and educators working in the kindergartens involved in the project. The 97% of participants believe it's important to promote a timely early detection of difficulties in kindergartens (Fig. 7).

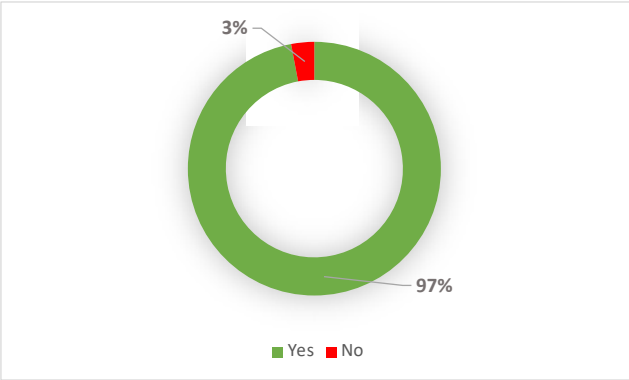

Fig. 7 - Is it important to promote timely early detection of difficulties in kindergartens?

This data is of utmost importance for the purpose of this research, since it indicates how the central theme of the project is strongly felt by the participating teachers, confirming the need to implement specific skills to support a good educational intuition through scientifically-grounded working tools.

In order to improve observation and detection abilities, the research team deemed it appropriate to investigate which educational issues teachers would like to be trained in. The requests that emerged are various and diversified, the following being the most outstanding (fig. 8):

- Child observation (26%);

- Special Educational Needs (15%);
- Family relationship (13%);
- Colleagues relationship (12%);
- Learning strategies (9%);
- Class management (7%);
- Effective communication (6%).

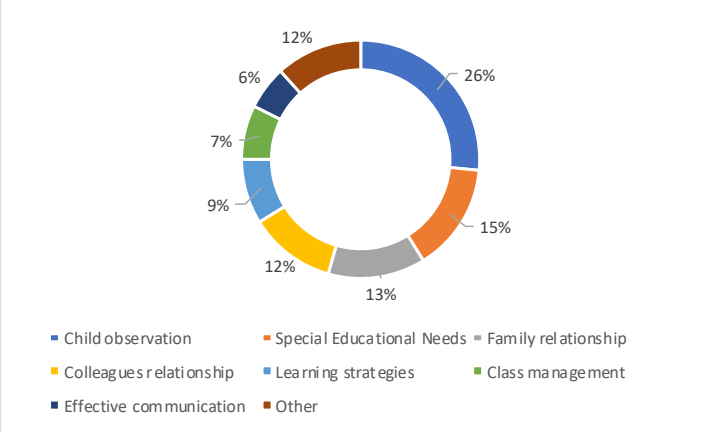

Fig. 8 - Training topic

Other training requests concern behavioral disorders (oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder), the management of a difficult class and the relationship with pupils in difficulty, aggressiveness and hyperactivity in children, disability, and developmental disorders. The ability to develop a correct observational attitude is perceived as an essential competence for those who work in the educational field, like in particular the importance of developing unconditional acceptance of the other person through a willingness to listen that is free from stereotypes, beliefs and biases, in an attempt to understand the child in his or her uniqueness and genuineness. The observation of processes and its dynamics may appear as a well-known topic, which has been widely analyzed, discussed, and investigated; however, often times there are no systematic or accurate detection protocols.

The duration of training courses is frequently variable and depends on the topic addressed. In this regard, most of the participants indicate the need to plan meetings lasting no longer than 3 hours, once a week or once every other week, with an overall average between 15 and 20 hours, in line with the majority of courses already promoted by their school or local authorities.

However, many teachers specify that the duration is not a limiting factor, because the motivation to participate is influenced by the interest in the educational subject.

Finally, according to the participants, trainers should preferably be professionals in the proposed topic (55-81%) or specialized school teachers (35-51%), a third of them indicating university teachers (24-35%) as an option (fig. 9).

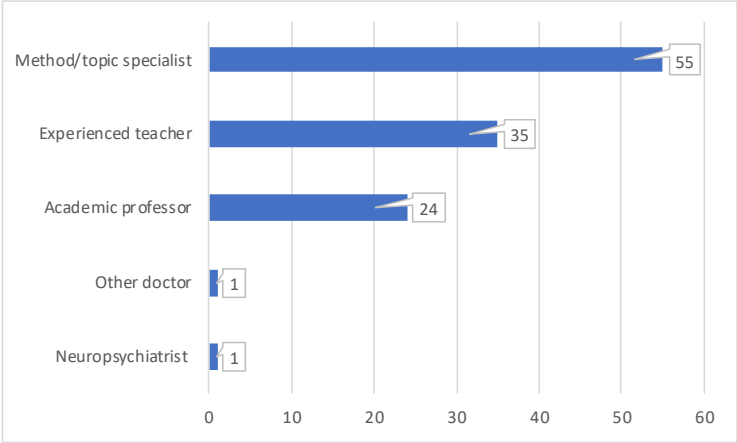

Fig 9 - Trainer profession

Through the questionnaire, the participants were asked to reflect on the training methods they preferred and considered most effective, in order to improve their expertise at early detection of difficulties at school (fig.10): 66% of the participants (n.45) expressed their preference for active and practical workshops, and 49% of the total (n.33) asked for presence training which would facilitate teamwork, cooperation and the sharing of good practices.

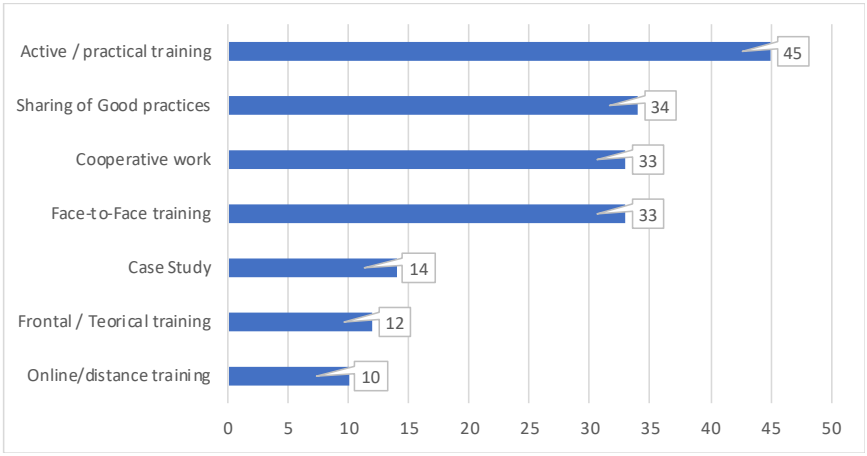

Fig 10 - Training methodology

Lecture-style/theoretical education, case studies and online courses are the least requested training modes, which however account for 15% each.

Qualitative survey tools (focus groups and semi-structured interviews) made it possible to collect further data on educational needs and possible models to improve training offers to teachers.

Many participants highlighted the need to keep the motivational aspect in the foreground, as it is considered the essential element to support specialization paths for teachers and their desire to detect difficulties in children at an early stage.

At the time this research was conducted, in-service training was not mandatory. Taking this premise into account, it is essential for each training course to be presented to teachers in an effective, engaging and challenging way, in order to motivate them to attend the course even though, and precisely because, it is not compulsory.

The members of the focus groups, who belonged to the two schools participating in the project, expressed stimulating ideas to improve the educational offers in the area. What emerged from the group discussion made it possible to outline important guidelines to plan future education. Depending on the needs of the schools, it would be appropriate to offer modular courses structured in workshops, which would allow participants to investigate the topic of early detection of difficulties and the development of educational and didactic strategies, on the basis of their needs, thus offering teachers an opportunity for monitoring, supervising and accompanying their students, exploring different observation tools and sharing a reflection on the warning signals in children aged 3-6 years.

In this regard, starting from the complexity detected inside the school environment, also due to the ever increasing presence of pupils with special educational needs, the qualitative data collected has shown the opportunity to reflect on the need to guarantee teachers the possibility of constant pedagogical supervision, guiding them through the most difficult cases and, more generally, in their daily work. The figure of a pedagogical consultant represents one of the possibilities for schools to cope with the various difficulties arising when managing pupils. This support can thus constitute a valid and impartial help for teachers, useful to define shared strategies and possible training courses, leading also to the identification of variables that, in the presence of particular educational needs, can make a difference in achieving quality of educational processes (Negri, 2014).

As the opinions shared with the researchers highlighted, **workshop mode** is certainly the one preferred by teachers. The research sample also hypothesized the possibility of involving, in the same workshops, different specialists belonging to the school environment and to the healthcare system, in particular

experts on the topics covered, on warning signals and on innovative observational and educational strategies. This would help teachers to learn about the experience of other people working and focusing on the growth of children, thus promoting a combined and integrated network approach.

Regarding the *training specific topics* express by the participants, teachers highlighted the following: i) metacognition in preschool children; ii) the key role of teamwork and communication between colleagues; iii) the child's developmental milestones and phases; iv) the key indicators of child difficulties and how to observe and detect them. Furthermore, it has been suggested that, for it to be more effective, *training should be addressed not only to teachers*, but it should also be designed for principals and auxiliary school personnel, as well as create special modules for curricular and special needs teachers. It could be useful to issue a certificate of attendance at the end of each training level proposed, although it should be important to define in detail methods and criteria to evaluate the actual impact of the course and its functional repercussions on each teacher's method.

As one participant in the focus group explains, "training must be promoted and funded by the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR) in different ways: grants to self-governing schools and to school networks through participation in training courses on specific topics, allocation of training resources to CTIs (local centers for inclusion). The promotion of training actions should be the responsibility of those who fund and organize the courses, but I think a certain importance lies in conceiving training as a tool to promote and enhance the professionalism of teachers within each individual school" (participant 3, group 1-IC Giussano, IT).

In particular, the task of the school principal should be to identify educational needs and promote the participation of teachers in the courses. It is also true that, in some instances, the annual changes in the personnel of each institution, and in particular in the appointment of principals, do not always provide for the necessary consistency and depth of the various subjects addressed during the annual training courses.

Training can also be a tool to implement new school policies; indeed, "effective training actions and courses truly responding to previously detected training needs, do change the professional culture, allowing innovation and evolution of complex and delicate systems such as the school" (participant 2, group 2-IC Offanengo, IT)

The effectiveness of different educational offers should also be monitored and detected through the evaluation of participants and the impact on good institute practices. Some teachers suggest evaluating skills before and after the course, reporting the results of the courses and sharing those results within the school.

According to a school Headmaster, “the resistance that teachers often show towards training is largely due to previous unsatisfactory experiences; in most cases, training courses only focus on theoretical contents and do not fully meet their expectations. There is often a lack of examples of ‘good practices’, of experiences that have worked in specific but exportable cases, of solutions to particular cases. Therefore, being able to evaluate the training of teachers is especially important to direct the educational offer in a more effective way” (Headmaster 1).

While this is undoubtedly shareable, it is also true that the initial atmosphere in certain training activities generally addressed to adults, and more specifically to teachers, is of extreme resistance and prejudice against innovative proposals. Trainees are often biased with respect to the effectiveness of the different training courses and they do not understand that, sometimes, what makes a real difference in achieving results could derive from their very attitude and their desire to be trained.

Sometimes, in fact, it is not important to diversify educational topics and analyze individual cases from which to infer good practices, but it is desirable to conceive the course as an opportunity to discuss and exchange views, inducing participants to rethink about different theoretical contents and translating them into their daily work experience.

It is thus important for the trainees to ask themselves how it is possible to make use of the good practices learned on such occasions and share them with their colleagues. The participants in the experimentation also consider as extremely important the support of the institutes to the work and test groups that form in each unit, whose function is collecting the most effective experiences and transmitting them to the other teachers of the network, thus constituting true 'libraries of good practices', to which everyone can access on the basis of their students’ needs. In this way, “discussion between teachers could be further encouraged, also through international exchange programs and educational research centers in collaboration with universities, with the task of training, supporting, counselling and evaluating the impact of training, in a perspective of continuous professional development” (Headmaster 2). At the basis of this idea, it is possible to recognize a concrete realization of the construct of the **community of practice** which, as Alessandrini claims, through an integrated and multifocal approach, makes it possible to consider different elements, dynamically interacting in a given professional reality such as the school (Alessandrini G. & Buccolo M., 2010):

- practices, implemented by qualified and motivated teachers;
- intentions, rules/regulations, repertoires, procedures, knowledge, (explicit/implicit) theories supporting the practices of the teachers in a given institution;

- communities of practices, as complex sets of individuals sharing cultures, life and learning histories, knowledge, traditions;
- interface communities with which one interacts in a given context, i.e. the different existing types of communities of practice (Wenger, 2006; Alessandrini & Buccolo, 2010, p.100).

The lack of economic and human resources, the social complexity and the educational emergencies, and the consequent educational needs, therefore, spur a reflection on the value of potential communities of practice in each school and they call for and understanding of the potential methods to be activated in order for those communities to be fully established.

6. Discussion and emerging dimensions

From what has been previously mentioned, it seems evident that teachers consider training as the foundation of a positive path towards the early detection of difficulties in children in kindergartens and, as such, they believe training should be promoted and created to meet the true educational needs of teachers and their network.

In an attempt to summarize the different stimuli from this research, it might be important to highlight some emerging dimensions which are a useful starting point for a reflection on a possible renewal of the training activities addressed to teachers working in kindergartens:

1 - The role of the teacher is shifting "from a merely executive role to professional role" (Altet, Charlier, Paquay and Perrenoud 2006); therefore, *teachers need continuous training* in order to be able to respond effectively to the increasingly diverse needs of their pupils.

2 - The analysis of needs cannot clearly be a phase unrelated to the whole process and sole responsibility of the research institutions in charge of its implementation. An ecologically grounded analysis of needs cannot in any way disregard the *involvement of trainees* and a shared mode in which teachers take on the role of co-readers of their own educational needs. Within this context, characterized by positive interdependence, the research institution shares its expertise on the methodology (design of a survey plan, development and validation of specific survey tools, elaboration of analysis systems and interpretation of collected data), while schools give appropriate indications pertaining to the needs of the context in which the training must take place. Methodological precision and ecological soundness, in terms of context sensitivity, are two necessary elements along the path of knowledge of educational requirements.

3 - It seems fairly established that a training model providing for an aseptic

articulation of meetings, based on the alternation of theoretical inputs and application activities, has now come to an end. Such models, even though often stimulating and skillfully coordinated, are not able to work on the real needs of teachers and convey an idea of technicality, often far from the expectations of individuals and organizations. The current orientation, often desired by the very participants in focus groups, has been the creation of a modular training system based on the interests and knowledge levels of participants, relying on the *learning by doing* principle, flexible in its strategies and, above all, significant at a systemic level, i.e. able to give pedagogically sustainable and realistically transferable indications on methods within the individual school realities, in order to detect the difficulties of students at an early stage.

4 - It is now of utmost importance the need, expressed by participants in focus groups, to *monitor the influence and the impact of teachers' training on the processes of children observation*. It is interesting to note how the awareness of the gap between what is learned in training and what is put into practice in a real context reveals possible issues in the training processes: on the one hand, being too distant from reality; on the other hand, being unable to become authentic promoters of a change. A unifying force should be established between the training classroom and the school classroom, in order to give birth to a mutual enrichment between theory and practice, research and field action, acquired skills and new educational needs.

At the present time of the publication of this article, the MOEC partners (as the rest of the world) have faced the very dramatic situation regarding the Covid-19 lockdown and restrictive measures. As a consequence of the massive infection of the population by the coronavirus, in Italy, Spain, France and Poland the Government decreed the suspension of the classes at all educational levels, and this included also every kind of teachers' training.

Before the confinement, the teacher training that is part of the Project was designed and partially delivered in presence. In order to carry on the project and its outcome, the Core team decided, through the national lockdowns, to deliver the training online, thanks to webinars and sharing of digital materials.

This action was an important example of how it's possible to reach teachers also thanks to distance learning, in order to keep the participants engaged and underline their professionality and dedication to school, even in a struggle situation as it was and still is.

7. Conclusions

In view of the growing complexity in current society, the considerations of

this essay aim at analyzing a current issue of great ethical responsibility, such as the training of teachers. Its objective, therefore, is to promote in an increasingly structured way an articulated reflection on possible training practices, to meet the professionalism of teachers working in all levels of schools.

In this regard, quoting Morin (2000), it is possible to state that the developments of different disciplines have indeed contributed to a focus on the advantages of the division of labor, but at the same time they have generated potential drifts linked to "super specialization, compartmentation and distribution of knowledge". Not only have they "produced knowledge and elucidation, but they have also generated ignorance and blindness, instead of correcting such developments, our teaching system obeys them. It teaches us, from primary school, to isolate objects (from their environment), to isolate disciplines (rather than acknowledging their solidarity), to separate problems, rather than connecting and integrating" (p. 7).

The ongoing debate on the training of teachers, particularly of special needs teachers, also prompted by the publication of recent decrees on inclusion[4], strongly underlines the need to empower the main actors who, in different ways, work in schools, to outline the specific elements that must characterize the skills of special needs teachers.

This is necessary in order to avoid both a logic based on hyperspecialism and excessive medicalization against the promotion of a real inclusive approach, and a defeatist attitude of the school personnel, sometimes taking the form of alibis and rhetorical demands. Asking for the opinion of those who work in the field, at the same time allowing them to continuously rethink their personal and professional experience, becomes thus a priority in order to define the profile of authentic, qualified and thoughtful special needs teachers, who fully comply to the demands of their context.

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[4] See D. Lgs. n. 66/2017 *Norme per la promozione scolastica degli alunni con disabilità.*

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