

University, Education and Professional Identities. The Case Study of Special Education Postgraduate Courses for the Didactic Support of Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

The subject of teachers' education has a particular perspective in the pedagogical framework. Even more so, as far as the training of specialised teachers on didactic support for students with disabilities is concerned, since the legislative and training path in relation to this professional category has been the subject of numerous changes over the last decades. The present contribution intends to illustrate an examination of the most important evolutionary phases of the educational course for specialised teachers. The results of a research conducted on 93 specialised teachers in training are presented in relation to the motivational and identity aspects, that led them to the choice of undertaking this training and work path. The empirical evidences allow us to reaffirm the importance of the close correlation between past thinking and action patterns and what is in place in practice, capable of contaminating and influencing the teachers' operating methods, as well as their own beliefs in relation to such complex profession.

Keywords: Teacher training, Specialised teacher, Professional identity, Beliefs.

The Two Sides of the Teacher Specialised in Special Education: Law and Form

The educational structure of school institutions has certainly been impacted by social changes, which have rapidly and dynamically affected the various cultural dimensions in Italy in the past few years. In this perspective, teachers are the main actors on stage, especially as far as their *agency* is concerned, which is the «judgement ability and discretion of choices pursuing the intention of an educational project» (Aiello, 2018, p. 3). It is generally possible to state that the teacher's profile itself reflects the hurdles in controlling an ongoing change, adapting the professional aspects to the new social and political logics.

The image of the special education teachers supporting students with disabilities is in this sense particularly symbolic for three main reasons:

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1. first of all, they represent a complex professional role joining motivational and identity aspects with educational, disciplinary and methodological knowledge;
2. secondly, the legal and, consequently, the educational journey of specialised teachers has been often reformed by legislators;
3. thirdly, special education teachers are increasingly becoming key players in the inclusive process of guaranteeing and protecting citizenship and participation rights of each and everyone (cf. Amatori, 2019).

Moreover, it should be considered that «imagining an inclusive school without drafting a teacher profile able to actively participate in structural and organisational processes creating high levels of inclusion is inconceivable» (Bocci, 2016).

The educational dimension of special education teachers can be read as a case study to interpret the complex topic of contemporary teachers' education. This is possible in view of its potential two-fold repercussion on the professional dimension, entailing the role, functions and tasks, and of the vocational dimension, namely the identity, motivational and contextual aspects, which lead to choose such a commitment. Since the above mentioned dimensions focus on the person as a citizen and worker, they should not be read separately, but rather in a connected and dependent manner. «The topic of teachers' education [...] concerns a variety of administrative aspects and cultural, social, civil, and ethical implications across the board» (Chiappetta Cajola, 2018, p. 27).

Moreover, “inherent vices” are often attributed to special education teachers, which is why they are still today confronted with diminishing and marginal tasks. They are considered as playing a secondary role compared to general education teachers, although the legal framework and the actual educational impact clearly suggest a shared responsibility and a tangible mutual involvement.

The legal framework defining the educational journey of special education teachers has often followed different models in terms of quantity and quality in close association with policies, procedures and cultures: from single-purpose to multi-purpose education, from two-year to 400-hours courses, which obviously envisaged a substantial programme reshaping, to the current educational framework ratified by Ministerial Decree 249/10 and its later modifications. This Decree envisages the creation of University study programmes of 60 ECTS to be acquired in eight months and including 150 hours of direct internship in schools.

The debate about this topic has been extremely intense and rich in significant contributions from the pedagogical scientific community. The recent Legislative Decree 66/2017 has envisioned a range of laws for the education of

specialised teachers for primary and secondary school, which include, in fact, an additional one-year course. Nevertheless, this course will be accessible only after having acquired 60 ECTS on inclusive didactics additional to the 30 ECTS already included in the Primary Education Studies degree programme. «These regulations need to be interpreted together with those established by the Legislative Decree 59/2017 titled *Reorganising, Adjusting and Streamlining the Systems of Initial Teacher Education and of Access to Secondary School Teacher's Roles*» (Cottini, 2017, p. 50).

Therefore, the topic of teachers' education not only continues to be central in the educational framework, but it needs to be also examined in a broader sense and in perspective, as it is tied to a precise idea of school and education. Even more so to realise our wish of an inclusive school, which is oriented towards a widespread educational success (Bocci, 2019). Particularly:

setting or resetting the debate regarding the identity and the education of special education teachers supporting students with disabilities cannot succeed without considering and reevaluating the system in which they work and compared to which their role as "facilitators" finds credibility, acknowledgement and success, transforming directions and obligations of such role. These professionals are specialised in didactics differentiation and in the differences of individual functioning in context, only in which their work finds its meaning and value. (Santi, 2014, p. 193)

It is then appropriate to inquire about which educational model is more effective, towards which horizons its implementation should tend and for which teachers it should be structured.

What kind of education for what kind of teachers?

The quality of school is necessarily based on the quality of teachers. «Since the quality of school is made by teachers, if investments in the preparation of short- and long-serving teachers are not made, no improvement of educational programmes will be possible» (Ianes *et al.*, 2019, p. 11). Therefore, education based on the logic of complexity and integration of theory and practice should aim at overcoming the strict approach considering the former as preparatory to the latter, without envisioning the cognitive value of action (Damiano, 2004).

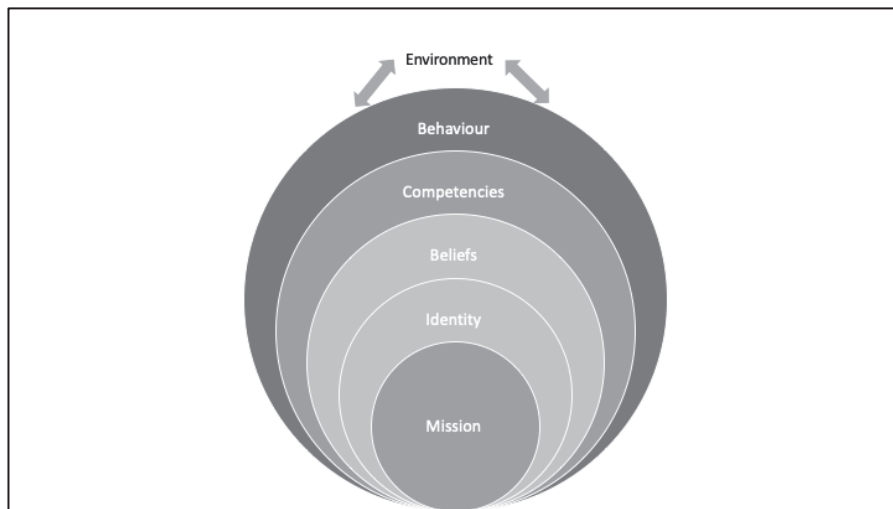
This perspective can be combined with the idea of the *Expert Teacher*, namely «a person, an educator, a mediator, and an active player in the change process, believing not only in the traditional dimension of didactics, but also in team work and in school organisation» (Ianes *et al.*, 2019, p. 12).

The need to clearly define the image of teachers is visible also in the lack of a shared and regulated framework of respective competencies. However, the following documents could initiate an endeavour in such direction:

1. the professional profile outlined in the *National Collective Labour Agreement 2018 - Teachers' Section*;
2. the teachers' competency framework presented in the *New Hires Competency Profile INDIRE 2017/2018*;
3. the competency framework envisioned by the *National Education Plan for Employed Teachers* (Ministerial Decree 797/16);
4. the inclusive teachers' profile of the *European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education*.

We can assume that the main directions to be pursued concern the agency and *empowerment* dimensions, distancing ourselves from those logics, which defined the features of a “good teacher” in a static and descriptive way through specific rules until a few years ago. Both of them refer indeed to owning fundamental professional qualities, which can be found in the onion model proposed by Fred Korthagen (2004).

Image 1 – Korthagen’s concentric system (adapt. by Amatori, 2019, p.102)1



According to this model, professionalism is achieved by the pursuit of the maximum (and ideal) balance of the above-outlined different levels. It is then possible to establish that the personal side of the teachers are the main focus

and are «considered as interface of the professional life, clarifying the connections between personality and professionalism, which were hardly contemplated in other, more recent theories» (Amatori, 2019, p. 103).

The education of teachers needs to take these factors into account, as they are closely related to their own professional future perspective. As a result, they need to be included in a complex vision suitable for complex profession, like the teacher's is. It is precisely through initial education that some of the preconceptions still correlating special education teachers to vocation, which is untied from deep cultural and professional roots, whose uniqueness lays on strong self-critique and meta-reflection skills, can be dismantled. Identifying the motivational factors leading to choosing such a complex profession means «going after a pedagogical theory of teaching and of school consistently defining the specific professional profile of future teachers» (Amatori, 2019, p. 104).

The professional identity regarding one's own role is closely connected to the achievement of specific competencies.

Teachers become influential professionals if they reinforce their own professional biography and if they step in a vital cycle of cultural growth, involving the participation in a variety of experiences. [...] Nevertheless, the ability to reorganise and improve their own work experiences through a cognitive-reflective approach, resorting to knowledge and emotions, seems to be crucial. (Margiotta, 2019, p. 53)

Examining these aspects can overhaul teachers' education to effectively meet their needs and the requirements of the school of change.

The Scientific Research: European University of Rome Students specialising on Special Education

The teachers' personal styles of teaching, which strongly depend on perceptions and acquired knowledge, can be real catalysts of the learning process. As a matter of fact, «personal and professional features play a fundamental role in the development and implementation of the professional role» (Morganti, 2018, p. 107). For this reason, we have decided to launch a research project on post-graduate students of the European University of Rome specialising on the didactic support of students with disabilities. We involved the students in an attempt to understand what kind of teachers will inhabit the school of the near future and, especially, who is benefitting from the education currently in force, being aware that the ability of self-assessment and of reflecting on their own personal and professional journey is pivotal for a significant improvement of their own professional profile.

Study Sample and Methodology

The study has envisaged the creation of a semi-structured questionnaire addressed to postgraduate students specialising on didactic support activities for students with disabilities at the European University of Rome. This questionnaire is a simplification and quantitative reduction of the one addressed to teachers in training envisioned by Amatori (2019).

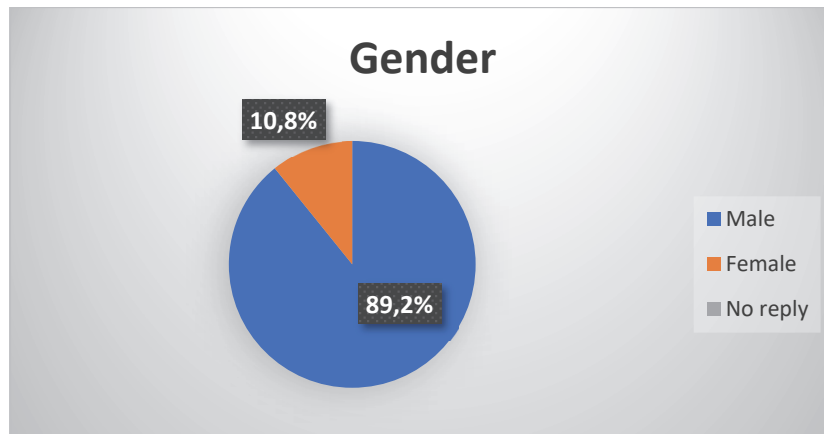
93 students participated to the survey on a voluntary basis. The methodological approach to the analysis of the results follows the interpretative-phenomenological model.

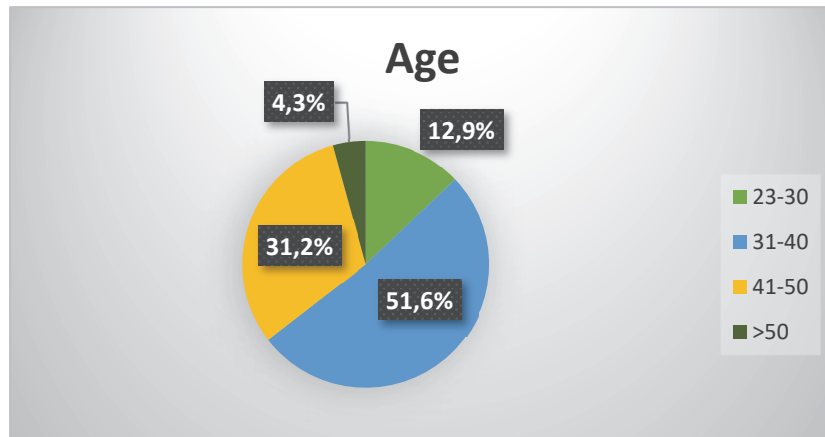
The questionnaire has been built and shared through Google Modules and has been divided in two sections. The first section has been structured in six items regarding personal data, through which the interviewees have been asked to specify their gender, age, most recent achieved qualification, religion (if any) and, lastly, their parents' profession.

The second section has been organised in eight items regarding stylistic and methodological standpoints concerning the differences between general education teachers and specialised teachers, the motivation leading the students to undertake such educational and professional journey and, lastly, future professional perspectives in the field.

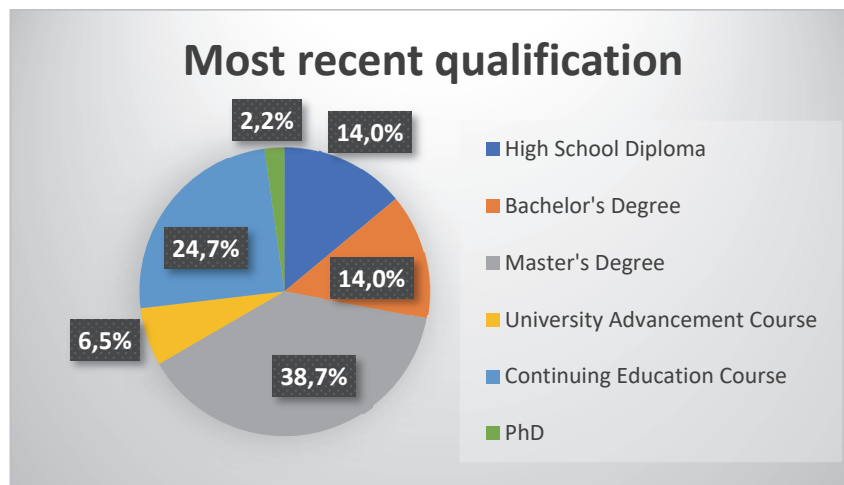
Results

The first section of the questionnaire has focused on the interviewees' personal data.



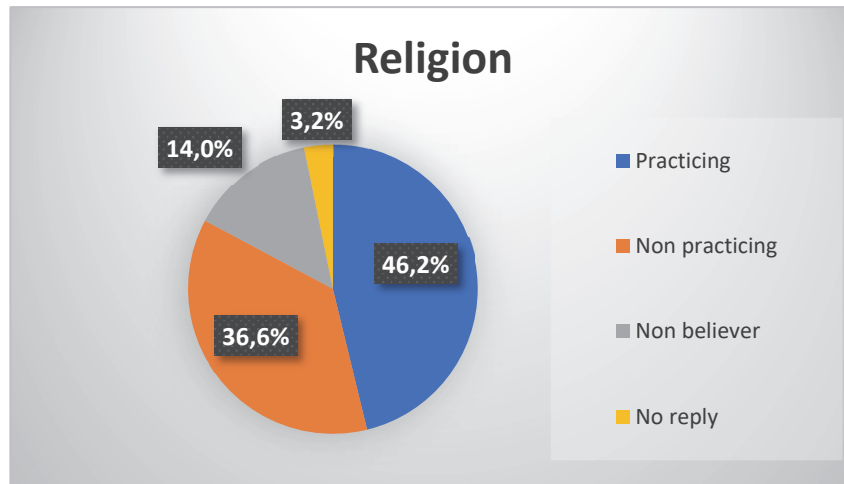


Almost the entire sample is female. The majority of the interviewees is between 31 and 40 years old, despite a good participation of adults between 41 and 50 years.

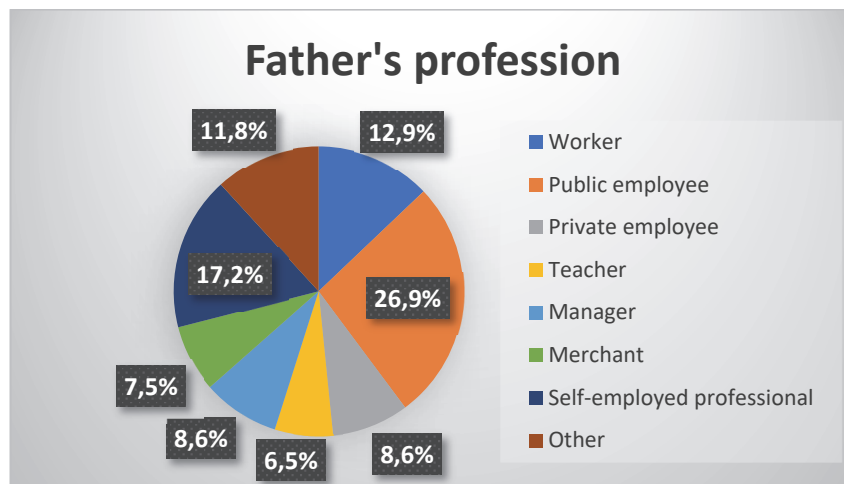


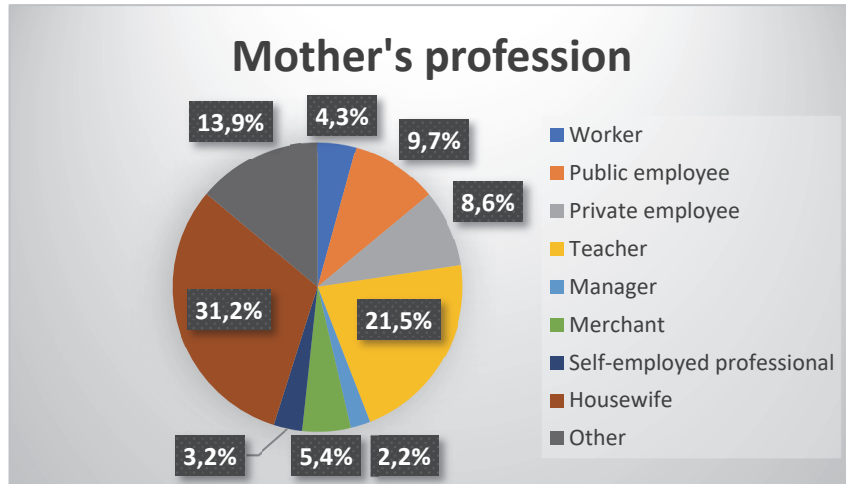
As far as the most recent qualification is concerned, only 14% of interviewees stopped studying after upper secondary school. The rules of the postgraduate course indeed grant access also to school graduates who have acquired such qualification before 2001.

Almost 70% of students has achieved a bachelor's degree and/or furthered their studies through master's degrees or advancement course.



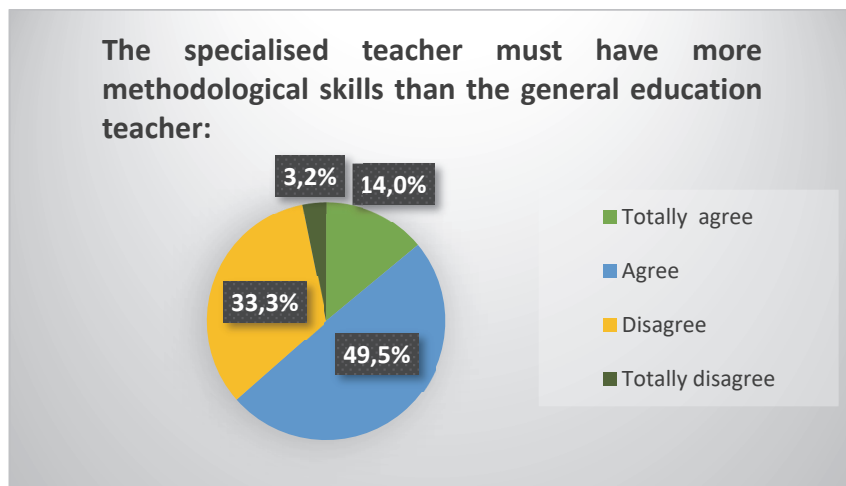
With the fourth question, the interviewees have been asked to express their religious beliefs. The replies, which can be attributed to the the last level advanced by Korthagen (2004), refer to vocational aspects and to the *mission*. Since the decision to undertake an helping profession could derive from a religious background, we think it is important to examine whether this factor was detectable or not. Almost all participants reveal to be indeed religious, despite the differences between practising and non-practising believers.

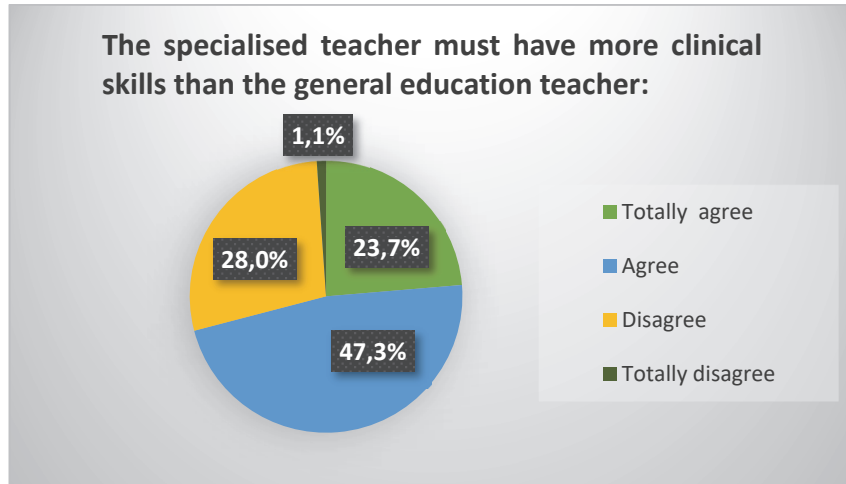




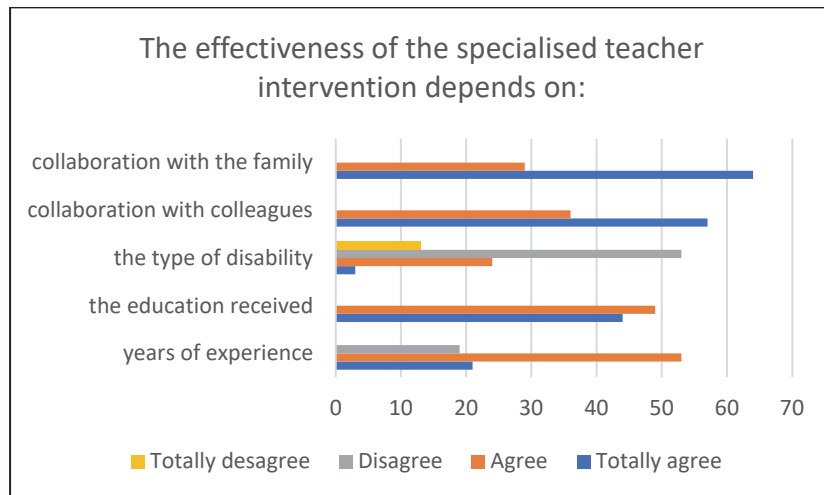
Additionally, an interesting element of analysis is the possible influence of the family profile on their professional decision. As a matter of fact, one out of four participating students declares that one of the parents works (or has worked) as a teacher.

The teachers have had the chance to reflect on the typical aspects of their own future profession in the second part of the questionnaire. They have been asked to dwell specifically on how their profession differs from the general education teachers' one. According to the results, students seem to consider specialised teachers more skilled in methodological and clinical terms compared to general education teachers.

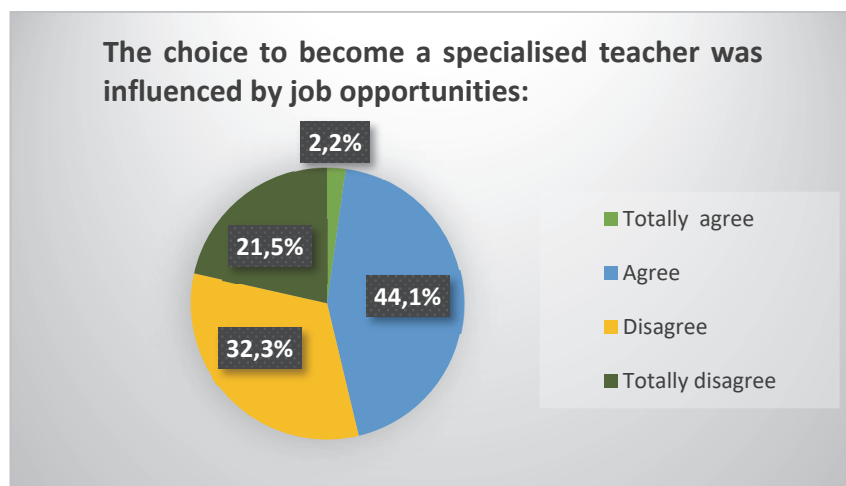




Moreover, we have asked to express which factors mainly contribute to an efficient educational intervention by the special education teacher. Most interestingly, almost two thirds of the interviewees consider the cooperation between colleagues and with the student's family fundamental, along with a common acknowledgement of the importance of the received education. The number of interviewees ascribing the effectiveness of teachers' interventions to the years of professional experience is still very high.



The interviewees depict a more elaborate picture as far as the motivational factors are concerned. While the results are quite clear regarding the first item, in which half of the students declares to have made such a professional decision based on future professional opportunities, the other half states otherwise.



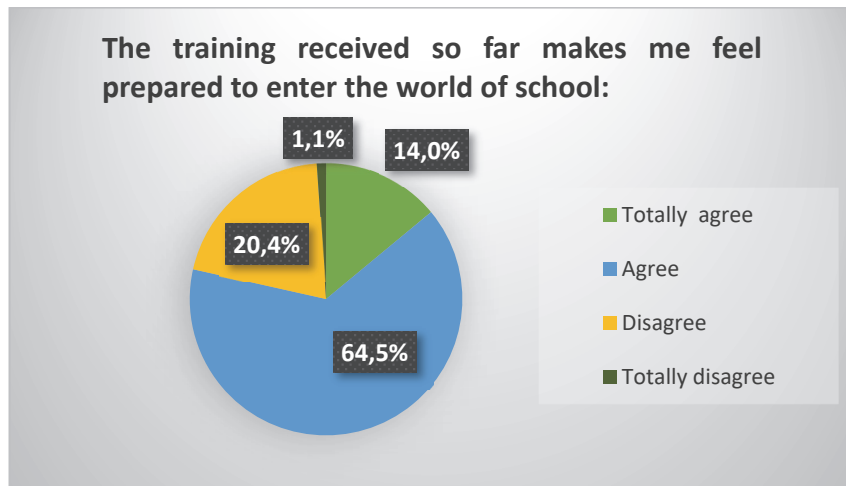
We have subsequently asked to express the reasons that lead to undertake such a professional journey. The results are much more complex. Indeed:

- 16.1% relates this decision to having had teachers who were successful in passing on their passion for this profession;
- 19.4% sees it as a reasonable continuum of a previous study programme;
- 41.9% states of having an inclination towards support and care professions, while 39.8% declares to be particularly interested in helping the most vulnerable;
- none relates this decision to a failure in other educational contexts;
- 19.4% declares that teaching to students with disability has always been their highest aspiration;
- 5.4% reports to consider it as the most solid possibility to become a general education teacher at a later stage;
- 4.3% relates to ethical-religious reasons.

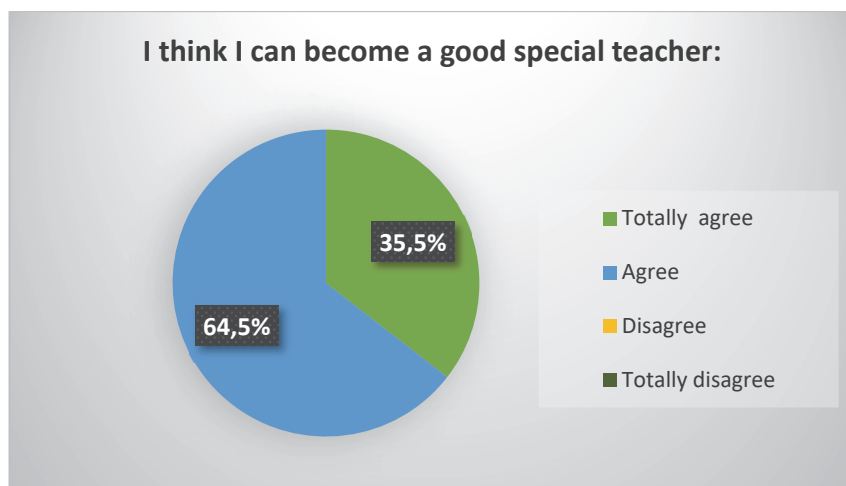
Other interesting reasons, which were reported by the student in the “other” section, have been the following (1.1%):

- “my mother has had this job for 30 years”;
- “I am already an educational assistant since a long time”;
- “having a sister at home with specific learning disorders, which were not taken into account by teachers and, as a result, were not diagnosed on time”;
- “I have been a child with disabilities myself”;

- “I have approached this profession by chance, but I have then developed a passion for it”;
 - “my mother has passed on this passion to me”.
- Moreover, we have also asked the interviewees to evaluate the education they received.

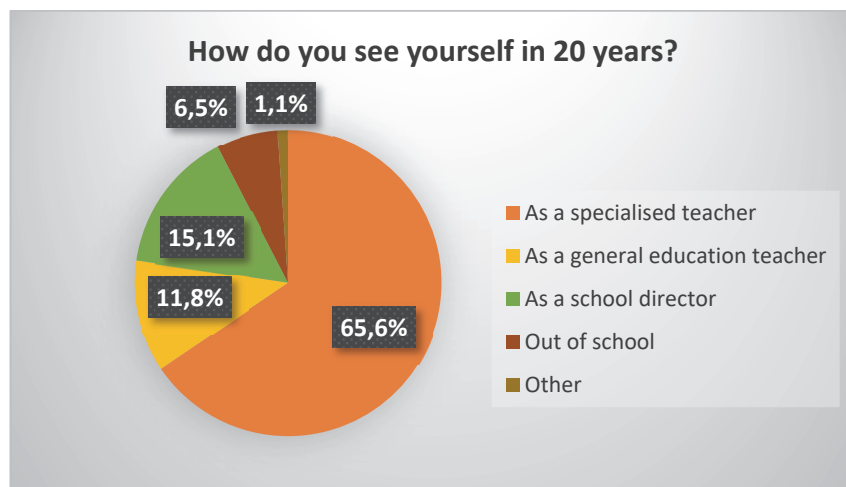


More than 80% of the students feels ready to enter the school world. In this respect, it needs to be underlined that the questionnaire has been completed after approximately four weeks from the beginning of the postgraduate course.



We have also asked the interviewees about their own perception of professional identity, how much they felt able to become “a good special education teacher”. All of them have shown to be positive about themselves in the upcoming profession of specialised teachers.

The last question was about their own professional situation in the future, aiming at understanding if and to what extent the decision of undertaking a professional journey as a special education teacher was perceived as a “transitional phase” or as a more stable path.



The majority of the interviewees intends to stay in the role of specialised teacher. 15.1% reports to be willing to become school director, while 6.5% sees themselves out of the school industry. A significant 11.8% declares to be willing to become a general education teacher.

Data Analysis

The study questionnaire provided data encouraging to reflect on the environmental approach to the role of teachers specialised on special education. The results can be analysed in particular considering the concentric circles model of Korthagen (2004) in connection with the environment (tied in this case to education), the competencies, the opinions regarding the image itself of the special education teacher, and with the effectiveness of the didactic intervention, the professional identity, and the *mission*.

The interviewees have reported to find favourable keys to enter the professional world in their environment, that is the education they received. Therefore, the undertaken educational journey made them feel ready to choose this profession and start teaching. A third of them, however, could not reply. The reason could be found in various factors, which range from those closely related to the moment in which the questionnaire was filled out, namely shortly after the beginning of the postgraduate course, to those of cultural and social nature (for example: a more specific education on some disability types or programmatic and operational aspects).

As far as competencies are concerned, data depicts the specialised teacher profile as one of a highly competent professional. Specifically, more competent than general education teachers. On one hand, this perspective underlines the notable educational structure available for special education teachers, while on the other it sheds light on the higher probability of delegating responsibilities by virtue of a greater education. However, students seem to follow this perspective, believing that special education teachers should have more competencies in methodological and clinical terms.

Particularly interesting aspects emerge from the section of beliefs. As Korthagen (2004) himself highlights, teachers' competencies are so strongly influenced by their beliefs, that their future actions are also shaped by them. The factors impacting the effectiveness of educational interventions the most seem to depend on the cooperation levels with the closest people: general education colleagues and the student's family. Professional experience is apparently still one of the most influential factors, despite the notable consideration towards the education received. The type of the student's disability does not seem to be among the factors influencing the effectiveness of the specialised teachers' intervention. This confirms that the multi-purpose education received should be really interpreted from an inclusive and non-sectorial perspective. «This is valid even in a reality where unfortunately discourses of inclusion still present practical models of an individual biomedical nature leading to forms of exclusion, which impact specialised teachers, who are delegated to give technical solutions to the problem, as well» (Isidori, 2018, p. 255).

Moreover, the professional identity and the *mission* deserve to be particularly considered. The first reassuring information emerging from the questionnaire concerns the potential “conquest” of stability and professional continuity of special education teachers. As illustrated in the study from Trellle, Caritas e Fondazione Agnelli «special education teaching is one of the most favoured channel to access general teaching after the five years phase of “conscriptio”. This implicit agreement transforms a delicate role in a generally painful duty» (Associazione Trellle, Caritas Italiana, Fondazione Agnelli, 2011, p. 109). The

wish of a career evolution towards a school directing role, however, is expressed mainly by teachers between 31 and 40 years; interviewees between 41 and 50 years old see themselves out of the school world.

Yet, the access to the profession remains anchored to identity matters relating to inclinations towards care and helping relationships rather than to empathic traits or management competencies. Moreover, a transferral of generational and familiar scripts takes place, even if in limited cases, seeing the professional experience of parents as teachers or special education teachers reoccurring with the offspring. In different circumstances, the experience on themselves or on close people with disabilities and the consequent development of relational paradigms in such direction has been the key to access the profession of special education teacher. Additionally, the examined sample is almost perfectly divided regarding professional opportunities as main factors influencing the decision to undertake this professional journey.

Conclusions

The issues regarding teachers' education are being debated in the pedagogical community and their complex nature necessarily forces a vision which is contaminated by the typical investigation knowledge of pedagogy (Amatori 2019). Interdisciplinary twists, which are typical of complex phenomenon, occur indeed in the educational framework.

The temptation of "formatting" teachers, as well as students under certain circumstances, is still in fashion, running the risk of segmenting and fragmenting roles that need to be read and interpreted in their entirety. «The quality of teachers needs to read as a global concept rather than as a sum of measurable and behavioural elements, which are separated and acquirable independently from one another» (Ianes *et al.*, 2019, p. 23). Teachers have been (and still are) indeed the main characters of a long developmental journey, which has outlined a profile that increases the educational quality of the school system.

Therefore, it is needed not to fall in the trap of considering the teacher as a *unicum*, but rather as belonging to an expert community «able to steer educational processes and to develop appropriate learning environments, focusing on their personalisation and individualisation» (*Ibidem*).

Yet, the long and difficult legal journey of the last decades has witnessed transformations and reforms of teachers' education, particularly of special education teachers. In our view, a real analysis of the actions in favour of an immediate implementation of new system instead has been lacking. For this reason, it is necessary to understand that the teacher is first of all a person and that identity aspects are crucial in regards to the reasons leading to choose such a

profession. Additionally, as it has been already stated, the teacher's beliefs incisively determine future professional actions. It is indeed possible that as the educational model changes, so do the users. In other words, the decision to become special education teachers can be influenced by the perspective education.

The future research lines should pursue the objective of more precisely realising to what extent education can influence the development of future teachers' professional identity.

A potential evolution can be investigated with the use of the above presented questionnaire at the end of the educational journey, in order to understand and analyse potential changes compared to what resulted with its use at the beginning of the postgraduate course.

International studies carried out by Priestley, Biesta e Robinson (2013; 2015) confirm, in this respect, the circularity between patterns of thinking, past actions and what is ongoing in practice. In other words, the agency of the teachers is contaminated by past professional and personal experiences, on top of the beliefs regarding the image and role of the teacher in social terms.

Educational journeys for teachers need to be designed with an eye for the "endless worlds", real and idealised, which represent the person in its complexity. Education can be effective only when it pursues the objective of being significantly influential in regards not only to the requirements of the economic and professional world, but also to the personal needs of each and everyone.

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