

EXPLORING TEACHERS' REACTIONS AND CHALLENGES IN TRAINING FOR SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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Abstract

Among the main factors that can affect the success or failure of processes aimed at school inclusion, scientific literature identifies also those inherent in teachers' attitudes and fears regarding disability, and the tasks peculiar to their figure as educators. Starting from this perspective, this research paper reports the results of an experimental study on the attitudes and fears of a group of teachers undergoing training for specialization in educational support activities for disabled students. The results of the survey carried out reveal the importance of this issue and the need to stimulate new studies in this area. In fact, indications have emerged about the critical issues and the main dynamics peculiar to such a difficult role as that of supporting a person with disabilities, bringing to light the emotional-relational and experiential aspects on which to focus more in order to perform the training processes for future educators in the field of special pedagogy.

Keywords: Disability, Support Teacher, Education, Special Pedagogy, School

Introduction

The social perception of disability and inclusion is a Pandora's box that has been uncovered only in recent times, and which is difficult to interpret if it is embodied in the representational and evaluation devices used so far, such as rigid and polarized dichotomies, including acceptance-rejection, concern-serenity, agreement-disagreement. Considering that the nature of perception is far more complex than this, it is necessary to investigate the concept of attitude and its role in today's society. From an etymological point of view, "attitude is a psychophysiological state of which the subject may or may not be made aware through introspection or even through the mediation of self-descriptive rationalizations, or even through the use of retroactive information from the external environment"; so we can learn that attitude is not always a subject's self-aware process. In the field of social psychology, the concept of attitude is used to designate a long-lasting disposition, or according to a simplified definition, a tendency, a durable disposition to react favorably or unfavorably to a particular object or category of

objects (Oskamp, 1977). In this paper, among the various meanings, we will give preference to Eagly & Chaiken's one (1998), who define attitude as a device that punctuates the relationship between the individual and his or her social world according to a set of psycho-pedagogical-social components designed to evaluate situations, events, people and groups with a certain degree of favorability or unfavorability. Rosenberg et al. (1960), on the other hand, propose a tripartite model in which attitude is given by the complex relationship between three components: a cognitive, affective and behavioral one. By analyzing them in relation to the concept of disability, we can see that the cognitive component refers to the knowledge and beliefs attached to it (what one thinks and believes); the affective component describes our emotions and feelings toward who or what evokes them (the feelings the subject arouses); whereas the behavioral component deals with the actions of approaching or turning away from it (the ways one acts). When we observe the world and try to interpret it, we apply cognitive categories that inherently perform a social function, namely, they help identify spaces of commonality and spaces of divergence, those of the "us" and of the "them" that tend to necessarily emphasize differences. Consequently, the "others" that are considered "different from us" are perceived as an outgroup, or better the group with which individuals do not identify themselves (Jones, Wood & Quattrone, 1981). This differs from the ingroup that, instead, is the group with which individuals identify themselves and of which they feel part. Therefore, cognitive mechanisms are created, which lead people to manifest positive feelings and special treatment for people in their ingroup and to show, on the contrary, negative feelings and unfair treatment toward the members of the outgroup. So these dynamics tend to diverge from otherness, which in this case is disability, and to stigmatize clichés and prejudices. If we want to try to delve into the world of stereotypical and prototypical views, disability is usually associated with images such as prosthetics, suffering, support and childhood, not to mention the process of medicalization that pedagogy is currently going through, or rather of spasmodic pursuit of the diagnosis as an end in itself with the aim of "providing a certification" to the disabled student. Against this background, this paper aims to investigate and outline the teachers' attitudes and fears toward disability, according to indicators of potential unsuccessful or inadequate school inclusion. The assumption of this paper postulates that the greater the severity and type of disability, the greater the teacher's attitude of reluctance and inadequacy. This will make it possible to lay the foundation for an efficient training process for teachers who, on a daily basis, establish a teaching, social and personal relationship with disabled students.

1. Teachers' initial attitudes and considerations on the concepts of disability and inclusion

During social interaction, the subject creates individual variable representations with respect to an object in question, which in our case is disability and inclusion. Moreover, social representations are conditioned by complex ideological systems permeating the society in which one lives, while attitudes lay their foundations on an inter-individual level, that is, on individual modulations of a common reference system (Doise, 1989; Rateau, 2000). Therefore, it may be said that ideology constitutes the matrix of representations, which in turn are the matrix of attitudes. It is beyond the scope of this paper to dwell on the broad theories of social representation, but it is necessary to state that they influence individual perceptions and attitudes about disability, as they allow

reflecting on the social dimension of knowledge and the processes of interpretation and co-construction related to it. The representation of disability as an object of knowledge is achieved through two processes: the anchoring, which allows understanding what we are unfamiliar with; and objectification, which turns concepts that are difficult to experience into images. In this regard, before moving on to the representation and discussion of the empirical research carried out on a sample of 33 teachers undergoing training for specialization in educational support activities for disabled students at the Suor Orsola Benincasa University of Naples, it seems appropriate to report a short analysis of the reference literature, among which stands out the study carried out by the forerunner Morvan (1987). The latter systematized images and related representations about disability based on a research activity involving social workers and teachers. Subsequent studies, including Mercier's ones (1999), analyze the images underlying social representations of disability, which are:

- The semiological image, representations guided by classificatory principles aimed at grouping types of disabilities (the part for the whole);
- The relational image, which focuses on the acceptance-rejection dialectic;
- The secondary image, which links disability to suffering effects;
- The supportive figure image, which infantilizes the disabled person.

By contrast, recent studies confirm that teachers' general perception of disability is increasingly close to a logic based on stereotypes and prototypical images. There is no doubt that teachers' didactic-pedagogical practices themselves are then influenced by the very fear of disability, as well as by their opinions about its nature. In fact, it follows that the greater the severity of the disability, the greater the sense of inadequacy and fear that will increase towards the disability itself (Fiorucci, 2016; 2018; Fiorucci & Pinnelli, 2020; Odongo & Davidson, 2016; Ramel, 2014). Obviously, having prior experience with a disabled person also conditions the way one perceives disability, either negatively or positively, depending on one's own experiences. In Italy, on the other hand, studies regarding teachers' attitudes and fears (Alli, 2023; Castellana et al, 2023; Ianes & Canevaro, 2016; Vianello & Di Nuovo, 2015) confirm that effective inclusion lies mainly in the adaptation of the social elements of the context to the disabled person's specific needs. Another point to be mentioned is the danger that lies in an increasingly common practice, namely that of making use of a medical-specialist language, which is now an integral part of the pedagogical one and that risks further aggravating the process of stigmatization of disability, leading it back and generalizing it to a simple diagnosis, an absolutely limiting aspect for any educational and social context (Goussot, 2015).

2. Structure of the empirical research conducted on teachers' behaviors and concerns towards disabilities

The purpose of the research carried out was to investigate the nature of the attitudes and fears of a group of teachers undergoing training for specialization in educational support activities for disabled students at the Suor Orsola Benincasa University (Naples). The aim was to place the teacher at the center of the training process by

analyzing his or her most properly human, labile and fickle side so that this could inspire future courses increasingly focused on the person, as well as on professionalization. In other words, the aim was to focus attention on how one's own perceptions and emotions can influence (negatively or positively) the professional field with a view to the continuous reorientation of the training, readjustment of the apprenticeship and of the workshop experience. The sample analyzed consisted of 33 teachers attending the specialization course for secondary school support activities, with an average age of 39 years, with 97% belonging to the female gender and 3% to the male gender. About 60 % of the participants were from Campania Region, where the abovementioned training course was held, and holding an educational qualification not directly related to the didactic-pedagogical sphere, with a clear prevalence of graduates in law and economics. A survey created on Google forms was administered, consisting of 32 questions divided into three macro-areas:

- professional and experiential characteristics;
- concerns and fears related to the educational-relational plan;
- concerns and fears related to specific disabilities.

In the first macro-area there were open-ended and other multiple-choice questions aimed at obtaining information describing the sample, while in the remaining macro-areas, aimed at investigating the main research question, "standard phrases" regarding attitudes and fears were proposed, which were rated according to the agreement and disagreement parameters typical of the 5-point Likert scale:

1. strongly agree;
2. agree;
3. uncertain;
4. disagree;
5. strongly disagree.

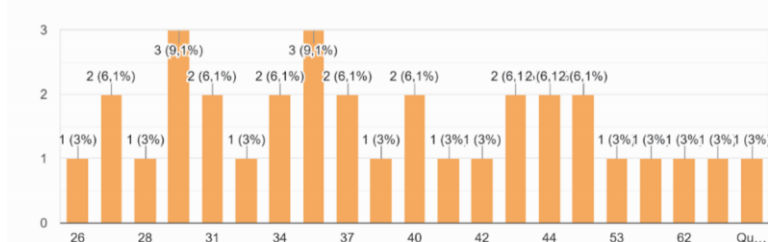
A descriptive analysis of percentage frequencies was carried out on the quantitative data. The goal of the analysis was thematic, i.e., aimed at making disappear teachers' concerns and fears regarding the various macro-areas of the questionnaire, both on the experiential and didacticrelational level, and in relation to specific disabilities.

3. Results

Below the results obtained from the questionnaire submitted to the research sample, in the form of graphs and diagrams.

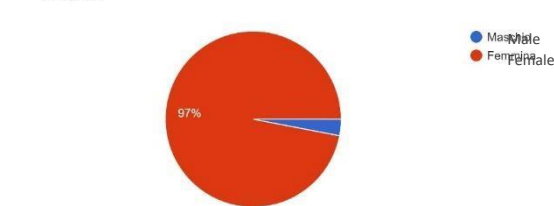
How old are you?

33 replies



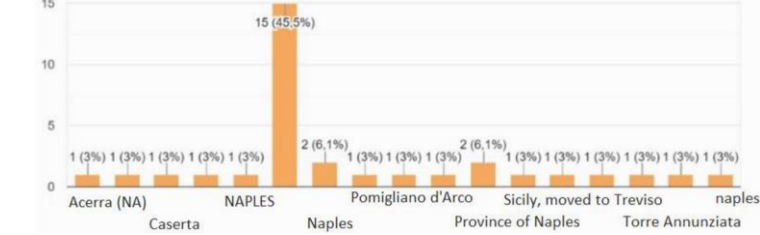
Which is your gender?

33 replies



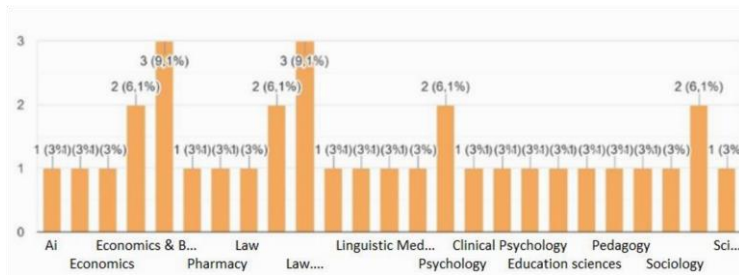
Where are you from?

33 replies

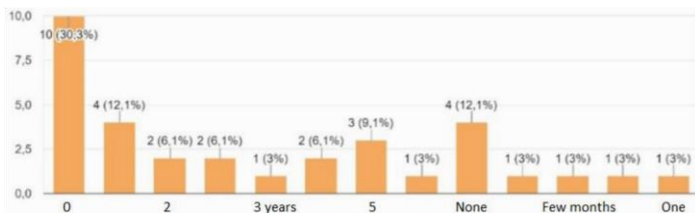


You hold a degree in...

33 replies

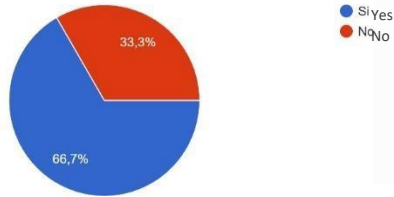


How many years of experience do you have in support activities at school?



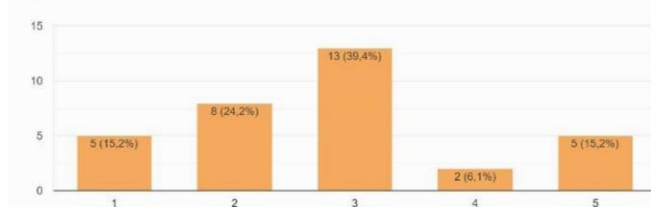
Have you ever had contact with disabled students before choosing this training course?
 Hai mai seguito un alunno con disabilità? orso di formazione?

33 risposte



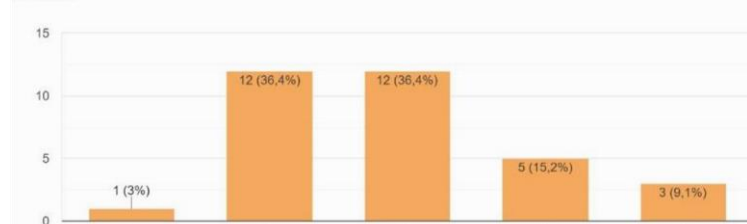
Do you think that previous contact and knowledge of a disabled person can affect one's professionalism?
 Credi che il contatto precedente e la conoscenza di una persona con disabilità possa incidere sulla
 professionalità?

33 risposte



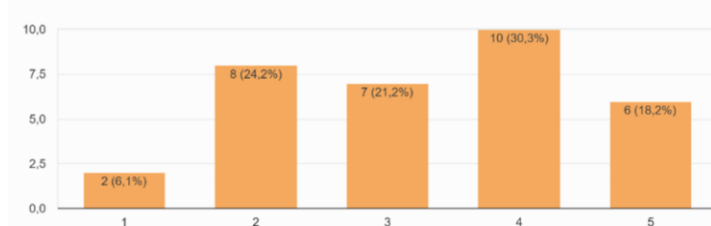
Do you think your knowledge with respect to the training course, in the field of pedagogy and special education, was adequate?
 Pensi che la tua conoscenza con respecto al corso di formazione, nel settore della pedagogia e della didattica speciale, fossero adeguate?

33 risposte



How did you find the course to produce a positive impact on the development of disabled students?
 Quanto ti ha trovato il corso utile per produrre un miglioramento nello sviluppo degli studenti disabili?

33 risposte



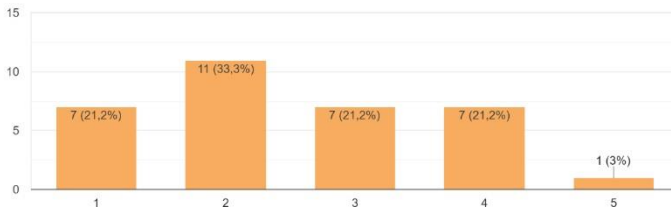
Do you think this training course is necessary for your professional experience?
 Pensi che questo corso di formazione sia necessario per la tua esperienza professionale?

33 risposte



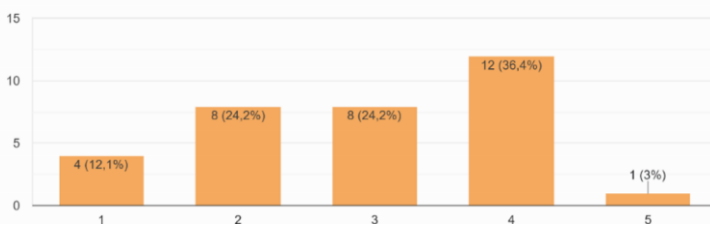
I am afraid of not being able to handle emergency situations
Il timore di non riuscire a gestire le situazioni emergenziali.

33 risposte



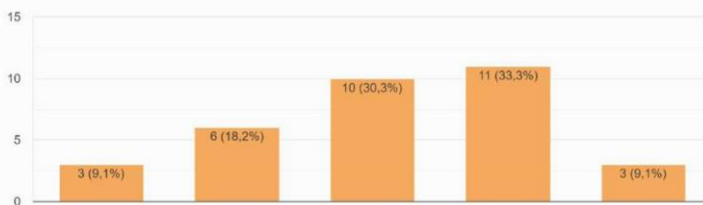
I am afraid of not feeling up to it, of not being prepared enough
Mi fa paura il non sentirmi all'altezza, non essere abbastanza preparato/a

33 risposte



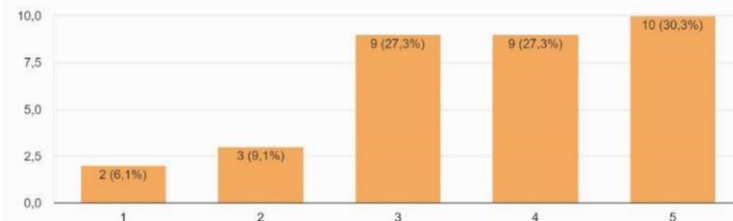
Ho paura di andare incontro alla sindrome da burnout

33 risposte



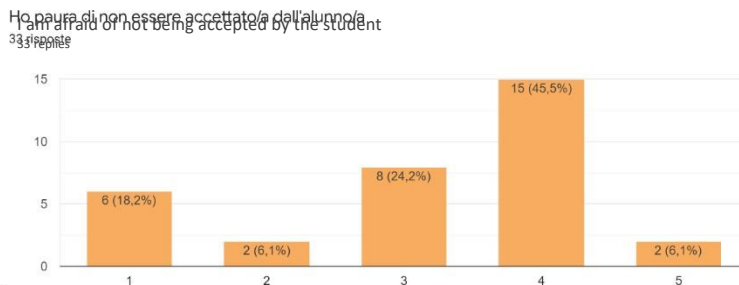
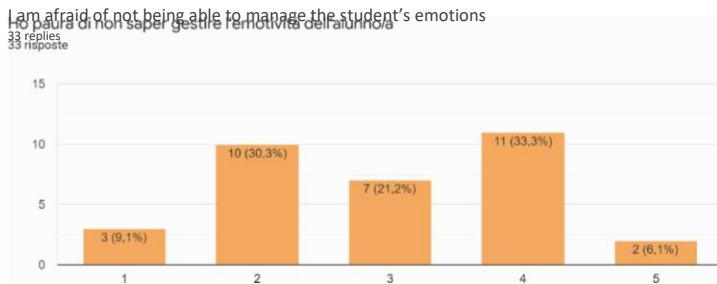
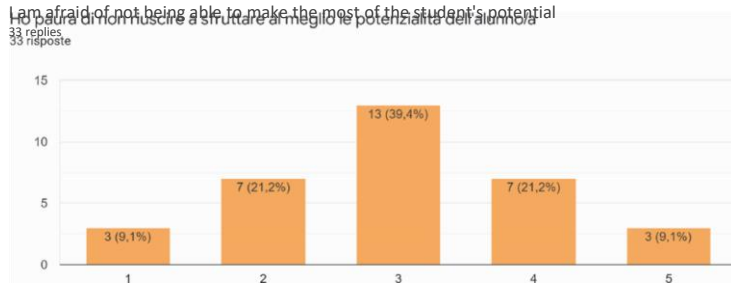
I am afraid of not being able to be empathetic, or not being able to be in harmony with the disabled student
Il timore di non riuscire a essere empatico/a, non riuscire a essere in sintonia con l'alunno/a disabile.

33 risposte



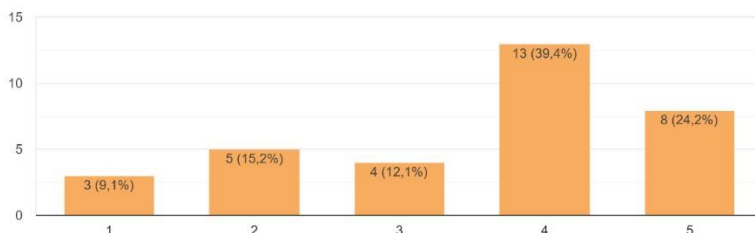
I am afraid of developing burnout syndrome

33 replies



Trovarsi fortemente in disaccordo con la famiglia o con gli altri colleghi, mi fa molta paura.

33 risposte

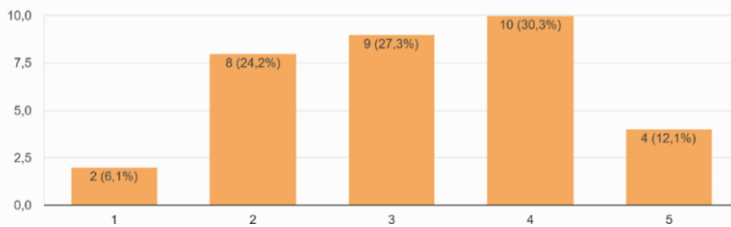


Being strongly in disagreement with the student's family or with other colleagues is very frightening to me

33 replies

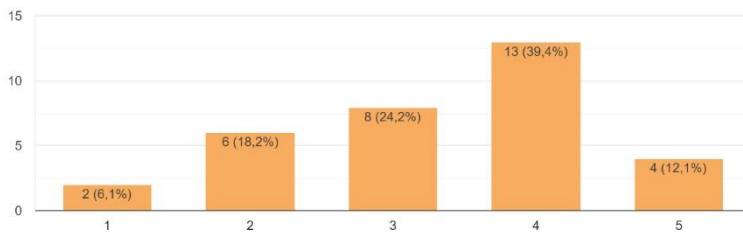
I am afraid of not being able to produce any improvement for the student
Temo di non riuscire a produrre alcun miglioramento per l'alunno/a

33 risposte



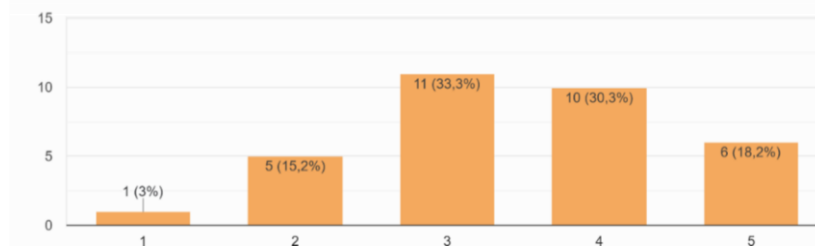
Ho paura di non riuscire a creare un proprio lavoro di inclusione

33 replies



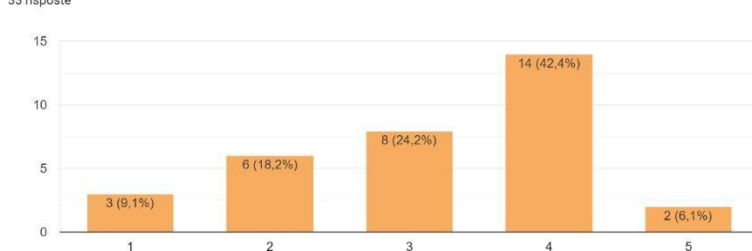
Not being able to integrate the drop-out students into the classroom terrifies me.
Non riuscire a integrare gli studenti che hanno abbandonato la scuola mi terrorizza.

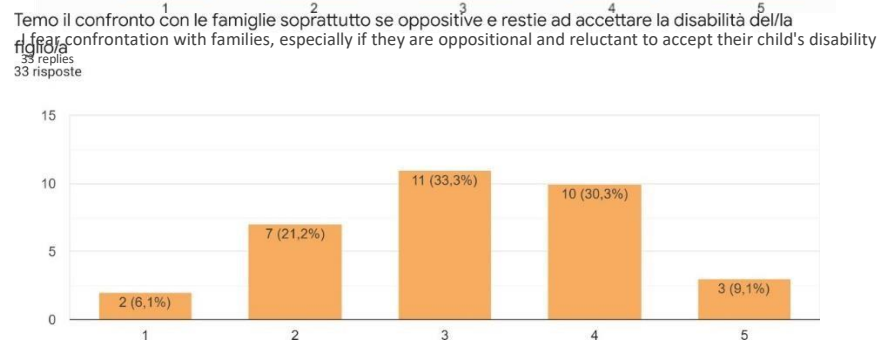
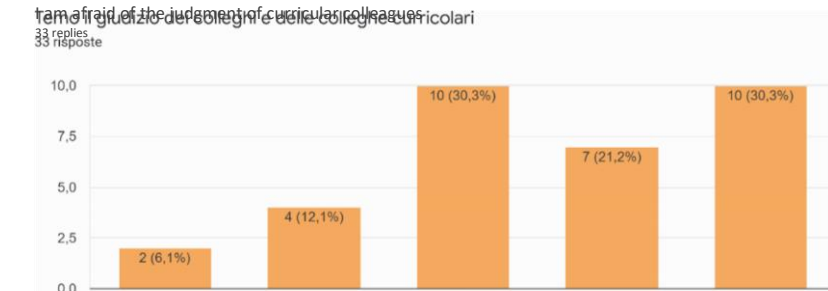
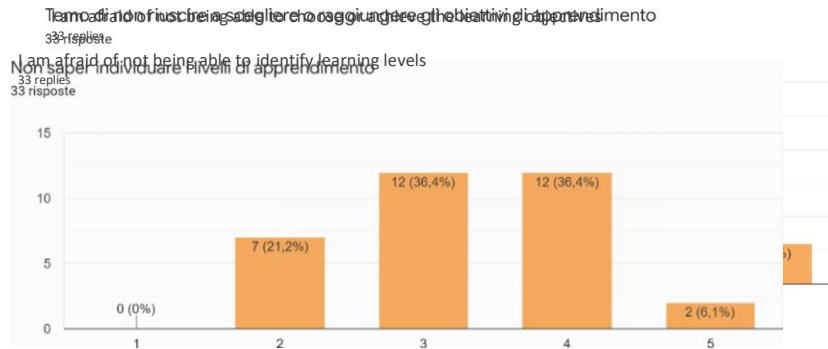
33 replies



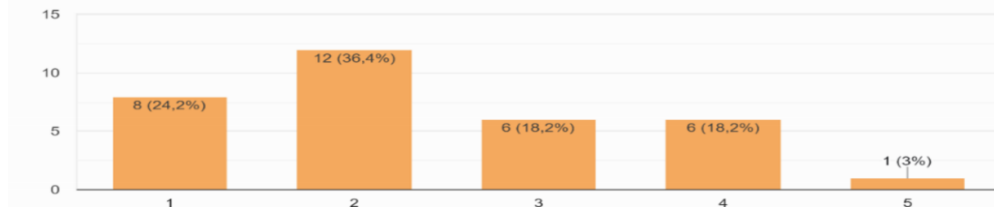
Knowing that I am responsible for the life of a person who is already in difficulty terrifies me
Mi terrorizza il sapere responsabile della vita di una persona che si trova già in difficoltà.

33 replies

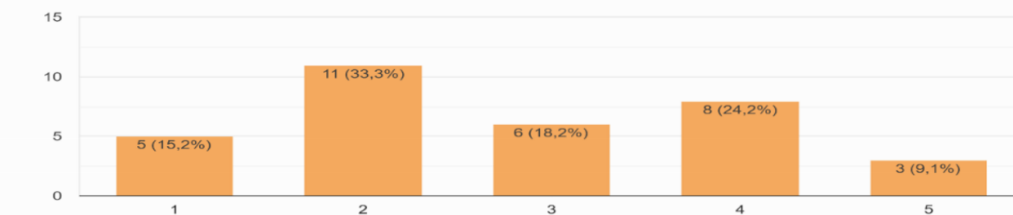




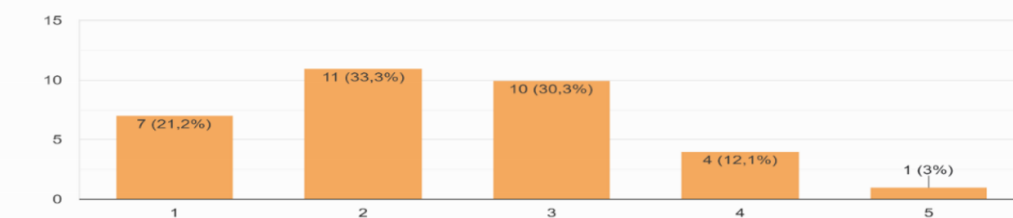
I am afraid of not being able to communicate with deaf or non-verbal students
 Non saper comunicare con gli alunni sordi o con gli alunni non verbali
 33 risposte



Non afraid of getting problems related to behavioral issues (ADHD, ODD, Autism and so on...)
 Non aver paura di avere problemi comportamentali (ADHD, ODD, Autismo ecc...)
 33 risposte



Affraid of as dealing with difficult cases (Autism, cerebral palsy, complex syndromes, blindness) ecc...
 Aver paura di aver a che fare con casi difficili (Autismo, paralisi cerebrale, sindrome complesse, cecità) ecc...
 33 risposte



4. Analysis of the results

The analysis of the results shows that 45.4 % of the participants had previous experience as curricular teachers, while 54.6 % had experience as support teachers. The experience as curricular teacher was multi-year, while the experience as support teacher was for shorter periods (no more than one school year on average). Almost all of the participants believed that contact and prior knowledge of a person with disabilities could affect their professionalism, and stated that they had already had contact with disabled students (72.7%), mostly incidental and occasional. About 36.4 % of the respondents believed that their prior knowledge with respect to the training course in the field of pedagogy and special education was fairly adequate, while only 3 % of them believed it was

totally inadequate. However, this denotes an awareness of the need for further training to enable them to learn how to approach didactically and humanly to disability; in fact, 93.9% of the respondents believed that this course was necessary for their professional experience. With respect to the perception of the professional self, about 24.2% of the respondents were afraid that they would not be able to produce any improvement in the disabled student's development, while about 18 respondents were afraid that they would not be able to handle emergency situations. Yet only 12 out of 33 respondents were concerned about not being up to or prepared enough for this role. The majority of participants also showed that they felt strongly empathized and aligned with the disabled student, but they were still afraid of not being able to handle his or her emotionality. Again, in imagining their future professional experience, teachers-in-training stated that they would have more difficulties and concerns in dealing with severe (40.48 %) and intellectual (33.33%) disabilities. Fears referring to sensory disabilities (17.26 % blindness, 7.14% deafness) and motor disabilities (1.79%), on the other hand, seemed to be less.

On the other hand, with regard to concerns and fears related to the educational-relational plan, 10 respondents were afraid that they would not be able to produce any improvement for the disabled student or that they would not be able to integrate him or her into the class group. Also interestingly, about 15 respondents feared confrontation with families, especially if they were oppositional or reluctant to accept their son or daughter's disability. Only 6 respondents, on the other hand, feared that they would not be able to apply the theoretical knowledge gained during the course, while 15 respondents expressed neither positive nor negative views in this regard. It seemed relevant to deepen the evaluation with respect to the concerns and fears that might arise with respect to specific disabilities, and it followed that only 7 respondents were afraid of not being able to communicate with deaf or non-verbal students; the majority was afraid of not being able to handle issues related to major behavioral disorders caused by ADHD, ODD, Autism and other forms of such disabilities. On the other hand, the attitude of teachers toward difficult cases such as autism, cerebral palsy and complex syndromic frameworks turned out to be negative, as only 10 respondents believed they could handle them. Also emerging was the fear of not being able to communicate effectively with the blind or deaf-mute students due to the lack of knowledge of Braille codes, sign language and other gestural codes, bringing to light the need for training in this regard.

5. Discussion of the results and final considerations from a didactic-pedagogical point of view

Generally, the perceptions of people or future teachers start from reflecting on the medical and individual condition of disability, focusing mainly on the person's deficit, diagnosis or dysfunction. Obviously, such a medical-individual view is likely to point out what are its limitations, namely, the sense of constraint, restraint, burden, and absence of ways out that fall negatively on the teacher's judgment and attitude toward disability. In fact, this survey reveals the teachers' fear of being unable to deal with issues related to the deficit and the integration with other students in the class. Being exposed to "uncontrollable" situations leads a teacher to give up and experience the world of school with frustration. The attitude related to self-perception is sometimes contradictory. On the one hand, teachers seem confident about their pedagogical and didactic knowledge gained

during the training course; on the other hand, many of them remained neutral about certain fears, such as that of being able to fail or not being able to control events somehow, with possible drifts on the future teacher's self-efficacy and self-esteem. At the same time, an aura of positivity surrounds the Lickert scale, represented by the hope that what was learned, combined with experience, may make the professional life of the support teacher less unstable. However, they fear that the state of emotional distress and intense psychological distress may get worse over time. Fears concerning specific disabilities complete the picture: the complexity of the deficit increases the resulting fears. Relationship difficulties emerge with functioning profiles characterized by communicative problems, especially related to the lack of knowledge of the braille codes or the sign language. On the other hand, with regard to the most severe cases, teachers express fears concerning more care-related tasks rather than education-related ones. When dealing with intellectual disabilities, they express the fear of not being able to adjust their didactic intervention, of not understanding the levels and modalities of didactic adaptation; as for the sensory disabled students, the fear of not being able to make learning contents and tests accessible. The results arising from this short survey are not that far from the framework assumed initially. Positive images typical of inclusion sometimes contrast with stereotypical and prototypical images of disability. Nevertheless, by referring back to Morvan's concept of anchoring, it is surprising that the perception of disability goes beyond the usual sense of commiseration and resignation related to its bio-medical sphere. Instead, attitude arises from our feelings, our fears, and influences our behavior, which is the result of the context and the experience being lived. Obviously, this also applies to teachers' attitudes toward disabilities. Assuming that experiencing emotions and fears is part of human nature, there should be more careful and rigorous approaches underlying the educational dimension. What in social perceptions and even more so in the relationship between learner and teacher can be dangerous, is reducing the complex into the simple. A process that often trivializes phenomena that are difficult to interpret, reducing them to a single explanatory principle. In fact, the very instrument used in this investigation, namely the questionnaire, is a method for apparently facilitating teachers' judgments based on group categorization; if it becomes chronic, it lays the foundation for judgments marked by strong trivialization, an approximation from which highly penalizing professional actions can result. As for the analysis of the data, it follows that the emotions felt by teachers towards students with disabilities are generally positive. It appears that the teachers consider the training course to be worthwhile, but they are also aware that their previous knowledge related to disabilities had positively affected this survey. The framework of positive perceptions is enriched by benevolent behaviors that show an inclination to encounters, confrontations, and encouragement. Shifting the focus to fears and apprehensions related to having to deal with an emergency or uncontrolled situation, anxiety becomes apparent in teachers' responses, but never transcends into necessarily surrendering views. Therefore, the first research assumption that saw the fear of failure directly proportional to the severity of the disability finds partial confirmation. Difficult situations give rise to feelings of bewilderment, anxiety, and helplessness, but they also turn out to be stimulating because the desire for change and hope is so strong that they reduce the role of the support teacher into an assistant to the person. Consequently, from this survey emerges the need for further study

and research on teachers' training in order to break down those beliefs and clichés typical of disability. What emerges is also the need to develop the idea of a truly inclusive school by investing in training courses characterized by a high degree of involvement through theory and, above all, practice and contact with disability, in order to better understand and manage fear. The stereotyped and medicalized view of disability exposes the fragility of a complex profession by highlighting aspects not only in terms of content, but also in an emotional-relational and experiential sense, on which more focus should be placed in the training processes dedicated to the field of inclusive education and special pedagogy.

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